

THE CAULDRON



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And finally, we extend our greatest thanks to you, our readers, for giving this publication an audience. *The Cauldron* would not exist without your interest and support.

Divine Crow Awards

The Divine Crow Awards are given each year to three exceptional pieces of writing. The pieces are judged “blind” by a member of the Kalamazoo College community, and this year’s judge was alumnus Joe Tracz.

This year’s winning pieces are “Twelve Moments of Clarity and a Misheard Song Lyric” by Cameron Schneberger, “You go a fariin go bruk out” by Dorraine Duncan, and “The Old Man of the Lake” by David Landskroener.



Joe Tracz is a New York-based playwright and screenwriter whose credits include *EPIC* (20th Century Fox) and *LIGHTS OUT* (FX). His plays have been performed across the country, and his adaptation of the first Percy Jackson book, *THE LIGHTNING THIEF*, opens off-Broadway summer of 2014. Joe has a BA from Kalamazoo College (2004) and an MFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

Stephanie Vibbert Award

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given to one piece of writing in the book which most exemplifies the intersection between creative writing and community engagement. This award honors Stephanie Vibbert, an English/Psychology double major who died in a car accident, while returning from a peace march in Washington D.C. in her senior year at "K." Stephanie's life was passionately devoted to both creativity and to community service, and this award was created to encourage Kalamazoo College writers to use their creativity to reflect upon and explore issues of poverty, human rights, sexual orientation, race, class, gender, and cultural diversity.

The recipient of this year's Stephanie Vibbert Award is Dorraine Duncan for her piece "You go a fariin go bruk out." A four year international student, Dorraine based this series of poems on questions she's received about living in the United States from friends back home in Jamaica. Her poetry demonstrates a sharp authenticity that encompasses the joys and frustrations she has felt as an active member of dual cultures and stands magnificently in the intersection of creative writing and social justice.



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*Denotes Divine Crow Award Winners

†Denotes Stephanie Vibbert Award Winner

Preface

As we were putting together this year's edition of *The Cauldron*, we noticed a great deal of darkness in the selected pieces. Perhaps more so than in previous years, our contributors took on the great and daunting responsibility of telling the troubling stories of abuse, depression, and unfulfilled relationships. This year's book is full of self-reflective and fearless writing and art about times of trauma and transition, about things lost and things learned. The book examines the power and importance of both memory and prophecy, and often teeters in between the unforgiving spaces of both past and present.

But amidst trials by fire, violence, and disappointment, our contributors also tell stories of resounding hope. Their sophisticated work reminds us that even in a desolate world, art has the power to deliver truth. Humankind has never just sat around, languishing in the decay around it. We've always created art, and it is from art that springs newness: new ideas, new perspectives, new mechanisms for fighting off the darkness. Art makes us bringers of light.

Because the book often lingers in transitional spaces and provisional territories, we have given it the theme of *movement*: movement upwards, onwards, backwards, and forwards through space, time, and memory. John Updike once wrote, "We are all so curiously alone, but it's important to keep making signals through the glass." In the pages of this book you will find writers and artists who are not only making signals through the walls that isolate them, but who are unapologetically screaming, dancing, and singing, their stories of courage, second chances, and new dawns.

This year's *Cauldron* features poems such as Dakota Clement's "At a Funeral for a Drowned Boy"—which finds the beauty in life while moving towards death—and Dorraine Duncan's "You go a fariin go bruk out," which escapes the trap of just being a diatribe against bigotry by moving between two cultures and exploring the humanity of the individual, revealing us all as broken and misunderstood and in need of love.

Belinda McCauley's "Immortal Bones," Kendal Kurzeja's "Listen to the Story," and Mallika Mitra's "Secrets" are all stories that deal with their protagonists moving forwards and backwards, escaping abusive relationships through the conduit of dreaming, dreaming for both the past and the future.

Artwork like Jenny Tarnoff's "Old Faithful" and Lauren Gaunt's "touching moment" point to the profound beauty that is in the constant, fragile movements of our planet.

We hope that this edition of *The Cauldron* is edifying and optimistic, showing that amidst the certainties and uncertainties of our past and our future, the one constant that will always remain is the unequalled magnificence of the human imagination, an instrument that lets us decide, collectively and individually, in which direction we want to move.

We chose Alex Smith's "On Top of the World" as our cover art because we believe it represents what we must do in order to live rich and meaningful lives. The two female figures in the painting are postured in such a way that they could either be looking ahead of them into the wild and white-skied distance, or just turned for a moment to survey and reflect on all that is behind them.

And so must we.

David Landskroener & Jane Huffman
Editors-in-Chief, 2014

A Recipe for Summer

Kira Boneff

Four tablespoons of watercolor paint,
 blossoming into sunflowers on leafs of paper.
Half an acre of grass, mowed or un-mowed,
 to leave its fingerprints on blue jean knees.
Roughly a quarter million dandelions,
 persistent little buds that make up the bouquets
 you give to your babysitter, your first crush.
A pinch of French vanilla coffee,
 its aroma filling the house as your cousin Jeremy
 shows you the difference between
 boys and girls in the basement bathroom.
Three teaspoons of maggots,
 crawling on the dead pigeon you find
 in your yard and cover with grass clippings.
Two hundred gallons of hose water
 to fill the backyard's pink kiddie pool,
 your family's fiscally sound substitute for the ocean.
One quarter pack of cigarettes,
 found under a bush behind the library
 and smoked in secret after dark.
One pair of bowling shoes, size nine,
 snatched from the alley and left in
 the trunk of the olive-green station wagon.
Half a dozen designer purses,
 hiding under Samantha's bed without receipts,
 the security sensors still intact.
A cup and a half of glass shards,
 pooled on the floor beneath the window
 that your mother shattered with her screams
 an hour before the Fourth of July block party.

