



R2: THE RICE REVIEW

R2: The Rice Review is a free student literary journal at Rice University.

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A Brief Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the tenth edition of *R2: The Rice Review*. As Rice enters its second century, we are thrilled to bring *R2* into its second decade as the university's premier literary journal.

This year, we received a record number of prose, poetry, and visual arts submissions—an encouraging testament to the ever-growing arts community at Rice. More so than ever before, we have not been content to simply archive the written or curate the visual. Rather, we humbly offer this magazine as one way to shape the university's commitment to the arts, and encourage everyone—regardless of discipline or experience—to start (or continue) creating.

To that end, we aimed to increase *R2*'s presence on campus this year. From our Fall Open Mic Night—where over one hundred people gathered to hear poets, songwriters, and rappers share the power of the spoken word—to our newly-minted Monthly Writing Contest, we hope our campus-wide initiatives touched every student in some small way. We have also endeavored to make this year's journal one that can stand on its own, a creative object unto itself, wherein the written and the visual are engaged in a conversation that is greater than the sum of those parts. You, dear reader, are the final participant in this process—and in many ways, the key ingredient. Just by your sheer presence, this all comes to life. Thanks for being here.

Before you start enjoying the wonderful pieces that make up this edition of the journal, a few notes of additional thanks—to the English Department for their immense support and seemingly unending store of multicolored paper; to the Visual and Dramatic Arts Department for their guidance as we further integrate visual art into the magazine; to Ian Schimmel, our faculty advisor, for his incredible dedication and warmth; and to our wonderful and tireless staff, for the countless hours they have spent creating and building this magazine.

And finally, again, cheers to you, our readers. We hope you enjoy this year's issue as much as we have enjoyed making it. As always, we hope that it inspires your own creativity and work, and encourages you to share it in turn. Thanks for joining the conversation.

Happy Reading,

Jay Becton, Editor-in-Chief

Stefanie Saathoff, Managing Editor



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ANGE MLINKO

PERCIVAL EVERETT

Don't Trust American Men Originally from Canada Living in Paris

Marissa Hall

It was love at first sight: Daniel awkwardly asked to kiss me—instead of shoving his tongue down my throat at a break in the conversation—and when he needed to pee after, he ran to find a tree reasonably far away from me. I could still see him pull down his pants, but he was a good 50 yards in the distance. Even though my Spanish dorm, *la residencia*, was a one-minute walk away, he was still considerate. Sparks flew.

When we fell asleep together with all our clothes on (again, “What a gentleman,” I thought), I worried my mascara was smudging. “Do I look like a raccoon?” I asked.

“No, when I look at your eyes all I see are sparkles,” he said. He wasn't talking about my eyes themselves; I was wearing very shimmery eye shadow. But still. The cheesiness coursed through my veins, clogging my arteries and making my heart squeeze—the most wonderful heart attack.

It was definitely love, right? I skipped through Salamanca's Plaza Mayor in the pouring rain when he kissed me goodbye and returned to Paris. No, he wasn't Parisian. He was American. Or technically Canadian. With an impressive Irish accent he could pull out after he'd had a bit to drink. Sure, he didn't sound quite so exotic when he was sober, but still. He had an accent. I swooned.

“It's Not My Fault, I'm Happy” hit my inbox on Facebook. Not his original words, no, but he was listening to a song by Passion Pit, and that title: wasn't it perfect? Our Facebook relationship grew serious. I knew that we had only spent less than 24 hours together in person, but sometimes you just *know*. He wanted to work for NPR, on the program “Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!” His interest in NPR told me he was worldly, involved in politics, just like my father (and don't psychologists say you

are supposed to end up with someone who is like your father? Or brother?). And “Wait Wait...Don’t Tell Me!”: The boy had a sense of humor. I was falling fast.

One day, we Skyped. Our relationship was escalating at a shocking velocity, from Facebook messages to Skype, and we were already imagining our future together. “You should get an internship with me in San Francisco this summer!” he said, brown curls flopping into his green eyes (I’m guessing they are green, but maybe blue? It’s hard to tell when you fall in love in 24 hours with plenty of cheesiness and Sangria in your bloodstream). “What do you want to do this summer?” he asked. “I’ll look at job openings for you. We can go to the farmer’s market before work in the morning and watch the sun rise!” Little did he know those two words—farmer’s market—made me catch my breath. Had I found someone with a mutual passion for kale? Did he like making spinach smoothies too? Did he associate “organic” with “orgasmic”? There was no turning back now. I was smitten.

Had I found someone
with a mutual passion for
kale? Did he like making
spinach smoothies too?
Did he associate “organic”
with “orgasmic”?

Fast-forward one month, past days of heartache and daydreaming, and I am arriving in Paris with my friend from Spain, Kathryn. She and Daniel are childhood friends from the Bay Area, and Daniel came to visit her in Salamanca one fateful month ago. While they reunite, I plan to soak up every moment of My Romantic Weekend in Paris. Yes, we are planning to stay in his friend Tim’s apartment with Kathryn too, but Daniel revealed over Skype that we would have our own bed. That was all we needed to spoon the night away.

Daniel greets us with a giant loaf of French bread. We take the Metro past the Eiffel Tower, a bold column of golden light against the cloudy night sky. A three-man French band, complete with an accordion, plays next to us. They are expertly skilled at simultaneously serenading us and harassing us for tips. Then, my movie moment: in the rain, Daniel and I kiss under the Eiffel Tower. This was definitely Love.

Arriving at Tim's apartment is a sharp scene change. With a single futon taking up 70% of the floor, the remaining space is comparable to a walk-in closet. "I tried bringing my sleeping bag over for us to share," Daniel tries to explain, chivalrous as ever. "But...I forgot." The four of us—Daniel, Tim, Kathryn, and I—will share the futon, all lying sideways with our long legs falling off the edge.

For dinner, we eat flaky baguettes and the thickest, most buttery cheese I've ever tasted. Brie, in comparison, would taste as weak as skim milk, but this mystery cheese is as rich as Organic Farmer's Market Cream. We drink red wine from plastic cups.

The next morning, our bodies ache. Daniel and I haven't kissed since we were under the Eiffel Tower. I don't want to say anything and convey my disappointment though, and I think back to my theater teacher two years ago.

"Tell me about a time you felt betrayed by someone you liked," my professor said, trying to get me to open up emotionally in the monologue I was performing for my classmates.

"Well, there was a time in high school when I really liked a guy," I began. "We sat next to each other in Calculus and we took AP Art together. He was really into graffiti art and Banksy. I asked him to our spring dance, and he showed up high and wouldn't talk to me. At the dance he spent the entire time with another girl."

"Oh?" my professor asked. "And what was your biggest fantasy with him?"

"Um, I guess that we would go to the beach after the dance and watch the sun rise?"

"Really?" He smiled at me and cocked his head. "Was that all you wanted?"

"Yeah, I guess watch the stars too," I said awkwardly, my lie showing itself in my reddening cheeks.

"Alrighty then," he said, not convinced.

Waking up in Paris on three hours of shaky sleep—shaky because I slept with my legs on my suitcase and we woke each other up every time we grunted or turned over—I am also unconvinced that spooning Daniel and Kathryn last night was part of my Parisian fantasy.

"That was...interesting," Kathryn says. She, Daniel, and Tim are all long-time friends, and no more than two years ago Kathryn fell for Tim, only for him to give her the cold shoulder. "Was it really necessary for Tim to be shirtless, wear silk boxers, and hold my hand while we spooned?"

The four of us proceed to take showers, sharing the same towel that gives off the strong aroma of mildew. But then Daniel buys us fresh chocolate croissants, which melt in our mouths. We amble

down stone streets lined with shuttered windows letting the sunshine in and meet another friend from Spain, Becca. Together we climb the stairs to the Sacré-Cœur Basilica, past several men jogging in neon spandex and matching shoes, and take in the expansive aerial view of the bright cityscape. Our numbers are growing, but still I am convinced that Daniel will sweep me into an alleyway any minute (“*Mademoiselle*, a kiss?”) and we will proceed through Paris alone, hand in hand.

Instead, the five of us cross the famous bridge that passes over the Seine and is covered with a myriad of locks whose keys have been thrown into the river by thousands of couples. Ah, the symbol of Invincible Love. Daniel and I avoid eye contact. After several minutes, he takes my hand in his cold ones, bleeding because they are so dry, and I relax.

Later, I discover that Daniel is stubborn, a trait that somehow was never evident in our emoticon-filled Facebook messages, so stubborn that he takes us in three circles around Paris for two hours trying to find Becca’s friend. But oh, what a man: if it proves anything, Daniel is simply determined, embodying the charmingly masculine cliché in his refusal to ask the throngs of people who pass us for very simple directions in his fluent French. My optimism never fails.

Finally, Kathryn, Daniel, and I, all exhausted, arrive at a restaurant. I dismiss the fact that Daniel and I have yet to be alone together; surely it will happen tonight, when Paris is most breathtaking. In the meantime, we gorge ourselves on bread, meat, and cheese, and the waitress pities us and extends the happy hour so that we can all have two pints of beer.

The rest of the night goes by quickly once we have alcohol in our systems. The first order of business, of course, is to buy more alcohol. Swigging wine from the bottle (and feeling very normal about it), the three of us walk through Paris, passing a mob of hundreds of people on roller blades. To a sweet French family with children, Daniel raises the bottle of wine and cries, “*Vive la France!*” They laugh and echo his cheer.

We stop next at Daniel’s friend’s house, a girl in his choir (how sensitive is a man who sings!) who talks ceaselessly and claims her spot next to Daniel. “Daniel and I both want to do radio,” she coos to Kathryn.

“You’d be so good in radio,” Kathryn says sarcastically.

“Aw, thanks!” the friend beams, oblivious to Kathryn’s tone.

I almost fall asleep on the toilet. I blame the wine. But when we arrive at the underground nightclub, I pretend to regain my energy. “Come dance!” I say to Daniel, who is, by now, very drunk;

I am levelheaded and exhausted. His radio friend gives him a sip of her drink and shimmies up to him instead.

After completing stage one of Too Much Red Wine, the exhaustion, I quickly am on my way to stage two, everybody's favorite: the self-pitying, hiccupy tears. Kathryn comes into the bathroom with me, always a woman's prime place for therapeutic conversations and emotional confessions.

"Why are you upset?" asks a French woman in her strong accent.

"I came all the way to Paris from Spain to see a guy, and now he's ignoring me!" I cry, attracting concerned glances from the long line in the bathroom.

The woman inhales sharply. "A *man* has done this to you?"

"Yes," I say.

"Don't you *ever* let a man treat you this way! You are *beautiful!* You go *right* back into that room, and you dance with someone else, and you *forget* about that *man!*"

Amazingly, advice from a French woman in a nightclub bathroom does wonders for one's self-esteem, and she is wise: the minute I begin dancing with another man, Daniel drunkenly jogs over to me, forgets to ask to kiss me, and begins intently sucking on my face.

Minutes later, we leave the club, and our group walks back to the radio girl's apartment to spend the night on her floor. In the dark spiral stairwell of her apartment building, Daniel and I cry together.

With his head in my lap, he speaks, between tears, the most romantic words to me yet: "I wasn't ignoring you! I don't know what to say. I...I like you, dude."

How dare he! With that one final sentence, Daniel tainted one of my favorite words forever. With that one simple word, "dude," I realize that he does not see us making organic kale and spinach smoothies together after a day at the farmer's market. My Romantic Weekend in Paris had come to an end, if it ever even was.

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esteem, and she is wise.

Still, I remember Paris as enchanting. One evening, Kathryn and I walked for miles along the Seine, the sky graying and the distant bridges blending into the hazy darkness. As we purchased ripe strawberries in a charming outdoor alley stall, shaggy-haired Owen Wilson biked past with his mother. The morning after the spiral staircase disaster, Kathryn and I escaped Daniel and Tim in his silk boxers and drank espresso together in a cafe, watching fathers straighten the bows in their daughters' hair, holding hands while the little girls jumped over puddles in their patent leather shoes. Kathryn told me about the hiking trips she and her best friends took in remote California mountains, the way they all slept side by side in their sleeping bags on the front porch of an old cottage. She told me about her father, who had passed away a month before she came to Spain. When we returned to the apartment, Kathryn bought eggs and flour and made everyone Nutella crepes on Tim's hot plate. We filled the tense air with Oakland rap. That night, Daniel, Kathryn, and I went to Tim's choir recital in a centuries-old church, where massive marble columns obstructed our view of him. Towards the end of the concert, Daniel reached for my hand. Outside of the warmly lit church, we shoved our hands in our pockets, our bodies stiffening in the cold wind. I jogged to catch up with Kathryn, the towering figure ahead of us, her strides long and calm, her golden hair glowing under the lamplight.

Conquering Grounds

Jessica Fuquay

All our children learn. The uprooted will sing
of the root's tearing. We draw the ocean-blue,

the yellow sun smiling over neat rows of waves,
old ships bobbing like toys in a bath—the Niña,
the Pinta,

the slave ships that sailed in their shadows
someplace off the page where a whip drives

the wind. Eyelids drawn taut, we are
educated. Fingers snap

and the stories unspool from our throats, chain-
links
whose rattling we have taken

for voices—the Yoruba, Igbo, Quechua,
Guarani, the specters in our vision,

each absence of a name.
Who can see a face straight?

There's grain in my reflection, and every
beam of light suspends the upturned dust

of artifacts. From glass shards, we make lenses
to see farther into blindness. The centuries vanish

at the point of their horizon, its sun so bright
we never saw the flares.



The Things We Build
Artist: Spencer Shaw



Flash Flood

Rucy Cui

It starts with rain misting the silhouettes of the trees outside. Within an hour, the downpour worsens, until entire branches are swaying in the wind and lengthening to caress the street. I am afraid they will stretch to the point of snapping. The houses in our neighborhood are so dignified that I prepare myself for the utter *loss* of dignity, for splintered rafters, uprooted flower gardens, rusty debris embedded in front lawns like wet newspaper into sidewalk cracks.

It is stiff and unhappy inside. I'm supposed to be watching Olivia, but she's looking around with keen, glistening eyes. She has eaten a clementine orange. She darts a hand through her hair, once, twice. Droopily in her other hand, off a corner of the couch, she holds the peel in a perfect whorl of skin that reminds me of the way our mother used to lay apples bare with her paring knife. It smells fresh and sour, dampens my sinuses with its tanginess. She, however, smells like the inside of a psychiatric hospital. I know because I've been there. I imagine grabbing the peel and dragging it across her neck, under her armpits.

A year ago, after Olivia dropped out of Yale, we visited her for the first time. I was fifteen. We drove an hour and a half outside of Houston to tour the grounds of Spirewood Valley and marvel at the sheer quantity of trees. My parents said being close to nature was transformative, and I think they meant for Olivia, but something in their tone made it seem like they were all transforming without me. I was too preoccupied with what we were leaving behind to join them. And while it was a point of pride to the staff that the trees outnumbered the patients, it always smelled like air freshener indoors. It never smelled like there was the beginning of a forest, purposefully planted cypress and magnolia leading off into mimosa and pine, fifty feet away from the exit. I could see the fragrant giants from most windows, and they tickled my nostrils like a taunt as I inhaled air freshener in Olivia's room on the third floor.

Do you want anything else to eat? I ask. I feel odd because this is her house, too. She should be able to amble over to the fridge whenever she's hungry, or to escort herself to the bathroom. But I also feel like I have to prompt her. It's her second day back.

She shakes her head.

Anything to drink? Orange *juice*?

She shakes her head again. In the crook of the couch, Olivia is slight and pale. The rain makes her edgy. I remember when we were younger, when the four years between us were blurry with insignificance and the days spun outward like sunlight off a balcony, easy symmetry that was bucolic in its sweetness and simplicity. We used to play school, with me gathering our favorite stuffed animals into chairs and her reading entries out of a children's dictionary. She was always the teacher because she was older. Now she just seems limp and distracted all the time.

You have to tell me what happened, she says finally, sitting up a little. She's alert because she wants information, and I'm instantly resentful. I think about drowning her out with the TV.

What do you mean?

Mom and Dad are looking at halfway houses for me. *Without* me. Do you realize how nonsensical that is? And you're here babysitting, in the morning, on a weekday. I don't get it.

I point out the living room window. It's a bonafide storm, I say. I'm not going anywhere. Briefly, though, I wonder who's babysitting whom. Maybe I'm watching Olivia watching me. Maybe nothing is what it seems since I've been kicked out of school.

She dashes a hand back into her hair.

I roll off my end of the couch to turn on the TV. The screen fumbles for a signal, then the news comes on. From a closed off room, a petite anchor wearing heavy chandelier earrings informs us, in our own closed off room, that the rain is up to a foot. I can't fathom it.

Olivia keeps touching her scalp. I need a haircut, she mutters. All of it. I think that would be good for me.

Before we really
noticed what was
happening, we
noticed her hair.

I don't answer. She has lovely hair. Before we really noticed what was happening, we noticed her hair. It used to be long, thick, lustrous. Even now, when she has picked out and rinsed down most of it deep within the drainpipes of the house, it's lovely. Just thinner. She struggles with other compulsions, all of which were amplified at Yale, but the bulk of them seem to revolve around her hair. Once, when we visited her, I asked about it, confused how doggedly she pursued the destruction of something beautiful. What for? Why?

She said, I don't know.

On the news, the petite anchor issues a flash flood warning. Move to higher ground and stay clear of watery roads, she instructs, her earlobes sagging under the weight of her earrings. She starts citing flash flood statistics from last year, and how four people and a dog drowned trying to drive through the deluge, when the signal cuts out.

In the living room, there are family portraits that've been hanging undisturbed for years. The frames came from a fair trade retailer, made by Senegalese craftspeople. I remember Olivia chose them, drawn to the flashiest designs and strangest patterns despite our perfect ordinariness. And in them, we smile outward as we would've when we were still a young family, instead of inward like we do now, hiding, reluctant to show pleasure too boisterous for our circumstances. My mother's lips are full and unlined. My father's eyebrows haven't whitened yet. I am consistently laughing, but with my front teeth only half grown in. There are no current photos. My parents have been devoted to Olivia, devoted enough to preserve her memory on the walls like a ceremony every spring, when I would proffer forms for school portraits and they would say, These are getting too expensive. Let's try and focus on the nice ones we already have.

Aloud, I ask, Do you think Mom and Dad missed the storm? They left so long ago... They must've missed it. But what if they don't know better than to drive straight back?

Olivia scours another spot on her scalp. I imagine breaking each of her fingers, the cuticles of which are short and jagged after years of abuse. I am filled with bitterness that unfurls from my chest into my extremities, but I can't tell where it's directed, whether I want to launch myself across the couch at her or through a window. Sometimes it feels like my fault. I remember the flurry of helping her move into the psychiatric hospital last year, and how my parents, surgeons at the Texas Medical Center, promised afterward to finally teach me how to drive. It was a rare weekend that

they were both free. I woke up, groggy, uncertain, on the tail end of a dream about surging lakes and swarms of fireflies, to the smell of frying onions downstairs, and laid there listening to them bang around the kitchen. It was the onions that did it, instantly rousing me like sunlight through window blinds. I wonder what would've happened if I said something. But I laid there, just laid there instead, resentment stiffening my limbs, listening to my parents cook for Olivia because they wanted to run an hour and a half out of their way to deliver an omelet to her. When they were gone, I thought to myself, I should've said something. When I checked later, I realized they had left no omelet behind for me.

Olivia doesn't answer my question. The rain raps against our unyielding roof. I tell her to stay put, that I'm popping over to Mrs. Markham's house for a radio. I graze the walls with my shoulder as I exit, knocking a portrait slightly askew.

Our neighbor has been vacationing so regularly that I've started spying on her at the beginning of every month, bidding her goodbye in my own way as she climbs into taxi after taxi and speeds off. My parents might've once bought knickknacks like Senegalese picture frames to try to, indirectly, see parts of the world, but they're just for decoration, displays of culture and travel. We don't leave. Sometimes at night, when I can't sleep because I miss things that don't exist anymore, I pretend I'm getting ready to fly with Mrs. Markham to Turkey or Guatemala or Denmark in the morning. She packs three large suitcases for three weeks, then hides her key on the ledge above the front door. Today is the middle of the first week, and I feel lightheaded with the possibility of it all, the promise. It has been a while since I've let myself into her house.

I can't quite reach the ledge without a stool, so I sneak into our garage and choose a wooden one that was recently discarded from the kitchen. Olivia is supposed to be watching me, and I'm supposed to be watching her. But I don't think of her at all, to be honest. I am tired of thinking of her. The rain makes her uncomfortable, so I move fast.

When I go outside, the wind urges me into a swoon. I stay upright, but barely, and begin moving against it in the direction of Mrs. Markham's driveway. The fountain in her front garden is of an angel holding a pot, a stream normally trickling out so that the noise lulls me to sleep from across the street. She doesn't turn it off when she leaves. Now it gushes pathetically in the deluge, trying to keep pace

and transform water into something peaceful again. I scrabble against the slippery pavement. At the door, my clothes weigh me down to the point that I have trouble lifting myself onto the stool.

It's a simple thing, the thrill. And unlike other things in life, it never disappoints me. I use a single burst of energy to snatch at the key on the ledge, hop back down, and fit it in the lock. The sky releases its first flash of lightning, followed by a peal of thunder. I push open the door.

I can't breathe for a moment, or move. Always, no matter how careful I intend to be, I pause in the middle of the foyer and take in the stillness. It's probably when I'm the most vulnerable, standing there, vibrating under the weight of what I've done. It's certainly what got me in trouble at school, the lights screeching on, *snapping* on, and me with my head bent in absorption over an administrator's desk. Mr. Faraday has four daughters, and his blonde wife is pregnant with their fifth child, who he hopes is a boy.

Sometimes I keep a token—an earring without its sister or an old grocery list off the fridge. Sometimes I keep glass perfume tops because they're nice to look at on my dresser, but always after spritzing the nozzle into my neck first. Sometimes I keep the entire perfume, like I did with Tanya's mother when I was at her house working on a science project. More than the heft, though, the solidness of what's precious and private in my palm, I appreciate the story. It's infinitely interesting to me that Tanya's mother wears Amouage Dia, that she's seeing a dermatologist for a mole on her leg, and that she's considering going back to school next year to finish her degree in anthropology.

Mrs. Markham stashes the radio in her office, in a drawer with miscellaneous objects like paper clips and printer cartridges. I know enough about her life to say that it's the most innocuous drawer of all—in her bathroom drawer, she keeps birth control pills, makeup, and a slick plastic case filled with razorblades. In her bedroom drawer, she keeps sex toys and a leather-bound diary. There are more than fifty entries chronicling the single week out of the month that she spends at home. She must carry another diary with her when she travels.

I end up taking the radio, a pack of candles, and a quarter that I notice on an open ironing board upstairs. After a beat of hesitation, I take the case of razorblades, too. Then I let myself out.

Can I confess something? Olivia asks when I stumble back into the living room. She's still cradled in the crook of the couch, its embrace fitting her narrow frame like a draped arm.

I nod. I swathe myself in a fluffy white towel. The carpet squelches under my toes as I sit back down. While I was gone, the electricity cut out, too. My stolen candles are drying on the coffee table. Until then, we wait in dimness.

I wish this hadn't happened to us, she says. I wish this hadn't happened to you.

Don't try and sound responsible for me.

I *am* responsible. Maybe not for you, but for everything else.

You're right. So much grief because you're fucking crazy.

Olivia barks out a laugh. Yeah, she says. I want to reclaim who I used to be. But I don't know how.

I think she's lucky not to have moments like before, when she was boiling water in the middle of the night and almost dumped the pot over herself. I walked in on her. Or when she almost vaulted out of the car on the highway, outrunning the unhappiness that was more like helplessness. Or when she almost inhaled at the bottom of the pool because she wanted to feel chlorine behind her eyelids, between her ears, under her tongue...

Well, I say. Listen, that's perfect, I say. I pull the case of razorblades out of my pocket. I rest it on the coffee table, where it reflects sharp edges in the half-light.

Come with me, Olivia says.

Hair is nothing special. It splinters around her face, catching in her eyelashes as she blinks. She starts crying, an angry noise for every swooping motion of the razorblade. I don't remember seeing my sister cry since she broke her collarbone in middle school. She focuses drowning eyes on me as I sit in the bathtub, waiting. I was going to dash to my room and grab some scissors, but the way she holds the razorblade is comfortable, practiced. Her hair is so thin that it slices as cleanly as putty.

The thought of the broken collarbone takes me back. I almost feel like I'm in elementary school again, right before Olivia started picking her scalp. I used to sit in the bathtub then, too, and watch her inexpertly rub makeup into her eyelids, cheeks, and lips, as she got ready for dates with pimply pubescents. Sometimes I would paint her toenails, or sometimes I would just offer input—not that I knew much about grooming practices when I was little, adoring her, falling over from wanting to be helpful, rooting around for roly poly bugs with the same bare hand that I ate my lunch. I was a real

tomboy. Olivia was the prettier sister by far. When we were younger, we had fun. My parents were still parenting, and my grandparents were still alive. It's strange to remember.

I handle Olivia very carefully, like a relic.

Afterward, when the bathroom is a mess, I find a battery-operated shaver under the sink. I handle Olivia very carefully, like a relic, pressing my fingers into her neck just so. Then I run the shaver over her head, cutting off the misshapen fringe that's left. I see bald spots and fresh scabs. She's exhausted, but her gaze is alert, calm. We throw open the bathroom window and watch rain patter on the linoleum floor as wind sweeps bits of hair outside.

We go back to the living room, tripping through the house like unexpectedly happy, drunken children who've snuck their way into alcohol at a funeral. We push all the furniture into a corner, light the candles as best we can, and admire their flickering since they aren't quite dry. Olivia laughs and laughs and laughs, the sound like an air conditioner finally turning on after months of winter.

The radio crackles, and a man announces that the rain level has dwindled back down to eight inches, but to keep avoiding watery roads. In our area, west of the mountains, the flash flood warning is reduced to a flash flood watch. I take a deep breath and change the channel to a hard rock station that strains the speakers with each crash of the cymbal. We dance until we forget we're human. Olivia playacts at headbanging, but since she's newly bald, she just looks like she's having a seizure.

I have an idea, she shouts over the music.

We clatter through the doors of the house. I swing my arm and release the empty case of razorblades in the general direction of Mrs. Markham's driveway. Olivia darts into the middle of the street, her thermal sweater instantly soaking so that I can see the edges of her plain black bra. She tilts her head up, shaking it as if in answer to the sudden flash of lightning that illuminates her, briefly. And I take in the bald spots and fresh scabs, the raindrops running down the intimate curve of her ear. She will forever be the prettier sister, but that's okay.

Olivia, I say. *Olive*, I say, remembering her childhood nickname. It's funny because there's a world of difference between an Olivia and an Olive. Which one am I waiting for?

We stand in the street, under the deluge that eases to a drizzle, until our parents come home.

Flying South

Amber Nadeau

I: And Medicine Wouldn't Fix It

There's a sort of connection between all of us here and
if I were asked I wouldn't be able to explain it,
I know a lot of us felt lost before we got here.
Too smart, maybe,
or not smart enough,
or not popular,
we didn't enjoy parties and getting drunk and
having sex the way we were probably supposed to.

No one has sex here.

What am I saying? I'm sure that people do.
I'm sure that there are people here who hate me.
I'm sure I even hate myself sometimes.

We talked for a long time the other day
about why I hate myself, if I should be worried,
if this is a treatable disorder, another symptom
of depression, or if it's just part of my personality, and

funnily enough even though I can name
the twenty most common amino acids,
even though I have worked through almost 100 hours of lab
and written thousands and thousands of pages of notes
and papers and everything in between,

I still have no idea about this.

I thought you did. I still think you do sometimes.

II: Clip Art Chemistry is Always Green

I wish I could follow you around
and learn things from you.

You're just one of those people who I assume
knows what they're doing,
maybe because you're so damn calm all the time.
I've never seen you get angry.
The only time you were angry, I wasn't there.

And I'm not so sure you weren't just sad.

What is that old quote about absinthe?
After three glasses you see the world as it really is,
and that is the most terrible sight in the world.
You were on your fourth glass. I'm somewhere
between the second and third, between seeing things
as I wish they were and as they really are and
I don't know which glass is better.

I've done some research on lithium,
not enough, probably. I wonder if
it makes your hands shake, I wonder
if it makes you cold and that is why I wear
jackets all the time when I am with you,
particularly my green corduroy peacoat
that I would have lived in if it had been the sixties
and I had lived in New York.
Since I am neither in New York nor in the sixties,
I only wear that jacket with you.

No one wears jackets here.
No one has sex either.

III: Sometimes Sleep Is Productive

The peculiar thing about where I live
is that if I ascend the flight of stairs
outside my room I eventually end up
in a sort of loft, a forgotten corner
where no one except me ever goes.

On one side is a locked door that says it leads
to the roof; on the other side is a door
that leads to machines.
I know this because I can see
the machines working in semidarkness.

I bet they have something to do with the air conditioning.



Self-Portrait
Artist: Ellen Marsh



Every time I look in the window
of that door I expect to see a face
looking back at me. Aren't we all
afraid of that happening, though?

I wonder why I used to be so afraid of the darkness.
These days I like the dark because
it means that it's almost time to sleep.
Looking forward to sleep gets me
through the day.

No one ever sleeps here, or that is what it seems like.

IV: The Smell of Acetone

If I say I got five hours of sleep last night,
someone will say they got two.
If I say I am taking seventeen hours,
someone will say they are taking twenty-one.
If someone says they only ate eight hundred calories today
I will be silent because
I know from that number that I have failed again.
To fail to fail to eat, what a funny concept.

I remember in a poetry class one year I wrote
a poem about eating disorders
and no one figured out that it was really
about me.
The other day I learned

that acrylamide is naturally produced
in fried and browned starches. Acrylamide is
a neurotoxin, a carcinogen,
and essential for gel electrophoresis.

No one can pour a gel like I can.
I am also very good at pipetting. It's a more precise
science than you would think:
slowly releasing the plunger so that the tip
fills evenly and slowly with fluid.

The more viscous the substance the more slowly you need to go.

No one ever has sex here.

V: Gigaparsecs

I dream a lot about various things about you:
your hair, your eyes, etc.
I try hard not to fall asleep because
whenever I start dreaming
about people,
bad things are sure to happen.

It's best if I don't dream at all,
it's best if I expect nothing from anyone else,
and especially not from your eyes,
which are the color of some sort of celestial body,
a star perhaps, the kind of stars I would have

drawn in elementary school, blue and white.
Pluto was my favorite planet back then.

I think a lot about the scale of the universe
and how it's so large that we will never
be able to see all of it.
Sometimes I wish I were frozen
in a spaceship and
I could drift through space for
billions of years until I came across
an alien race with the knowledge
and curiosity to defrost me.

I'm sure such travelers are out there now.

They could drift in space for eternity and
no one would ever find them.
Russian cosmonauts.
Space debris left over from the sixties.
Green corduroy peacoats and girls
with eyes that are colors I can't describe with words.
Broken micropipettors.

Make sure to write down the serial numbers, you never know when you will need them.

Amber Dermont

Interview by Elle Eccles and Jay Becton

Amber Dermont is the author of the novel *The Starboard Sea* and the short story collection *Damage Control*. Her work has been featured in numerous publications, including *Zoetrope: All-Story* and *Tin House*. She received her MFA in Fiction from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and her Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. Dermont is currently an Associate Professor of English at Rice, where she teaches creative writing courses.



You published your debut novel, *The Starboard Sea*, in 2012. Could you walk us through the novel's inception? How did you decide to focus on sailing as the centerpiece of the novel?

I spent years working on the novel manuscript that eventually became *The Starboard Sea*. One of the lessons I try to emphasize with students is the importance of developing a literary intuition and pursuing a narrative. My own prep school experiences informed some of the details, but I had enough distance from those times that I was able to imagine a wholly separate world. The prep school I attended was right on the water—we had a tall ship, a crew team, windsurfing. Nothing captures privilege quiet like a sailboat. The main character, Jason Prosper, is a sailor who has lost his crew. He's haunted by the death of his best friend and not eager to return to the water. Jason is lost but he has access to the language and nomenclature of sailing and celestial navigation. The language of the sea is highly lyrical and this poetry helps Jason to tell his story. My impulses as a writer are almost always comic but I understood early on that I could not rely on humor. This is a novel of loss and mourning but the sailing gave the storytelling lift and light. Here's a confession: this is not a story I wanted to tell. I resisted writing/finishing the book for years. Part

of me didn't want to be known as the author of a prep school novel and another part of me did not wish to revisit my adolescence. Very few people finish novels so very few people understand how hard they are to write and how difficult it is to handle the emotions within the story and the reception of those emotions. Try breaking your heart into shards and then handing those shards out to strangers. That's what it feels like to publish a book.

How did you decide to write from the first-person perspective of a teenage boy? Do you relate to that point of view or have a lot of experience with it, or was it a challenge to inhabit his mind?

Well, here's the thing: I am a fourteen-year-old boy. Not in body or mind but in spirit. I went to a prep school that was predominantly male and so I grew up witnessing the world from a male point of view. I know how to listen to teenage boys and how to talk to them—probably because of my younger brother whom I went to prep school with and whom I love dearly. Boys are not a mystery to me. They are much more vulnerable and sensitive than our culture gives them credit for being, but our culture also gives them way too much credit for being cool, reckless, adventurous, confident and laid back. I've never been jealous in my life, but I do envy boys and their freedom. My brother moves about the world and has access to places I will never visit. All of this is because he is a man—boys have this access to look forward to and girls—even the most intrepid—are trained to be guarded. Aidan, the main female character in the novel, has a rich and wild past that has mainly served to damage her. In many ways, she was the hardest character to write. Early on, I heard Jason's voice and trusted that he would lead me through his story, his shame, and the anatomy of his betrayals.

How does teaching creative writing influence your own writing process? Have students or the classroom ever taught you things about writing and process that you don't feel you would have learned otherwise?

I struggle with the same concern my students struggle with: how best to tell the story. Just because you've written one story doesn't mean that you know to write another. I admire the ease so many students have when they first begin—when they haven't read much and don't know the

elements of craft or rules of narrative. I love that sense of play, that spark of accidental genius. The more you know about writing, about how a sentence is literally crafted and rewritten, the more conscious the art and science become, the more demystified, the harder it is to be swept away by the unconscious magic of composition. Stories arrive from strange places and I love when a student writes something that completely bewilders me and makes demands on me as a reader: not because it is incoherent, but because it is ambitious and taking serious risks.

What do you do when you get “stuck”? Not in a crawl space, but in your writing.

I’ve never been stuck. I view writing as a profession, not an indulgence. Look, I’m writing a sentence. If I want to, I can follow that sentence with another. This sentence will feature the color blue. This sentence will have a rhinoceros and a shiny convertible. How could you ever dream of being stuck as a writer when there are convertibles waiting to drive you to the zoo?

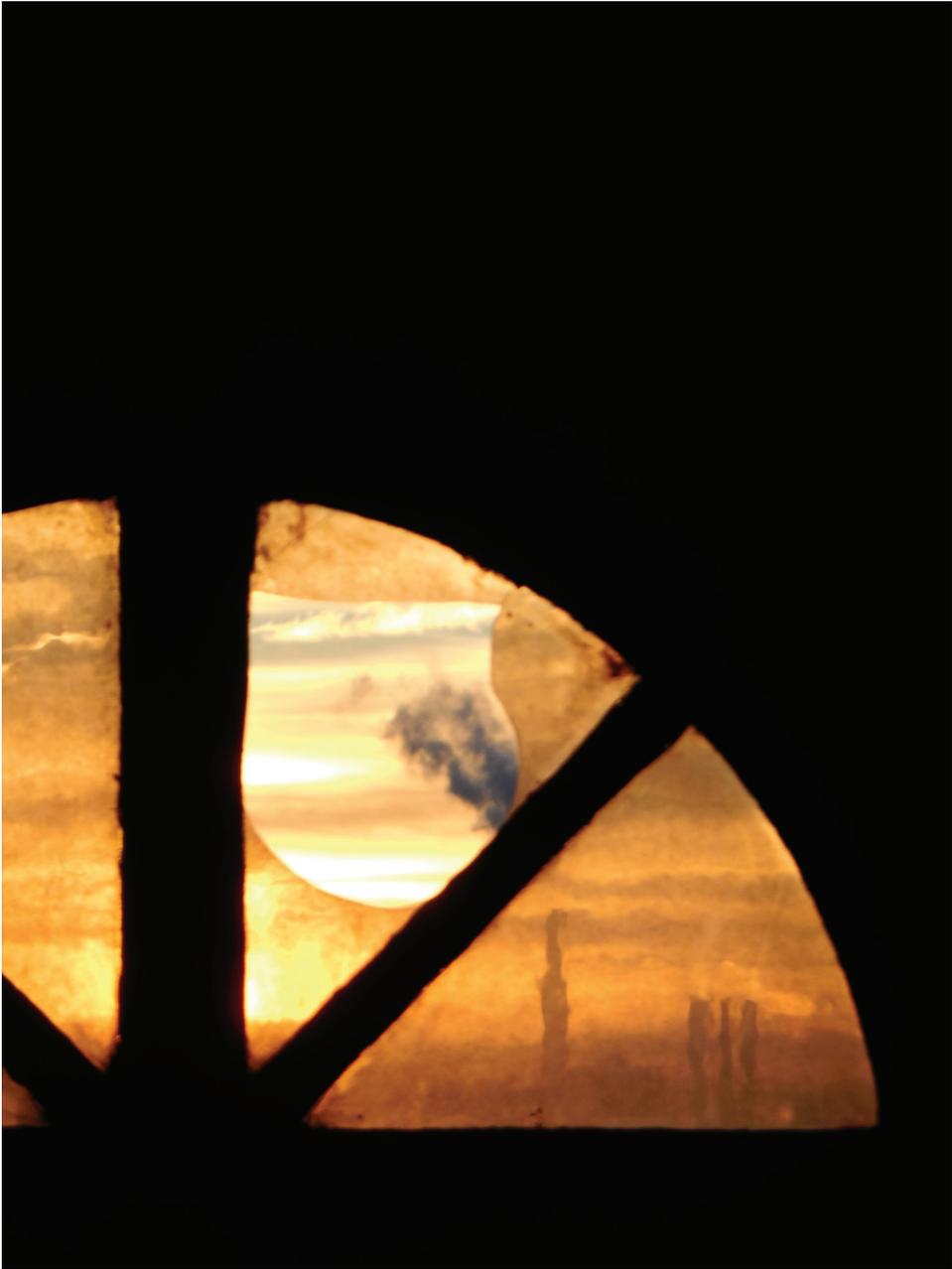
What’s been the most frustrating, or just plain wrong, piece of writing advice you’ve ever received? What’s been the most influential?

I am not inclined to do as I am told. Advice is a dog whistle that doesn’t work on me because I can’t hear it (and I am not a golden retriever, I am a fourteen-year-old boy). I’ve had two teachers who insisted that all stories should, by default, be written in third person. All I took this to mean was that these two writing professors preferred writing in third person and saw first person as a trick and second person as an affront. I love the access to voice and diction the writer has in first person, but I also think that every story tells you how to tell it—if you listen. It worries me to think of all of the first person narratives these two good writers have missed out on, but the fact is that both of these teachers also prefer the short story to the novel and so they have their own predilections. Why be burdened by another writer’s hang-ups?

My students never have to listen to me. That is their privilege. I would argue that there are very few people who will read student work with my same degree of attention and care but sometimes the last thing anyone wants is to be read closely—most people aren’t ready for it. My

only real advice in a workshop is find out who your readers are and not just people who like your work but people who respond to it in a surprising and engaging way—people who help you to see something new in your own writing.

The best piece of advice anyone ever gave me is write every day for a minute. You will see that the minute often turns into twenty minutes and then an hour and then a day. But at the very least, you put in your minute. You gave yourself over to the story.



Whitecaps

Katelyn Larson

It's been six years since I've been to Maine, six years since I've last seen the lake, but as my beat-up Explorer follows the winding road along the lakeshore, it's obvious that nothing's changed.

The day is still young, the sun not yet at its zenith, and the water slips by, glasslike and utterly undisturbed. Boats bob on the lake's surface, tied to buoys, their covers stretched tight to keep out the weather. I try to keep my eyes on the road, but the lake draws me in.

It's magnetic.

I don't understand it—how Sebago Lake has managed to remain unchanged when so much else in my life has been turned on its head. Something about time and this place doesn't seem to mesh. Maybe it's the glassy water, or the bubbling laughter of children, or the steady, thrumming purr of a motorboat's engine. I'm not sure what exactly, but something here must keep time at bay.

I know what Mom would say. Give it ten years, twenty at most, and the lake will be just like everywhere else. It's only been safe because the rest of civilization doesn't want to make the drive up here, an hour off the highway, in the middle of trees and water and not much else.

But I'm not sure she's right.

The lake is pure in a way nothing else I know has ever been, and other people see that, too. It may not draw summer tourists the way it did when Dad was young, but the shore is still alive with visitors, the lake filled with afternoon boaters. Or at least, that's what I gather from the stories Dad tells me. He comes up here a few times every year, rents a trailer in the campground where we used to own a camper of our own, and boats. Just him, a boat, and the beauty of the open water.

He says he loves it.

I can't help wondering if he's lonely.

The road peels away from the lake, and the water disappears behind a wall of trees. The pavement gives way to dirt. My tires sink into potholes and jar over ruts, and I tighten my grip on the wheel. I'm close now. Another five minutes and I'll be there.

I see the sign first—*Point Sebago Resort*—then the road curves and the renters' entrance is ahead of me. I park in front of the administrative building, but leave the engine running and don't get out.

I take a deep breath and run my thumb over my engagement ring. It's a simple ring—a sleek, silver band and modest diamond—but it's perfect. Eric knew exactly what I wanted. I slide the ring from my finger and fish its box from my purse on the passenger seat. I swallow hard, slip the ring into the cushion that holds it, and return the box to my purse, reminding myself that this is only temporary. I'll be wearing it again by nightfall.

I back out of my spot and pull up behind a minivan at the security checkpoint, waiting while the attendant inside the booth issues directions to the father driving the van. The gate swings up and the minivan passes under it. The attendant beams at me when I roll down my window. I smile back.

"Hi. My dad checked in last night. Adam Boudreau. Lot 181."

The man nods, his smile still in place, and the gate lifts. The campground slips by me in a blur. I came here hundreds of times as a kid, but this is only my second time using the renters' entrance. I pass the beach then the small convenience store and at last I turn off the main road. Lot 181 is on my left.

The trailer is battered, abused by dozens of renter families that visit week after week. Dad sits in a folding chair before an empty fire pit, the ankle of one leg propped on the knee of the other and a newspaper stretched wide in his hands. He leaps to his feet when I park beside his truck.

"Al," he says, spreading his arms wide. I laugh and clamber from the Explorer. His arms envelop me. The newspaper crinkles against my back. "I was starting to think you weren't going to show."

I grin. "Traffic, Dad, and I took the back roads so I could see the lake."

"You'll see plenty of the lake," he says. "I rented a boat for the whole weekend."

I step back from him. My grin still lingers. "Of course you did."

...

My first real memories are of the lake.

The lake, the campground, and our boat are present in nearly every major memory I have from before I turned eleven. Birthday parties and summer holidays and flickers of more mundane events,

like the day I lost my front teeth and the first time I rode a bike, are all colored by the brilliant flash of sunlight off water and flooded with the heady, crisp scent of a burning campfire.

Mom is a serial mover. We lived in six houses before I turned nine, and each was newer and grander than the last, as Mom climbed the so-called corporate ladder. I blame my lackluster memory on all that moving. If we'd stayed in a house for more than two years, maybe I'd remember something of those houses, of those fractions of my life. I think Dad may have felt the same, because despite us rattling through house after house, barely staying anywhere long enough to scratch the wooden floors or repaint the walls, he insisted we keep our trailer in the campground nestled along the eastern shore of Sebago Lake. Even when we left Maine for Massachusetts and proximity to Boston, Dad clutched our camper close, demanding that we make the two-hour drive north every weekend between April and October.

And so the trailer and lake remained constant in our ever-changing lives—at least for a while.

...

Dad woke me early one day the summer of my tenth birthday, pulling back my covers and easing me off the couch. He carried me out to the car and drove us down the bumpy dirt road to the shore. Pale dawn light filtered through the trees. I rubbed sleep from my eyes.

He parked in front of the docks and led me out onto the longest one. His hand was calloused and rough in mine. He built houses. I asked him why once. He was a homemaker, he said.

The dock swayed beneath our feet, the planks creaking. We stopped at the dock's end. Before us, tethered to the dock and bobbing in the water, was a gorgeous Baja speedboat. Dad started talking, rattling off numbers—its length, maximum speed, boater capacity. His words blended into a roar in my ears, the senseless babble of a salesman. I grazed my fingers over the boat's red paint, as fierce as a sunset.

I tipped my chin back to look at him and he smiled, the leathery lines of his cheeks creasing. He squeezed my hand.

“Is it ours?”

His smile morphed into a full-fledged grin. “Do you like it, Al?”

I nodded.

...

Boating is Dad's everything. If he had to pick one thing to do for the rest of eternity, it would be boating, even if it meant leaving everything—even me—behind. It would bother him, I think, to leave me. I hope it would.

Before Dad bought the Baja, we had an old bow rider. I could sit for hours at the very tip of the boat's bow, my fingers extended to the spray, while Dad steered across the lake. When I was really little, Mom would loop her fingers through a strap on my lifejacket and keep me anchored. She hated the bow rider.

She didn't like the Baja much either. Its sleek beauty and raw power did nothing for her. Most days she refused to come with us, even if we planned to spend the whole day out there—especially on those days.

Above all else, Dad loves going down the river from Sebago Lake, which we're on, to Long Lake. The trip takes all day, and we used to leave early, often just as the sun was rising. There was this spot on the river, halfway between the lakes, where whole flocks of ducks would gather. Dad used to let me throw them bread from the boat. It was my favorite part of the trip.

Mom never came when we went down the river. Not even once as far back as I can remember.

...

The wind roars past my ears as Dad revs the throttle and sends us racing out over the lake. His rental is an old speed boat, a few years out of its prime, but still capable of tearing across the water. I sit in the passenger seat, my knees drawn to my chest, and study Dad. He stands at the wheel, one hand on the throttle. His eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, but I know they're studying the open water, calculating the best route to whatever destination he has in mind, while simultaneously checking for other boaters and rocks lurking beneath the water's surface.

He glances at me and a grin splits his face. "I have a surprise for you." The wind nearly tears his words away, but I manage to decipher them.

I raise an eyebrow.

His smile widens. "You'll see."

And I do. The ride takes twenty minutes, but it blurs by in a rush of flashing water and screaming wind so quickly that I hardly notice. Dad brings us to a stop in a small cove. A boat bobs in the water before us—a red Baja. Or at least, what used to be a red Baja. Years of sun exposure have bleached the fierce paint into a pale, blotchy pink, but I'd recognize this boat anywhere.

A true boater knows—
and loves—that the glassy
calm won't last. Whitecaps
always come again.

“How?” I whisper.

Dad's left the engine on, and we putter forward, drifting as close as Dad dares let us. “I spotted it earlier this summer. That's our girl.” He sighs, and I can't tell if it's a sigh of nostalgia or regret. “The color's a bit worse for wear, but she looks good as new otherwise.”

“I just can't believe it's still on the lake.” Truly I can't. It's been fourteen years since

I've seen this boat. We only owned it for a year, and yet just seeing it sets my heart racing. I spent whole days curled on its backseat as a kid. I learned to dive from its back platform.

“A boat like that one, treated right, could still be on this lake five years from now.” Pride rings in Dad's voice, but there's something else there too, and this time I know it's bitterness.

I brace myself, lacing my fingers tight in my lap, and keep my eyes on the Baja. The afternoon sun beats down on us. I can feel sweat beading between my shoulder blades. “Could we go down the river?”

Dad frowns at me. “It's a bit late in the day for that, Al.”

“Just halfway then?” I bite my lip. “There's some stuff I want to talk to you about.”

He doesn't say anything, but I know he's still frowning as he turns our rental away from the Baja. I try not to frown too.

...

When my mom yells, her voice rises to a shrill screech, and then as her anger grows and her patience dwindles, it drops to a hissing whisper. Dad once likened her moods to the lake on a hot summer weekend. In the morning, the water is calm, a sheet of glass as reflective as a mirror, but as the sun climbs higher so do the waves. Steady wind and reckless boaters break the glass into tossing whitecaps, sharp waves that crest and break. Boating becomes a nightmare of rough water and endless spray. When at last night settles over the lake, the whitecaps give way to nothing more than frothy waves lapping at the shore. A true boater knows—and loves—that the glassy calm won't last. Whitecaps always come again.

That, my dad said, was Mom's cycle: glass to whitecaps to deceiving calm and back again. He insisted it's that final stage of deceit that's most dangerous.

...

"We're selling this damn trailer, Adam!"

The metal step squeaked beneath me as I shifted, wrapping my arms about my knees, and glanced over my shoulder. The netting was peeling back on a corner of the screen door and I could clearly see the chipped white paint of the real door behind it.

"Calm down, Sarah." Dad sounded tired. I imagined him running his hand down his face, like a mime changing his expression with each swipe of his palm. "Ally's right outside."

A truck rumbled down the dirt road and I ducked my head into my arms to hide my face. Mom's laugh was sharp. "That's my point exactly. Our daughter is sitting in the middle of a campground with nothing to do but listen to us. She needs to be with children, participating in sports and clubs, not stuck here."

"Al loves it here." Dad's voice tightened, but as Mom gave another mocking laugh, I slipped from the steps and followed the truck down the dirt road. Trees rose up all around me, fading sunlight dappling the campsites tucked between them.

Their fight would end like all the others. Mom would win. She always did. Always.

A light flickered to life over the door of a camper to my right, and a girl raced out. Her father was right on her heels, a lighter and stack of newspapers in his hand. A woman appeared, carrying marshmallows and chocolate. Together they had all the makings of a night spent roasting S'mores over a campfire.

I wandered farther down the road. Dad didn't like me to make the mile-long walk to the beach alone, so I settled in an empty campsite and drew pictures in the dirt. When the last of the sunset's dying light faded away behind the trees, I made my way home. The girl's parents had disappeared, and she sat alone at the fire. She spotted me and waved, bounding up from her seat and across the campsite. She stuck out her hand to me. It was sticky with marshmallow. "I'm Emily," she said.

"Ally."

We must have been the same age. I could picture her sitting next to me in my fourth grade class, perched at the edge of her seat, her hand shoved eagerly into the air. The idea made me smile.

“Are you making s’mores?”

“Yup.” She leaned in close and hid her lips with one hand, as though making sure no one could lip-read her words. “But my mom ate all the chocolate.” She grinned. There was chocolate in the corner of her mouth. “We could eat marshmallows though.”

I hesitated. Dad had probably given up the fight by then, leaving Mom to debate the best way to sell the camper. They’d have no idea I left. “Sure.”

She flashed another grin and tugged me to the fire. The camper door rattled open and her mom returned with more chocolate. She smiled at me, and it was the same brilliant flash of teeth as Emily’s. Her mom was a tiny woman; she reminded me of a pixie, all light and air and happiness. She stayed with us for a few minutes, asking my name and where I lived before retreating to the trailer and leaving us before the crackling fire, a stack of graham crackers between us and chocolate smeared on our hands.

Emily kept up a constant chatter, her hands waving so wildly she dropped a marshmallow. I gave her one of mine. It was a perfect golden-brown, exactly as Dad taught me. Emily just stuck her marshmallows into the heart of the fire, let them burn, and then tugged off the blackened skin. She cooked three in the time it took me to roast one, but I didn’t speed up, not even when there was only one marshmallow left in the bag.

When at last there was a pause in her rambling, I asked if she was a renter or an owner. She didn’t understand what I meant, and I explained that renters only stay at the campground a week, Sunday to Sunday, but owners come up every weekend. She laughed and bobbed her head. Her family came up the week before. They were leaving in two days.

We ate the rest of the chocolate and even the crumbs of the graham crackers before I left. Emily made me promise to visit her the next day. She wanted to go to the beach.

Dad was waiting for me outside the trailer. His body sagged with exhaustion and his hair was mussed from him running his fingers through it. He didn’t scold me as I expected. Instead, he wrapped me in a hug. We went for a drive down to the lake and stared at the Baja together. He didn’t mention the fight, so I told him all about Emily. His shoulders slumped as I talked, and his smile was tight. It took me longer than it should have to realize I was making it worse for him, that my excitement was striking home the blow that he was losing the camper, that Mom was snatching it

from his fingers. I trailed off into silence. Dad assumed I was tired—or maybe he just didn't want to admit that he was the reason I was quiet—and he took me back to the car.

Mom was asleep when we got home. Dad tucked me in on the couch and pretended to read the newspaper at the kitchen table until I fell asleep. I knew he was pretending because he was reading the list of houses for sale. He hated that list, hated it because he always knew that someday Mom would win and our camper would be printed there, waiting for someone else to snatch it up and call it home. From my angle, I could see a sprawling lake house on the page, complete with its own dock and boathouse. The last thing I remember is Dad's long sigh.

The next day, Dad offered to take Emily out on our boat if her parents were okay with it. I rushed to see if they were. We spent the morning out on the lake until the waves become too choppy for comfort and Dad brought us back in. Emily chattered as incessantly as the night before, but now I responded in turn, laughing and joking with her. We entered a sandcastle competition that afternoon and then painted ceramics at the pavilion by the beach. Mom and Dad invited Emily's family over for dinner, and we spent the night around the fire. Our parents mixed as if they'd always been friends, with the ease that I'd only ever seen at the campground. Back home, adults had jobs and responsibilities and expectations of each other that simply didn't exist there.

Our moms sat side by side, and I realized that Mom was small too, but she lacked the daintiness of Emily's mom. Where Emily's mom was all grace and bright laughter, Mom was sharp. The planes of her cheeks were harsh, the jut of her nose angular, and her movements were calculated and cost-efficient.

Physically, our dads were nothing alike—mine was powerful, made of muscle and callus from days spent on construction sites, while Emily's was lithe, all lanky limbs and long fingers—but in action they were near perfect replicates of each other. Their laughter boomed across the campsite, echoing back at us from the trees, and their hands wove stories through the air.

I woke up early the next morning, just in time to see Emily's family packing their things into their car. I stood at the edge of our campsite and waved as their minivan disappeared down the dirt road. I waved until my arm hurt. Then I just stood and stared.

...

Dad golfed every Sunday morning. He'd get up at eight, throw his clubs into our SUV, and head off to the campground's golf course. Rarely would he be back before noon. It was his ritual. In turn, Mom made Sunday mornings our time.

She let me sleep in, though I was almost always up by nine, and then made me whatever I wanted for breakfast. Eggs, pancakes, French toast. If I could name it, she cooked it. Once, after I begged and pleaded for what felt like ages, she let me eat waffles and ice cream on the condition that I kept it a secret. Dad never found out.

We filled the rest of the morning with more activities than I could ever hope to remember. Dad took the car, so we were trapped in the campground, but I was never—not even once—bored. Some days, we sat in front of the television and watched early morning cartoons while Mom painted my nails or brushed and braided my hair. Other times, we went down to the beach and swam.

My favorite days were when we signed up for activities at the visitors' center. Few owners ever participated in the campground-led activities, but renters signed up by the dozens. Whatever we did—whether it was beach volleyball, painting ceramics, kayaking, or any number of other things—we always returned to the trailer having laughed so much my stomach hurt.

Those mornings, I think, may have been the only thing Mom liked about Maine. Or maybe it just seems that way because those were the only times she wasn't arguing with Dad. When they were together, it didn't matter what they talked about, it always ended in arguing—arguing about the decrepit state of the trailer or the time I should have been spending with my peers or how Dad should never have bought the Baja without consulting Mom first. Our last summer was defined by those arguments, and I wish, more than anything, that it hadn't been.

...

One weekend late in July, Mom didn't come to Maine with us, claiming she had too much to prepare for a conference call the next week. Dad woke me early on Saturday and led me to the car. He let me sit in the front passenger seat. We stopped for doughnuts, and he bought a loaf of bread from a gas station. Then we were off down backstreets and winding dirt roads. I knew where we were going.

We parked in a deserted parking lot and passed through a copse of trees and there before us was my favorite spot. There was a little shack on the far side of the river that served ice cream and drinks during the afternoon to passing boaters. It wouldn't open for a few hours yet. The pale dawn light cut

through the misty air and glinted off the river. Dad led me down the shoreline to a cluster of picnic tables. While we ate our doughnuts, I told him all about the movie we watched at school on Friday.

I popped the last bite of doughnut in my mouth and licked the glaze off my sticky fingers. Dad handed me three slices of bread, took three himself, and led me to the water's edge. A flock of ducks floated in the water. Most of the ducks were resting, their heads tucked beneath their wings. A dock jutted into the water, and a few ducks were curled on the planks. Others noticed our arrival and paddled toward us. One squawked. The sound pierced the quiet, and the sleeping ducks jerked awake. Dad tore off a chunk of bread and tossed it out over the water. The ducks dove for it, quacking.

We threw bread to the ducks in silence until we ran out of slices. Dad went back to the picnic table—to get more bread, I assumed—but called me after him. I knew what was coming; it was a deep ache in my bones, as sure as anything I'd ever known. I slid onto the bench opposite him and picked at the weathered wood of the tabletop.

“Al,” Dad said and I froze, my hand curling into a fist in my lap. “Your mother and I have been talking and we think it’s time to sell the camper. It hasn’t been an easy decision, kid. I want you to know that.”

I shook my head, slow at first and then wildly, my hair stinging my cheeks. “No.”

He sighed. “Al—”

“No,” I interrupted. “No, no, no. You can’t.” I fought back tears. He’d never listen if I broke down, if I acted like a little girl. “Why does she always win?”

Dad’s hand curled over mine. “Your mother—Mom,” he corrected himself, “and I made this decision together. No one won anything.”

“That’s not true.” I jerked my hand free and clasped it with the other in my lap. I couldn’t look at him. “I heard you fighting. You let her win. You always do.”

“Alexandra,” he snapped, and his voice was sharp. “Mom is not the bad guy here. There are no bad guys, do you understand?”

I didn’t say anything. My nod was jerky and rough. I wondered if Dad could see through it. He was lying and I hated it. I hated him for it. He tried to convince me to feed the ducks again, but I

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refused. He tossed the rest of the bread into the water in whole slices. The ducks went wild. I started for the car.

Dad opened the front passenger door for me, but I scrambled into the back and curled up against the window. I stared through the trees, trying to catch a glimpse of the river, of the flash of sunlight off water. I couldn't see anything.

I found my voice as we crunched out of the gravel parking lot. "Can we go down the river tomorrow?" The next day was Sunday and we'd need to go back to Massachusetts, but we used to do it all the time before leaving.

Dad glanced over his shoulder at me and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Al. No time. I promised Mom we'd be home for dinner."

He turned back to the road, and I swiped away a tear as it rolled down my cheek.

...

I don't realize we've reached the river's halfway point until we're docking. It's only as I leap from the boat and fumble with the lines to tie it up that I recognize where we are. The rope slips in my hand, and the stern of the boat swings out away from the dock.

The shack that sold homemade ice cream on the opposite bank is gone, replaced by a convenience store. A sign in its window displays a bunch of prepackaged frozen treats. One long dock runs down the shore before the shop, and a dozen boats are lined up along it, their owners milling about on the grass or hovering inside the safety of the store's air conditioning.

I don't see a duck anywhere. There isn't even a feather floating on the water. The tension that's been gathering in my chest since I asked to come here seems to have my heart in a chokehold. I swallow hard and realize that maybe Mom's right: the lake is changing.

"There's a spot up the river where the ducks still gather," Dad says.

The grip on my heart loosens slightly. He remembers the ducks. At least that's the same. I wrap my arms around my waist and force a smile. My thumb rubs over my bare ring finger. "But we didn't bring any bread."

Dad hesitates a moment before reaching under his seat. He produces two things: his battered, old, Red Sox hat, which he tugs over his windblown hair, and a plastic supermarket bag. He tosses me the bag. "I thought we might end up here. Stuck that in the boat last night, just in case."

Hidden in the plastic is a loaf of bread. The tightness in my chest surges back. My smile falters. “Well, show me the ducks, then.”

He laughs, pockets the boat’s keys, and joins me on the dock. The walk is a short one, not even ten minutes along the river’s bank, just far enough to distance us from the ruckus of the convenience store. We make it in silence.

The bank of the river is steep here, but Dad leads me to a rickety, old staircase and we climb down to the water’s edge. The stairs end abruptly—they probably led to a dock years ago—so I sink onto the bottom step, fish two slices of bread from the bag, and hand one to Dad. The ducks float five yards out in the water, at the edge of the shade from the tree overhead. Most don’t pay us any attention. A few drift closer, and one catches my attention. It’s watching us with beady eyes, its feathers ruffled, as though we caught it in the middle of cleaning itself and now it’s too embarrassed to proceed.

“So, Al?”