Among the things I miss are

Fiona Carey

my mother's red rice and my sister's chicken;
helping her cut bread, or slice onions; and
my mother's big laugh and baby's little laugh,
and the greetings we passed back and forth
every day in a ceaseless game of smiles.

I miss my neighbors' easy handshakes.

I miss the way the loud courtyard
with tiles that fry your feet in the noon sun
would fold into its nighttime geometry,
suddenly graceful, puddled with moonlight.

I miss brushing my teeth at the spigot on the roof,
under the stars —

I know I've told you all this before.

You know I miss making tea and slow conversation
behind the house, and the smell of burning sugar
when the teapot overflowed.

I miss too many bodies on the bus, the feeling
of going the direction other folks are going;
and I miss the ocean,

filling us with wildness and salt.

You've heard me say plenty of times
how much I miss the sound of the language of welcome,
which I am still learning to speak,
though nobody can give a name to everything.

But I like to think my sister is with me
every time I cut onions the way she taught me,
in little slivers — and I don't cry anymore.

I count and recount these past-and-future things
like prayer beads:
thankful, thankful, thankful.



Limón
Lauren Gaunt

Immortal Bones

Belinda McCauley

I was not asleep when my mother crept into my room at half past one and whispered into my ear that she was going to live forever. Like most nights, I was wide awake, pretending to be asleep, wishing that I was. I was always very careful to make sure that my breathing was slow, my eyes shut—not too tight—and I'd even have a bit of a snore going on, the softest kind.

I was not a heavy sleeper—I was just smart. Something told me that if I pretended to be invisible, my father wouldn't hit me, and sleep was the closest I could come to invisible. So I would lie in bed pretending and listening to a chorus of raised voices and flesh on flesh as my father's hand connected with my mother's face. Those were always the nights that my mother would crawl into my room and climb into bed beside me, careful not to push me off the slim mattress or disturb my supposed slumber. Then she would whisper into my ear the reasons she hated my father, followed immediately by the reasons she would not leave. I was always at the top of that latter list; she would not leave me with him. Some nights, she would cry. My pillow would still be wet with her tears in the morning, but I would never say anything to her about it.

The morning after my mother whispered to me that she would live forever, there was also blood on my pillow. Not a lot; just a few drops, dried brown on my dirt-streaked pillowcase. My mother had held me close to her that whole night after the fighting stopped, hugging me to her chest and rocking us back and forth on my narrow bed. Instead of her listing her reasons, she just said, "*Mijita*, I promise you that I will live forever." She whispered it over and over again—"forever, forever, I will live forever"—until it made no sense.

I walked out to the kitchen with caution, as I always did the night after a big fight. My mother stood in front of the stove, hands splayed, head bowed. I thought she might have been praying, even though she'd once told me that God had stopped listening to our prayers. I stood in the doorway for a moment, not making a sound. Her shoulders trembled, her breath stuttered in her throat. I took a step forward, wondering if I should comfort her. My mother immediately straightened up, rubbed the tears from her face, and turned to me. There was a poorly bandaged wound on the left side of her face. The blood had soaked through the material, which I recognized as a strip from the shirt she'd been wearing last night.

"*Buenos días, mija*." She tried to smile, but it looked gruesome next to the blood-soaked bandage. I gave a shy smile back. I'd learned a long time ago to not ask about her wounds, and in return, she didn't lie to me about how she got them.

Immortal Bones

(continued)

“¿Y Papá?” The whereabouts of my father often affected my activities, as I would try to avoid being in the same room as him for longer than a minute. I found it was very difficult to upset someone in less than a minute.

My mother shrugged. “No sé, *mija*.”

It was not uncommon for my mother to have no idea where my father was, as he seemed to think that it was okay to vanish for days at a time and then come crawling back just when we'd start thinking we were free of him forever. Though he was technically the family breadwinner, my mother's parents had left her a generous inheritance, the full value of which my father did not know. My grandparents had lived frugally, tucking away their savings and telling no one of just how much they had. Therefore, it was not difficult to convince my father that the money in their bequeathal had substantially less zeroes than it did in actuality. The money my mother did tell him about was invested in card games, pool tables, emptied bottles, and young, thin women in short skirts and high heels. The money he did not know about bought our groceries. It afforded the new shoes on my feet and the replacement light bulb in the fridge. I'd told my mother to get herself something that she wanted, too, but she'd only smiled sadly and said to me that money could not buy what she wanted. I had not asked what that was.

My skin rippled. If my mother did not know where my father was, he could be anywhere: sprawled on the sofa with a hangover, pissing on the bushes in the backyard, pissing in the toilet like the civilized person he was not, fucking the neighbor's wife, in the car waiting to try to drive me to school...I'd see him everywhere until I knew where he was.

“¿Por qué no lo sabes?”

My mother shrugged again. “Because he left.” After a heavy sigh, she added, “*Mija*, he's not coming back this time.”