I rip off a chunk of bread and toss it to the disgruntled duck. It paddles forward timidly. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don’t know how to bring this up, how to dredge up events that lie five and fifteen years in the past respectively. My heart races. “Why’d you and Mom sell the trailer?”

He falters mid-throw, and his piece of bread makes it only a few yards. None of the ducks will come close enough to get it.

“Back then, you said it was a joint decision, but was it?” The bread in my finger crumbles to bits and falls into the river. I don’t get another slice. “I don’t understand why you gave up the trailer so easily.”

“I didn’t give up the trailer, Ally.” Dad takes off his baseball hat and smooths his hair. “Your mother and I decided it was best to stop coming up here every weekend. Best for you, so you could get involved in sports and clubs and make more friends back home. Best for your mother’s career—and my own for that matter.”

“But you loved it up here.”

“Of course, I did. And I still do.” He shakes his head, setting aside his bread. “But I also love you, Al. And I loved your mom.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why’d you love Mom?”

“I—” He falters and shakes his head again. “Why does anyone love someone?”

“I don’t know, Dad.”

But I think I do know. I love Eric for dozens of reasons—his ability to crack a joke at just the right time, his honesty, the way he is with his nephews, his brilliance, his relationship with his parents, the dimple in his left cheek when he laughs. What I don’t know is why Dad loved Mom.

I have a theory, though.

“It’s been so long, Al. Why is this coming up now?”

“Five years isn’t that long.” I wrap my arms around my knees and rest my chin on them. I study him out of the corner of my eye, taking in the deep, leathery wrinkles around his eyes and the scar that runs through his eyebrow. “You truly can’t come up with a single reason? You married her. Surely you knew then.”

He presses his palms against his eyes and rubs. “Her fire. Her strength. Her control.” He breathes out in one long exhale. “But those are also the things that tore us apart.”

I stare at the ducks.

Dad loved Mom because she was like the whitecaps. He loved her for her power, just as he loves the whitecaps for theirs. There’s something beautiful in power, in the raw ability to sweep past obstacles. Day after day, the whitecaps gather and roll across the lake, steady, reliable. Mom was the same. But too much power becomes tiresome. The waves wear at the beach, weathering stones and battering docks. A person can only take so much before it overwhelms him.

Boaters leave in the fall and the lake freezes over in the winter, and the whitecaps cease to be until the next summer. Dad received no such reprieve.

So maybe it wasn’t that Mom wanted to leave him. Maybe it was that he wanted to get out. Maybe Mom didn’t win. Maybe Dad did.

...

After our last summer in Maine, Mom and Dad held it together for a while. Dad threw himself into his work. He owned his own construction company by the time I was twelve, and the company was so big by the time I graduated high school that he had people doing just about everything for him. He went golfing every day. Mom continued climbing the corporate ladder until she was her company’s manager of sales for all of New England. I joined clubs and sport teams. Before I was even

a freshman in high school, I'd played softball, basketball, field hockey, and soccer. I ran track in high school.

They were good at faking a happy marriage for a while, but when the cracks started to show, they appeared too quickly to be covered, fissuring through the house, rocking us to our cores. Back then, I thought Dad tried to hide it, straining to patch us up, while Mom just didn't seem to care, but now I'm not so sure about that. It may have been what I wanted to see, but I don't think it's what I saw.

They fell apart for good the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college. Dad took me up to Maine that April. It was the first time I'd been back since I was ten. The way he told the story to me, in an honest, broken moment out in the middle of the lake, Mom simply slipped him divorce papers over their morning coffee and asked to have them signed by the time she was back from work. There was no obligatory separation stage, no living in different houses and pretending to fix things. Mom kept it simple. She made a decision and that was it. Like always.

And Dad went with it, because it was the easy thing, the effortless thing—and more than that, it was the thing he wanted.

...

We began packing the second week of September, the weekend after my tenth birthday, and finished two weeks later, a full month before we normally stopped coming up north. I helped Dad load boxes into the back of our SUV while Mom ran through the camper one last time, searching for knickknacks or belongings we missed. She didn't find anything. I wasn't sure she would've bother repacking even if she did.

I hesitated before climbing into the car. My feet itched to run into the trailer. I didn't want to leave, not if it meant never coming back. I thought of our Baja and Emily and the smoky warmth of a campfire. They would all become my past. Without the lake, my future loomed bleak and unending.

I had no time to act. Dad boosted me into the backseat with a tight smile and closed the door. Moments later he and Mom were seated up front. We backed out of the driveway. The road curved ahead, and the car bounced over the ruts in the packed dirt. I swiveled around and peered over the backseat, watching the trees close in on the camper, hiding it from my view—turning it into a memory.

I grasped at everything I knew of the trailer: the sunken fire pit, the battered couch, the flickering television, the squeak of the linoleum floor beneath my toes, the *thwap* of the screen door when I ran

in and out. I yanked those memories to my chest and clutched them close. As the campground fell away behind us, I forced all that intimate knowledge to stay clear, to brighten and focus. I wouldn't forget it. I wouldn't forget the trailer. I refused to.

...

Now, looking back on it all, I wonder if the lake was ever as perfect as I remember. Maybe it wasn't the lake that was perfect, but the past itself.

I suck in a deep breath and push myself to my feet. Dad follows my lead and we wander back down the river toward our tethered boat. The bag of bread, hardly touched, dangles from my hand.

"You asked why I brought this up," I say. My voice is quiet, but Dad jumps, as though he expected an attack, not an explanation. I run my thumb over my ring finger and smile. "Eric proposed. Two weeks ago." Dad glances at my hand, and I laugh. "My ring's in my car. I wanted to talk to you first, before you knew."

What I don't say is that I came here to answer questions I'd never dare ask him—was divorce something I'd never escape from? Did it not matter how much I loved Eric now? Were we destined to fall apart the same way Mom and Dad did?

The truth, I think, is that I'll never know, not until it's happened. Maybe Eric and I will last. Maybe we won't. Either way, I love him now, and that's all that needs to matter.

Dad breaks into a grin and claps his hand on my shoulder. "Congratulations, Al!" His smile falters, and he stops walking. He holds me at arms length, his gaze steady. "What happened to me and your mother...it doesn't need to happen to you and Eric."

I rest my hand on his and squeeze. "I know, Dad."

We reach our rental boat and Dad stoops to untie the front line, but I reach out, grab his arm, and pull him into a hug. His arms wrap tight around me as I press my face into the cotton of his shirt. He's sweaty from a day spent in the sun and a bug buzzes by my ear, and I realize that this hug isn't perfect. It won't fix everything. It doesn't make Dad's part in the divorce okay. It doesn't absolve him from guilt.

But it doesn't need to.

Uncle, I Saw You on TV

Doha Aboul-Fotouh

Uncle, it actually wasn't me that saw you on TV and if I had I wouldn't have even noticed—I would have been on my phone or picking at my nails.

But my parents watch TV old-fashioned and

that night in Egypt after everyone went to sleep—mid-afternoon here in sweaty Katy—they were watching some recording, grainy and full of faces with saved-by-the-bell glasses, and I heard them gasp and my dad stood up, grabbing at the arm of his hard cotton-stuffed chair.

My mom had paused you.

They were mid-afternoon watching a lecture on MBC 2 whose title translated to *Religion and the World*; I had made their tea.

The only snippet I caught before candy-crush-text-whistle distraction

was *you are all leaving this world* from the neat-bearded-moon-glasses'd sheikh who sat cross-legged in front of you and the many cross-legged men and then the sound that everyone in the audience made humming in agreement but otherwise uninterested.

So, Uncle, I was distracted but when I looked up—I met you.

Your elbow resting on the top of an upraised knee, a *tasbeeh* in your hand,

My mom pressed play.

You nodded once, smoothed the beads between my dad's square-ended fingers and looked down for just a moment, and then the camera slid past you so easily.

"*Aammic Mohamed*," said my mother, "your Uncle Mohamed."

"He always dressed well," said your brother, and then, "rest in peace."

I've seen you in yellow-cornered photos and the large portrait in my father's office behind his printer, and in my cousin's edged smile and her son's big bent nose.

I've heard you in my father's nostalgia.

Uncle, I know how you stole pens for him. I know you shared a towel until your mother could afford another. I know you bought him hard-boiled eggs with your lunch money. I know how you lived the American dream in dusty 1970s Cairo, how you rose out of the garbage-pile ashes of your family's village without a father and you built high-rises.

Uncle, you built art deco high-rises by the Nile and they were so tall and so gorgeous before becoming inevitably sand-colored and everyone moved in but my father because my father your brother moved out and out and out to humid ranch-house Katy. I know how your death gave

my
cousins fear that didn't surface until they parented.

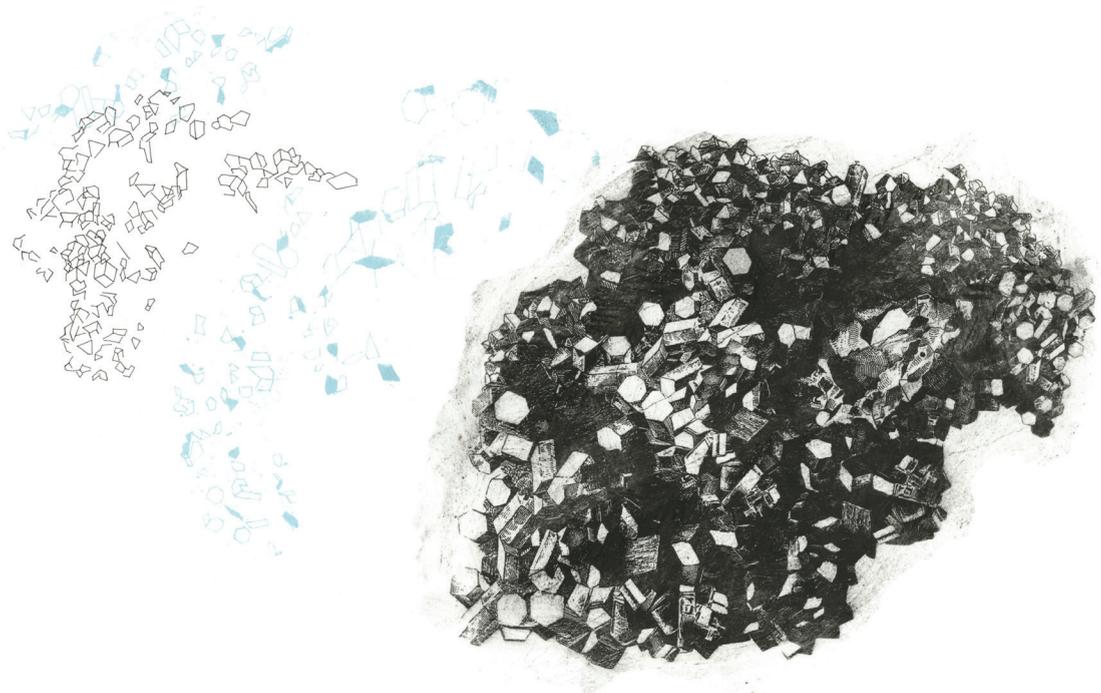
I watched them spoon mountain honey into their children's clam-shell mouths;
Mountain honey prevents cancer. Camel milk prevents cancer. Cardiovascular exercise prevents
cancer.

Your grandchildren are the most camel-milk-mountain-honeyed athletes I've ever known, Uncle, but I bet they've never seen you on TV.

I'd never seen you move before. I know you didn't know and we sure didn't know—
but when you went to that lecture after work some day before 1989 in your handsome
pin-striped grey suit that jitters dizzily on the screen—

Uncle, when you went, we saw you.







Miguel Coyula

Interview by Cassy Gibson

Miguel Coyula is a filmmaker and writer from Havana, Cuba, best known for the films *Red Cockroaches* and *Memories of Overdevelopment*, both of which have garnered international accolades. A noted member of the Microcinema Movement, Coyula's low-budget digital productions and intricate, innovative storytelling methods are remarkable experiments in both form and process. A writer as well as a filmmaker, Coyula recently published his first novel, *Red Sea, Blue Evil*.



You made your first film at the age of 17. What was it like having a vision at such a young age and what led you to pursue the arts as a career path?

Well, at the time I didn't know what I wanted to do. I thought I wanted to study design because my dad was an architect. But when I was twelve I wrote a short story and I was also doing comic books—not professionally, just in school, drawing in notebooks. And then, when I was 17, my aunt came from Miami and gave me this old VHS camcorder and I started playing with it and realized it was the combination of literature and comic books; I could do moving images and have the characters talk, so it became the ideal expression. In that moment, I realized that that's what I wanted to do.

Do you have any advice for young adults who are considering pursuing creative work?

I think that the most important thing is to be sincere with yourself first. It's the opposite of what they say, that you have to think of the audience, because if it is sincere for you, it will always be sincere for an audience, whereas moral nourishment is not important. [It's important] Just to

be able to communicate something that otherwise that audience would not get. If you are being completely sincere, they will receive something.

You're known mostly for your filmmaking, but you recently published a novel. Can you tell me more about that? What led you to write and publish this novel? How would you describe it?

Well, I actually wrote it fourteen years ago when I was still doing my short films. It's a science fiction novel that takes place in an alternative reality. I wouldn't say it's the future, but it's a reality where communism has stayed behind. It's a very strange world where there's acid rain and genetic manipulation. There are many characters. I don't think I could describe the whole story, but it basically centers on this strange reality.

Your writing seems to be heavily influenced by your Cuban culture. How do you see your work in relation to Cuban literature and filmmaking?

It's interesting that my latest film has a lot to do with Cuba, but most of my films don't. Basically, my sensibility comes from other parts of the world. I began with Japanese animation in elementary school. I'm influenced by European films of the 60s and 70s and American filmmakers like Orson Wells and David Lynch. There are also Cuban filmmakers that I like. So it's a hybrid of many different styles. In the end, you really digest all of these influences and that's what creates a style of your own.

As a director and a published author, how would you define the relationship between writing and filmmaking? Do you see them as separate aspects of your craft or one in the same?

Because I write, shoot, and edit my films, I see it all connected. It's all part of a sense of rhythm for me. It's something that you do in music—you do in writing. It's just the idea of conveying an idea and how you go from one sentence to another, from one shot to another, from one note to another. It's similar in that sense for me.

What is your favorite part of the creative process?

The editing, to me, is the favorite. That's when it all comes together. You can discover a lot of things that you actually didn't plan. In the way I work, I don't do a film in chronological order. In most productions, you write the script, you shoot, and you edit, and those three stages are their own. You couldn't really go back and forth. Many times I'm editing and I come up with an idea. Just putting two shots together can give me idea to create a third shot, a transition, or add a line of dialogue. Working fluidly allows it to really come together for me, because there are so many discoveries.

I heard you were doing some filming here on campus during your visit. What kind of movie will Rice be featured in?

It takes place in the same universe as my novel. Actually, the movie I'm making takes place before the novel starts. I was filming images of laboratories and hallways. I'll add my actors later.

Any last statements about the creative process or your philosophy on creativity?

A lot of filmmakers start and think, "I'm not going to do this film because I don't have the budget." The advantage of working this way, with limited money, is that you can really let your intuition flow and come up with things that you otherwise couldn't even plan on paper. The work becomes more intense. I would say that's an advantage of working on a low budget – the obstacles lead you to find a way to work around them that enriches the process.



The Pool Man's Daughter

Zara Khan

Therese, wearing silver slip-ons and a scowl, strode into the den and reported that Wagner was sick.

From the form lying listlessly before the television—her mother—floated the reply, “Have you done anything about it?”

Surprised somewhat by the question, Therese shook her head, her crown of curls dancing.

“Well, your father’s probably around,” her mother yawned.

At the dismissal, Therese slid out the back door. Her father, after having adopted the pool for his current pet project, was to be found usually in or around it. It had been drained before winter, and he had been trying for a month now to refill it, meeting with only piddling success. “Must be some problem with our water line,” he mused at dinner—and at lunch, at breakfast, and all times in-between. He was fast approaching the point where the neighbors would use the word “pool” in identifying him, just as he had been “Sir Stainless Steel” last September or “Magnolia Man” last March.

He beamed up at his daughter as she made her way over in her silver slip-ons. “Come out to help your old man, Therese?”

He really was rather old. He was synced to the sun, waking and sleeping in solemn deference to its rising and setting. He wrote letters in the morning to his remaining relatives in the Balkans, stretched and recited several passages from memory of Virgil and Milton, then shrugged into his thin tweed jacket and walked the two miles to the university. Though a professor of mathematics, he was asked often by the Literature Department to hold guest lectures, and he took particular delight in these opportunities. He would stand before a group of undergraduates, tilt his white-haired head

to one side in eager appraisal of the room, clear his throat exactly once and begin, “Chaucer was an absolute rascal.”

Therese had no intention of helping her father with the pool, and she let him know this. “Wagner’s sick,” she added.

“How’s that?” he asked, righting the glasses that seemed always to want to tumble from his head.

“He threw up on my rug,” she said.

“Dr. Arkin is probably still in. It’s just, what, two-thirty? You can walk Wagner over.”

“But my rug,” Therese carped.

Her father glanced at her. Eighteen, tall and striking, she was nothing like him. She had grey eyes that suggested a depth that he knew she didn’t possess, that she had never possessed. When she was younger, he would do his best to breathe life into the characters of Andersen and Aesop at her bedside, slipping into lilting tones for fairy voices, letting a sliver of his mother tongue influence the voices of foreign characters. Therese never asked those sorts of inconsequential questions of which children are so fond—“What was the princess wearing? Does the king have a brother? What happened to the frog?” She would usually turn her head on her pillow and fall straightaway to sleep. Only once did she poke her father’s cheek with her tiny finger and make a comment.

“I don’t like you or your books,” she stated. Then she turned her head on her pillow and fell straightaway to sleep. He stowed the Aesop on his topmost bookshelf and donated the other books to the library on his walk the next morning.

Looking at Therese now, her earrings glinting under the light from the pale sun, he said, “Go clean your rug.”

The corners of her mouth were drawn into an immediate frown. A smile appeared so rarely on her face that he didn’t have any recent memory of what it looked like. He doubted seriously that there was any photographic evidence of it; her face in photos, even in those fading ones from vacations to Cape Cod and the Adirondacks, vacillated between stormy and stony.

“You know where the cleaning supplies are,” he continued. He stepped back to the pool.

“Can’t you just do it?” Her arms were crossed.

“My priority right now is the pool, Therese.”

“Who cares about the pool? You don’t even swim.”

He swam in the university pool every day, twenty laps before his afternoon vector calculus class, twenty more before retrieving his tweed jacket from his office and walking back home. He had excitedly told Therese just a few days ago about the upcoming Faculty Swim Meet, about how his colleagues had approached him with a proposal to form a team called The Pisces, stylized “πscēs”.

“Even if I don’t swim, you should,” he reminded her. “It’s good exercise.”

“Oh, I hate it!” she cried with a pathetic imitation of passion.

She had been placed on the local team on her fourth birthday and had continued swimming for the next fourteen years out of habit rather than interest. She was awkward only when she swam. She avoided submerging herself entirely in the water, claiming that she didn’t want the chlorine to ruin her hair. Her coach likened her to a one-winged seagull.

“It’s good exercise,” he repeated.

There had been ballet lessons and a month-long flirtation with the flute, cooking classes at the community center and a semester of sculpture. She emerged from each unamused, unaltered, and, after the sculpting course, unwilling to try anything new.

“What about Wagner?” she asked.

What about Wagner? Wagner had arrived home with him after work one day, sleeping in a cardboard box. Therese was eleven when she first peered into the cardboard box and studied Wagner’s pink nose. She had informed her father that it would be best to return him.

“But wouldn’t it be nice to have a playmate?” he asked, bewildered.

“No. I don’t want him,” she said.

“But he’ll be so fun! You can teach him tricks and—”

“I’d rather not. If you want, you may keep him.”

“Well, we’re certainly keeping him,” he said, quite uncertainly.

“You ought to name him, then.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“I’d rather not.”

He swallowed his worry. “We could call him...Wagner. Homage to an excellent composer, and a good pun, too, the way he wags that tail. What do you think, Therese?”

She didn’t know who Wagner was or what a pun was, but nodded once, then returned to her room.

There had been trips to psychiatrists. The resolute Dr. Eger prescribed a host of medications with the aims of curing Therese's "mild depression, insomnia, ennui and lethargy," while Dr. Rand insisted that Therese be administered was an herbal extract of spearmint and chrysanthemum. Therese refused to take any of the medications, and Dr. Rand was stripped of his license after officials found that he had recommended toxic milkweed to a dozen or so patients.

Did Therese have friends? Did Therese need friends? She never asked to bring anyone back from school. He had introduced her to the children of all of his colleagues, but she avoided them and they consequently avoided her. Even before she had had her braces removed, though, there were boys, unwelcome, present in droves. They clustered around her window with guitars at night, drunk or dared. The neighborhood watch would chase them away after hearing Wagner's relentless barking. "Wary Wagner," the neighbors took to calling him, or sometimes simply "Watchdog."

The neighbors had no name for Therese.

Now, Therese repeated, "What about Wagner?"

"Take him to Dr. Arkin..." her father responded absently. A second later, he blinked.

"Actually, I can walk him over."

She looked at him with eyes that contained a washed-out mirth.

"I thought your priority was the pool," she teased.

"Who cares about the pool? You don't even swim," he said, trying to mimic her playful tone. He was met with only piddling success.

Sparrow Banding

Gregory Aird

Of course I noticed the intricate markings
painted onto its plumage,
the artistic strokes of ochre and white
nestled between the streaks of black,

like gaps separating exposed book spines
on a shelf. But when I reached out to touch
the nervous, feathered mass ensnared
in the vice grip of an index and middle finger,

I felt through its paper skin and hollow bones
the rapid pulse pumping out a voiceless SOS.
And I couldn't hear you calling out
to smile for a picture.

I was lost in the black orb of its eye, a one-way mirror
reflecting a world of demigods, hiding behind it
a space where all I could hear was
silence,

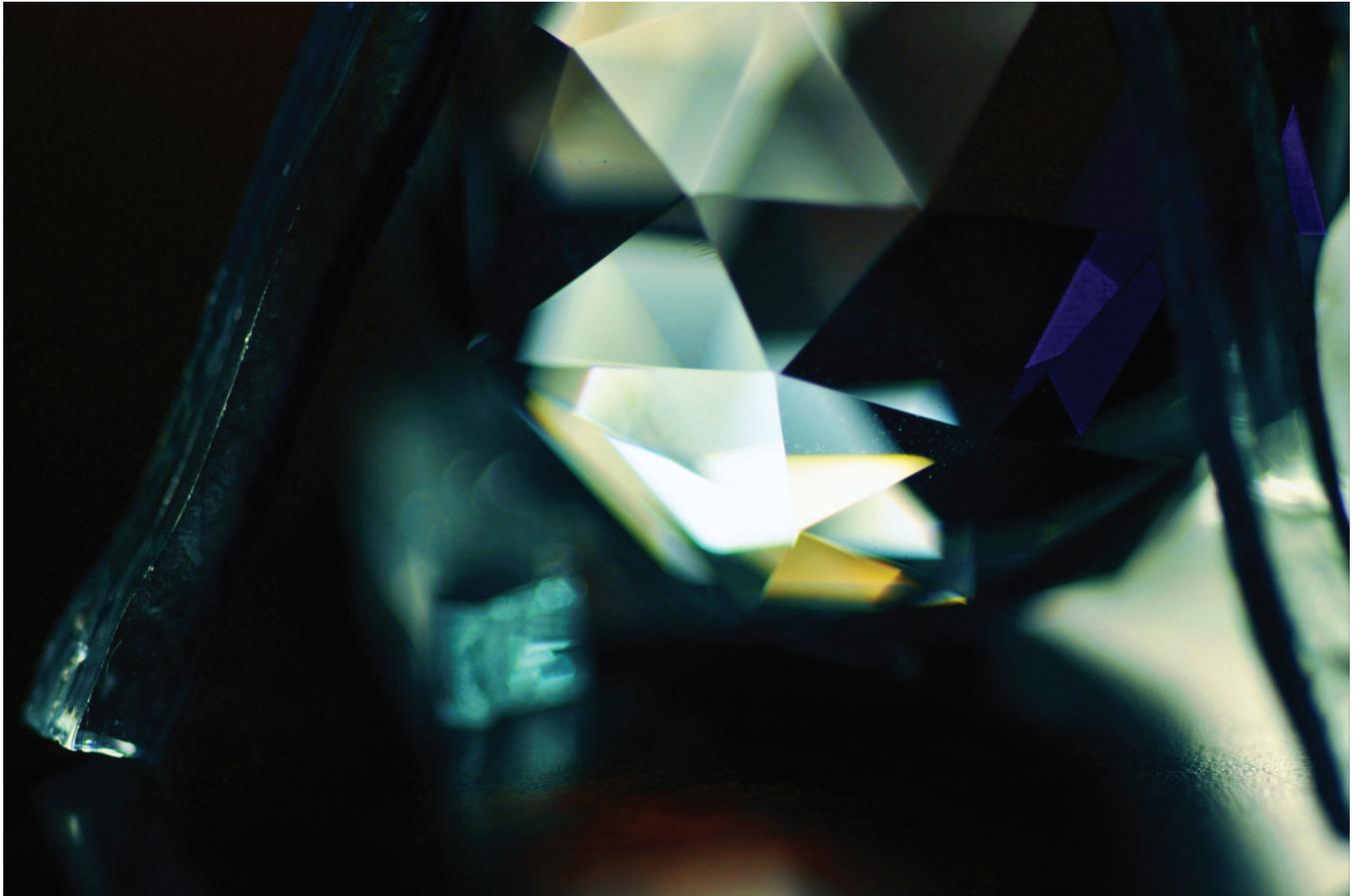
the kind that falls
when a bird sits on a nest hidden in the undergrowth,
wondering why her mate is so late to return.

Vasily Kandinsky's Sketch

160A

Doha Aboul-Fotouh

Well, if you wanted to vibrate my soul—
you've done it.
I crossed the room for you,
you with your many round eyes aggressing me.
I don't want to look
away. I'm watching an attack;
it's the bystander effect and I haven't called anyone
to help. Swathes of pink/black/powder-blue slash the
canvas in their movement. I'm not sure that you'll stay
there or give one last shudder
and melt.
I'm not even sure how I pinned you
down with my gaze.



Shine
Artist: Ronan Allencherril

A Practical Issue

Michelle Doughty

There was nothing to do at Ridgeview but get fit, so Rich stacked the weights on the bar. He sank into the bench's thin black cushion and leaned his head back, checking the distance from his eyelevel to the weights, from his hands to the center of the bar, from his center of gravity to the floor. He let the bar down for five seconds and pushed back up in two.

"Shouldn't you have a spotter?"

Breathe, press, five. Breathe, shake—

"Hello-o-o? Rich?"

Six. Exhaustion spread across his chest in tightly compressed heat, and he refused to make a sound. Seven.

"You should have a spotter. Like a sponsor, but for weights."

Rich tilted his head back to see the face of his roommate floating above the bench. Geoff was young, just twenty-one, and Geoff was a heroin addict. Rehab clients weren't supposed to classify each other by substance, because "our addictions do not define us," but they did. Geoff was a heroin addict, and Rich was an alcoholic. Five days ago, at the start of Ridgeview Recovery Center's ninety-day inpatient rehabilitation program, they had been assigned to share room 216. Geoff had taken this to mean that they ought to be friends.

Rich let the bar hit the rack, releasing it with a carefully muffled clang.

"Nine," he said.

"How's your workout going?" Geoff asked.

"Fine," said Rich. He rubbed at his shoulders and arms, where all-consuming ache was settling, focusing and grounding him.

“Hey, that rhymes,” said Geoff, with a bark of wide-mouthed laughter. His teeth were porcelain-white from recent crowns and veneers. “You’re a poet and you don’t even know it.”

“Geoff, why did you interrupt me in the middle of my last set?”

“You know, nine—fine?” Geoff perched on the bench next to him, rocking his feet from heel to toe, heel to toe.

“What are you even doing up this early?” Rich asked.

“I thought maybe I could try this out,” Geoff said. His feet kept dancing and his knees were bouncing up and down. He twitched more than Jordan hopped up on a juice box.

“This?” Rich asked. When he stood from the bench, another addict strode up to call dibs. In the hour since Rich had arrived, the gym had gotten crowded.

“This,” repeated Geoff, gesturing at the entire gym and the men inside it. “You know, I figured it was time to walk the walk, health-wise.”

“Look, I’ve got to go up and take a shower, so maybe...” Rich trailed off as he grabbed his keys and began to weave his way out of the gym, past the slamming weights and whirring treadmills. Geoff followed him.

“This is the end of your workout?” Geoff asked.

“Wasn’t it going to be the beginning of yours?”

“Not if I’m alone it’s not,” said Geoff. “So if this is the end, since when have you been up?”

“Since six,” said Rich. He walked with all the grace of an un-oiled tin man, while Geoff kept bounding ahead of him and trotting back before spinning around and jumping ahead again.

“First things first, huh?” said Geoff. “Here: I’ve got the door.”

Rich thanked him, and they walked down the salamander-orange halls in a semblance of togetherness, past the PT room and the half-dozen individual and group therapy rooms.

“Is this a normal thing?” Geoff asked. “Going to the gym?”

“It’s an almost-every-morning thing. You just probably don’t hear me getting up.”

“Oh, I do!” said Geoff. “I just always thought it was you taking a piss or something.”

They strolled through the courtyard past the chapel, where the “nondenominational worship leader” was rearranging the circle of plastic chairs back into rows. The night-shift counselors were drooping at their posts while their replacements were only just finishing their coffee.

“Oh,” said Rich. “Well, I can hear you when you come in late at night.”

“Midnight’s not late,” Geoff laughed. He opened the door to their copy-and-paste room, filled with two twin beds with wave-patterned bedspreads and two small grey desks scrunched up against opposite pale pink walls.

Rich kept his possessions tucked out of sight, except for a few sheets of half-crumpled paper scattered across his desk: the drafts of letters he had written but never sent to his wife Shannon and daughter Jordan. Geoff preferred to use the floor as another drawer, with piles of clothes covering the carpet, addiction-themed books in haphazard stacks, and a rolled yoga mat up against the wall. Rich hadn’t had a roommate since college, and he hadn’t missed it.

“Let’s say I get up early,” Geoff said. “Then would you teach me how to lift weights? It looks fun.”

“It’s not fun,” Rich said. He leaned against the wall next to the bathroom, tugging the shoes off his feet.

“Rewarding, then!” Geoff said.

“Depends on your perspective,” Rich said, lining up his shoes in the bottom of the shared closet. “For you, probably not.”

“It looks metaphorical.”

Rich paused with one sock on his foot and one in his hand. “What?”