The words echoed through my skull like a gong in a cave. My mother had only ever spoken these words to me once before, when I'd been seven. My father had been gone five days. In those five days, I'd watched my mother become young and beautiful again, a state of hers I'd never before witnessed. All I'd known of her was the miserable wife of a drunk whose skin eventually faded into the purple and green color of bruises. But in the five days without my father, the longest stretch of time we'd been without him, her face brightened. Her premature wrinkles seemed to smooth out. She began to wear colors of a hue that rivaled her gloriously beaming face. I even heard her sing, and my mother had a wonderful voice. For a moment, it was possible to see a young, healthy woman who had once had suitors lined up outside her door. I could see the girl that my father had supposedly fallen in love with.

I had never glimpsed the man my mother once fell in love with, not in real life. I'd discovered a photograph from the wedding, two smiling, young people lost in their love for each other and their joy at being united by God and law. I did not recognize those two people.

When my father finally had returned, the evening after my mother had dared to utter that he might not, it was like my mother had never been beautiful. It was like she had never sung. It was like she was once again a creature of the shadows and had never dreamed of dancing in the sunlight.

"Did he say he's not coming back?" I asked.

"He's not coming back," she repeated. Her face was set in horizontal lines, a look I could not argue with.

When I got home from school that day, I nearly bumped into my mother coming out of the bedroom she shared with my father on the nights he was home. She carried an armful of towels colored like bicycle rust. Her eyebrows jumped when she saw me, and two of the towels fell to the floor. I bent down to pick them up for her, recoiled, and dropped them once more. They were soaking wet, and they had stained my hands crimson.

"¿Mamá? ¿Tanta sangre?" Her wounds had never been this bad before.

"Sí, *mija*," she responded, somber and—was that a hint of panic?

"We're going to the hospital."

She dropped the towels as I grabbed her arm, trying to steer her towards the front door. She had at least changed the makeshift bandage, but I could see pus leaking through the thin cloth.

"¡No!" she shouted, stamping her feet so that I could not move her.

"¡Mamá, tienes que ir al hospital! ¡Por favor!"

"¡No!"

She got that look on her face again, all stubborn horizontal lines. I let go. She was the parent, I was the child. She squatted and began to pick up the bloody rags. After a moment's hesitation, I helped. I started towards the trashcan with them, only to be met with another adamant, *¡No!* My mother bade me follow her to the old fireplace that I could not remember ever using. She tossed her towels into the hearth and waited for me to do the same. For a split-second, my mind swarmed with a million questions, all beginning with "why," and then I threw my pile of rags into the hearth.

My mother bustled around until she came up with a matchbook. She lit two matches and pitched them onto the pile of rags. They caught light briefly before

Immortal Bones

(continued)

extinguishing. She made a frustrated noise, cursed, and tried again. Once, twice, more and more. We would be out of matches soon.

"Mom," I said quietly. "Mom!"

She stopped. "What?"

"Mom, blood can't catch fire."

She made that same frustrated noise and let the matchbook drop to the floor.

"We need oil. Or – or wood."

She nodded. "*Bueno.*"

I retreated, heading for the backyard. My mother didn't try to stop me leaving her sight. On my way, I chanced a peek into her bedroom. My father's clothes all lay on the floor, torn into strips. There was a bucket at the foot of the bed, filled with what smelled like bleach. I peered into the pail; the liquid inside was tinged scarlet.

When I got outside, I went straight for the old, dying tree we had. I refused to let my eyes wander, kept them focused on the tree, on the piles of dead twigs at its base, the dried leaves, all those flammable things. I shook my windbreaker off my shoulders and began gathering leaves and twigs into it. I bundled the kindling up, careful not to let any of it fall out. The rest of the backyard swam in my peripheral; the leaves crunched underfoot. I concentrated on the back door and started up a mantra: Don't look, don't look, don't look.

Of course, I looked. A meter away from the back door, I let my eyes rest on the thing that I'd noticed was out of place the moment I'd set foot into the yard: the spade, lying next to the haphazard mound of dirt.

My mantra changed as I stood frozen and the bundle of kindling tumbled from my arms: Oh God, oh God, oh God.

My father would not be coming back. My mother would live forever because my father would not.

My breath shook as the pieces clicked into place and painted me a picture I did not want to see: I was helping her.

Even though God stopped listening to the prayers of a girl and her abused mother, I started a Hail Mary under my breath. *Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia: el Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres. Y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre: Jesús. Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.* I crossed myself with a shaky breath and bent down to pick up the kindling. I wondered vaguely how many Hail Marys I would have to say for assisted murder. One thousand seventy-six, I decided. Seventy-five now. That would be enough Hail Marys to save my soul, and my mother's.

As I crept back into the house, head hanging, I decided that the next time I was at church, I would light a candle for my father's soul. It would not be enough to save him.

When the fire was lit, the smoke curled through the chimney like a sigh of relief. My mother cried. I took her hand in mine, gave it a squeeze. Then I went to the bedroom that was now only hers, and I brought back my father's things. Little by little, I flung his clothes onto the fire, watched it grow, and listened to my mother's sobs.

"Flowers," I told her. "Bright, colorful ones. We'll plant them in the backyard. He never let us grow flowers."

She nodded. "*Sí, hija. Flores. Un jardín para nosotras. Un jardín grande.*"

That garden of flowers would be as colorful as my mother's clothing in the days after. It would look as happy and cheerful as her smile. Some days, I would kneel in the dirt at her side, planting seeds on my father's grave. I had never seen flowers grow so beautifully.

There were still some nights that my mother tiptoed into my bedroom, nights that I still pretended to be asleep. Those were the nights that I would hear her sing.