“Oh, you know,” Geoff said. “Like, *pain is the touchstone of our spiritual growth* and all that.”

“Well, lifting is painful, but that doesn’t mean that it won’t not—nevermind,” Rich said. He ducked into the bathroom and tried to close the door, but Geoff’s voice held it open.

“So will you help me?” Geoff asked. “We have Individual at the same time, so we could do it right before!”

“There won’t be enough time to shower.”

“You don’t have to shower immediately!”

“I do. In fact, I’m trying to shower now.”

“I’ll let you go in a sec; just promise me you’ll—”

Rich shut the door and turned the shower on. The hesitant sputter of water drowned out Geoff’s talk of spotters and sponsors, and Rich let his head fall back

The insides of his
elbows were riddled
with holes, black
and old and gaping.

into the spray while he waited for the endorphins to take hold. A workout was nowhere near as quick or powerful as a good stiff drink, but it was something.

After nearly sixteen years with Shannon, fifteen of those living together, fourteen of those married, Rich panicked each morning he woke up alone in a twin bed. It took his subconscious a few anxious seconds to reorient itself, and then he jumped up and flicked the lights on. Geoff threw his hands up to block the light, glaring at his roommate through the cracks between his fingers. His hands cast three different tints of shadow on his face.

“There’d better be a fire,” he said.

“C’mon, get up,” said Rich. “I’m getting dressed. You should too.”

“Not in the middle of the fucking—”

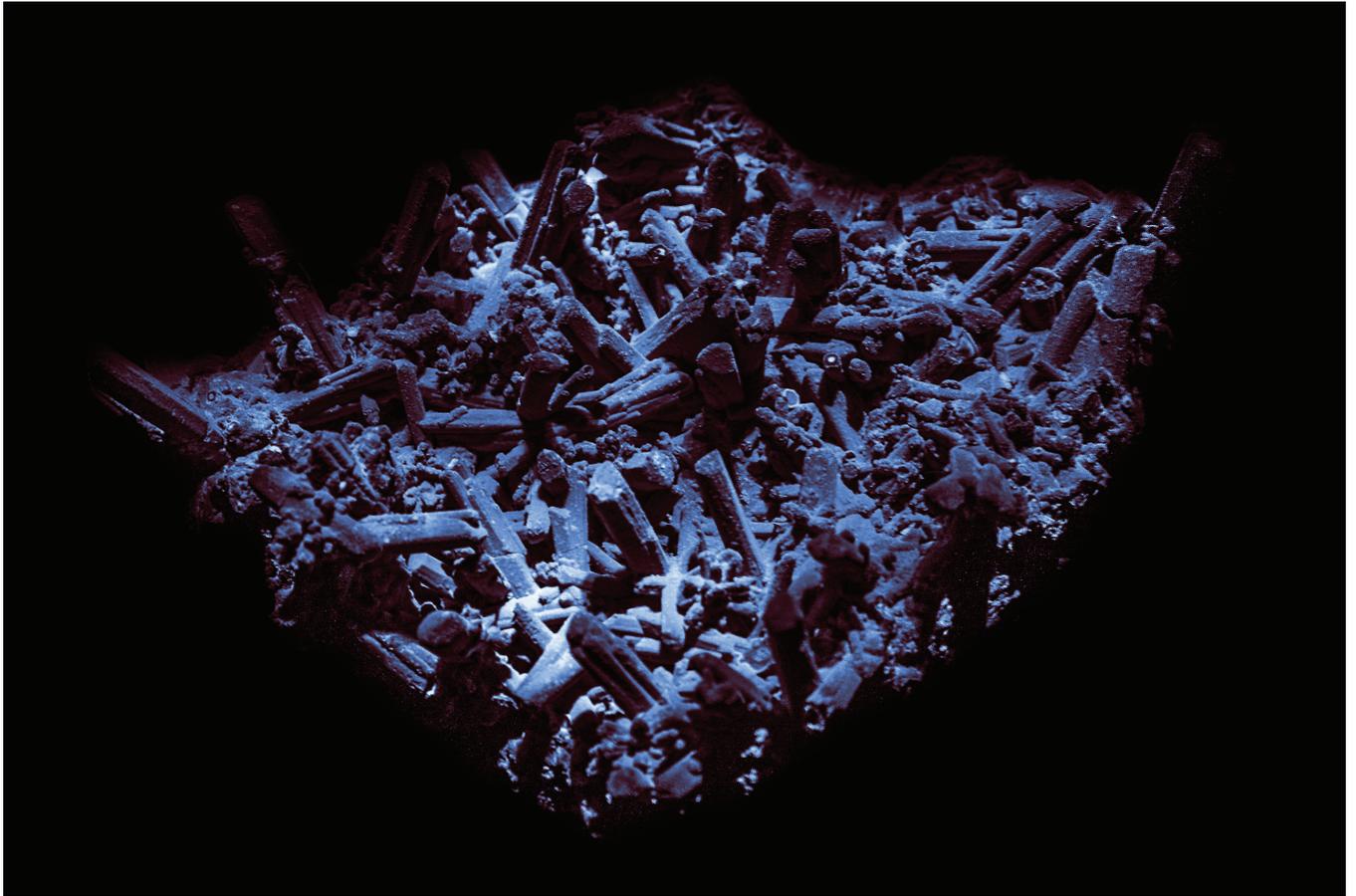
“Hey, I’m not the one who wants to do this,” said Rich, who knew he wasn’t telling the entire truth. He blamed the boredom, mostly, and his sponsor’s voice in his head reminding him that he needed something different. Rich couldn’t just keep being himself but without drinking, Javi always said. His entire personality was susceptible to change, and worth the change, if it would end in sobriety. If nothing else, Geoff was definitely a change.

“Do you even have proper gym clothes?” Rich asked.

Geoff crawled out of his bed, leaving it unmade behind him, with the flat sheet ripped from the foot of the bed and tangled up near the pillow. He grabbed a pair of basketball shorts from the floor. After digging through his mound of not-quite-clean-not-quite-dirty long-sleeve shirts, he finally donned a plain blue t-shirt.

Rich had expected collapsed veins, abscesses, or persistent infection, but Geoff had different injuries from other addicts. The insides of his elbows were riddled with holes, black and old and gaping. Rich couldn’t tell whether these were recent injuries or if this was just how Geoff’s arms had scarred over. He realized that his roommate must have put considerable effort into concealing his arms until then.

“Hey, c’mon, let’s move. First morning’s the hardest,” said Rich, who was lying again.



After that first workout, Geoff convinced a reluctant Rich to stretch for fifteen minutes. Soon enough stretching after their workout became another routine in the blurred days of meeting in the same rooms talking to the same people about the same things (drinking and drugs: they are bad).

A dozen days into the program, Rich found himself camped out once again on the mats in the corner of the gym, trying to press his forehead to his shins.

In the middle of the hamstring stretch, Geoff said, "I almost died."

"What?" Rich asked.

"My rock bottom," Geoff said. "I took too much, and I almost died. Then my parents sent me here."

"OK."

"Just thought you should know," Geoff said, sliding his feet out and pressing his forearms flat against the ground between them. He motioned for Rich to do the same. "And besides, you never mentioned yours."

"No, I didn't." When Rich tried to mimic the stance, the twinges in his legs and back reminded him that Geoff was closer to his daughter's age than his own. "Mine is thoroughly average."

"But isn't it still important?" Geoff asked. "Like, for your recovery? To talk about it?"

"I don't remember most of it."

"Come on, I've pulled that before; you have to remember something. Maybe the type of drink, or what you were up to beforehand?"

Rich brought his legs back in and shrugged his arms into a tricep stretch.

"Whiskey," he said. "Driving home."

"Don't just recite events," Geoff scolded. "Give me some *emotion*. How do you remember *feeling*?"

Rich paused while he inched his hand down his back, feeling his arm tighten like an old rubber band. He remembered collapsing onto the couch, trying to process the spin of the Earth, and then Shannon had leaned over and asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing," he had said. "When's dinner?"

"We already ate dinner," she had said. There had been something strange happening at the corners of her eyes and at her neck, but she was too out of focus for him to see what was wrong. "Do you remember what we ate?"

The trembling in her neck might have been her pulse. Shannon's heart had been speeding up while Rich's slowed down. That night he slowed so much that unconsciousness caught up and ran him over; he fell under its wheels before he could even answer Shannon's question.

"Drunk," Rich said eventually, releasing his arm. "I felt drunk."

"Then...?" Geoff pressed. "Come on, then what?"

"Then...then Shannon thought I had a stroke and took me to the hospital and found that I had a BAC of thirty-eight and my car was half-wrecked from a hit and run *I* did, and no one was hurt but Jordan had seen me stumbling around and Shannon filed for divorce the next day because apparently she'd had the papers waiting for *months*," Rich said. He stood and headed for the room, and Geoff followed.

"You're right," Geoff said. "That was actually pretty standard."

"That wasn't it," said Rich. He was annoyed, and he could trace the annoyance to his disappointment in Geoff. He wasn't sure why he expected his child of a roommate to understand, when no one else had, when they had all accepted the divorce as a natural low-point.

"Then what was?" Geoff asked.

Losing Shannon and starting to lose Jordan too should have been an epiphany. *The* epiphany. He should have fallen long enough or landed hard enough to give himself an aversion for alcohol, but he didn't. The wisdom from his rock bottom, like the effect of countless other life-changing moments whose opportunities he ignored and whose circumstances he could no longer remember, faded within a day. So he drank when he got out of the hospital.

"It was the day after," Rich grunted, and he refused to discuss it further, because talking with Geoff wasn't going to change his life either.

Rich and Geoff's group met in room 103, right next to the chapel, at five o'clock every evening. A few days after Rich and Geoff traded rock bottoms, the group started preparing for the upcoming family therapy session. With a little luck and a lot of other people rambling, Rich wouldn't have to speak.

"My mom and step-dad'll be coming in for Family," Geoff was telling them. "My dad died before I was born, and Mom married Greg when I was eleven."

“Are you close with Greg?” asked Roy, the group’s facilitator. Roy had been working at Ridgeview Recovery Center for almost a decade now; his dark skin was beginning to sag, and his thick Teddy Roosevelt mustache was shot through with grey. He wore large-frame glasses that made his already close-set face look like the reflection on the back of a spoon.

“Not particularly,” said Geoff. “Anyways, Mom and Greg had my half-sisters after they got married, and I already felt like the bad kid, so I embraced it.”

Geoff was an expert therapy patient, so practiced at sharing his innermost thoughts that he revealed them at the slightest provocation. Rich didn’t enjoy watching the emotional striptease, so he kept his eyes on the fake plant next to his chair. It was a decent-looking fake, but when he tugged at the leaves they never ripped. The plastic just warped.

“Do you still feel that way?” asked Abe from the other side of the plastic fern. His hoarse, nasal voice was a by-product of impure coke.

“Oh no,” said Geoff. “Now that I’m older, dropped out of college, and have an addiction instead of a career, I feel like the apple of my stepdad’s eye.”

Rich turned his gaze from the indestructible leaf and sat up straight in his chair. This was new.

“Geoff—” Roy began.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” Geoff interrupted. “Sorry, Abe. Sorry, Roy.”

“You know what they say about anger,” offered a high-functioning alcoholic with a history of trying to network at meetings, like AA was an Ivy League frat. Rich pegged him for a G&T man, tonic optional.

“It’s only a mask for fear, yeah,” Geoff said. He kicked his chair back onto two legs and then let it thump back down. “Because they could cut me off, and then...”

“Boom,” said the druggie to Geoff’s left, who managed somehow to be both gangly and pudgy at the same time. “Rock bottom just got lower.”

Geoff chuckled and wiggled his hands. “Hey, who wants to see me homeless?”

Roy stood up suddenly, his chair whining as it skidded backwards.

“All right, group, I think that’s enough for today,” he said.

The rest of the addicts obediently shuffled to their feet and joined hands for the serenity prayer. It might have been a pretty prayer, maybe even meaningful, the first hundred times Rich had heard it.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, breath the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

After the prayer the men on either side of Rich grasped his hands even tighter and swung their joined arms, like kids playing jump rope.

“Keep coming back,” they chorused together, and Rich’s voice joined theirs by habit. “It works if you work it!”

The addicts dropped each other’s hands and filed out for dinner, but Roy tugged Rich to stay behind.

“Rich, I...” Roy started and stopped. “I wanted to talk to you about Geoff.”

“I’ve *no* idea why,” Rich said.

“Well, jazz hands aside, that little performance wasn’t too odd, considering that he’s being moved soon,” the counselor said. “His parents aren’t too happy with his progress—”

“But we just got here!”

“Not really,” said Roy. “Besides, a spot opened up at a pretty exclusive place in Nevada. That was his parents’ first choice from the beginning.”

Rich nodded a few times, thoughtlessly carried by his own momentum like a bobblehead doll. “When?”

“Only a few days. They just told him today; that’s why he was a bit...off. And you? I know you two’ve gotten close; how are you doing?”

Rich was doing badly. He wanted a drink. But neither of these were unusual enough to merit reporting.

“I’m fine,” Rich said, making for the door.

“So, not at all fine, then,” Roy called after him.

“It’s...” Rich hesitated, trying to tease away how he actually felt from the thick morass of what he ought to say about how he felt. “It’s a manageable amount of not fine, right now.”

The next Sunday afternoon, Rich watched Geoff compress the scattered room-wide mess into one small suitcase. The blinds were down, and flat fluorescent light flooded the room.

“Don’t forget to work out over there,” Rich said.

“They’re going to give me a personal trainer, apparently,” Geoff told his jeans.

“Well, then. You’ll be fine.”

“And the counselor to client ratio is like one to two, so I’ll be set there,” Geoff said. He was too young, Rich saw, to know how to fold his button-down shirts properly. Everything just got stacked together and then smashed down.

“Sounds good,” Rich said. “Everything else is up to you.”

“Yep,” said Geoff. “Everything is perfect. It’s all there, and I just have to reach out and...grab it.”

“It’s a bit harder than that.”

“Suppose so,” Geoff admitted to his socks.

It’s a manageable
amount of not
fine, right now.

There was a long pause, and Rich turned back to his desk. He was trying to think of something to write to Jordan. There was nothing new to report from rehab, and what could he really say to a ten-year-old about the situation anyways?

A few minutes later Geoff paused in packing up his copy of the Big Book, *Living Sober, Sober for Good*, and a King James Bible. He asked, “Do you ever wonder what exactly the program is?”

“Don’t drink and go to meetings?”

“But like, besides that,” said Geoff, running his fingers over the worn spines on his books. “The first three meetings I went to, I thought I was just behind on something that everyone else was already in on. But that feeling never went away. What is ‘it’? And how exactly will it work if I work it?”

Rich didn’t answer, so Geoff pressed on. “Sometimes I wonder if talking about the program is actually the program. I ought to get it by now—be able to say how it is exactly that I’m supposed to stay sober—but I still feel like I missed something crucial at that one meeting I couldn’t make it to, you know?”

“I don’t—”

“Course you don’t, sorry,” said Geoff quickly. He sat on the floor, leaning against his bed with his open suitcase forgotten by his side. “It’s just...faith, man. How do you do it?”

“It’s supposed to be a...surrender type thing,” Rich said. “Some things you just can’t carry, or you’d drink forever out of guilt.”

“So is it a humility thing?” Geoff asked. “Or like, a practical issue?”

“I don’t know man, it just...is,” Rich said. He had been raised Christian in that lackluster Christmas-and-Easter way where this kind of thing was not discussed, but Geoff wouldn’t let the subject drop.

“So you really think that your Higher Power is looking out for you?” Geoff asked.

Rich still found Christianity appealing sometimes—he liked the forgiveness and some of the minor-key hymns, and he used to drink like self-destruction would be his resurrection—but he didn’t respect it. He wasn’t willing to question the balance that he had struck between faith and apathy.

“I don’t know, sure,” Rich said. “But I really ought to be finishing this.”

Rich waved the still-empty page that ought to contain a letter to Jordan. “Or starting it. Or something.”

“Yeah, of course. That was a weird question, anyways. I’m not even sure where I was going with it. I just...” Geoff sat back on his heels and let out a long sigh. “I just don’t want to leave, even if it is to another rehab. I’m not ready.”

“You don’t have to be, though,” Rich said. “Not until you’re done with that place in Nevada, so another ninety days at least.”

“Yeah, yeah, and I’ll take it one day at a time and all that,” said Geoff.

“Yeah,” said Rich. “All that.”

Rich didn’t want to live one day at a time; he wished he could just take the next ten years in one big gulp. He wanted to skip past the point where he had to go beg for his old job back and find an apartment and probably a new dog. He wanted to see Jordan all grown up. Would she still wear her hair in a strand-snapping-tight ponytail and walk like she had an irregular number of knees? A decade from now the two of them could have regular lunches where he could ask her how work was treating her. Once he had years of sobriety under his belt maybe Shannon would talk to him again. He’d have a chance to tell her that she was it for him. There was no one else and there never would be, and maybe Shannon would feel the same way. Maybe she’d give him a forty-seventh chance. He didn’t see much worth paying attention to in the interim.

Geoff was done packing before Rich had written anything other than “Dear Jordan.”

The rest of Geoff's story Rich learned from Roy a few days later, after another group therapy session in room 103. Two counselors from the Nevada place picked Geoff up and took him to the airport. They arrived early, breezed through security, and faced a two-hour wait before boarding. Geoff snuck out through a bathroom with two entrances and walked back out past security; he was already on his way in a cab to see a friend of a friend of a dealer by the time the counselors raised the alarm. They found Geoff five hours later with a kidney infection and an abscess in his left forearm where he had accidentally skin-popped.

Rich couldn't find any more information. As a counselor, Roy was trained to isolate patients from the outside world, not to relay news. And the new place wasn't letting Geoff take any calls.

"They're probably just—embarrassed or some shit," Rich said, his hands thrashing the air in front of him as he paced within the circle of chairs in front of an impassive Roy. "That they let him get away like that when they—they *knew*—"

"It's OK to be angry or disappointed," Roy said. "Just let yourself feel these things. Don't be afraid to grieve."

"Grieve for what? No one died, Roy."

"Just take it one day at a time, Rich."

"Damn, and here I thought I controlled the fabric of space-time. I thought if I just drove at the right speed then my magical flying car would take care of..." Rich looked up to find that Roy had left the room. Rich was alone, ranting about *Back to the Future* to a plastic fern. He shrunk down under the relentless gaze of the ten empty chairs facing him.

Geoff hadn't been ready, and Rich refused to listen because he didn't want to admit that he wasn't ready either. Sure, Rich could be sober, *anyone* could be sober, in this resort of a rehab with aggressively orange walls and daily chapel, meditation, and eight different group meetings. At Ridgeview everyone wore dazed, glassy stares and spoke empty words with the same lilting rhythm as lullabies. Real life wasn't this easy, and it wouldn't get any easier as the ninety days of no-man's-land turned into weeks, months, and years of sobriety. The burden never got lighter. Somehow he was just supposed to get stronger.

Rich wanted a drink, but for the first time since he was sixteen, he might have wanted sobriety just a little bit more.





This Hospital Is Filled with Reefs

Veronica Kuhn

One hand was held fast
as the other chased
silvered fish, gathered sand.
A face does not slow
the slap of a playful wave playing
the salty role of every wave.
On the land, spotted
dogs, people are umbrellas.
Some have lost hearing in one ear.
The green inside each dying
polyp is a penciled point.

*

Let this waiting aquarium calm you.

*Bleomycin with your butterfly fish,
adriamycin with your saddleback clownfish*

If you watch an aquarium, you become
an anemone freed—
vinblastine with your sapphire devil—
from a central nervous system.

If you dare to scuba, the very oxygen
will burn your lungs.

*

The diving lights illuminate reefs.
The diving lights do not illuminate

this mass of cells. The cells multiply
quickest at the core of hair.

The hair runs in the shower,
but the shower could be hotter.

The heat could be louder.
The loudness provokes nausea,

but any action provokes nausea.
This story could be more tragic but

the cells,
quiet,
multiplying.

*

Some expected a revelation that never came. “What was at the bottom of the trench?” If I reached it, I was in no condition to take data. Though I suppose the bottom is mostly murk, a haze of plankton, and a desire for bright songbirds flitting songlessly through trees.

*

The fish in the tank follow,
switch direction.

Agriculture

Doha Aboul-Fotouh

“But where is my garden,”
asked the woman. It was
no use, customs took away her seeds
in the airport white-noise.
She came for a garden.
Her subsidized apartment has a Bunsen burner
and a 4x2 balcony,
neighbors who speak her language
but use it to ask each other where is
her husband, her father, her child.
Weeds grow through the cement
cracks in the unlined parking lot.
She came for a garden. Weeds are not
a garden. A garden
is the right of any woman:
a place to plot and grow and
do whatever she wants under the rightful eye of
the sun.
Instead sun burns the dust on the plastic-shaded
window above
the breakfast table where she eats alone cold
cereal

accompanied by the clank of the spoon and
the crunch in her mouth.
Like gravel-crunch when she rolled her bag into
the complex
and a million faces awaited
her, her color, her face, her forehead, all
repeated in a sea like the pattern of wheat
repeated on
fields. Fields here are
covered with cement and then covered with
rubber tire and rubber shoe tracks.
Pressing her hand to her forehead
she wishes to sew
a garden in the lines neatly drawing above her
brow.
It seems so long ago now, she thinks
as she crowds to greet a woman
and man and their three children.
They are escaping the country she escaped
but with their seedlings in tow.



Broumov
Artist: Lydia Smith

Lord, Bless Those Who Fear You

Matt Vale

This essay collects, alongside my own thoughts, the words I heard and the friends I made during trips to Benedictine monasteries throughout Texas and New Mexico in May of 2013. Heard from here are both the monks and nuns themselves, those who came to their monasteries for prayer, and others met along the way.

Llano, TX
May 6
Hour of Sext

Lord,
bless those who fear you
who read in your land
the book
of your waiting
your listening
your watching
who feel
the immensity of your skies
riding
on their breath

So cool still in May; your wildflowers live even now. Highway embankments clothed in mats of Indian blanket's red and yellow wheels, phosphorescent and astonishing and punctured with patches of pure yellow, pure lavender, blue and white pepper of bluebonnet. And hours and hours down highways, through Llano, Eden, to Sweetwater, towns in the dry cracked earth.

You burn this land; you clothe this land in glory as in a garment of light

Purify me, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have broken rejoice.

Vigils	4:00 AM
Morning Meal	4:45 AM
Lauds	6:00 AM
Terce	8:45 AM
Mass	9:15 AM
Work	9:50 AM – 12 Noon
Mealtime	12 Noon
Sext	1:00 PM
None	3:30 PM
Meditation*	5:20 PM
Vespers	5:50 PM
Compline	7:30 PM
To Bed	8:00 PM

*(Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament)

Emergency Room; Amarillo, TX

May 7

10 PM – Hour of Vigils

My daddy said, You go work for them mean nuns. My daddy was mean, pure sick mean. He sent me there cause he wanted them nuns to beat on me and yell at me. I'd do all their physical labor from sometime in the mornin till it got dark and they'd give us a bowl of rice for lunch. I said, Shit, don't y'all nuns know that's hard work? I'd jes bout pass out in the afternoons from bein all weak and malnurshed. And they'd come yell at us. But I'd yell back at em.

I's a wild child he said and he turned toward me with greying eyes and a ragged beard; leathery skin and a missing tooth. *Jes recalcitrant* he said nudging me with his elbow with a grin under a beat up NASCAR hat, concrete dust on worn jeans, workboots, and a cowboy shirt with the sleeves cut off. *Still am.* How does that phrase go, He'd been rid hard and hung up wet and his voice had the sound of cigarettes and whisky in a forty year-long honky-tonk; his girlfriend in a Harley t-shirt and a black vest, stout but meek, somehow, and she looked at me from the other bank of chairs with something wry and trusting as if she'd heard it all out of him before. *We jes ol' Lubbock hippies* he said. *Kenny* he said, and he put out his hand.

Across from me a rough-looking man with cedar tar staining his hands and denim jacket and pant legs—and he was rough-looking but a worrying face, and a pale shapeless daughter, and he turned the newspaper pages without seeing the words. Hispanic families had their kids across the floor; slumped and texting teenagers. The black ladies behind me laid hands on their boy and said *Jesus heal my child* while he touched his hand to his glasses and looked down at his tennis shoes *Heal this child's lungs, heal this child's heart.*

Yeah, world religion, he said, *I's in to all that at some point. We tried it all.* I was dehydrated and weak and running a fever, and whenever I started to pass out Kenny nudged me again with his elbow and said *Stay on that horse, preacher.*

They sent out the cedar cutter's wife, in hospital gown and pressing her right hand to the bottom of her left breast. She had a hell-raiser's smoker's voice and said *What am I supposed to do out here?—Keep pressure on the wound, Mrs. Hays, until we call you*, the nurse said. She held her eyes straight ahead with her mouth hung open and her breaths slow and heavy and she let out great moans while her husband crumpled newspaper pages good and slow and stared at the empty chairs under the poster *Committed to Compassionate Care*.

It's all about meeting the Lord Jesus Christ face to face Kenny said. *It's gonna be terrible, terrifying. It's about when you got yourself in hard trouble, I mean them times when you done something thes just evil, it's pure evil and you say, Lord Jesus help me, Lord Jesus have mercy on me.* He looked at me. *It didn't come to anything else cept that, seeing His terrible face and falling down before it. The fear of the Lord.* He kept his grey eyes on me, crazed, otherworldly. *I need a damn cigarette.* He staggered out the doors, then back in a few minutes later, with a slip of paper he slapped down on the chair. *Damn cop gimme a ticket for smoking on hospital grounds. I told him, Hey man, you let me finish my cigarette, if it's costing me twenty-five bucks.* What are you here for, I asked. *Tumor in my throat.*

Later I lay in the dark, behind one of the curtains, an IV in my arm pushing in cool veins of liquid, like veins of silver in the roots of a mountain. When they took me back the black lady was speaking to the doctor, saying *And he come back from that operation and everything was alright, until he start having this trouble breathing again, Lord have mercy, Oh, you got to help him, you got to help this child.* And I lay in the dark, in and out of sleep, hearing the moans of the cedar cutter's wife from behind her curtain, first with no words, then *Help me, help me, why ain't nobody here.* Christ you united your body to our wounds you came to gather up every body like careful flowers pour your light into them Lord you save us from our bodies like cracked shells you turn your face upon before all ages

*For I will restore health unto thee,
and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord,
because they called thee an Outcast*

Houston, TX
December 1
Between Compline and Vigils

“Sometimes I lay my hands on others and I feel a darkness in them that I am pulling against, and sometimes I say to the darkness, *He does not belong to you; he belongs to the Lord; let go of him.* And sometimes the darkness says to me *Not until he does.*”

“And sometimes I lay my hands upon others and feel rivers of light opening in them; I say, *Lord, I do not know what kind of healing this person needs, but make it work in them; I trust that you are the Healer of every one of your children.*”

. . .

Prayer finds the emptiness inside many shells. Prayer finds bodies, moments, and words, to fall through and through and through. I am myself a falling through, finding each stable repose not to be the final layer, nor the found thing, nor the found moment. I find moments always withdrawing, as if curtain, through curtain, through curtain. *Do not be naïve about “now” and “I.” What I have given belongs to Me.* I find myself urged, ever and again, urged, *No more. In your falling through, I have loved you. In what you say of yourself—“each moment I am a failed and a rotten work”—I have found My own son; this day I have begotten you, from the womb of the morning.*

Stating something in many different ways (each time it is a different thing stated) until the mind comes upon a thing best stated by stopping speaking. NB: what is meant is not going beyond words. Prayer discovers words as holding shapes that they do not understand. Prayer looks to the shape that words are saying but they do not understand. NB: what is meant is not going beyond words.

I have said, I am saying, *King of kings, God of gods, Lord of lords.* But there is an inside of words. The inside of words is called praise, and it cannot be spoken, but it can be meant. *King of kings, God of*

gods, Lord of lords—each has a content; praise pertains not to content, but to meaning. Meaning cannot be spoken. Meaning itself has no grammatical form, though it may unite itself inseparably to a grammar.

But this falling through is a mercy; it is a healing, it is a love. It reaches, as if, a critical velocity of falling. And I feel (I find) underneath me and through me—underneath the self who at every layer of looking inward wishes to seize upon what it finds, cry *HERE I am; here is me*—there is instead a

Sometimes I lay my
hands upon others
and feel rivers of light
opening in them.

great and open opening-through. And with each of the stories I tell about myself—each image of sloth, or pride, or self-hatred, desire, or greed which arises in me—I assent: *Yes, that is what I am, wretched, blackened, filthy, hateful*. Nonetheless with each of these stories, there is still this opening-through, operating and speaking: *No, you are not that; you are not that; you are not that*. It begins with good qualities—fine things, good work, superiority. You are not that, nor that; you are not that. But it moves to fear and anger and refusal to be humbled; *Neither*

are you that, nor that, nor that. I begin to feel what I am by feeling myself as a falling away; He is as a wide, and a warming, and a frightening opening-out, against which none of my wretchedness can stand or adhere; against which my wretchedness is always seen and known entirely, but overwhelmed by adoption. *You are none of these things; you belong to Me*.

Lord, let our speaking become prayer, become drawing words from a great wide well of light; the language not our own, through mouths not our own

...

Rio Grande City, TX; Benedictine Monastery of the Good Shepherd

May 16

The hours after Compline

It belongs to nothing I could concoct or invent or understand for myself. Gosh, I just don't know, it's a mystery, y'know, the mystery of God's love.

Sister Luella has a Minnesota accent. She was a farmgirl in the years after the Depression. They all three were, Sister Luella, Sister Nancy, Sister Fran; these little nuns in the hard desert.

The Church, keeping the waters of life in the Church, it's really up to little people, y'know. People who just open with their inner being to God's love, and hold inside them that inner candle—oh gosh, no she snapped her fingers, stamped her foot no, that's not a good word to describe it at all. Just this core... light that lightens, y'know. And it lightens others, and they clump together and really just get started and get going.

The Rule of St. Benedict tells us to listen with the ears of our spirit. We can't just do normal looking and hearing and listening. It's really just a kind of mystical life, I suppose. Gosh but we're all just normal people, you know. God does that for normal people.

We're just listening for the Divine Will, y'know. Sister Nancy's going to McAllen for the day tomorrow but we're just going and going, and plugging in, and listening in, and grabbing hold, and hanging on! drumming her palms on the side of the chair, bouncing from her seat Oh gosh just going and going praise the Lord

...

Prayer is knowing myself as mirrored; I encounter the Word, and I find it to speak myself; I encounter it not as external truth to be admitted or assimilated; I find *it* to speak the one truest thing about *myself*. But I do not find the Word as a mirror in which I see myself reflected. If I find a reflection in the Word, I am not the sovereign, emanating source. Instead I know myself as the mere reflection, lacking the vitality of the body, original, in flesh and blood. I do not experience the Word as affirming myself—as affirming the self I experience as mine. I encounter the Word as revealing the displacement

of my Self from my self (from the self that I experience conventionally as mine). I find my self evacuated of my Self; I find that my Self lies where I am not. That is, I find my self as residing in a forsaken place between two Selves, both where I am not: one Self, exterior, delivered and spoken to me in the Word and the Church; a second Self in an interior more deeply than I can know. *Tu autem eras, Lord, interior intimo meo*—But you, Beauty, were more interior than my own inwardness. *Et ecce intus eras et ego foris, et ibi te quaerebam*. And behold, you were within, but I was without, and there did I seek you. *Mecum eras, et tecum non eram*. You were with me, and I was not with you.

Elizabeth sees her cousin Mary and she knows herself as being-in-prayer—as being in praise. She sees the Word without her (within her cousin), and the Word within her (John the Baptist in her own womb) leaps and enlivens, recognizing his Lord. She speaks a word of praise, that is, a Word that she cannot know the inside of, one that utters itself through her (and as her), without her knowledge of the full meaning of that Word, as it would echo down ages: *Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb*. She knows it nonetheless to be deeper within her than her own self. Being-in-praise and being-in-prayer are my speaking in a language I cannot experience entirely as my own. Yet not an amorphous, contentless unknowing; not a negative mysticism. Not a dismantling of the self into some ultimate, indeterminate void. A dismantling, rather, into my assent to conditions inadmissible by, or unthinkable for, the narrowed self. I do not “unknow” myself into abyss; my unknowing is mediated through and stabilized by obedience to a particular text, particular propositions, a particular historical Church. A formal obedience which precedes my understanding of content; *fideo ut intelligam*.

As Elizabeth, an in-between. Deep in me a light, out-pressing; without me, the same light (in the Word) active, in-reaching. The me that is caught in between is brought into closer and closer conformity with both. In being-in-prayer I know my self (this in-between) as a vanishing thing, or a thing, more aptly, whose not vanishing is a puzzle—for He holds our finitude in being. I know my self as a conjuration; I am dreamed, my self is dreamed. I discover my Self speaking this language I do not own; I find myself adopted; I find that my being consists in being owned by you. *For you have received the Spirit of adoption—the Spirit producing sonship—in which we cry, Abba!, that is, Father!* The discovery of being owned is praise—is crying *Abba, Father*.

...

Rio Grande City, TX

May 14, 15, 16, 17

Hours of Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline

The sisters come and huddle around the rattlesnake we found, the turtle, the hawk feather, the tarantula, the chaparral. *I wonder what the Lord gives him to eat*, Sister Luella said.

That really is a prayer itself, y'know. Being one with, and sensing, and tuned in and communing with even those beautiful branches right out here by this window. What are they? They're God's presence to us, she whispered. *Sometimes we pray outside around the mesquite trees with Our Lady, and all the rabbits and other creatures, y'know, they come to sit and pray with us.*

This desert is flat and eternal and the sun sinks in perfect circle. You and I follow the path through the dark but stop to see the nighthawks circling the lit monastery like swift and silent ships, dozens, catching insects, speaking, trilling; in and out of darkness. *Draw near me all who are weary, and I will refresh you*, you said.

Monastery of Christ in the Desert

May 27

Hours after Vespers

Just a powerful service, said Lowell, Baptist minister, professor of New Testament and homiletics. His body is so very hurt, from a stroke, I believe; he clutches one arm to his belt, shuffles his feet with effort. Yet each time he leaves his seat in the chapel after prayers, he bows, slowly, with great pain, I imagine, to the Sacrament. *Honoring the flesh, the Incarnation*, he says, that is the great gift of this tradition.

Grace abounds, he says. Christ touches our bodies with His very own, I write.

I cannot meet his eyes. He knows himself as blessed, healed, touched, precious. He looks on me and I feel myself full of shame, smallness, refusal; shame that I refuse the free gift of love; that I refuse a victim *meek and lowly of heart: I hid not My face from your shame and spitting; from your buffeting Me and striking Me with the palm of your hand. But I am the lamb, meek and humble of heart; I lay down My life for you; I search the mansions of creation for you, My lost one; I stand at the door of the heart, and I knock. Always, will I knock.*

*He slaughtered the fattened calf for me,
and clothed me, filthy and disobedient, in rich robes.
In my shame you show me your wonder
I spat in your face and you laid down your life*

...

Speaking this Word of praise, I am pulled without of myself. If to love God entails an *extasus*—if it entails an orientation toward Whom I cannot contain or image—then I must begin to encounter Him by not fully being myself, by speaking what I do not understand (praise). I must begin by beginning to split, barely, at the seams. And I am flooded with what I am not, with what the vessel of me cannot in any sense contain. Not only because the vessel should be burst, but additionally because it stands in utter incomparability with—total inability of interfacing with—what it would hold. Nonetheless this holding is effected, and in prayer we discover that it has, in fact, been effected—in prayer which may take the form of the sublime, though it includes many other things. I find, *I am encountering within myself what I cannot myself account for* (an Other). A drastic, an egregious, gap must open between how I appear (to myself, conventionally) and what, I can now detect (in prayer), is really contained within me, yet never assimilated by me.

My speaking praise involves itself in a sphere of understanding and assent deep, deep beyond the “*I*” I experience as my own. It involves itself not in desires and cognition and interest, but in will; in the determinations I make which are, I find, so fundamental to my being “*I*” that I cannot access them—since access implies being an “*I*,” and when I am an “*I*,” the determination has already occurred. I enter into involvement with this withdrawn space by proxy—by assent to and involvement in symbols, whose scope I can, thanks be to God, in part understand. By symbols, I do not mean things unreal, merely representative. I mean realities which cannot even enter into body-feeling, or into thought: realities which entirely determine and found and instantiate themselves within the experienceable world of bodies, yet they themselves as *things*, as principles of being, are things whose nature simply does not lend themselves to intelligibility, sensual or otherwise. Yet to be symbol means: they have nonetheless given themselves to be materially graspable (both in feeling and in cognition, which is in every instance material, bodily). By symbols I mean *incarnations*. But my assent to visible *symbol* (to phenomenon) makes efficacious a reality in *depth* (in noumenon). Grace binds the seen,

They become
voice and bright
wings of morning.

the graspable sign, in inseparable involvement with the unseen, unintelligible; this is a miracle and a mercy. I cannot be an actor in the depths of me, but there has been given to me a specific path through the visible (and operating in the experienceable “I” of me) which “does work” in an invisible realm (beyond all of my “I”-working and “I”-doing). It “does the work” (if *doing* it can be called) of what I could never, in any sense, effect—for it works in unintelligibles, immaterials. *Indeed, You love truth in the heart; then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom*; begin, O Lord, to unknot the knots which cannot be untied—for they have never been tied in my phenomenal self.

So too the Spirit comes to our aid and bears us up in our weakness; for we do not know what prayer to offer nor how to offer it worthily, but the Spirit Himself goes to meet our supplication and pleads in our behalf with unspeakable yearnings and groanings too deep for utterance.

...

Rio Grande City, TX
Office of Lauds

Each morning in Lauds liturgy the three Sisters stop for no more than two minutes to speak in tongues. They make no fuss. They open their hands and are old women no longer; they become voice and bright wings of morning and one chortling, and one droning, and one singing. There is blue inpouring of light and the Sisters stop, each with one another, in the same spinning moment.

We are engulfed by the Trinity, Sister Nancy says suddenly, out of the silence.

Monastery of Christ in the Desert

May 26

Hours after Sext

Brother Mike

“All that started when I was thirty-one. I’m forty-six now. A young woman I knew told me, ‘Hey, you’ve got to call this monk and talk to him. I don’t know why. I just thought of it.’ Out of the blue. No reason. I really didn’t wanna do it. But it kept pushing on me and finally I did. So I call up Brother Aelred—he was from Boston and I grew up in New York. It was just totally ironic to me. It was the first time I had ever just listened to somebody for two hours, like two hours on the phone. And it was like he knew me. It was like he was talking about me, but he was talking about himself. And finally they set it up so I could come visit for a few days. So then I’m thinking, I don’t know why I have to this I just do. Don’t know why. Just have to.

“So I say, I’m not taking any work stuff, no cell phone, no money, won’t take my car, take the bus. Now I’m walking to the bus station and—I know this sounds crazy, but I did it—it sounds crazy but you see, those lines on the sidewalk like this? Don’t look at my crazy shoe, falling to pieces. Eh, I’m a monk.

“Anyway I’m walking and I’m paying attention not to step on any of the cracks. And it’s making me really focus. Then I’m looking up and seeing the trees on my street and thinking, ‘Man, I’ve never looked at these trees before.’

“Finally the bus stops for thirty minutes for the people who’s been riding longer, and everybody’s sitting together, except this one guy, and he’s blind; I seen his cane leaning like this. And you know, I grew up Roman Catholic with my parents, but it was never really a big deal for them. They never taken us to church every Sunday like that, just feasts and big occasions. And I’d never read the Bible, I mean I’d read it, you know, every now and then. But anyway.

I'm eating breakfast
with these monks and
no one's saying anything.

“So I’m thinking about all this stuff, about the fact that God is doing all this, and I go over to talk to him, to the blind guy, and he says the first eye went blind one year, then the other went blind the next year. Said it was the best thing ever happened to him.

“I get up to leave and he says ‘God bless’ to me. Just like that, ‘God bless.’ And then he says it again

to a waitress who helped him, ‘God bless.’ And then it just hit me, that all this was God, what I was doing. It was just all getting really ironic for me. You know what I mean ironic.

“I get out to Assumption Abbey in Minnesota—I was in Minnesota at the time. I’m eating breakfast with these monks and *no one's saying anything*. Looking out on this pasture, fields, and it’s just so quiet. And I burst into tears because I never been in such quiet before. And then everything’s completely different. Life is completely different. Just peace. Inside a me and out.

“Finally I go back to work and one day this guy—this just negative guy—is coming towards me, and it’s almost like I seen coming towards me, you know when the heat’s rising off the highway and it kind of simmers, like a mirage. It’s like I almost seen that on either side of him. And it’s this wave coming at me, and when it hits me, everything shatters. Everything just falls apart, snaps back to the way it was.

“I’m walking down the street a few days later and seeing people cross without out the walking sign and thinking ‘That’s wrong, they shouldn’t do that; what’s wrong with them?’ Then I realize, I used to always do that, cause I never looked up and saw things really. And God was showing me not to judge them, and that if I wanted to have this peace all the time, I was going to have to leave all of that behind, all that negativity, and go out of the world, and see His face myself.”

Monastery of Christ in the Desert

May 27

Before Lauds

“In my dream last night I was walking along the road to the monastery and it glowed coral and manila like it does at sundown, when we walk back to camp after Compline. And I walked sometimes, and I ran sometimes, and sometimes I was on crutches and in the big black boot again, like I was after the fall and the surgery. And sometimes you were walking next to me, or my family was, or people who have helped me, and teachers, and all of them speaking kindnesses to me, helping me to keep walking. I could see them sometimes, their faces hovering round me, and other times their bodies were not there but I felt their presences behind me and throughout me. And it wasn't that they were speaking to me, but that I felt all that was spoken. All that was meant. What it meant was a shape of feeling. And each shape had no process; all of its meaning was simultaneous—I understood all of what they said in one moment, without time. Though I remember what they spoke as linear, constructive language.

“And finally I came to your godmother on the road, and she held a book I had read two years before, on Franciscan prayer, and she said, *Dear one, you began to seek God back then, but you stopped; why did you stop? You were not ready to understand. But now you are beginning to give yourself to this. Never stop; you are ready now.* She was speaking of the boot, my foot, the surgery, the fall; *Bless your heart, dear one, you had to be broken before you could be made whole.*

“When I fell from that boulder and I lay broken in that crack in the earth I knew I had reached too far, held the world as too much a thing to be owned, and I lay in the hospital bed with only you an abstraction on the phone, and my life across the ocean. I screamed when I fell; I cried out when I lay there. But in the helicopter the sun striking the whole horizon to trumpets and bells and great goldening rings of cloud in the dying out of day *Like a lion He breaks all my bones;*

from day to night You bring me to an end;

He has shattered my bones;

Lord I have cried out to you in my distress

He.”

Abiquiu, NM
May 28
Hours after Sext

“God wanted me to tell you all this so you’d know it was real. I walked with God for fifty days from Easter to Pentecost, from Tucson to Oregon to Albuquerque. I’d wake up, right, step off of a bus, walk into a room and say, God, whatever is your will. I met holy people. I met crazy people. He is speaking to you in all that. Everything that is out there in the universe, it’s in you. Everything that is is a being expressing Itself to you. It’s a mystery. When we get the Word, right, the Scripture, the liturgy, God’s showing us ourselves, onna outside.

“But you’re going in the way that God wants you to. And one day it’ll happen to you, you’ll experience it really and you’ll say, ‘Now I seen it.’ And it’ll be the most important thing to happen to you. It’ll become your life. Just like it did for me. I know this because God wanted us to talk. We didn’t talk by chance. He brought us together for a purpose. And He’s drawing you to all of this, to monasticism and monks and contemplation for a reason.

“And now that I told you all this, I know it’s time to leave the monastery. I been here six years, remember. I been asking God for a while when I’m spodda leave. And He kept saying, ‘Wait, wait,’ but it was so’s I could talk to you, and tell you my story so you’d know that nothing that you see and hear is coincidence. It’s all Him speaking to you, guiding your life. And everything in your brain, God put that there to lead you to Him. And whenever you move your body, move your limbs, it’s Him moving through you, even when you suffer or go the wrong way, away from Him.

“And now I know it’s time to leave, so I’m saying goodbye to you, cause I’m leaving tomorrow morning.”

Abiquiu, New Mexico

May 27

Office of Terce, Reading given from the Book of Job

Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward. I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause: Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number: Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields: To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety. He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night. But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth. Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole.



Morning
Artist: Ronan Allencherril



Good Girl

Saira Weinzimmer

She would often hear the footsteps.

They weren't like her mother's neat *click clacks* when she came in late after work, or her friends' loud *clomps* in the school halls. They were soft footsteps, barely-there footsteps, a flutter of a coat, the quiet crunch of a twig under a careful boot, a rustle of pine needles, the barest scent of cool mint upon the air. She didn't notice them much; they blended into the routine of life. They waited with her when she stood in the lunch line, they followed her as she walked to the library, they shuffled behind her in math class. Sometimes she would listen to them instead of the teacher; they were more interesting than fractions and decimals.

Most of the time she laughed with her friends and ignored the footsteps. She won the 5th grade class spelling bee. She got the highest score on the English homework and her mother even gave her a smile. She was the best of all her friends at Double Dutch. She skinned both her knees roller blading and had to get stitches on one elbow. She never mentioned the footsteps. The footsteps were old news. Boring footsteps.

The footsteps grew louder. They made *tap, tap*, tapping noises behind her as she walked home from school. They *thumped* in her wake as she climbed the stairs for bed. At night they paced back and forth across her bedroom carpet, muffled, shuffling sounds that trod through her dreams. In gym class, when she had to run laps around the soccer field, she tried to outrun them. Just as an experiment—to see what would happen, you know. She pumped her legs harder and harder until she could feel the muscles burning, tearing from her ligaments, ripping off her bones. She ran until she breathed fire instead of air. She ran and ran until the world went out of focus and she could see nothing, hear nothing but the pounding of the footsteps behind her, always just at her elbow, sharp mint tickling her throat.

“Slow down, Lila!” said voices behind her. “Lila, where do you think you’re going?”

She decided that maybe she was wrong and she did like the footsteps. What did she know, really? The footsteps were her friend, after all; they kept her company when she came home from school and nobody was there, and they followed her around the house while she waited for her mother to get back from work.

She had more important things to worry about, anyway. Mrs. Mason had assigned a new art project and she wanted to do well on it. Her mother liked art; her mother called it the *divinity of the soul*. She might as well be good for something. The project was called “Self-Portrait.” You had to make an art piece that represented yourself. School was hard. She drew a girl with a black Crayola marker and glued a leaf across the eyes. *There. That is me.* Mrs. Mason didn’t like it; she gave it back with a big red F on it and the words “There must be more to who you are, Lila.” The footsteps tapped, *tap tapped* behind her as if to say *that’s all you’re worth?* even though she ignored them and didn’t care. She grabbed the picture and ran to the bathroom on the third floor; she pressed her back against the wall under the sink and ripped the paper into pieces until there was nothing left to tear but empty space. She should have been better. She felt cold even though she wore a thick sweater and fixed her eyes on the bathroom door. The bathroom seemed like a different world, a world where eyes couldn’t reach her.

That gave her an idea. Maybe keeping out of sight would work. Hide in the bathroom. Hide in the art room with Mrs. Mason. Hide at home, sick with the flu. But the footsteps still followed her. They trotted behind her into the art room, they dogged her detours to the bathroom and stood a motionless sentry outside the door. Her mother said, “Lila, you’re not sick, you don’t have a fever—there is nothing wrong with you,” and she sighed as she picked up her briefcase. The footsteps waited with her for the bus, scraping against the concrete.

She vowed to get rid of them. She promised herself. She made herself pinkie-swear. *I will get rid of the footsteps*, she thought, but her lips did not know how to form the words.

No! She locked herself in her bedroom when nobody was home and screamed, screamed out loud, the sound a boomerang, bouncing off the walls and falling back down her throat.

History class with the man was as boring as the footsteps. His footsteps went back and forth, back and forth at the front of the class. They sank into her brain and tracked mud across her vision.

Back and forth, back and forth. “Lila?” he said. “Can you stay with us, Lila? Do you know what started the Civil War?” He smiled at her, a wide, wide smile. She shook her head.

“Can you speak, Lila?” people asked.

“Lila, are we going to have to put you in remedial math?”

“Lila, why aren’t you eating your dinner?”

“Lila, are you retarded?”

“Yeah, I think she is, she’s retarded.”

There were footsteps across the gym, squeaking footsteps that cut into her ears. There were sharp echoes of footsteps on the concrete in the basketball court, footsteps in the wet paint in the parking lot, footsteps that made soft imprints in the sand by the monkey bars. The grass bent as footsteps passed over it. There were footsteps across her closed eyelids as she laid in bed at night, silently coming closer, closer, darkness pressing all around her. Footsteps tap dancing on the inside of her head. Footsteps *thunder, thunder, thunder* across her temples. Footsteps beat a wild war dance, pounding on drums and dripping paint. Footsteps pulsed lurid against her eyes. They drowned out the sound of the end of the day bell, her classmates’ laughter, her mother’s questions. They drowned out his face and his voice in history class. They drowned out his voice when he called out to her in the hall “Lila? Could you help me clap the erasers outside?” and she closed her eyes and listened to the footsteps come up behind her *nearer, nearer, nearer*, the scent of spearmint tickling her nose. She didn’t hear him when he pressed her against the dumpster and said softly “Thank you, Lila, you’re such a good girl, good girl,” and she didn’t see him when he came closer and closer and closer. She could only hear the soft scuff of his brown boot against the dirt and pine needles. The front of the boot was peeling away from the rubber sole; the leather was worn so thin that his toe threatened to break through it as his foot shifted. Why didn’t he get new shoes?

Lila, you’re such a good girl, he said. *You’re so beautiful. I’m so proud of you.* He grasped her hand and held it tight, hot breath caressing her neck, wind whistling sharply through teeth, crunches of pine twigs beneath the feet. The toe pressed against the leather front of the boot. *Breathe, breathe.* He held her close and she felt hot all over.

Good girl.

Ange Mlinko

Interview by Courtney Brown

American poet and critic Ange Mlinko was born in Philadelphia and graduated from St. John's College and Brown University. She is the author of *Shoulder Season*, 2004 National Poetry Series winner and James Laughlin Award finalist *Starred Wire*, *Matinees*, and, most recently, *Marvelous Things Overheard*. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The London Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Paris Review*, and *Poetry Magazine*. She currently teaches creative writing at the University of Houston.



What draws you to write poetry, as opposed to other genres of literature?

When I think back to when I first fell in love with poetry, I think of a sonnet like John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14, which I memorized when I was sixteen or so: "Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend / That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new." Now I can point to all the devices that made my hair stand on end when I first read it—the meter, the rhyme, the sleight-of-hand enjambment that breaks the syntax and makes line 3 do double work. But the point was, my hair stood on end without knowing any of that. I had been reading stories and novels a long time. I knew my way around a sentence. But this felt like a glimpse of the Alps after skiing on bunny trails all my life.

What is your writing process like? Do you sit down to write at a certain time every day, or do you begin when the mood and inspiration strike you? Do you begin each poem with a certain image or idea in mind?

I write only when inspired, but it's actually quite easy to get inspired—I just start my writing session with some reading. I'll dip into a Shakespeare play. Or I'll flip through W. H. Auden or James Merrill's *Collected Poems*. Sometimes a brand-new book by a living poet will excite me—Amanda Jernigan, Don Paterson, Averill Curdy, to name just three. An image or metaphor is crucial to get me started.

When did you begin writing poetry? What sparked that first poem?

As I mentioned above, I was a teen and I was inspired by Modernist and English poetry, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot as well as sonnets by Donne, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Hopkins. I think the most introspective times of life—adolescence and middle age—are ideal for poetic awakening.

Has your writing process changed at all since you first began writing? If so, in what ways?

Yes, my writing process has been fluid, because I tried so many things—I've experimented with just about every type of postmodern play, and imitated many poets. Imitation is an important part of the process of learning—whether it's playing the violin or chess or coding. It feels like a waste of time, too, and you produce a lot of waste text. But the more waste you produce, the more understanding you will have. I don't produce much waste anymore. I don't have to do too many drafts. I can capture a poem almost in one stroke.

Who is your favorite author or poet? How has their work influenced your own?

I've had different favorites over the years—Frank O'Hara, James Merrill, Paul Muldoon, Marianne Moore—and I've learned amazing technique from them. But the poets I reread over decades tend to be Dante and Homer and Shakespeare. And, I suspect, I will always reread Constantine Cavafy.

I've noticed in your work an expansive and diverse range of terminology. I had to keep a dictionary on hand to contend with some of your poems. How did you come to have such a comprehensive vocabulary? Is it the accumulative result of years of attention to language, or do you perhaps spend your nights perusing encyclopedias?

Your question makes me laugh, because I actually did peruse encyclopedias as a child. I found them fascinating! My vocabulary and range of reference, though, come from decades of reading, period. I came late to teaching, so I am only recently an “academic,” but I was always an autodidact. I have given up many a sunny day outdoors to finish writing an article or do some research in the stacks. In addition to enhancing my vocabulary, it has kept my skin quite young-looking. So there's that!

Your poetry tends to take on a somewhat global perspective; it is filled with references to foreign lands and words and phrases from other languages. I also understand that you've taught at a university in Morocco, and I assume from your poetry that you've done much more traveling besides that. Have you visited every place that is mentioned in your poems? Do you speak fluently any of the languages, aside from English, that have appeared in your poems? What draws you to write with such an international perspective?

To begin with, my parents were immigrants and I was their first child, so I had a trilingual childhood. My mother was Belorussian, my father Hungarian. They'd both grown up in Brazil as refugees after World War II, so Portuguese was the common language between the extended families. I grew up speaking it and learned some Russian too, then took Spanish, French, and ancient Greek in school. I can't say I'm fluent in any of them, but I've taken tours of them now and again. When I lived in Morocco and Lebanon, I got to practice my French a bit. And I took a class in spoken Arabic, but I didn't stay abroad long enough to make headway.

In some of your poetry, “Conversation Comedy” in particular, I’ve noticed an emphasis on religion. Would you consider yourself religious? What influence does this have on your poetry?

I grew up Roman Catholic and went to parochial school. I was drawn, imaginatively, to monastic life. I am not a practicing Catholic now, but it formed the basis for my moral and creative thinking. I believe, broadly speaking, in a Creator with a capital C.

What is some of your best advice for a young writer of poetry? What advice do you wish you had received as an undergraduate?

What a tricky question! I wouldn’t have listened to good advice when I was an undergraduate. I chafed against my education, but now I’m grateful I was made to read the ancients and the classics. A good musical education is also a lifelong resource. These are all part of the long game—remember that poetry is a long game, and don’t be taken in too much by what’s trendy. On the other hand, remember that poetry speaks to actual people in a time and place, so don’t get snobby about it; the dead can’t hear you.

Savannah

Marissa Hall

All that's left of Clara's gummy bear vitamins are the green ones, and she pouts as Savannah sticks her hand inside the plastic jar, peels the head of a sticky bear from the belly of another, and drops one into her sister's outstretched palm. Clara closes her eyes tight and grimaces as she chews with her mouth open. She says they taste like soap. Technically Savannah is supposed to take two pills: a chewable disk of calcium because she is lactose intolerant and a nondescript off-white oblong tablet that serves as her multivitamin. When her mother isn't here to remind her that sixteen-year-olds are too old for gummy bears, she takes one of Clara's multivitamins instead; her grandmother doesn't know the difference. She has enough pills to keep track of herself, pills of all shapes and colors for all sorts of pains and problems. As Clara cleared her breakfast dishes yesterday she whispered, "Savannah, why does Grandma's blood need to go on a diet?" because their grandmother had told them that the smallest pill was a blood thinner.

Their aunt is sick in a way that can't be cured by a speckled pill, no matter how potent. Before she left to be with her sister in New York a week ago, their mother said, "There is no magic pill for Louise," because Clara asked if Aunt Louise was getting her vitamins. "What she needs the most right now is love," she added, an explanation that Savannah knew expressed the gravity of the situation. When love is all you can give, it's already too late. Love isn't chemical. It can't be injected intravenously; it can't calm crazed cells or freeze their reproduction. No one has ever been cured with love.

...

Everything this summer seems so *still*. Savannah doesn't want to bring her best friend Charlotte to her grandparents' house because for half the day her grandmother reads and her grandfather sleeps. They don't have cable, the internet is crabby and defiant, and their backyard is muddy and ridden

with mosquitoes. In the evenings, Savannah reads and Clara plays with her Barbies on the living room floor, enough entertainment to keep her six-year-old imagination consumed for hours. Sometimes Savannah looks up from a page and listens to Clara mutter to herself, her total concentration on the two plastic figures in each hand. She can faintly hear the sound of a spoon scraping the bottom of a bowl, her grandmother doing needless cooking on the stove because she refuses to buy a microwave.

Usually in June, Savannah would be in Maine with all her cousins. There would be bathing suits dripping on the railing, sand in their food and every nook of their bodies, the wonderful smell of the ocean and sunscreen in her gnarled hair. With eighteen family members in a house there aren't many opportunities to think about stillness. The kitchen is always packed, the front screen door is constantly slammed, and toilets are continually flushed. This year the family has been shaken up by some unfeeling, unseen hand. It sends them tumbling in different directions like dice, her parents landing in New York and giving love to Louise, as if love was something like flowers that you tie together with a ribbon and pass from hand to hand. The rest remain at homes in different states and opposite coasts, with Clara and Savannah stuck in Houston, moving twenty-five minutes from their home to stay with their grandparents, who find flying to Maine too difficult now. Savannah sometimes leaves her magazine on her grandparents' couch and re-stacks the heavy books of National Geographic photographs on the coffee table, or she rotates the pot of orchids or turns on a lamp. As soon as something is different everything is static again, the furniture rigid and heavy, the leaves of the orchids unwavering, the tissue in the box to her side frozen in a contorted upright pose. In Maine they leave the doors and windows open, and the breeze messes with their hair as they play cards and disturbs the pages of books left on tables. Frisbees scuttle across the front porch, towels are sent flying from backs of chairs, and plastic cups are spilt of lemonade. There's a gentle sense of harmless unpredictability.

...

In the mornings, before Savannah takes Clara to summer camp and before the humidity fogs her sunglasses and makes her lungs feel marshy, she runs the fifteen minutes to the track. This summer she can't shake her desire to do sprints in blinding morning sunlight, feel the heat create freckles on her shoulders and tan the backs of her knees. She is always alone at six in the morning and takes off her T-shirt for no one but herself, to be unimpeded, feel as much of the soft wind on her bare skin. Running in circles has never seemed so liberating.

She is in the middle of her second lap when she sees a boy her age walking towards the track, stretching his arms above his head and moving his mouth to the music he is privately playing in his headphones. She takes him in from behind her sunglasses: older than she thought, definitely older than sixteen, maybe twenty judging from the size of his arms and Adam's apple. He purses his lips, nods his head, and raises his eyebrows almost imperceptibly, all three motions done simultaneously. She is suddenly annoyed at his subtle confidence and strut at 6:30 in the morning. She sprints, arms dicing the gentle air, bowing her head and plowing her legs, not looking to her side when she passes him again. The pounding of her legs and heart and the bass in her ears makes her feel solid. He's sitting on the side of the track now, right arm around his knees, head cocked to the side, following her shamelessly with his eyes. He rolls her water bottle back and forth between his feet.

He waits until she's standing right in front of him to stop kicking around her water bottle. "You look like you need this," he says as he stands, tapping the black aluminum bottle in his open palm like it's a weapon. He's shorter than she is by two inches, maybe three. When all she does is nod, he hands it over. "Good run you had there."

"Thanks," she breathes into the water bottle. The still-icy water is soothing as it slides down her sore throat.

"You run for Parker High?" he asks. Savannah closes her eyes and keeps drinking. She tries to steady her breathing but her jumping chest betrays her.

"Yes," Savannah says, meeting his eyes as they rise from her chest. "I made Varsity this year."

"I might've guessed," he says with a sly smile. "You're clearly pretty dedicated if you're here at 6 on a summer morning."

"It's the best time to run. And I need to get out of the house," she says, and she wishes she'd just said, "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Yeah?" His right eyebrow raises, and she wants to tell him to stop smiling at her, but that seems like a ridiculous request to make of a stranger.

"Yeah." She can tell he's looking at his reflection in her sunglasses, and he frowns and stands up a little straighter. "Why are *you* here at six in the morning? Don't seem to be running."

He loosens up as she says this, his shoulders falling more naturally. "I'm not usually up now, but I couldn't sleep and saw you running today. I live over there," he says without taking his eyes off of her, jerking his head toward a block of small shuttered houses facing the track.

“And do you run?”

“Not like you,” he says. “But yes, to stay in shape for tennis.” She nods and looks again at his arms, freckled already in early June. “I’m Mick, by the way.”

Sometimes she imagines
she can baptize herself
every morning.