Untitled
Allison Hammerly

Mama is in the fire

Jeffery Washington

Mama is in the fire; Mama's new boyfriend
there too. The house is coughing up charcoal smoke
and wood chips all over the lawn. All over
Mama up there with Mama's boyfriend. He
yelling crazy shit says he's gonna kill Mama gonna burn this bitch.
He there in the house too. The neighbors smell the drama.
Butler Av is watching me watch Mama. The sheriffs
are out too; the one with the bullhorn pretending
to care about Mama, stuck way up on the second floor. He up there too.
Says he got a gun. He's got a gun and a fire for Mama.
Charcoal smoke. Wood chips. The little boys from down the block
give their love to Mama, saying they'll pray on it.
Good kids. Hugs from Mrs. Smith. No word
from Mama. He up there yelling shit and coughing; why
Mama ain't coughing? The roof is caving in. The bars break off the windows
the house is straining to hold on to Mama. Still no word.
The neighbors back away from the flames
going crazy burning the house, burning hope, Mama. Firefighters
can't enter he says, or he shoots Mama. My Mama! The house
keeps coughing. Hacking. Him too. I smell burning. The bullhorn says it's over.
Says he has to let go of Mama. He jumps out the fucking window.



Old Faithful
Jennifer Tarnoff

Earthworms

after Raymond Carver's "Fat"

Kate Belew

Sitting there at her coffin I realized how much you miss out on when you don't talk for a couple years. So I figured I would just start right back up again. Right where she and I left off so I said Mom, here's what happened while I was coming here to see you, and maybe you planned it for me. You were always kind of sneaky like that, with your motives I could never understand. So, here's what happened Mom...

I fucking hate airplanes. I said.

I didn't even think about the fact that I was in a public place until the man next to me, in the window seat laughed.

How embarrassing. Can you believe it Mom? Was I always so socially awkward?

I just think they shouldn't exist! I said, trying to explain myself to him but he only raised his eyebrows.

Like, I mean, they are big pressurized tubes of people that are propelled through the sky to wherever it is we need to go. I said.

He nodded.

And, I mean, these seatbelts aren't really doing shit. I said to him.

He laughed, and stuck out his hand to introduce himself.

I accepted his hand, but after that everything got too quiet kind of stale like the oxygen in that God damned airplane.

I hate it when that happens, don't you Mom? When everything is so quiet, and you keep looking at each other out of the corner of your eyes, just waiting for the other person to say something. So I broke down.

So, like, where ya goin? I asked him.

Now, or eventually? He said.

And I'm like, well how about eventually? Because you know, that sounds more interesting.

Well, I guess in a few days I'll be out in the sandbox. He said.

The sandbox? I asked him

And he laughed. Afghanistan. He said.

I never know what to do with my face when people say things like that, you know?

So I asked what for, without even thinking about it, because you know how I am, and sometimes those situations make me feel a little bit anxious.

He laughed again.

He didn't need to say anything more about it.

With his life in this weird transitional phase it made me want to stare at his

Earthworms

(continued)

face a little, Mom, and it was a pretty face. Cut jaw line, with these eyes that kind of danced around in the shitty lighting of the airplane. His hair was dark and he had that military fade haircut that made more sense after the fact.

And where might you be headed? He asked me.

And I was like, well, my mom died. So I guess I'm going to her funeral.

He looked bemused at this again Mom, so I was like, what?

And he was like, you guess you're going to her funeral?

So then I had to explain that I haven't talked to you, Mom, for a few years now, because we kind of stopped making sense to each other, and then he got really quiet because this is not the normal kind of airplane talk between strangers.

He had really nice hands mom.

And see, this is where things got strange. He took a pen out of his dress shirt pocket and he scribbled an address on the napkin that they give you with your drinks in those tiny plastic cups with the tiny little peanuts or pretzels, and he handed me the writing, and I got real quiet too. Mom, maybe you don't know this about me, but I'm not really that great with men either. So, anyways, I accepted the napkin real politely.

Just in case you ever need somebody to talk to. He said.

And I said, won't you be the one needing company?

We stared at each other for a minute, and then he just started reading some really boring looking book, but it was those hands again Mom, the way they flickered over the pages of that book.

He looked at me again, like, an hour later and he said, how do earthworms move?

And I said, what?

And he said, well, do they scrunch up from behind or do they pull forward first.

And I told him, I guess I haven't ever thought about it.

The plane landed really shortly after that, and the seat belt signs came off with that ding sound, which really cut the silence.

I'll write you, you know. When I figure it out, I said.

Figure out what, he said back.

How earthworms move.

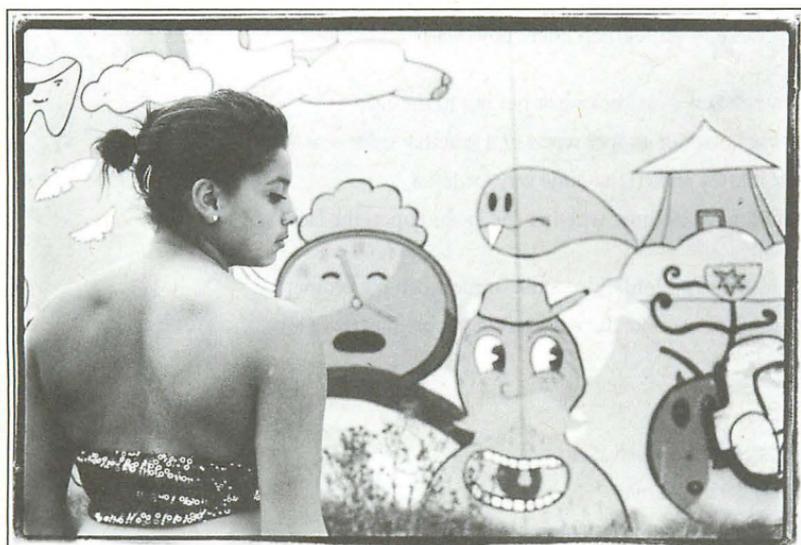
Oh, right, of course, it's important. He said.