She takes his hand. He doesn’t seem to mind how sweaty her palm is. “Savannah,” she says. And then, “I should go.” She looks towards the row of houses and wonders which one is his. “I have to take my sister to camp.”

Mick looks at his watch, bemused. “At 6:35? Seems a little early for camp.”

“Well I have to shower.”

“Of course,” he says with a smile that doesn’t show his teeth. “It was very nice to meet you, Savannah. I’m sorry if I cut your run short.”

“You didn’t,” she says. She wants to turn away, but she doesn’t want him to stand here and watch her run away until she disappears behind the fence. She also feels a tug of attraction towards him, and part of her wonders why she’s so eager to leave.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” he says with a wink. When she turns and runs away, her legs feel unsteady.

...

Though she’s never been baptized, Savannah knows it has something to do with purity. If you take away any religious connotations, you are left with a washing, so sometimes she imagines she can baptize herself every morning. Often, she can convince herself that she really does sweat toxins from her pores and then wash them down the rusting drain in her grandparents’ shower. With eyes closed, she pictures the soapy water collecting in bubbles at her feet as the milky collection of her accumulated vices. When there’s nothing but her strong, invisible, naked body being doused in water, no sound but its sighing hiss, there are moments she feels close to holy.

...

Where Savannah works is a shop ten minutes away that sells, among other trinkets, packages of cookie cutters in the shape of the cross, the state of Texas, and chili peppers. The Country Shop is owned by middle-aged Mrs. Watts, looks out onto a Laundromat, and is stuck between a sporting

goods store and a smoothie place. Savannah can hear the blenders at Groovie Smoothie revving tirelessly over the sound of the Dixie Chicks that plays from a red portable boom box next to the register. At the register, she sits on a stool whose top is the shape of a cowboy. She's starting to memorize all the words on the CD, mouthing the lyrics as she puts white sticky sale tags on coffee mugs and looks out the front window at moms with coffee in one hand and their child in the other. The typical Country Shop customers are grandmothers in pink leopard print scarves and big thick-rimmed orangey sunglasses and housewives wearing oversized sun hats and carrying oversized purses. Savannah prefers to look inside the Laundromat. Its people are always more interesting. Yesterday she watched as a man left his laundry, squinted up and down the street in the blinding afternoon sun and crossed over to the store. He was wearing light brown faux leather pants, a black Hawaiian print shirt with red and green flowers, and when he parted his cherry lips to say "Good afternoon" it smelled as if he'd sprayed cologne inside his mouth. He paid with a credit card and tipped her in pesos. People like Nelson Aleksandrov (she looked at the name on the credit card receipt) always make her stomach feel a little tight, but they are harmlessly strange and they distract her from the boredom. Savannah wishes she could've taken his picture with the brand new Polaroid camera her mother gave her when she left for New York. Her mother's a journalist who says "photos tell the truth." But a picture wouldn't be able to capture the chemical scent of Mr. Aleksandrov's cologne or the guttural aversion she felt to it. Despite this, Mr. Aleksandrov's Vaseline lips and leathery pants and skin would've made for a more interesting photograph than what is currently in Savannah's "Summer" album—flowers in her grandparents' backyard, Mrs. Watts holding her new Chihuahua puppy, and her purple pedicure.

The entire way back from work to her grandparents' house, Savannah drives with the radio off. Her mind flits to the image of Mick in his kitchen, looking out onto the track. She imagines him

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standing at his sink, watching her run as he washes his hands and looks through the front window. Even after two minutes he doesn't move, the rushing water pouring unnoticed over his limp hands. She doesn't know whether she likes the idea of this attention or not.

When she opens the front door, the television is shouting in the living room. "In here!" her grandmother calls. A documentary is blasting on the television, a week-long PBS special on Mary Lincoln. Today is its third night. "Clara's in bed. She had a tiring day at camp," her grandmother says, muting the TV.

"The campers went to the pool," her grandfather says. His voice has a mucus-like quality to it, and he tries to clear his throat.

"With all those kids?" Savannah asks. Frightening, the idea of fifty six-year-olds running on slick concrete and jumping with flailing limbs into a congested pool.

"I don't know how they did it. Sounds like a nightmare to me. Clara went to sleep as soon as she got home," her grandma says, shaking her head.

"What?" her grandfather asks. Stiffly, he bends forward in his chair.

"It's a nightmare, I said," her grandmother says.

"Clara had a nightmare?"

"What?"

"Is Clara okay? Should Savannah check on her?" her grandfather tries to cough but his lungs wheeze instead.

Her grandmother frowns. "Clara's fine. What are you talking about?"

"You were talking about—" he puts all his concentration into his weak cough. "About a nightmare."

"Yes, Neil, I was talking about the pool."

"What?"

"The pool today. Honey, let's watch the program, okay?" Her grandmother turns the volume back up on the remote.

Her grandfather sighs. "I'm tired."

"Not much longer till bed," her grandmother says, her eyes already back on the television. Savannah stares at them for some sign that this has been some sad joke. Even more disturbing than

their unsmiling mouths is that they aren't frowning either. They relax again into their cushioned chairs in ease. There's nothing to be concerned about.

...

The next day when Savannah jogs to the track she plays her music louder than necessary so that the words consume her head, floating rhythmically in the space between her ears in a way that seems to magnify every detail of the morning. The beauty of the world this morning is jarring. Mick is lying on his back in the grass next to the track, his arm bending like a tent to cover his eyes. Savannah takes her time as she approaches him, taking in his sunbathed skin and letting her thoughts wander to what it would feel like under her fingers. With hands on her hips she stands in front of him, shadowing him from the sun with her body. His boyish smile gives away his relief at seeing her. The presumptuousness of his "I'll see you tomorrow" suddenly strikes Savannah as a masked plea. She smiles, feeling the addictive rush of being desired.

"Don't you look comfortable," Savannah says.

"I am," he says, still lying down. "You should join me, I think."

"I have my water bottle. I'm wearing my running shoes. I came to run."

"I can see that," Mick says, closing his eyes and smiling with pure contentment. He pats the grass next to him with his right hand. "C'mere."

Savannah sighs melodramatically to overcompensate for her hyper heart as she lies down next to him. Her arm brushes against the hairs of his hot arm.

"There we go," he laughs. "Beautiful morning, huh," he says.

"How old are you?" she asks quietly, and then thinks, *Too soon, dammit!* and her chest quickly constricts into a knot.

He doesn't respond right away, and then says, "What?"

"Nothing, nothing," she mumbles.

"Twenty-one," he says. Savannah turns her head to look at him, but his eyes are still closed.

"Cool," she says vaguely. She is thinking that she must have gone to his high school graduation because her cousin Taylor is the same age. Her grandmother has a photograph on the fridge of her and Taylor at the ceremony, her head swung back as she laughs, her open mouth revealing an expander that temporarily left a gap between her two front teeth wide enough to fit two toothpicks. Her small unconfined breasts pucker the fabric of her green summer dress absurdly.

“Sound okay?” he asks, laughing.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Cool,” he says, still smiling.

Overhead, there are no clouds, nothing to look at. Curious, she asks, “How old do you think I am?”

Frowning his lips and narrowing his eyes, Mick says, “Stand up.” Propping himself up on his forearm he takes her in as she stands, starting at the top of her head and ever so slowly smoothing his gaze over her body like butter, even taking in her pink running shoes. “Eighteen,” he says, like a judge making a decree.

“Maybe,” she says with a smile, grateful that he gave her two years.

“Hmm.” He squints his eyes but looks amused, and she knows that he guessed high. The idea that he suspects she is younger and doesn’t care sends a ripple of chills down her arms despite the heat pulsing in the still air like an inaudible drum.

...

The sticky night bathes Mick’s cheery yellow house in a murky haze, darkening the bright colors to various dim shades of grey. She reverses the moment in her mind earlier that day when Mick finally rolled onto his side and ran his hand slowly over the hair in her ponytail, watching his hand and not looking in her eyes. “Come over tonight,” he said softly. She felt like she was on the edge of a bobbing diving board, her toes curling and arms waving uncontrollably, the fall inevitable.

Too anxious to come alone, she asked her best friend Charlotte to join because Mick said there would be a party; his parents were in Florida for three weeks. In the driver’s seat, Charlotte runs her compact brush through her sleek black hair one last time and peers with raised eyebrows through the windshield at the house. Briefly, Savannah is overcome with sadness that nobody knows she is here, her grandparents in a deep drug-induced sleep and nearly deaf anyway, her mother in a hospital chair numbly watching her sister sleep. She wonders grimly if her mother has ever loved her own daughters so fervently, with so much force and directed purpose, as she loves her dying sister right now.

...

Taking her hand, Mick leads Savannah away from his friends, who sit on his living room sofa surrounding Charlotte, who is drunk and singing along with the song that’s playing. A bright light

from the bathroom in the hallway illuminates three young men standing at the running sink with their eyes closed, splashing water onto their noses and pulling at their nostrils.

“I don’t do drugs, if you were wondering,” Mick says.

With his hand sliding down Savannah’s back, he leads her into his dim room. “Tell me something I don’t know about you,” he says.

“That’s a lot,” she says.

“So start.” He walks over to his computer and hits the space bar a few times, the white light that pops from the screen making his face and neck glow. They sit on his bed, and she tells him about the Country Shop and Mr. Aleksandrov from the Laundromat and her sick aunt in New York with her parents.

“You okay?” he says, which catches Savannah by surprise that he cares to ask.

“My grandparents are losing it,” she says instead.

“Both of them?”

“They’re both practically deaf and refuse to get new hearing aids. My grandfather can barely walk anymore, and they have a chair attached to the stairs that slides up and down with a remote. My grandmother can only get through the day if she starts taking painkillers at five in the morning to numb her back.” Savannah thinks about how she can bend over and put her palms flat on the ground and imagines not being able to slouch in a chair or lie down in the bath tub without feeling the rubbing of fragile bones like her body was the earth’s crust, unstable and shifting.

When Savannah stops talking, Mick holds her in his arms and kisses the top of her head. She feels her body soften like muscles in sleep and sag into his, as if the weight inside her could somehow be released if she just let his body take on some of hers.

...

Charlotte stops coming with her after that, but Mick’s friends are there more often than not. He always holds her close when he is near them, sliding his hand up the back of her shirt or running his hand along her stomach at the top of her jean shorts. She starts bringing her camera and takes pictures of his friends smoking joints, the smoke curling from their lips in billowy tendrils. If she can make it into art, she can pretend that their fire eyes and pockets that shake with the sound of pill bottles don’t make her feel completely isolated. Mick’s hand in her back pocket lets her forget them.



Self-Portrait
Artist: Lauren Rutherford

By the end of the sixth night Mick's words begin to fill Savannah's head like hot steam that leaves her light-headed. "I love your stomach," he says, the tips of his fingers running in meandering trails over her skin. He whispers, "I love your hair," and smooths it with his hands or pulls it down in the back in a way that makes her groan. He loved her soft lips, he loved her lopsided breasts, he loved her tan legs. When he speaks, he says the word so freely, like it has lost its power to him. Though she tells herself it means nothing, she sometimes gets close enough to think that it does.

...

On Wednesdays Savannah gets out of work early, so she picks Clara up from camp and makes her a snack before taking her to the park. Clara peels the skin off her grapes to make them feel like eyeballs as Savannah cuts the crusts from Clara's bread, skins an apple, and cuts it into long thin slices that Clara calls "apple fries."

Going to Choo-choo Park with Clara makes Savannah feel heartsick for the uninterrupted joy that takes over Clara's face as they play. She and Clara pump their legs and pull with their arms as they swing in out of sync arcs, rarely rising and falling together. When they do, Clara yells, "We're married!" and when they fall apart again Clara squeals, "Noo! We're divorced!" Today they are pterodactyls on the swings until they hear the dingy sound of clicking metal that announces the approaching train. "Choo-choo!" Clara says, and jumps off the swing, her arms waving frantically like a drowning swimmer. Letting out a high-pitched shriek when she hits the ground, Clara holds her foot and folds her body into a little shaking ball, her shoulders rising and falling as she hiccups tears.

"Is it your heel?" Savannah asks, jumping from the swing too and crouching next to Clara, who holds her bare left foot between her hands.

"No, it's my f-f-foot," Clara, stutters, pointing to a pebble that has dented her heel and left a small droplet of blood that is slowly growing in size.

"C'mere, honey," Savannah says. "Get on my back." Hopping up on her other foot, Clara snuffles and wraps her arms around Savannah's neck. As the train passes them, the rush of noise mutes Clara's crying, and she rests her head at the base of Savannah's neck and relaxes all of her weight into Savannah.

In the short walk back to their grandparents' house, Clara's breathing calms from rapid inhaleds to longer, smoother exhaleds. Nobody comes to the front door when Savannah opens it, and she guesses that both of her grandparents are upstairs reading in bed. Six years ago her grandfather, often

still dressed in his damp running clothes, would jog to the door to open it when the family came to dinner. He scared Savannah because he used to stare down her plate at the dinner table until she finished all her food, making the Clean Plate Club a daunting requirement that never went unnoticed or unannounced to the entire family. Now his nagging comments about uneaten food have ceased completely, and it seems as if a switch had been flipped, making her formerly serious grandfather become sadly sweet in his debilitating, humanizing decline. Clara more often finishes all the food on her plate than he does.

Setting Clara down on the living room sofa, Savannah pulls at her shirt that sticks to her back and wonders where her grandmother keeps the Band-Aids. She finds a box in the medicine cabinet of the downstairs bathroom.

“Where are the Scooby Doo ones?” Clara says when she sees the disappointing tan Band-Aid, frowning her eyes as sunlight flooding through the window hits her face.

“Those are at home, Clara. Grandma doesn’t have them here.”

“But Mom always gives me Scooby Band-Aids!” Clara whines. “I don’t *want* this one!” she says, swiping Savannah’s hand away.

“I can get some later today, but right now let’s put this one on, okay?”

“I want Mom,” Clara says. “I miss her and Daddy.”

“I do too,” Savannah admits. “You want to call her? It might help to hear her voice, huh?” Savannah lifts Clara onto her lap and puts her cell phone on speakerphone. The rings fill the silent living room, and Savannah’s heart begins to beat faster in anticipation.

“Savannah?” their mother’s voice comes through.

“Mommy!” Clara squeals.

“Clara! How are you, baby?”

“Good,” Clara says.

“We went to the park and Clara hurt her heel,” Savannah says.

“No, my foot!” Clara corrects sternly.

“Your heel is part of your foot, honey. Did you put a Band-Aid on it?” their mother asks.

“No. They are all too boring!”

“She won’t let me put a Band-Aid on it, Mom,” Savannah adds.

“Clara, a Band-Aid will make it feel better. Even if it is boring. Your big sister knows how to be a good mother,” their mom says.

For a couple minutes their father gets on the phone and asks Clara about camp, and she tells a story about finding frogs in her friend’s pool. When their mother asks Savannah about work, she tells her about Mrs. Watts’ Chihuahua puppy, who almost got stepped on when Mrs. Watts left him tied to a tree outside her shop for an hour that morning as she took inventory. Savannah pauses for a moment, wanting to ask about Aunt Louise but not wanting to upset Clara, wanting to tell her mother something more meaningful than the stupid Chihuahua story but unsure of what she can say. Nobody but Charlotte knows about Mick. She wants to ask her mother when she will be coming home, because she senses it will be more than the three weeks that were promised before her parents left. Clara seems to be getting bored sitting still and is trying to turn the TV on, so instead Savannah just says goodbye, feeling more detached from her mother than she had before hearing her voice.

When Clara’s mouth falls open and her eyes become transfixed by the television, Savannah wanders back into the living room, where Clara has left a pile of her Barbies. When Savannah was Clara’s age she treated her dolls like they were little people, holding them with delicate fingers and tucking them into tissue-box beds at night. Clara takes pink and blue markers to her dolls’ hair and gives them permanent highlights. Her Barbies get in fights and are thrown into the air with thoughtless, haphazard neglect. She leaves them lying on the ground, their colorful hair splayed violently behind their heads, arms popped from sockets and reaching into the air at odd angles, clothes half off and revealing naked plastic skin. Savannah picks them up off the living room carpet and puts them back in Clara’s box of toys, their creepy white smiles frozen on their faces despite the abuse they’ve received. She doesn’t know why she does it—her grandparents probably won’t notice the

Something about the
Barbies’ smiling unclothed
bodies lying exposed and
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mess—but something about the Barbies’ smiling unclothed bodies lying exposed and ignored makes her cringe.

...

When Mick gets too tired and can’t keep his eyes open any longer, Savannah still can’t stop herself from kissing him. She watches him trace his fingers over her arms and marvels at the gentle way he touches her skin. Closing her eyes, she thinks to the last boy she made out with, a senior who grabbed her neck in his hand when they were kissing, squeezing too hard, and shoved her head with both hands towards his pants.

Mick always falls asleep first and she lies with her head on his chest, allowing her body to mimic his, her head obeying the rise and fall of his breathing. As she rides her bike home early each morning through drowsy neighborhoods, the pressure of the bike seat shoots pain between her legs. When she opens the door to her grandparents’ house, she no longer winces as it creaks because she knows that the note left on the counter saying she’d be at Charlotte’s will still be unread; her grandparents will both still be in the oblivion of sleep for another hour at least. Sometimes she collapses in bed and other times she sits in the shower, asking the water to cleanse her sticky body. But now the tiny droplets that cover her body are less remarkable, and she dries off feeling no different than when she’d stepped in.

One day she walks in her towel through the living room and places five hidden hints, Polaroid photos of Mick and his friends holding pipes and pills, in various spots—between pages of books on the coffee table, under the cushion of the sofa, inside her grandmother’s old piano music, under the potted orchid.

“How’s Charlotte?” her grandmother asks the next day at breakfast.

Savannah hasn’t spoken to Charlotte for two days now after she asked, “Has Mick ever taken you out to dinner? He invites you over every night and you leave before he wakes up.” Charlotte stabbed a movie ticket stub and put it on her bulletin board. “And has it ever occurred to you that maybe he’s always high, just like his friends?”

“She’s fine,” Savannah responds now, her eyes on the watery, undercooked eggs her grandmother has made. “She says hi.”

“You should have her over sometime, sweetheart.”

“Grandma,” Savannah says calmly. “I lost some photos I took. Have any shown up?” Her grandmother pauses with the door to the refrigerator open. “Not that I’ve seen,” she says. She tells Savannah maybe the cleaning woman threw them out when she was there yesterday afternoon. “Are they important?”

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After not speaking with Charlotte for two more days Savannah decides to lie to save their friendship. They lounge on their stomachs on blowup rafts in Charlotte’s pool, their backs burning purposefully for the tan aftereffect.

“I’m not seeing Mick anymore,” she says into her folded arms that act like a pillow for her head. “Really?”

“Yep. He’s too old.” Savannah pauses because she knows Charlotte expects more. “And you were right. He’s only interested in sex.” She feels a twist of dread, the same sense she had when her mother said, “There’s something I need to tell you about Louise.” Savannah knew the truth before her mother said anything more.

“Thank *God*, Savannah. He gave me the creeps.” Charlotte props herself up on her elbows. “You guys didn’t...do anything, right? You didn’t sleep with him,” she says flatly.

“No, no,” Savannah says, hoping that her blush is hidden by her sunburn. She feels disjointed; she hadn’t thought that she would have to lie twice. “Of course not.”

“Good,” Charlotte says. “I was worried for a bit that you were about to follow in the footsteps of my cousin Amanda, giving blow jobs in amusement park bathrooms. That poor girl. It’s pathetic what she’ll do for the attention. Sometimes I just want to slap her and say, ‘You know they don’t give a shit about you, right? Don’t you know every single one of them laughs at you?’ ”

Savannah doesn’t respond and rolls over off the raft. It is wonderfully cold, and once underwater she doesn’t stir, her hair billowing behind her like seaweed, the only part of her she can’t stop from moving. For a while she lets her body float immobile like she did when she was little and faked dead underwater. Charlotte’s words follow her into the chemical water and prod at her head, pressing at her closed eyelids and making her feel surrounded and vulnerable like blind prey.

...

When Mrs. Watts leaves Savannah to work alone, the first thing she does is unplug the red boom-box and let silence hover in the empty shop. She has to restock the leather belts with silver cross

You know they don't
give a shit about you,
right? Don't you know
every single one of
them laughs at you?

buckles and water the flowers outside the shop, but for twenty minutes she stares out the window at the Laundromat and rubs her itchy eyes, watching a handsome man in black cowboy boots and dark jeans take his clothes out of the dryers and fold them meticulously. After a while she goes outside to water the flowers, the rush of heat hitting her face like an open oven and making her cough. The white flowers are withered and stand in scorched soil that sucks the water and leaves it looking as dry and cracked as before.

When Savannah comes out of the bathroom with the watering pot full again, the man from the Laundromat is fingering the brim of a brown cowboy hat. He smiles as Savannah approaches. "What do you think?" he asks, sitting it on his head.

"Wrong color," she says. "It should be black with what you're wearing."

"You have a point," he says. He lets his gaze circle over the store. "Quite some knick-knacks you've got here."

"Yeah, we've got a lot of stuff."

"You like working here?"

"Sure," she says.

"Pretty quiet, I'd say. People come in here a lot?"

"Here and there they do. Hard to predict." Savannah knows the familiar scent of laundry detergent on the man. She recognizes his brown hair and square attractive face, not because she has seen him before, but because he reminds her of the men she sees as she drives home: a few years out of college, still in their work clothes, hands resting on copper beers.

"You've been working here all summer, right?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I've been in here before," the man says, and though Savannah swears she would have remembered him (the only ordinary person to enter from the Laundromat), she figures maybe that's why he seemed familiar all along. "I'm Joe," he says. "People usually call me Joey, though."

"I'm Savannah," she says, surprising herself that she admits her name so readily. She wonders if her low-cut dress and wedge sandals make her look older today.

"You going to work here the rest of the summer, Savannah?" She likes the way he says her name, taking his time with every letter.

She nods and raises her eyebrows. "Yup."

"How do you stay occupied in here? I'd go crazy. Don't you have music?"

Savannah realizes that he is propelling the conversation with his questions and begins to feel that effervescence in her stomach. "Even the music gets boring to be honest," she says.

"Yeah? I bet." He takes a seat on a stool by the door. "I just got started on my laundry over there. Thought I'd come over here to kill time. Hope you don't mind," he says. He looks at her with raised eyebrows and then adds, "But looks like a little company couldn't hurt."

"Not at all," she says. "I still have two hours till I close."

"Oh, that's rough. Do you have plans for when you get out?"

"I might see a friend, I'm not sure yet," she says. "You?"

"Getting a drink with friends. We're discussing plans for tonight. Do you like barbecues?"

"Of course," she says, remembering what Charlotte told her about Mick and thinking this man seemed like the kind of guy who asked for the check and held his girlfriend's hands across the table at dinner.

"My friends are having one in a park nearby later, at around eight. You should come, it'd be fun. We're trying to get a lot of people together. Should really be fun," he repeats.

...

Joey leaves smiling and Savannah closes the store in a hurry. She decides to walk, even though it will take her half an hour, because she doesn't want Joey to see her pull up to the park in her mother's white minivan. Despite Joey's charm she wishes she were with Mick right now, walking together in the hot, still evening. She wishes she were holding his hand, something he only does when they are in bed together.

Mick answers his phone on the third ring. "Hey," she says. "I'm going to be over a little later tonight," she says.

"Okay. Call me when you're on your way."

"Don't you want to know what I'm doing?"

“What are you doing?” The boredom in his voice quickens her step.

“Going to a barbecue,” she says sharply. “With a guy I met today.”

“Who’s that.” The way he states the question like he doesn’t care makes Savannah purse her lips.

“Guy named Joey. I met him in the store today.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, there’s going to be a big barbecue at the park. The one off of Hibbard. You know that one?”

“You’re going to meet a guy you just met today in the park?”

“Yes, Mick, that is what I said.”

“Is he your age?”

“No. Your age I think. Maybe a bit older,” she says, feeling uncertainty creep into her chest as she says this out loud.

“Are you out of your *mind*?” There’s anger in his voice she hasn’t heard before. “Where are you right now? Wait wherever you are. I’m coming to get you.”

...

Mick sits hunched in his seat when Savannah opens the passenger door, both of his hands on the steering wheel. “Thank you for picking me up,” she says. “Were you with your friends?”

“Savannah, do you know how stupid you are?” His eyes, out of focus, pass over her but don’t settle anywhere.

“I’m not stupid,” she whispers.

“It’s night. It’ll be dark soon.”

“Mick, it won’t be dark for two hours probably.”

“Whatever. I just—never mind; you’re ridiculous. I’m taking you to your grandparents’ house.” The car is hot and stuffy and she coughs into her arm. She tries rolling down the window but the wind makes her eyes water, and she sneezes. “Are you sick?” he asks, turning towards her.

“Maybe, I don’t know,” she says. “I’m sorry about this. Please don’t take me home.” She says “home” the way you start referring to your hotel room as “home” if you stay there long enough on vacation, a way to describe the place you sleep and eat and bathe but that’s really just an unfamiliar stand-in. She reaches for his thigh.

“Don’t touch me. I don’t want to get sick. I should’ve known you were too naïve.” Mick looks at the road, his lips parted and unsmiling. She closes her eyes and tries to breathe steadily, but all she wants to do is touch him, to know that he will respond to her and everything will be how it was before. He flinches when she puts her hand on his shoulder and turns the radio on high, staring straight ahead like he has forgotten she is there next to him.

...

When Savannah gets home she takes a forty-minute shower and tells her grandmother it is to relieve the sinus pressure. The bath tub feels hard and cold beneath her back when she lies down, the water monotonous. Her grandmother makes her canned soup and tea on a tray and brings it to her bed along with a box of tissues. Next to the soup are two of her photographs, placed face down, their white backs making Savannah’s heart tighten like a fist.

“I’m sorry, honey,” her grandmother says, her hand fumbling on top of the covers to find Savannah’s arm. Savannah closes her eyes, possible words of explanation flying frantically inside her head, excuses and confessions fighting each other. She wonders if her grandmother checked on her this week in the middle of the night when she woke up to use the bathroom and Savannah was with Mick. As soon as she lets the thought enter her head she dismisses it because she knows this is something only her nocturnal mother would do. “I’m sorry you feel sick,” her grandmother says again, wiping a piece of hair from out of Savannah’s face. “But it’s just a cold, sweetheart. And I’ll get you anything you need.”

Savannah shakes her head because what her grandmother used to give her—stories about her family, monthly trips to the library, and hot chocolate with mini marshmallows for dessert—isn’t what she needs now. This is her grandmother’s way of loving her, Savannah knows, but it was something dependent and expected, so routine that she was beginning not to notice it. Was she unrealistic and selfish to expect more? Savannah wonders if she is being unfaithful and cruel because she feels she has outgrown this kind of love expressed through kind words, comfortable questions, and warm food. Knowing that Mick cares even less makes her turn towards her grandmother and bury her head in the covers by her leg. Her grandmother tucks Savannah’s hair behind her ear with one hand and squeezes her hand with the other, and Savannah desperately wishes that it could be enough.

Anatomy Lab

Amber Nadeau

Winter in the hospital.
Dead bodies, for once, in short supply;
one to each team of three. I remember
one tall dark girl with a French accent
and hands of black marble, across the table from me,
reeking of lavender.

Our woman. She wore coral lipstick that had rubbed off
on some tube or another, but enough remained
to surprise me when I touched her lips
and they were cold. The French girl sliced a line
above each breast, then straight down the stomach.

After you die you don't bleed.

When I felt her intestine I paused to think two things:
Did I turn on the crock pot? and *This feels gritty.*
Gritty like fine sand. We dug deep. Coral,
thousands of rough little pearls, spilled out,
as if her lipstick had colored her inside too.
Cancer, said the professor. *Quelle domage*, said Lavender Girl.
My hair stuck to my forehead. I wanted to wipe it away.

Don't Cry About It.

Raven Grant

As the clock strikes midnight on December 31st, you amble inside to drown out the noisy lover pops with another cup of plain yogurt from the refrigerator.

You've memorized 32 lines of a romantic monologue that only the water droplets from your exasperated shower head will ever hear.

For hours, you ruminate over every text you've ever sent.

You yank out strand after strand of stubborn keratin, only to find that you've left only split ends and lifeless follicles.

Heaven forbid you end up alone, and you don't know why.

Every day, you power-walk the most obscure routes to work so that you always cross paths but never make eye contact.

Stepping into the elevator, the chorus of an all-too-familiar love song yanks an unexpected stream of tears down your cheeks.

You've grown so weary of staying late to work on the group project. Alone.

By 4am, you're proud of your desk full of eraser crumbs and caffeine stains. You don't even realize your shirt is on backwards.

Nobody said it was easy. No one ever said it would be this hard.

Three weeks later, you still have no idea what you've been looking for in the refrigerator.

You've been harassing the mailman about a package that you accidentally mailed to your childhood address.

You picked out the perfect sweetheart princess dress, white gold infinity ring, and Mediterranean menu for your second cousin's best friend's wedding.