Keep moving, I said.

He nodded and smiled.

And Mom, even though right now you're not here, well you're here, but you're underground now I guess, or in heaven. I just want you to know that I'm gonna write to him.

And my life is going to change. I can feel it.



Untitled
Yohana Iyob

Gospel of the Border

Justin Danzy

I

My mom and I used to count forsythia bushes
on the way to drop me off at school. I hope she imagined
they were our angels telling us it'd be okay, like I did,
as vibrant as the Ark of the Covenant; divinity gushing
out of each precious cell handmade by the Almighty for
me and Mom to share. It was our game, and it made me realize
that I loved her more than I loved the bushes; and she'd smile
heavenly, more beautiful than Eden, how Mary did before
she knew her Son didn't belong to her but to the ages –
like He was an ark of gopher wood or a staff that splits seas.
I wonder if Mary smiled the same way for Jesus
as she did for His siblings; whether she looked upon the faces
of them like God's. Mom didn't smile at me when big brother
came with us. It was like there weren't any more bushes to love.

II

*Acts 4:12 – Nor is there salvation
in any other, for there is no
other name under heaven given among
men by which we must be saved.*

I prayed you my heartache, big brother, and you sent
it back with a bullet saying lead
is more dangerous than a noose; I read
your words, digging for acceptance, and spent
years tiptoeing between orphanhood and insanity –
silent as the turning pages of a dead man's bible
in the black of existence; pleading for your salvation, revival
of a soul imprisoned by your malicious brotherhood. Reality
became clouded by bloodlines I never wanted and wounds opened
by your disdain. Happiness fills the household – my words never spoken.

III

These four walls are my protectors; keeping me in the middle
between black and inmate – between stardust and soul – Pharisee
and Judas. I imagine Messiah's tomb lined with white concrete
bricks of a college dorm, that He felt vulnerable too in the middle.

White walls tear souls away from bodies how slave auctions rip
history apart, leaving me naked, lifted on a pedestal, fondled,
caressed by supernovas and tombs, and ghosts of Sodom dubbed
me king of these white bricks. But these walls feel like the adolescent dick

of Dad's favorite son killing the Leviathan inside my body;
and Death – like walls – is the middle; and Death – like slave auctions –
rips families apart. I picture myself a Savior, and my
tears the triumphant blood of a Nazarene's limp body

tortured beautiful by those He died to protect – like walls
that endure to say *It's not your fault, little soldier. It's not your fault.*

Dressing Up

Jane Huffman

1.

One year, in elementary school, I found a cock ring in my bag of Halloween candy. It was dark pink, gleaming, presumably unused. My mom took it as a sign that our neighborhood was deteriorating and swore she'd call the police, but I thought it was spectacular. I pranced around the house in my socks and tights, waving my hand in the air like the queen, my plastic treasure buzzing around the living room like a mosquito. As my mother screeched, I yanked my kid brother by the collar and shoved my fingers in his face screaming, "kiss the fisherman's ring, my child, kiss it."

When my mom ripped it off my finger I made her promise she would destroy it appropriately, with a papal silver hammer and in the presence of Cardinals. A decade later I found it in a box of junk.

2.

By the time I was thirteen, I could decipher the label on a candy bar with practiced expertise. 420 calories in a full-sized Twix bar, 530 in a Snickers. Polyhydrogenated fat is the bad kind. Fructose and glucose are the same. I watched the other girls pick off the edges of their Reeses Peanut Butter Cups and toss the rest, so I did the same.

On Thursdays, our class served lunch to the kindergarteners, usually cheap pasta and dum dum suckers. I would watch their tongues turn blue and green and touched my ribs, sucking in my diaphragm and counting. If I could feel seven, or more, I would sneak a sucker into my jacket pocket. I didn't eat them, but kept them in a dusty vase on my dresser and prayed to them like idols. They had had the body I wanted, slim, white, desirable.

When I stopped eating, I started masturbating. While my parents cooked dinner, I would run the bath water and let it run down my thighs. I told my best friend about it once. She offered me half of an orange and told me to demonstrate. She said "this is your vagina." I looked down at the bulb in my palm and said "you have to unpeel it first."

3.

In the basement of the house where I grew up, my mom kept a cardboard refrigerator box of costumes. She was a dancer with a reputation for winning every costume contest she entered. She kept her leggings and flame-colored taffeta as dusty

souvenirs from a time when she spun in rosette orbit, hitchhiking to Manhattan and brushing shoulder pads with the producers of the New York Ballet.

Every Halloween, I would dump its contents on the floor and dig through the chicken wire and stockings fashioned into spider legs until I found my prize, a purple spandex unitard with long, stretchy sleeves. It hugged my spindly teenage body like wind hugs the dunes, light shifting against the curvature of shifting sand. I wore it to school with dark lipstick and legwarmers. I said I was a disco dancer but my English teachers called it “precocious.”

4.

My mom tried many times before she was able to give birth. I came early, premature and blue in the lips, but breathing.

We don't talk about it very often, but every time she makes lemon poppy seed muffins, she says, “eat up, they're good for your ovaries.”

5.

In 1990, Canadian songwriter Alannas Myles won a Grammy for her song “Black Velvet.” I bought the album at a thrift store for fifty cents and listened to it on a portable CD player while I did algebra homework at the kitchen counter. My mom told me it was written about the death of Elvis, the first man she fell in love with.

She looked me in the eye and said, “Honey, whatever you do, don't procreate with a man who doesn't like Elvis.” I told her I never wanted to have children anyway. “*Black Velvet and that little boy's smile*”, she sang into a soapy spatula, spraying her apron with dishwater.

*Black velvet with that slow southern style
A new religion that'll bring ya to your knees
Black velvet if you please,
If you please, if you please, if you please*

Dressing Up

(continued)

6.

Growing up, I didn't know any other little girls named Jane. The kids at school said it was the name they gave to unidentifiable dead bodies and infants who were abandoned at hospitals. Jane Goodall was my first hero. In kindergarten, I found a khaki vest with cargo pockets, like the one Jane had, and wore it over my dress on yearbook picture day.

Waiting in line, each one of us got a plastic comb so that we could brush the recess out of our hair before we had our photo taken. My mom had warned me about the combs, insisting that I refuse mine. She said that if I got lice, she'd have to wash my hair in salad dressing.

The sixth grader who was handing out the combs asked me about my khaki vest. I told him that I spent 25 years in the rainforest and didn't need a comb because Chimpanzees knew how to pick fleas out of their own fur.

I smiled into the camera, my windblown curls falling out of their French braids.

7.

My freshman year of college, when I was still getting used to the pixie cut, I wore a pencil skirt, large gold earrings, and a pastel pink blazer from a thrift store to school on Halloween day. Two of my classmates complimented me on my Hillary Clinton costume, saying it was the best they'd ever seen.

That night, I dressed up as Scout Finch dressed up as a ham from *To Kill A Mockingbird*, blond wig, barbed wire and all. The only person who got it was a stranger at a party who raised his can of beer and yelled "stand up Miss Jean Louise your father's passing!" My ham costume got wrecked in the cold rain and I dragged its carcass to the curb, hoping some sorry trash-picker might want the giblets.

The next day, I dressed up as *Blue Velvet*, the 1989 American mystery film. I cut blue petals out of an old velvet dance leotard and pasted them onto my skin with putty. I went home with a boy who wore two black eyes. I asked him what he was dressed up as and he said "BOO Radley" as he pulled me under his white sheet.

8.

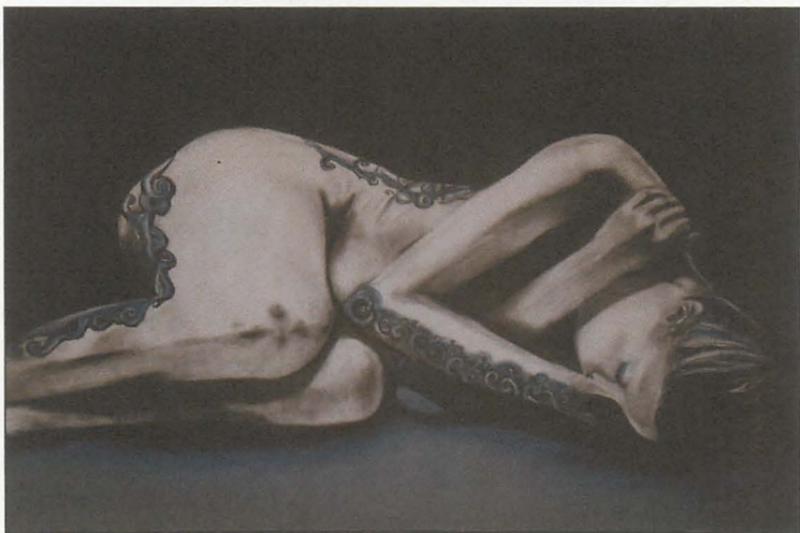
I went to an all-girls Catholic high school and wore one of those uniforms every day, with the tights, black watch plaid, and a silver Jerusalem cross I earned on a mandatory retreat. I rolled up my kilt until it grazed the tops of my knees and wore thigh-high tights and non-regulation cardigans from J Crew.

My junior year, I caught the attention of a teacher who called himself a recovering Catholic. He would stop me in the hallway after school under the guise of giving me detention for uniform violation, but would instead ask me questions about my childhood. When I told him I was raised in the suburbs of Detroit, he told me he would have assumed I came from wealth because of how I carried myself. He sent me e-mails filled with poetry, always addressed to "Sweet Jane." He lost a daughter named Emily when she was young. Em-i-ly, he said, like the sound of wind chimes.

One afternoon he led me into the chapel, where we wouldn't be interrupted, he said. He told me there was something he wanted me to have and handed me an old shoebox. Inside was a single converse sneaker in a men's size 11, tattered and weatherworn, but clean. He told me he would hang on to the other shoe so that after he was gone, we might still walk together.