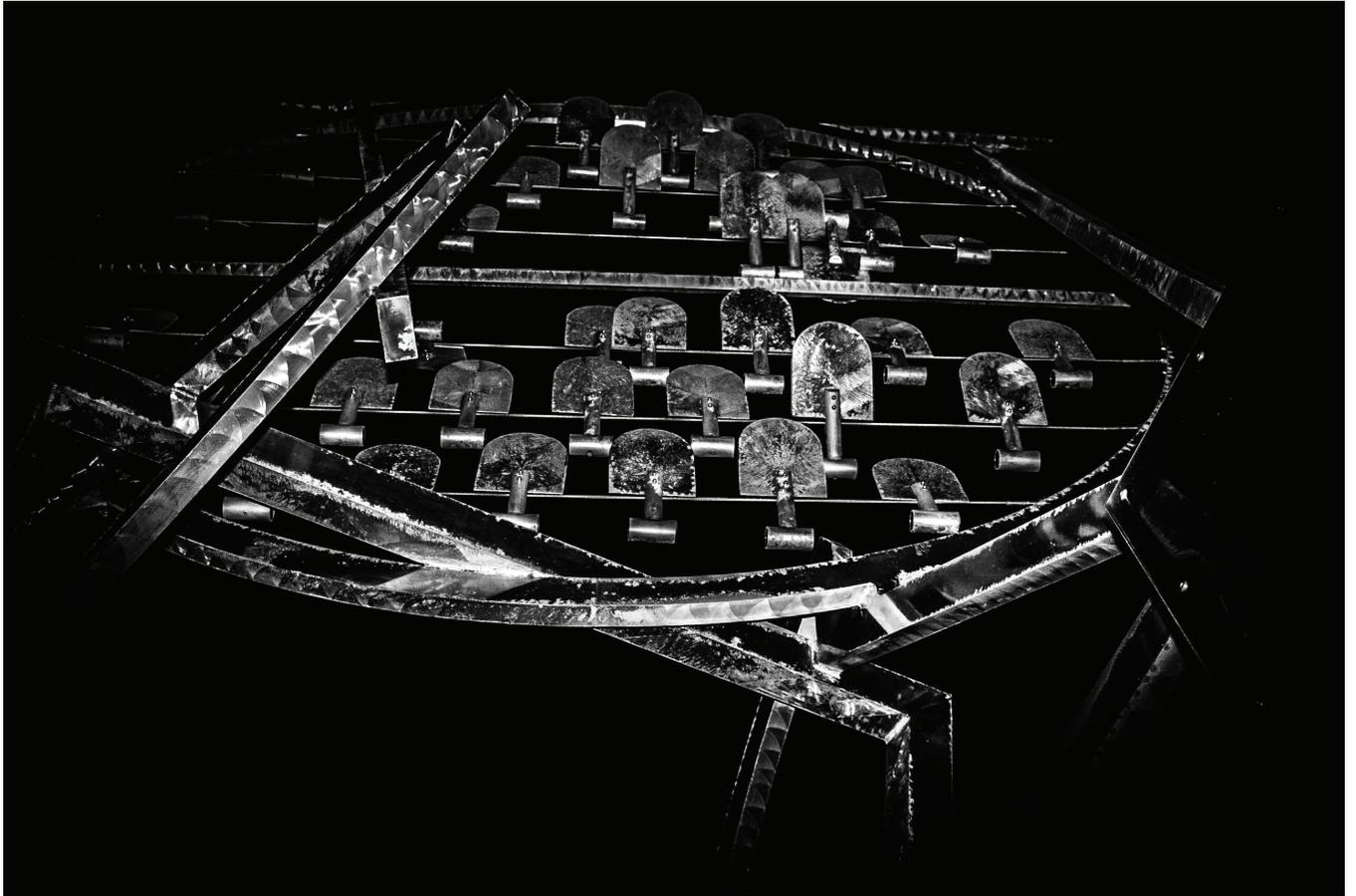
Rounding the last corner of your run, you try to pick up the pace, only to find a cut on your big toe bleeding through your ragged Nikes.

We all look for heaven, and we put love first.

Don't cry about it.



Lost Village
Artist: Lydia Smith



Crazy

Rucy Cui

Peter is married, and I am sweating. I have sweat off my makeup in the heat of skin against skin and the promise of punishment. Afterward, when I can climb out of bed and get dressed, I dab foundation over my face, swiping with a sponge to blend it out. The bottle is cool to the touch, almost empty from use, and it grounds me to the way things are supposed to be, that it is winter away from heavy sheets and even heavier limbs, that I can't traipse around this apartment for much longer in just a nightgown. When the song playing from the bedroom leaking into the bathroom reaches its chorus—“*Secrets I have held in my heart / Are harder to hide than I thought*”—I dust blush over the apples of my cheeks. Then I uncap an eyeliner pencil, hold it tight in my fingers like the stem of a wineglass, and scrawl around the border of my eyelashes. I have painted myself back into the person I am supposed to be.

Peter comes into the bathroom, kisses the nape of my neck. “Your new haircut is perfect,” he says. “I thought I would've needed an adjustment period. But it's perfect.”

I pack my toiletry bag, trying to decide how to respond. I wanted to take back something of myself, but how did it happen so that all I could muster was something as meaningless and auxiliary as hair? And he approved of it. “You know, short hair is less attractive than long hair.”

“I don't care about stuff like that.”

“What do you care about?” I ask uncaringly.

Peter shakes his head. “Don't do that.”

“I'm not doing anything.”

He smiles. It hits me hard, like a bolt of persuasion to the abdomen. “It's the last week that Meredith will be gone for the rest of the year. You're not allowed to pick fights with me.”

“I’m sorry. I worry. I don’t mean to hurt anyone, and that’s okay—I always end up hurting myself instead.” I look at my toiletry bag because I can’t look at him. One of the zippers has given me trouble for as long as I can remember, but for the first time, I realize there’s something caught in it—a string, a piece of stitching. It makes me think of all the nights that have passed and all the nights that will pass where I will stand in this bathroom and reanimate myself back into this person and struggle with this zipper. A makeup stain on the bottom of the toiletry bag has faded into an age spot. I scratch at it with my fingernail.

Peter kisses the nape of my neck again. He doesn’t say anything.

“Back to bed?”

“Yes.” He guides me, limp under his palm, across the threshold and through the music.

“I want to be yours.”

“You are,” Peter says, and it’s frightening because it’s true.

When I met him five years ago, he was my thesis advisor during my senior year of college. I was writing about magical realist representations in the Russian theatre, but I almost took a leave of absence instead. My father died.

Physically, Peter wasn’t much different then than he is now—handsome, that is, with the sort of magnetism that makes me part open like a pale pink flower. When he walks, he gives the impression of rearranging the air around him in order to reach his destination, of being sexually powerful, of being contained in knowing exactly what he wants. I thought I’d take a leave of absence because I was sad about my father, yes, the soft pronouncement coming from my mother over the phone like something not quite heard, something misinterpreted and mistaken, but above all else, I couldn’t fathom disappointing Peter. A leave of absence seemed like the proper way to acknowledge the loss of a family member and, at the same time, acknowledge the blow to my academic aspirations. I imagined telling him and being comforted from across his desk and exchanging emails once I’d settled in at home: *The department misses your analyses on magical realist representations in the Russian theatre.* Followed by: *My mother and I are healing. I’ve kept up my research, and look forward to resuming my thesis as soon as possible.* The actual scene played out quite differently.

“Were you close?” Peter asked. “To your father?” We were sitting in his office with the blinds drawn down; they cast rays of light across his knuckles, illuminating short dark hairs at the tops of his

fingers and a plain gold wedding ring. He tapped a ballpoint pen against the desk, absentmindedly, thoughtfully, but I could feel the full force of his attention on me.

I was taken aback by his question. When I'd hung up the phone that morning, letting my mother cry on in privacy, the first thing I'd seen was my roommate, studying in bed with her back to me and looking like she decidedly did not want to be interrupted. So of course I did, even though we didn't talk beyond my borrowing her toothpaste or her borrowing my tweezers. She had exclaimed, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for your loss." But I didn't know if I was suffering beyond rudimentary grief for a looming stranger-man who'd been in my life and paid for my expenditures and sent me kitschy bookmarks in the mail. Peter seemed cognizant of that. Maybe I was still in shock.

"I wasn't close to him," I said. "I remember being close enough to him when I was little that he carried me on his shoulders at the zoo. But I haven't really interacted with him in years." I paused. "It was a heart attack."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Peter held my gaze. "Most of all, I think I'm sorry to hear that you weren't close to your father. It's a difficult relationship to keep up over the years—I can't imagine having a daughter such as yourself and watching her grow up and knowing the precise instant, by way of which she carries herself, that she becomes a woman. However, I won't sign off on your leave of absence."

I frowned, forgetting my place. "Why not?"

Peter dropped his ballpoint pen and leaned into the desk, crinkling his solid color tie right down the middle, where silk met and succumbed to the edge of mahogany wood. In this entire semester of working with him, I'd never seen him in a patterned tie. I remembered sitting next to him instead of across the desk from him once. It was the first time my crush had physically manifested itself, my cheeks warm, my ribcage hurting from the sheer effort required to hold and restrain my thrumming heart. Our heads were bent over a specific sentence of mine: *Magical realism seizes our obsession with the uncanny and renders it quotidian.*

Peter said, "You're too goddamn brilliant to take a goddamn leave of absence."

At the end of the week, the haze of almost-happiness is shattered. Meredith comes back from her conference, and I go back to my apartment in the city.

“Hello?” My roommate, another stranger I know intimately well due to proximity, hears me unlock the door and pads into the entryway to make sure that I am me, and not a burglar with a master key. Then she loses interest. “Don’t forget the check for this month’s utilities,” she says before walking away, a brunette cowlick curving away from her pale forehead. She closes the door to her room.

“Thanks,” I mumble. “Nice to see you, too.”

I spend the rest of the day unpacking and readjusting. My clothes are balled up in my weekender bag, smelling of cigarette smoke and human sweat, disuse and overuse. In a fit of frustration, I toss everything I can get my hands on into the washer — clothes, bath towels, bed sheets. Waiting between cycles is the hardest part because I have a list of obligations to get to, I really do. I have to study for the GRE if I ever want to apply to grad school; I have to find better than a minimum wage job if I ever want to afford grad school. Yet I can’t stop myself from sitting and watching my clothes spin.

I spend the rest of the night sandwiched between books for studying and books for self-improvement. I am still in a swoon, can barely feel my extremities. I think of Peter and his conch-shaped ears.

In college, I was the girl who appeared to be guarded, at least from afar. But I fell in love easily, forgot my friends, and neglected my work as soon as I established a degree of comfort with someone, anyone who was interested enough to try. My first serious boyfriend’s name was Zack, who never liked to go by Zachary even though that was what was on all his official papers, who didn’t realize how invested I was getting until I bought him, but mostly us, a blender.

Peter, on the cusp of the end of my senior year, elicited a similar response. I was sure, I somehow knew after he kept me from leaving, that the tension around his mouth when he looked at me was important. I started spritzing the backs of my knees with perfume before we met each week. It wasn’t supposed to mean anything, but his mouth would twist, tenser and tenser, yet with a real impression of capitulation, as if to laugh, “You have no idea what you’re getting us both into.” And we would stay up late talking about Anton Chekhov, or stream-of-consciousness, or the intersection of ambition and success in academia.

When I graduated, Peter invited my mother and me out to dinner. “We never celebrated your thesis,” he said. “The best one I’ve advised on in my entire career as a professor. I don’t know if I can promise that without bias since you’re my favorite student, so take it with a grain of salt.”

My mother, fresh off the plane and still wearing a haggard expression about the eyes as if widowhood was a life choice along the lines of vegetarianism, something she certainly wouldn’t willingly give up, was charmed by Peter. Her shoulders were loose when she said, “You’re very lucky to have him.”

We ate at an upscale Japanese restaurant, at a table that wasn’t meant for three people, and the decorative lanterns dangled in such a way that I couldn’t see my mother during the meal unless I craned my neck around them. But they were much too bright to do that for extended periods of time, so Peter and I faced each other, feverishly, while she attached herself to my left side, an addition that was not wholly welcome.

“You know,” she said after her first sushi roll, “I don’t believe I ever asked you what you were doing after graduation. I don’t believe we ever had that conversation.”

“I’m taking some time off before applying to grad school, Mom. I’m sure we’ve had this conversation before.”

“No, I don’t believe we have.” She shook her head, wiped the corner of her mouth. “But you never communicated much to me, not even when your father was alive.”

Suddenly, I was certain I would burn up under the lanterns. I was very lucky to have Peter, but why couldn’t the reverse hold true? No one was very lucky to have me, and my mother didn’t even think so. She still begrudged me some lack of closeness, some inherent desire that I was supposed to have for duty. It was like I was fifteen again, and I was expected to love and confide in her, and she barely looked at me from above her easel. She was always painting things just out of reach.

I was very lucky to
have Peter, but why
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hold true? No one was
very lucky to have me.

“I’ll be back,” I said. I stood up and walked to the restroom. A waiter held the door open for me. At the sink, I let the water run cold, cold, cold, before splashing it over my face and neck, my muscles tense in anticipation, then wondrously slack after the shock. I’d reached for the potted orchids when Peter came in. He saw my fingers pulling at the silky petals, dropping them in the clogged sink. He touched my wrist, the part where skin was faintly translucent. I felt like someone had grabbed one of the decorative lanterns from outside and shattered it and stuck pieces of blown glass and vibrant color under my eyelashes. I was blind. He kissed me.

I’m leaning out of my window and smoking when my phone chimes, a single discordant tone that almost makes me drop my cigarette down below onto the head of a passerby. It’s Peter: *Let’s talk. Four Seasons room 437 at 6:00.* I take a final drag, then close the window. The last time I heard from him was more than two weeks ago. I’ve been marking time, the entire time. My new haircut isn’t so new anymore. In the interim, my room has gotten messier, and my roommate has gotten a boyfriend. She met him online.

I’ve been rereading *Gone with the Wind*. If not magical realism in Russian theatre, I think I would’ve written my senior thesis on love and sexuality in *Gone with the Wind*. There’s something terribly resonant to me about Scarlett pining after the idea of Ashley, yet Rhett loving her all the while because he’s the only one who knows who she is, that she is capable of both great selfishness and great strength. I’m too affected by stuff like that. I wonder if I know who Peter is. I know he is allergic to pineapple and that he has a birthmark in the shape of an apostrophe above his left elbow and that he was the first in his family to graduate from college. It seems like enough. I wonder if he knows who I am, or if I even know who I am.

I finish my chapter and set about, again, painting myself into the person I am supposed to be, pink in the lips and cheeks, black in the space between individual eyelashes. I have more than two hours before I’m supposed to meet Peter, and now that I’m done with my makeup, my palms go wet with anticipation. I decide to wash them, and to dry them in the breeze outside my window. I smoke another cigarette. I’ve only taken one GRE practice test.

The summer immediately after my graduation, Peter and I went to the coast and stayed for a month. He was on the board of humanities research at a small liberal arts college there. I packed

sandals and my toiletry bag, before the stitching started falling apart and the zipper stopped working, but I didn't pack anything useful like rain boots or a camera. Shortly after we arrived, we were hit with a torrential storm that trapped us indoors for the rest of the week, but not before saturating every article of clothing on our bodies, dragging necklines past our collarbones and hems past our waists in a single trip from the parking lot to the cabin.

"This is ridiculous," I complained. I peeled a wet, tenacious leaf off the leg of my jeans.

Peter laughed. His blond hair was opaque with rain, and I imagined myself parting open under his magnetism again. I wanted to touch him, drink him in like mulled wine. "When should we make the second trip?" he asked. "I think I left some notes in the car..."

"You're an idiot," I said. But I only said stuff like that halfheartedly.

He caught my chin. "Come back outside with me."

"You go. I'll make the third trip with you."

"What third trip?"

"The third trip that we'll invariably end up making because we've forgotten something else."

Peter rolled his eyes but acquiesced. After the door shut behind him, briefly spraying my splayed legs with droplets of rain, I stood up from the bed and found the bathroom. I reapplied my makeup in quick strokes.

The cabin was beautiful, and looked out onto the New England coast. Even if the tide rose that night, we were a safe distance away. We gulped down hot chocolate, followed by the mulled wine that I'd been holding out for, giggling tipsily into the sides of each other's necks. Peter smelled of musk and tobacco and something intangible, like I was breathing emotion off his skin instead of scent particles. That wouldn't have surprised me. He said, "I'm crazy about you." And I asked, dropping to the kitchenette floor like a leaf, "Actually, legitimately crazy?" I don't know if I was fishing for a particular answer, just that I'd never felt so alive before in my life. But is it still being alive if you're tied utterly and completely to the life of another?

I'm already on the subway when I get the next text from Peter: *Change of plans. Let's talk tomorrow. Same place, same time.*

I text back: *Sounds fine.* I transfer back in the direction from which I came.

Greetings from Paradise

Jessica Fuquay

i.

Please accept this postcard
as a memory of us. See me where the sand turns
to sucralose as I cup it in my hands,
where the ocean must be Kool-Aid, it's so sickly
blue.

I've forgotten your face, but the shadow of our
one

body still trails along the reef, its four legs
kicking and thrashing. Those frightened fish
are just rubber now.

ii.

It's my membership card.
How many keep theirs tucked
beneath their clothes, how many
have felt air as hot breath on the neck,
my government estimates at one in five
women. The rogue fingers tap their counting
on the floor.

iii.

Brain to fingertip, to groin, to water,
to where the bathing suit began
and ended.

Where you forgot yourself in the
drama of it all.

Where the snapshot has bled
its ink into the fabric.

To forget is the lining of memory.

iv.

Keep this scrap of paper. You left
your candy bar wrapper to glint in the sun.
Somewhere, you're smacking your lips.



At the Pier One Cold November Night
Artist: Gloria Quintanilla

Percival Everett

Interview by Jay Becton, Stefanie Saathoff, and Courtney Brown

American author Percival Everett graduated from Brown University and has published over 25 works of fiction, including *A History of the African-American People (proposed)* by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid, the award-winning *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, as well as his latest novel *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell. Everett is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California.



A lot of your works—*A History of the African-American People*, for example, which I find both hilarious and horrifying—employ humor and satire to tackle difficult issues like race in America. Why do you think this is such an effective strategy and how do you make sure it comes across in the right manner?

Well, you can never be sure. There are so many different kinds of readers out there, eventually, you just have to say to yourself, “I don’t care how it comes across.” Humor is just a wonderfully disarming tool. If you can get someone to see the irony in something—if you can get them laughing—then you can address more serious issues without them even realizing it. Humor is not the absence of gravity, you know; it is the presence of irony. And we’re ironic beings. We’re always contradicting ourselves. That’s what humans do. It’s easy to be sad all the time, of course, but that just gets depressing.

In several of your works, there are characters who, in various ways, are similar to yourself. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, the main character adopts his professor (who shares your name) as a mentor. In *Erasure*,

as well, the reader sometimes gets the sense that the novel is a little autobiographical. How do these different versions of yourself function within your novels? And how do you avoid the “bad rap” that comes with self-insertion?

Despite the alarming similarities between myself and the character in *Erasure*, it was never intended to be auto-biographical. But I do insert myself into *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* because I'm making fun of everyone else. I figured I should make fun of myself, too—and it turned out to be really easy to do. I learned a lot about myself, and the character turned out to be more like me than I thought. I don't worry about complaints about self-insertion, though. That sounds really weird doesn't it? “Self-insertion...Go insert yourself.”

You've produced works in many different forms: long novels, short stories, and also poetry. Do you have a preferred form? If so, how does this preference factor into the way you approach the other forms?

I'm definitely a novelist. With stories, I have a much different relationship. They're shorter than novels, sure, but the two are really different forms. I think principally in layers and I like the space and depth that novels afford. Occasionally, I'll write stories when I'm in need of a distraction. I don't spend the same amount of time on stories as I do on novels. That's not to say that I don't take them as seriously. They're just different.

What about the different genres you've worked in? Do you decide on genre when you sit down to begin a new piece or does it just happen naturally?

Every novel comes differently. They all have their own lives and meanings. I've only written one Western, but I've had a lot of books set in the West because that's the world I know—it's where I live. I've had novels set on ranches because I lived on a ranch. If I lived in a submarine, I'd probably have a novel set in a submarine. It'd be cool to live in a submarine, though. “Don't open that door!”

Do you have a personal favorite of your works?

No. That's like asking somebody if they have a favorite kid. "Yes, it's Bobby. The others are just terrible."

But I've heard that parents always do, they just don't want to admit it.

Parents, sure. But I don't. There's a wonderful saying—and I attribute it to Walter van Tilburg Clark who wrote *The Ox-Bow Incident*, I think—he said, "I love all my children, geniuses and idiots alike," in speaking about his work, and I think that's a good way to put it. I've had different experiences writing each piece. Some novels do give me more trouble than others. But I guess that's the way kids are, too. Like, "gosh, I'm always having to bail Courtney out of jail," you know?

How do you deal with criticism of your work? Does it affect your process at all?

I like reading scholarly criticism because I always learn something, even if it's just about the way someone else is thinking—it might not have anything to do with the work. But no matter what someone says or does, it doesn't change the work on the page. It's all about their interpretation, how they perceive it. That can always be interesting. Even if they hate it, I'm kind of curious about why. I don't take any of it personally. But any time I learn something, it's going to affect my work.

You use so many real people—or, rather, caricatures of real people—in your novels. Have any of these people ever commented on this? Like, did Ted Turner say anything about *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*?

I actually sent Ted a copy of the book, but I never heard anything from him. I didn't know anything about Ted Turner, though, which is why I used him. If you know something about somebody, you feel obliged to try to be more faithful to some reality. If you don't know anything, you can just make them up completely.

So how do you choose which celebrities you employ? Why Ted Turner or Strom Thurmond? What about those people made you decide they would have the most impact in their respective roles? Do you choose to use well-known names or figures to convey certain ideas that those people might represent through your fictionalization of them?

I'm a fiction writer. I have to be free to make it up as I see fit. In the end, the characters become simply vehicles for my making a point. And that's true of all characters. Now, in the Strom Thurmond book, that's Strom Thurmond. That's the whole point. The only other time I've really done it is with Ted Turner—Sidney Poitier is only in name because it's *not* Sidney Poitier. I used Turner mainly because of his relationship to media. He changed the face of media. And I kind of like the real person. I don't know the real person, but anyone who gives a billion dollars to the UN to actually pay the US' dues is pretty cool. He's also smart and crazy and those are two things that I think go well together.

A lot of our readers are aspiring writers. Do you have any advice for them? Something you think a young writer should hear?

Yeah. Marry money. Somebody rich. You'll need it. Really, I only have two things. One is *read*. And the other is *take yourself seriously* because if you don't, no one will. Pretty simple things. I, personally, like to read everything—and, sadly, I mean *everything*. Not so much fiction, though.

Are there any specific genres or authors that you read for fun?

I like reading math. To relax, I read Calculus. I deal with language all the time, so dealing with numbers and equations is a nice break. Chess problems are fun, too.

Have you ever gotten any horrible advice about writing?

I think all advice about writing is pretty horrible. In the end, you just have to learn for yourself.



Compulsion

Linh Tran Do

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I have life drawing class, the art studio for drawing nudes. On one of those afternoons, I punch in the code to the studio and claim my easel. More students trickle in and set up their corners. I snap several sheets of newsprint and white drawing paper to my easel and pop the top off my supply box to find a smooth stick of conte crayon. The conte leaves black grit in the grooves of my fingers. Good, I think. It will prevent me from peeling the skin on my cheeks—a rash, some people think, but I know it's not. I made my cheeks the way they are, pink and exposed, by picking at them.

Once my fellow classmates stand ready with their conte and chamois, the model removes her robe and stands on the platform, hands reaching upward as she displays her bare anatomy for sixteen pairs of eyes. Now several months into school, I no longer ogle the model's casual nudity. Every class, though, I marvel at her confidence to stand there, unashamed, perhaps even proud, of her body. Immobile, a virtual statue, she has nothing to hide. Not like me, burdened with secrets behind my long hair.

In a series of two-minute warm-ups, I sketch the model on tip-toe like a ballerina, then crouched with one leg out, and folded down in a stretching pose. As we break and switch from newsprint to white paper, I scratch at my cheeks. My skin silently shrieks in pain. I curl my fingers around the conte as I mentally berate myself. My face will be black with conte, I think, but I know I'll see something else when I look in my pocket mirror, the one I use to check the noticeability of my red cheeks. I'll see the flakes of skin barely clinging to my bothered, pink cheeks. Just one flick of my nail and the flakes will fall off. Back to smoothness.

I struggle to close my mind from those seductive whispers and keep my hands full of conte and chamois. The last thing I need is an infection where my gritty fingers handled my broken skin.

We begin a longer, half-hour drawing of the model seated in a chair. I use the chamois, orange from the sanguine crayon, to map out her head, her chest, the torso, the legs, the chair. Sanguine in hand, I sweep across the paper and leave trails of bright orange. With the chamois I soften some of the lines, and with my fingers I darken others to a richer, burnt orange. Behind me, I hear my professor prowl between our easels as she barks out critiques and the time remaining. I switch from the sanguine to the black conte and add shadow below the jaw, in the hair, at her elbows, and under her breasts. I chamois the harsh lines into a soothing blur, but too blurry, I realize. The conte returns, heightening the contrast. Chamois, conte, chamois, conte. The model's skin turns a zombie-esque gray. I keep the conte between my third and fourth finger of my right hand and position the sanguine as my primary tool. The orange enlivens her skin. I chamois again. The drawing floats soft and vague on the paper. I grab the stubby eraser and pull conte off in wide swaths. The chamois and the eraser transform me from a drawing student into a sculptor of light and shadows.

“Turn your easels around for critique!”

My professor's brusque voice jars me from my drawing hypnosis. Part of me immediately obeys and turns the easel around. Another part of me wishes that I can let my mind and eyes move as one entity and continue tracing the shapes and shadows of objects. My hands feel warm with movement, and new air constantly circulates through my lungs. Runners talk about runner's high. For me, this is artist's high.

I'm happiest when I'm lost in drawing because I'm so focused on telling the story of a line or of a narrative that I forget about my physical self and all of the flaws that come with it. Drawing transports me to another place and time where thirst and hunger and even sleep all fall away in the pursuit of an idea. My worst enemy is boredom, when I'm waiting for a red light to turn green, when I'm waiting in line, when I'm sitting in class that doesn't captivate me, when I'm by myself, when I'm with people, when my hands are empty and have no pencil or paintbrush or mouse or keyboard. My hands can't do nothing—they always have to do something, even if it means fidgeting.

Chamois, conte,
chamois, conte. The
model's skin turns a
zombie-esque gray.

Fidgeting covers a broad range of actions. Lots of people play with their hair or bite their nails or bounce their foot. Why do we as humans fidget in the first place? No one knows for sure. Genes may cause fidgeting, but it's often described as an unconscious act. I'm not sure—no, I know mine is conscious. I just wish it weren't, that I'm not the one to blame for my own actions, but I am.

The dictionary defines compulsion as “an irresistible impulse to act, regardless of the rationality of the motivation.” We've probably all thrown around the term OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) as a joke to our friends or ourselves who obsess over perfection and details, but OCD is much more than that. In fact, those very friends may not have OCD at all, just a detail-oriented mindset. Some may describe me as a perfectionist, but my real OCD lies in fidgeting, specifically, picking at my skin.

I clearly remember when and how it all began. Did I know then what that one day would do to me for the next four thousand plus days of my life? I was in third grade, probably eight years old, and I was leaning against the frame of the bathroom door, the one leading to my oldest sister's room. She wasn't there. All four of my siblings were too busy to spend time with their little sister. So by myself, I stood at the threshold between room and bathroom, one foot on smooth, warm wood and the other on cold, hard tile. My bare skin skimmed over the length-wise grain in the wood, so rough compared to the polished marble. The afternoon sunlight warmed the blue-tinted white paint of the walls. Alone and bored, I tucked my hair behind my right ear. As my fingers went over the top, they felt the uneven edge of my scalp meeting my ear. I'd never had the resolve to leave my scabs alone, and in the end, they always healed, scar or no. Besides, scars faded over time. And no one would see the skin behind my ear, so who cared what my skin looked like there? I pulled the first sliver of skin free. From my right ear, I moved onto the skin behind my left ear, and somehow, somewhere it all went way beyond my control. The back of my ears hurt from the battleground of my own destructive hands and my body's efforts to heal.

But I didn't stop.

One day, my middle sister said, “Is that dandruff on your shirt?”

I glanced down to discover a shocking snowstorm on my dark-colored shirt. Automatically, my honest self replied “no,” and I hastened to shake off the white flakes.

“There's nothing to be ashamed about. Dandruff shampoo will take care of it.”

I firmly shook my head.

“Are you sure?” My sister plunked herself down on the couch next to me and began combing through my hair. I sat frozen to the couch like a fresh popsicle to a dry tongue. No one knew my secret. I didn’t know how to tell her. What would she think?

“Hm,” she said. “You’re right. Doesn’t look like you have dandruff. What is it?”

She made several conjectures, each one wilder than the last. Finally, I whispered, “It’s my ears.”

I waited for her verdict of condemnation as she checked behind my ears.

“Oh, it’s just sunburn.”

The back of my ears looked like sunburn? In my head, I whooped in excitement. I had an answer ready in case a stranger asked what was wrong with my ears. But what if the “sunburn” never went away? Better that I confide in my sister than my parents. I couldn’t imagine trying to explain my predicament in half-Vietnamese, half-English.

“I peel the skin behind my ears,” I stammered.

“Don’t do that. You should let it heal on its own. I know it’s hard, but I do it, too. I pick at my hair and pull it out.” Relief tumbled through me. I wasn’t alone. My sister had a habit that she too couldn’t easily break.

“Sometimes it helps to have something in your hands.”

She snagged a coil of blue plastic from her desk. “Try playing with this.”

I twisted the blue plastic from its wound, cylindrical shape into a circlet of waves. Mesmerized, I tried making other shapes with it—a teacup, a snail, a bracelet. For a while, her advice seemed to work, but the plastic creaked too much. I couldn’t take it with me to class. I started wearing necklaces in the hopes that every time I reached for my ear, I’d play with the pendant instead. It worked, but not for long. I started wearing a ring so that my hands never went near my ears, but my hands, my mind weren’t satisfied, especially when the skin scabbed and just begged to be ripped smooth of the truly uneven bumps there.

On into high school I went. I lived in constant fear that someone else less forgiving would find out about this terrible habit and ask me uncomfortable questions I didn’t know how to answer. I wanted it—me, to stop. What frightened me even more was the truth that I was alone with my

I sat frozen to
the couch like a
fresh popsicle to
a dry tongue.

burden. My sister asked me years later if my “sunburn” had gone away. I mumbled a noncommittal answer, and that was all.

I’ve heard and read of compulsive behaviors before. I distinctly remember a character from some book or movie who stole jeans for fun even though her family had plenty of money. Why would someone do that? My heart races at the very thought of shoplifting. The character didn’t steal anything else, only jeans. I find this act so bizarre that I remember it long after I’ve forgotten the character’s name. Justine Larbalestier’s *Liar* talks of something similar. With the narrative as a compulsive liar, the reader is forced to pick out what’s real and what’s not, but I’m more fascinated as to why anyone would want to lie just for the sake of it. Many of us tell lies to cover up our faults, to make others feel better, to make ourselves feel better, or to protect others’ safety, but in a situation that doesn’t necessitate lying, why lie? Everyone knows that the bigger a lie gets, the harder it is to keep your story straight. And so, more importantly, why is it so hard for a compulsive liar to stop lying? The character, Micah Wilkins, admits that lying is bad. Throughout the novel she keeps saying that she’ll come clean and tell only the truth, but she periodically says that she slipped a few times. Again, she insists she’ll tell only the truth, but we as readers know better than to believe that. I am not so different from her.

Is it lack of self-discipline? I find that hard to believe. In high school, I managed a stressful schedule of seven AP classes, and in college, I never pulled an all-nighter, not even in my days as an architecture student. I can stop other bad habits from forming, just not picking my skin. I wonder if something is wrong with me.