The Velvet Underground is dead but they might tell me I had it coming, sitting there, my kilt pulled up too high, in plain sight of every patron saint and guardian angel. Staring down from their stained glass, I know what they were singing:

*"Sweet Jane,
Sweet Jane,
Sweet Jane."*



Dreaming
Jessica Walters

The Sylvia Plath Effect

Samantha Voss

[Anne, Sylvia, Sara, Virginia]

i am the weight of your mother's fur coat
on your shoulders, the arching slope
of gray cascading around you. the rocks
loaded and heavy in your pockets. the equinox
of life just before it tumbled toward
death. i am the bitter, biting vodka poured
smooth, the cruel click of the engine
as it turns over. i am the yellow lemon
of your life being squeezed, pulpy and dripping.
i am the hinge of the oven door, the spinning
of your head, the unforgiving magnet
of river, bathtub. i am the elaborate
kitchen scene, unrelenting bell jar,
and sleeping pill stomach. the open arm
willingness and carbon monoxide breath,
the unflinchingly poetic walk towards death.

Ghost

Lily Uribe

My grandmother was an elephant. Unashamed
of the physical and temporal space she stole.
Diamonds running down the crescent of her nose
peacock feathers flaring from the corners
of her eyes. She walked through the world
with the memory of a small cold pistol
forever imprinted in her hand. In my dreams
she is always moving towards me, opening
the jeweled folds of her lap like a stone
well, looking down, in.
The version of her I carry in my pocket
is only half-real, half-contrived from midnight
stories and half what I need for myself.
I have sculpted her out of
ghosts that smell of white pomegranate,
existing only in fog between images, but I have
dragged her out into being
for my own use, painted in the blank spots
with my own blood, coloring her red like me,
not grey, not dead, not afraid of death,
no pitcher of milk on the bedside table
growing warm, not crippled.
Waltzing. Weeping. Driving her babies into the country
and holding the youngest up
to the soft ear of a calf and singing

Valentiná, Valentiná.

At a Funeral for a Drowned Boy

Dakota Clement

Somersaulting underneath the dying oak,
I let the evening burn slow and soak

into my chest, the gentle crimson overflow
reflecting polished buttons on my wrist.
This is how I remember you—the moon below

the water, thin white crescent-curved fist
of a body, skin like bed sheets, kissed

with ribs, pulled tight over the spine—
turn myself over under the tree.

I want to have your same ivory shine,

the careless drifting limbs beneath the sea—
I want to drown and have them rush to save me.



touching moment

Lauren Gaunt

Secrets

Mallika Mitra

My grandfather is asleep in his bedroom, next to the guestroom my sister and I sleep in and I can hear his snores moving with the same rhythm of the wind blowing through the palm trees outside. That's the only thing I don't like about having Christmas in Florida: the palm trees. They remind me I cannot have a white Christmas. They seem to sway back and forth extra today to make up for the absence of snow, and my sister Leela, who is only three years old, four years my junior, glances out the window skeptically before racing to see the note left from Santa. Cookie crumbs are scattered across the plate, a mark of Santa's hungry hands, and the milk Leela carefully poured into a glass last night has disappeared. I wonder if Santa likes oatmeal raisin more than chocolate chip, and if so, if he feeds most of the cookies to his reindeer. That's what I would do; I wouldn't want to be rude. My sister picks up the note and unfolds it as if its delicacy should not be questioned, and she needs to be as careful as possible. She holds it out in front of her for a few minutes, before seeming to remember she can't read, and passing it to me.

"Thank you for the cookies and milk, girls!" I read aloud. "They really helped get me through my journey—"

I stop reading. The way the end of the "g" smiles makes me run to the kitchen counter and pick up a note my grandfather had left my mother and me when he went to the grocery store the previous afternoon.

Ran to the store, girls. Be back soon, it read.

The "g" smiled in the same way and both letters were written in the same style, slanted to the left with only the first letter of each sentence standing straight up. I wonder how many years my grandfather has been writing Santa's letters. To my own surprise, I am not angry. I am enveloped by how much I love my grandfather and his secrets. He makes me feel safe.

My mother is on the phone with my grandmother, my sister is practicing writing out the alphabet at the kitchen table, and I am eavesdropping. A year after I realized my grandfather is Santa, and I am hearing my mother plan another trip down to Florida for this year's Christmas with palm trees. She is continuously asking "what?" and demanding that my grandmother repeat herself. My parents told me it is so difficult to understand what my grandmother is saying because "she is sick" but I overheard them explaining to my mom's best friend Patty that she has cancer of the tongue, and the doctors had to take some skin from her upper thigh to replicate a tongue. When I was

Secrets

(continued)

younger I used to talk a lot with my tongue sticking out, repeating what my friends would say, but I stopped doing this when my mom said I sounded like a brat. It is exactly what my grandmother sounds like now, and I hope my mom never tells her she sounds like a brat.

"He's been okay for years," I hear my mom say on the phone. "He can handle this."

I know she is talking about my grandfather. My mom never tells me about her childhood but a few weeks ago we were writing stories on our fathers in Mrs. Muller's class, and I asked my mom about hers. She was quiet for a while and her eyes filled with tears like snow globes do with snow when you flip them over, and she muttered that her father was never as good to her as mine is to me. I want to know about my grandfather, but my family is very hush-hush about him. There are so many secrets.

"When you arrive in Heaven, please wait for me," I read out to a sea of black. I look down at my white skirt sprinkled with pink flowers and wonder, for the third time that day, if I should have worn black. But my mother had assured me before we got in the car that fifth graders didn't have to wear black to funerals, and that my grandmother would have wanted me to wear a "happy color."

The poem I read for my grandmother emits even more tears from my aunts, but it has made some people in the crowd smile. I think it would have made my grandma smile; she always loved hearing my writing and seeing my artwork. She had dedicated an entire wall in her and my grandfather's one-bedroom Florida condo just to hang up pictures my sister and I had painted. I wish I had painted her more.