Is it stress or anxiety? For me, it seems to be the exact opposite. Whenever I am bored, I do it. I suppose I irrationally think that by peeling away my scabs and uneven skin and surface pimples that my skin will be smoother than before. Instead, sometimes I leave it a little raw, pink, or bleeding. I know it is wrong. I know my skin will scar if I continuously do it over a long period of time. I know my body won’t heal as well the more that I antagonize my skin. I know people can see it and judge me. And still I do it, despite knowing all of that.

I feel like I am two people in one. On my best days, I am a happy and confident junior in college. My dreams of art and design stretch before me, full of opportunities. I participate in all kinds of extracurricular activities and keep myself busier than ever. I hang out with friends and laugh and forget about all my worries, academic or personal. At home, I share dinners with my parents or I am the light-hearted little sister to all my siblings. Life is good, and I’m grateful for all the wonderful

people I've come to meet and know.

On my worst days, I feel every discrete flaw inside and outside of me. Sometimes I feel lethargic as glass window panes, their molecules slowly creeping downward. I doubt my decision to change majors. Everything I draw that day looks like birthday cake flipped to the ground. Worse, my deepest, darkest secret behind my ears has manifested elsewhere far more noticeable, and my control crashes into millions of pieces of asteroid debris. On these days, only sleep can reset my attitude.

On the days my compulsive habit confronts my confident self, I tell myself that I will win. I have to against my own body. Clearly, fidgeting with another object isn't a strong enough incentive for me to stop such an old habit, but every time I draw, paint, or sculpt, my hands happily preoccupy themselves with the task. Oftentimes, the grit from handling dirty, dusty, or messy materials prevents me from picking my skin. However, I can't draw or make crafts all the time. The only solution I see is to make my skin so smooth, smoother than lacquer, that my fingernails have no reason to linger.

And so that was exactly what I set out to do a couple of years ago. Every night after I showered, I thoroughly dabbed lotion behind my ear. I immediately began to see a huge improvement in my skin, though I still didn't quite stop. Sleepovers with friends and sisters riddled me with anxiety. How could I perform my necessary routine without them noticing and asking awkward questions? I set monthly goals. By the end of October, I said, it would all be over, and what a relief! But October came and went, followed by November, followed by December, and into the New Year. I was never going to win. My faithful body, struggling to heal, but plagued by hands that couldn't stand to keep still. How could these hands, the ones that free me in drawing, also chain me to fear and shame.

Then, a miracle happened. During the summer, I went back home and ran out of my usual lotion. I couldn't go for a night without it. All my hard work would be gone in an instant. Certain I'd seen an extra bottle lying around the house, I searched every cabinet and drawer until I found a bottle of St. Ives. I don't know whose it was, but I took it up to my bedroom and used it in lieu. The next morning, I checked the skin behind my ears and couldn't believe what I was feeling—smoothness. I wanted to dance and sing and shout at the top of my lungs. I wanted to announce to the world that I was going to make it, that I wasn't a complete failure. No, my skin could never be what it would have been, smooth, soft, and even a little fuzzy like peach skin. I didn't care. I was free to put my hair up without scrutiny. I could be normal, just like everyone else in the world.

My success lasted for a few months. Anxiety gripped me again as I began playing with my



We're All Pink on the Inside
Artist: Matthew Kerkstra

earlobes. I saw it all unfolding before me again, and this time, my hair couldn't quite hide all the harm done. This had to stop. Immediately. I stopped in time for my left ear but not my right. Even behind the ears would have been better than this. With my earlobes, an inquisitive person might check my lobes to see if I had pierced them for earrings. Such an innocent move, and yet I would have to recoil, to hide my shame. Not only that, if I did want to pierce my ears, I never could, not with knowing that I might play with the earring and slowly move to my actual ears. I screamed in frustration. I screamed at myself. Hadn't I learned anything from the past? Luckily, I knew exactly what lotion to use to help heal the area, and eventually my skin grew smooth enough that no one would ask questions. Perhaps, I thought, I had regained control of my senses.

My compulsion taunted me. The new battleground between hand and mind began as deep-rooted acne that I couldn't stand having on my face. The small problem of acne exploded into something much worse. People thought it was a rash or an allergic reaction. I couldn't hide behind my curtain of hair. Medicine could only do so much when I was the perpetrator. I claimed it was acne, which it was in part, but any doctor must know that acne alone can't possibly do all this damage to my skin.

My mother began to worry more the longer it took to heal. While I was in the middle of doing homework, my mother came to give me a hug and also to examine my skin. I rustled my hair and shrank before her eyes, thinking that if I made myself small enough, she'd leave me alone. She persisted. My loving parents thought my skin was a serious health issue. They didn't understand why it hadn't improved despite all the pills and topical creams they'd given me. I knew these marks on my face were not a mark of serious health problems, and finally, I squeaked, "I fidget."

"*Fidget?* What do you mean, *fidget?*" my mother said in Vietnamese except for the word "fidget."

"I, you know, fidget." I prayed that she'd simply understand, but she didn't. English, as her second language, sometimes eluded her. I nervously cowered behind my stuffed cow, its fur smooth and soft against my cheek. I felt like a child, my arms wrapped around cotton-filled fabric that magically provided me security.

Then, I blurted, "I pick at my skin."

My mother gave an exasperated sigh. "Don't pick at your skin! It'll scar and look very ugly. Tomorrow I'll buy you turmeric and cut up the roots so you can rub it into your skin." Still muttering

about turmeric roots, she furiously conferred with my father, who suggested aloe vera or more topical creams.

“No, no, no aloe vera. Turmeric!” To me, she said, “This whole week, put turmeric on your face until it goes away. Then, when you touch it, your fingers will turn yellow, and you’ll remember to stop!”

Eventually, my parents went to bed, and I was left alone, frustration threatening to overwhelm me. Heat piled up behind my eyes, and tears collected at my lower eyelid. I couldn’t stop my emotions. Tears and muffled screams came pouring out. I didn’t want to wake my parents, but I had remained silent for too long. Whatever was inside of me, it fidgeted, it shook, it wriggled, it squirmed, it thrashed to be let out.

I thought about compulsive stealing. I thought about compulsive lying. I thought about compulsive anything. Could it be possible? I wiped my tears and looked up compulsive behavior on my go-to source, Wikipedia. In the first paragraph of compulsive behavior, the article mentioned OCD and, farther down, a list of other common compulsive behaviors, including picking skin.

Whatever was inside of
me, it fidgeted, it shook,
it wriggled, it squirmed,
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“Picking skin” led me to a page titled, in bold, “dermatillomania,” also known by various names such as “neurotic excoriation,” “pathologic skin picking,” “compulsive skin picking,” and “psychogenic excoriation.” In horror, I skimmed the article. Somewhere it stated that skin picking was closer to substance abuse than OCD. I could barely believe that such an issue had a name. I felt a little better that I hadn’t peeled so much away that I had a hole in my nose bridge or that I’d exposed my

carotid artery (whatever that was at the back of my neck), but the article only served to confirm what I’d known for a long time. I had a problem, and I needed to stop it.

I find this topic of fidgeting intensely personal. Who would understand? I thought my sister did, but her habit leaves no visible marks for others to see. I think about speaking up, but if I managed to heal myself once, I can do it again. But it seems that even when I do speak up, others

only see the symptoms, unsightly red marks on my skin. They don't see the real cause of the problem. No one understands how fear has followed me for all these years, a hairy, distorted monster snapping at my heels and feeding on scraps of anxiety. Twelve years. How could I let this go on for more than half of my life? Would it follow me to the end of my days, through jobs, through marriage, through kids, through everything?

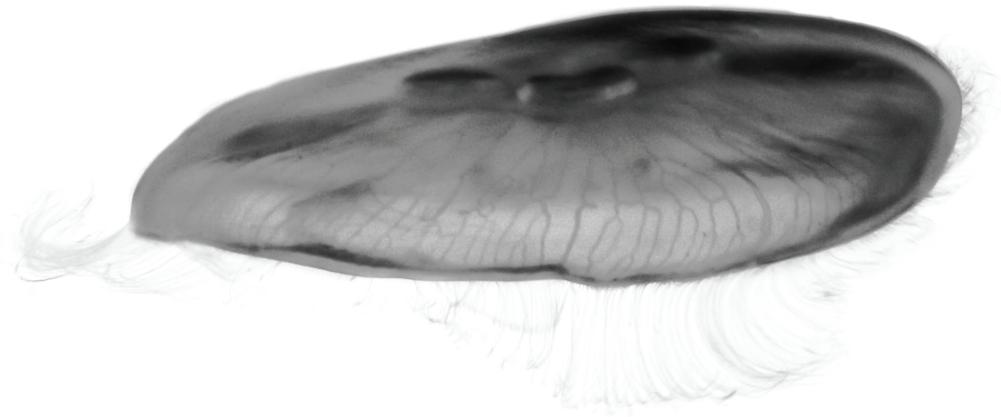
It already followed me to my first boyfriend. While I managed to keep my ear picking a secret from most of my family, that was impossible in a relationship that demanded trust and closeness. I was thrilled when I received my first kiss. In my mind, the kiss validated my likeability, but this belief soon hung on a door like a full-length mirror. One misplaced slam of the door would drop the mirror into a web of fractures. My boyfriend noticed that I pulled away from his touch every time he tried to tuck loose hair behind my ear or hold the side of my face when kissing me. I couldn't bear the thought of experiencing my first uncalled-for breakup on account of my ear. So I told him.

Now also my best friend, my boyfriend is the only person so far who understands my compulsive habit and willingly helps me on a daily level. Nearly every day we video chat via Gmail. We usually leave the videos open as we do our work or study, and he's there to watch me and gently remind me to stop picking when he notices. He can't always be there, though. Only I am with me all the time, watching myself in disgust as I insist on continuing, even though I want it to end.

Part of me accepts who I am. I am fidgety by nature. I don't think that will ever change. I push myself to read books that make me forget about my physical self, to draw something so fantastic I become absorbed in the work, to cook so that I am forced to keep my hands clean for food sanitation purposes, but all of these temporary acts only delay the inevitable that I continually turn to in any spare moment. Part of me can't stand who I am. Some days frustration and anger whizz together into a furious hurricane, and all I want to do is to rip the skin off my face, off my body, and start over anew, free of scars, free of struggles, totally free.

One Thursday in life drawing, my class has no model booked for the afternoon. My professor immediately hauls forth a bin of handheld mirrors along with a roll of tape to adhere the mirrors to our easels. I follow her instructions with dread. Of all the art forms, I dislike self-portrait the most. I can capture the near likeness of friends and family but never myself. After so many years of wondering why self-portraits are so difficult, I see only two plausible reasons. The first is that I am a stranger to myself. Whenever I see myself, I see only a reflection in the mirror, the part of my hair on the wrong

side and the flashing string of floss more interesting than my face. The second is that I know myself too well. Too many times I've stared at my reflection to pluck stray eyebrow hairs or to stare at the pores that present potential pimple sites. Add my inflamed, red cheeks to the picture, and I have no desire to observe my face for accuracy. Instead, I flatten my image to an unsmiling, gray smudge on the paper.





Dani and Jessica

Christina Dana

I dated this girl, Dani, who looked hideous from the side. Each side, either side, it didn't particularly matter. Her nose was too pointy, her eyes sunken and her lips bulbous. None of that is apparent dead-on. From the front she was beautiful. She held her face always at attention, muscles engaged and mouth perfectly pursed, like she was focused on making her features do exactly what she wanted. And also kind of surprised. She always looked a little bit surprised especially when she was meeting someone for the first time. You'd think she'd never met a firefighter, or a bank teller or a hedge fund manager before.

Her hair was never really parted. It just sort of waved from one side to the other in a ruffled brownish sheet. In the mornings I would watch her stand in front of the mirror and toss her hair back and forth. She'd throw it this way and that way and pat it and turn it and swoop it around and it would come out in a whirlwind of sort-of-caramel-colored strands in her sort-of-chocolate-colored hair exactly as it had looked before she started.

Sometimes she wore glasses but sometimes she didn't. One time, maybe six months in, I missed her entirely at the coffee shop where I'd first met her because she was wearing a different pair of glasses than I'd ever seen before. Plus her hair was up and I was distracted by the newspaper. She hadn't even told me she would be there. She waited for ten minutes in a bar chair maybe ten feet away. She came over, towered above me and accused me of not loving her anymore. What bullshit.

She would leave me these sticky note messages on my mirror while I showered but the fog would break the adhesive and they'd fall on the tile. And when I picked them up to read them they were cute and said things like, "Let me shower you with kisses" and "Hey pass that herbal essence ;P." But nothing about them said, "I've never done that before."

Oh and she claimed these allergies, like weird fucking allergies. One time she told me she was allergic to rope fibers. Another time, it was lemon juice. Like hell you're allergic to lemon juice. She would call carsickness when she thought someone interesting was driving so that she could sit in the front. She told me she had a phobia of touching garbage and so I dutifully removed hers from her tiny apartment kitchen every Tuesday night. She said she was afraid of giraffes because one time her mom took her to the zoo and she was tricked into giving one her hat.

“Giving?” I asked.

“He looked at me with sad eyes and then he took it off my head. If you don't consider that a gift, it's a good thing you didn't grow up with my family's Christmases.” She was always claiming a difficult childhood when really she'd been raised by two loving, accepting parents in the woods of Michigan with two sisters, who I've met and are cool. Her mom is a sassy Mexican woman and her dad had been a Detroit steel worker in his twenties and they both had the best stories about catcalls.

She said weird things that I was supposed to agree with but that no one could be expected to understand. Once we were at a stoplight and she said, “Well this is a real ‘one banana two banana’ situation” as if that meant anything. She once spent 20 minutes looking at pineapples in the grocery store before finally declaring, “I swear to God I would have no idea how to even cut one of these assholes!” and laughing away.

We met at the encouragement of a mutual friend. I was a member of this yoga studio and the hot girl regularly on the yoga mat next to mine approached me as we were wiping down our equipment. “So...” she said slowly and rather uncomfortably, “I'm sorry if this is awkward but, you're gay, right? I don't mean you look like a lesbian or anything, I just heard you talk about it on the phone once? About a date maybe? Or I'm just embarrassing myself?”

I stopped her. “No, yeah I am,” I said, surprised and laughing at her apparent awkwardness.

She smiled. “Well,” she said, relaxing, “I have this friend, and I think you guys would get along. Actually no,” she laughed uncomfortably, “that's not exactly true because I really don't know you at all. But I heard this is how this kind of thing works? Like it's a lot of friends setting up friends?”

I laughed again, “Kinda, yeah.” I agreed to meet the friend and got her number. I left wishing it had been yoga-neighbor's number but a date was a date.

I was supposed to meet her in this coffee shop on my corner, the coffee shop where I would later make the egregious glasses mistake. I sat in the back and waited for her to arrive. “I’ll be wearing a blue cardigan and carrying a yellow purse,” she’d told me the night before on the phone. After a pause from my end she said, “Isn’t this just so *You’ve Got Mail!*!” and I unceremoniously hung up the phone.

So there I was, waiting in my coffee shop, drinking iced coffee and surfing on my phone when she walks in in a huge huff. She was taller than average and wearing a boxy pale orange tank top. Her hair was in a terribly sloppy bun on the top of her head and she slumped down into her chair in a sort of sweaty, fed-up mess. She spread out all of her belongings on the chairs and table around her and settled in like she had just run to catch a train. And I remember thinking she looked like one of the laziest heaps of a woman that I had ever seen.

After at least a full minute of digging and adjusting, she finally sank into her chair. She reached into her giant mustard handbag and pulled out a blue sweater. She arched her shoulders and rolled her arms through each sleeve and suddenly she had a waist and breasts and she looked beautiful. She reached up to the top of her head and pulled her bun down in one fluid motion. I swear she even did a shampoo commercial shake. She pushed her sunglasses into her hair and it fell in waves down past her shoulders and far onto her back. I just sort of stared at her in awe of her transformation as she settled in and waited. For me.

I propelled myself out of my chair and walked over to her. “Hi,” I said, “You must be Danielle? I’m Jessica! Love that sweater.” God what was wrong with me?

She smiled, “Its Dani. Nice to meet you” This was the first time I realized how much muscular and cosmetic effort went into her face.

She moved her bag and I set my coffee on the table and it left one of those gross iced coffee sweat rings that I was overly embarrassed about. We started talking and I offered to buy her coffee but she insisted on getting her own. While she waited in line I leaned over to look in her purse but all I could see was crumpled receipts, two different take out menus and lots of chapsticks.

Coffee turned into dinner at a taco bar. Tacos turned into dinner Friday night. Friday night turned into Saturday morning. Saturday morning turned into me calling this hostess I had been occasionally fucking and telling her I couldn’t come over any more.

Dani and I dated for just over a year. For our anniversary I got her tickets to the ballet. She got me this leather overnight bag I'd had been suggestively leaving open in a page on my laptop. She also bought herself an ironing board. We were both happy. I lost the bag in a move a couple weeks ago. It was a good bag.

I just sort of stared at her in awe of her transformation as she settled in and waited. For me.

We did coupley, normal things. We went grocery shopping and visited each other's families on vacations. On Sundays we ordered salty Chinese take out and watched *SNL* reruns in bed. We took tennis lessons that were an absolute failure and I dragged her to yoga one day but she didn't like it and she hated getting sweaty. She gave really good back massages but mostly when she wanted something from me.

The day we broke up, I was caught by surprise. I walked up the stairs to her apartment, carrying a bag of grapes, a box of spaghetti noodles and a bottle of red wine. We were making dinner. I took out my keys and opened her door, pushing into the hallway with my shoulder. I set the bag on the kitchen and called out, "Honey, I'm home!" It was a lazy joke.

"I'm in the living room," she said, speaking in the quiet voice she used to be dramatic.

I laughed, "Don't get mad at me, but they only had green," holding the grapes out by their stupid ineffectual ziplock. She had her knees tucked under in her red armchair, halfway through a bottle of wine. "Jesus, Dani," I said, "wait for me!"

"Jessica, I fucked someone else," she breathed, all in a rush.

And everything broke. My response was visceral, immediate. "When." It wasn't even a question. It was hard and fast, as if my brain had been waiting for this moment, already prepared.

She looked up at me, "Two Saturdays ago, after Sarah's bachelorette party." Sarah of the yoga ass. Sarah of the set up. Sarah of the "When Sarah and I party together, we can't be held accountable for our actions."

"It wasn't Sarah obviously," a bad attempt at a poorly timed joke.

“Don’t tell me,” I said. I just looked at her face for a long time. I couldn’t think of anything, my mind blank until I pulled from the basement of my brain, “We saw *The Holiday* that Sunday.”

“I know,” she looked at the ground.

I stared at her and raised my eyebrows, “Jude Law fucked his nanny, “ I said.

“I know,” she said. She started to cry.

“I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“I know.” I turned out of the living room where we’d spent hours laughing and being bad at video games and making out on the couch. I walked through the kitchen where she’d tried to bake my 26th birthday cake but it fell in the middle and tasted like flour but even then I’d pretended I’d liked it, to the door where I’d dropped her off that first night after tacos and out into the cold back to my own apartment.

Then again, maybe
I just want to fuck
Jennifer Love Hewitt
in an empty house.

I dropped a box of her stuff in front of her door about a week later. I didn’t go in. I didn’t answer the phone. And she was gone, shed like an old skin too soon and it left me raw.

When we were together I had this secret fantasy that Dani and I would move in, cohabitate. Not because I wanted to live with her particularly, which kept me from ever asking, but because of this sort of vision I had. In my imagination I walk into our house or apartment after a long day at work and she’s standing in the middle of a big empty room. The walls are white and the furniture is covered in mountains of pure white tarps. She’s wearing big denim overalls and her hair is in two braids and she’s holding one of those long paint rollers on a stick. And she turns to me as I’m in the doorway and her braids sort of fly out a little bit and also she kinda looks like Jennifer Love Hewitt. But anyway she dares me to come over and she starts to paint and I jump in and together we paint this wall. And there’s color everywhere, more colors than walls, and its in her hair and on my clothes and before we’re done we lay down and have crazy paint-covered sex on the floor tarp. But then again, maybe

I just want to fuck Jennifer Love Hewitt in an empty house. Maybe I've just seen *Heartbreakers* too many times. Maybe that's nothing about Dani.

I think she's in DC now. Sometimes I look through her Facebook pictures. And I laugh at the ones I know she must hate. I think she has a dog.

But there was this moment when I loved her. A moment I really really fell for her. We were in the bathroom. I was brushing my teeth before bed and she came in and she was singing "You Were Meant for Me" by Jewel under her breath. She grabbed a pale blue washcloth and lifted the silver faucet. She ran the towel under the water, wrung it out and brought it up to her face, her tricky, painful face. But the whole thing was so graceful, every movement of her hands and her arms. She arched her neck up and started running the washcloth around her face, tilting her head back and to the sides like a music-box ballerina. She washed her face and her neck and I swear to God time slowed down. I still think about that moment, looking at her in the mirror as she cleaned her face and sang that song about heartbreak and soulmates.

I was never going to marry her, even if she hadn't cheated. She didn't really believe in marriage anyway. And I legally couldn't marry her, at least in most states. And mainly she was crazy. And ugly. Did I mention how terrible she looked at literally any angle? There have been prettier girls and nicer girls and better girls. Girls without insane interests or hypochondria or awesome mothers. Girls who can walk into a room without looking like she just battled her way through a hurricane. Who can end dinner parties before 4 in the morning and not sleep with anyone else. Girls who can take out their own fucking garbage.

Grandeur in This View of Life

Veronica Kuhn

1.

In the beginning there was nothing

In the beginning there was nothing but the sky, some fog, and water

In the beginning was the Word

In the beginning was the great cosmic egg

In the beginning God drew fire into the primordial ocean

In the beginning the Goddess of all things rose naked from chaos

In the beginning there were land and sky, animals and birds, foliage and trees

2.

Curiosity roams around the rusty soil.
You are here. You are waiting,
wanting just the slightest
life-blip from the radar,
a dried pool of water, just one
amino acid—no longer dreaming
in Ray Bradbury—on occasion, perusing
the Wikipedia article on Roswell,
which editors resent for maintaining
an air of mystery. Why are you
here? Why use other worlds
to dam the flow of your loneliness?
You grow tired of this cornucopia
of cereal boxes, these 7 billion people
ghostly and grating against
the skin of your wrists. You venerate
Neanderthals past. The funerary
rites, the red hair. The lack
of needles. The capacity for speech
you so often cannot muster.

3.

When I see dear Ardi grinning out of the cover
of *National Geographic*, the smallness of her skull
fills me with awe. Inside, the infinite
expansion of evolution is plotted out, bones
shifting as urns under a potter's fingers.
Australopithecus, Homo habilis, Homo erectus: all are captured

in caricatures that could be of my favorite uncle, captured
in the rows of black type that cover
white pages in beads. As I read, I run my finger
over my forehead, cratered as the moon's surface. My skull
slides past my palm. Few things are as fragile as bone.
Still fewer things feel as infinite

as my thoughts blooming in ribbons. Infinite
is what we demand this universe be, uncaptured
by poetry, science, or even us. Atoms in our bones
are eternal, and the eternity of atoms covers
up what we are not. We are mostly not. Ideas beneath our skulls
are half-baked and stuffed with silence. Now my fingers

wrap tighter than an iron lung around my cousin's fingers
as he squirms towards the gorilla enclosure. He is infinite
trouble at the zoo. At seven he has never seen the skull
of a great ape, so later I will show him one, and it might capture
his wide-eyed gaze. His father would say the Bible covers
all he could ever want, so he should not know of evolution. Bones

should be concealed, of course. But I enjoy a good bone to pick, and so I show him the joint of my crooked finger, and the gorilla's joint too: someday he may discover the reason for this lesson, he may find the infinite similarities between himself and things captured in cages. Someday too, he may see the same skull

in the latest issue of *National Geographic*, and this skull might cause a journey past changing savanna, changing bone. Everything changes. The subjects that once captured my interest now sit as lifeless as minnow bait. With one finger I can flip a switch, turn on darkness, but in my infinite sluggishness I do not. When it rains, my cousin is obedient and covers

the world with a poncho, shields his skull from fingers of water, abandons bone-digging. How infinitely captured children are. I forget why we must be covered.

4.

We stood on two feet to drain the heat from our backs
We stood on two feet to rob the umbrella tree of its legend
We stood on two feet to stem the cries of our sisters
We stood on two feet to tempt the hyena-like beasts
We stood on two feet to spirit our infants through perched reeds
We stood on two feet to appear larger than the average ape
We stood on two feet to run faster
We grew louder...

5. The Chimpanzee in the Mirror

The brow, the teeth.
The brow jutting
out like limestone in a cavern.
The teeth, curved and yellow,
worn to the gums, stained
like rotting fruit.
The fingers. The fingers
gnarled, speckled,
drawing termites from holes,
snatching bush babies.
The eyes—inky earth.
The cool darkness
between the roots of a fig tree.



Meditation
Artist: Ronan Allencherril

6.

The bowerbird displays a taste for interior design.
As we contemplate our central position in this universe,
the same bird lines its nest with the bluest of pebbles.

Somewhere, a rat refuses food to release another caged rat,
and the paper wasp observes another wasp's face.
The roses are overwhelming this garden gate.

The smallest ant can cultivate a fungal garden.
It is difficult to accept the uniqueness of this funeral—
an elephant, any elephant, could shift foliage over a corpse.

7.

It ends with a permanent blindness.

It ends with a bough exposed to ash.

It ends with many hammerheads rising past our mouths.

It ends with each eye convulsing once, a constriction of pupil,
a slow decay, the drop of space.

8. Reading the Last Paragraph from *On the Origin of Species*

Stop to contemplate the entangled bank.
The pigeon form twists: first sleek, now ruffled.
This is like nearing the highest window,
or the pouring of light into a cathedral,

the honeycomb hexagons, sheen on the spacecraft.
Every word interlocks on the page.
*From so simple a beginning, endless forms,
most beautiful, and most wonderful.*

The pigeon is also the kernels,
and the watchful cat, and the first of cells
suspended in the ocean. This order
is an explosion of vines. Here,

there is no architect. The mind
molds itself, says *yes*.

Quotes from section 8 of this poem were taken from Darwin's On the Origin of Species.

Contributors' Notes

DOHA ABoul-FOTOUH is studying for a degree in YouTube studies. She enjoys talking on the phone and otherwise pretending it's still 1995.

GREGORY AIRD is known to be a big, ol' ball of sunshine and is frequently stoked. Nevertheless, he tries to ignore the sun which forces him to get up each morning.

RONAN ALLENCHERRIL, spelled R-O-N-A-N space A-L-L-E-N-C-H-E-R-R-I-L, is a male boy suffering from an addiction to redundancy. He is a member of Will Rice college. He also happens to attend Rice University, interestingly enough.

DAISY CHUNG majors in Biological Sciences and Visual Arts. She is very passionate about conveying science through art, and is an aspiring scientific illustrator. Originally from Taiwan and partially from New Zealand, she enjoys sharing her unique culture with others and traveling around the world.

RUCY CUI is a book lover who never goes to bed alone. ;) She majors in French and English, but can only write intelligible stories in one. Her two biggest addictions in life are chicken nuggets and dropping coins off tall buildings.

CHRISTINA DANA really likes the show *Are You The One* on MTV. Her dream is to graduate in May with a job that affords her the luxury of a throw rug and this one mascara that she thinks makes her eyes look bonkers but probably doesn't actually make that much of a difference. She is a dreamer of dreams.

LINH TRAN DO sings nonsensical syllables on a biweekly basis. She spends the rest of her time manufacturing artwork and catching Pikachus.

MICHELLE DOUGHTY would like to apologize in advance for greeting your dog instead of you and for forgetting your birthday, as she inevitably will.

MEAGAN DWYER is a VADA major who enjoys listening to obscure bands that you've probably never heard of. She bleeds goldenrod.

JESSICA FUQUAY is shaking up Washington. She did her laundry once, and will soon launch her line of high-fashion muumuus. After she graduates this coming May, she hopes to have a long and successful career touring the world with her Barbara Streisand cover band.

RAVEN GRANT is a mango-flavored amalgam of teacup pigs, romantic comedies, and cheese snobbery. Only this, and nothing more.

MARISSA HALL loves biking in Houston and swimming in the Great Lakes. She appreciates those rare moments when you witness a young man in an Austin bar try to meet your friend with the pick-up line, "Is this the book club meeting?"

MATTHEW KERKSTRA hopes to make enough money from his art to support his true passion of engineering.

ZARA KHAN likes to capitalize on the fact that she shares a surname with the great Mongol warrior. She is eyeing suspiciously the statements of her fellow authors and contemplating whether or not to mount an attack.

VERONICA KUHN is a human being in Houston, Texas.

KATELYN LARSON is a dog-lover, a football enthusiast, and a wannabe writer—at least, when she's not distracted by the wonders of the Internet.

ELLEN MARSH asks questions. A lot. Whoop—here she goes: What are your core inner values? Why are you afraid of your greatest fear? What's been your most formative experience in your closest friendship? What's your favorite kind of question?

AMBER NADEAU writes poetry during downtime in BIOC labs. Her greatest enemies are word limits and expensive sushi.

LAUREN RUTHERFORD loves Rice, loves McMurtry, and loves all of you! She is loud and crazy and knows how to have fun. When she is not working on her majors in Psychology and Studio Art, she spends her time answering questions about her frequently changing hairstyle.

SPENCER SHAW didn't submit a summary so we wrote this one for him. Or maybe he wrote this. Maybe he's afraid of summarizing himself for fear of what he might find. Maybe he's afraid of summary because brevity is the soul of oversimplification.

LYDIA SMITH hates store-bought birthday cards and her dog. She collects empty notebooks for when she is older and has more sophisticated thoughts.

MATT VALE, having won the tribe's respect, never published his ethnographic accounts. He receded into a life of obscurity, retiring to the family's cottage in Dorset with his wife, Pimpernel, and corgi, Patches.

SAIRA WEINZIMMER is a cat-lady-in-training and a recovering *Harry Potter* addict. She enjoys reading philosophy she can't understand, juggling strange objects, and the oxford comma.

About the Awards

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judges were Selena Anderson (fiction and nonfiction) and Yerra Sugarman (poetry), both Ph.D. candidates at the University of Houston. Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.



2014 Awards

Fiction

- 1st prize** “Whitecaps” by Katelyn Larson
2nd prize “Dani and Jessica” by Christina Dana

Nonfiction

- 1st prize** “Don’t Trust American Men Originally from
Canada Living in Paris” by Marissa Hall
2nd prize “Lord, Bless Those Who Fear You” by Matt
Vale

Poetry

- 1st prize** “Grandeur in This View of Life” by
Veronica Kuhn
2nd prize “Uncle, I Saw You on TV” by Doha
Aboul-Fotouh