I step away from Jim, who had been speaking about how wonderful my grandmother was for twenty minutes before I read my poem, causing more and more people to break out in tears, and reunite with my mother, slipping my hand into hers. I can feel her body shaking next to me, the way it did when we first heard that Grandma's cancer had stolen her life from her in her sleep, and I squeeze Mom's hand tight. I look around and see my father and two uncles with solemn faces. None of them has cried yet today. But when I walked past my Uncle Bill's bedroom last night, I heard his deep sobs, and my Aunt Jo murmuring small sympathies under her breath. Right now, my Uncle Bill looks the same way he has all week. The ends of his mouth are turned down as if he is struggling to keep them up, his eyes look glazed over, and, despite his best effort, his hair is pointed in every direction. He looks a lot like my grandpa right now, and I feel a small pain in my stomach that hits me the same way it did when my mom told me my grandpa wouldn't be at the funeral. She said he was sick, which made my eyes get wide and I felt tears rushing forward like waves.

"Sick like Grandma?" I had asked in a whisper. My sister had been drawing at the table and I didn't want her to hear.

"No," my mom had whispered back. "Sick in his mind."

She had whispered too, but I think that it was because she hadn't wanted to say it. She seemed to think she was admitting something dirty.

My grandparents own a house a few minutes away from Lake George. They bought it years ago, before my grandmother got sick because she said she got stir crazy in Florida and we have so much family history in the Adirondacks of New York. My family has been spending summers up there for five generations. My grandpa loves the warm weather and could have stayed in Florida year round, but he agreed. My grandma could have asked him to buy an elephant and he would have done it.

It is a year after her funeral, which was held twenty minutes away from this house, and I can still hear the whimpers of the people I love and the cries of family members I only just met at the service. My grandparents' house by Lake George is my favorite place in the world, and now I am packing it away in boxes, one sweater and lampshade at a time. This house is huge and every time I call out for my mom or Uncle Bill, the only other two packing up the house and they don't answer, I realize just how big it is, and just how alone I feel in it.

When we started taking everything from the house and placing it into boxes yesterday, I tentatively asked why my grandfather wasn't here. I asked quietly, and as if I didn't really need an answer, because my grandfather had only been mentioned in whispers and during crying phone calls for the past year. I had picked up from listening in on these calls that he was in an "institution," as my mom had called it to my uncle, two hours from Lake George.

My mom is looking at me as if she feels bad. I think she has been pretending that she doesn't have to tell me about my grandfather because I don't really need the truth.

"He's still sick" is the only answer I get, but as she shuffles out of the room I hear her whisper "and because he's selfish."

I don't understand how she could call someone selfish for being sick; it's not his fault. I pick a white and blue hat out of my grandmother's drawer that I had seen her knit herself. I had already asked to keep my grandmother's clothes, but my mom told me there were people who really needed them who we would be donating them to, and they wouldn't fit me. I really want this hat, but now the word I'm most afraid of my mom calling me is "selfish," and that is exactly what I would be if I took this hat. I let my mind dance back to the day on the porch when I had been re-reading *Harry Potter and*

Secrets

(continued)

the Prisoner of Azkaban, and my grandmother had been knitting this hat in the chair next to me. Every so often I would ask how her knitting was going, or she would ask how my book was, and then we would fall back into silence. I felt so safe.

I take the hat and sneak it into my backpack without my mom seeing. It will be my little secret.

I haven't seen my grandpa in over a year. I can tell that every member of my family is at least a little angry with him, but I love and miss him more and more every day. After my mom, uncle, and I packed up my grandparents' house, my sister came up to the Adirondacks and we've spent the last few weeks swimming, canoeing, and running through the field by the house, chasing one another. A week from today is my first week of sixth grade and we're leaving for Lake George tomorrow. Today, my mom woke up Leela and me up and told us we're going to see Grandpa.

We're pulling up to the "institution," Four Seasons, which looks a lot happier than I expected considering whenever anyone talks about my grandpa being here, they are always close to tears. My mom, sister, and I make our way down the dimly lit hallway, past the open rooms in which I can see elderly people watching television, reading books, or mumbling under their breath. After my mom has told the lady at the front desk who we are visiting, she walks down the hallway with her head held high, deliberately not looking into any of the rooms. She has been here before, and knows exactly where she is going. Suddenly I realize why Leela and I have been spending days at different relatives houses, and my mom has disappeared for hours, only to return to have hushed conversations with family members that she thinks my sister and I can't hear. I am furious that she has been seeing Grandpa while I wasn't even allowed to speak to him on the phone, but my fury calms when Mom opens the door to a room at the end of the hallway and I am greeted by my grandpa's face.

His hair is out of place, as always, and his eyes seem to have sunken back a bit. His mouth is drooping and by the smell of this room, I don't think he has showered in a few days. But I have not been this happy since before Grandma passed away. Grandpa peers around Mom's flowing skirt, sees Leela and me, and beams.

"Well, there my girls are! It's been a while," he says through an unclear throat. It sounds like he hasn't talked in very long time.

"Grandpa!" Leela and I call out in unison as we jump on top of him. Suddenly all the whispered stories disappear and I am hugging the man who so many years ago wrote Santa's note.

For the next few hours, Grandpa asks Leela and me about everything: what we're drawing, what we're reading, how our friends are, if we're excited for school, and everything else he has missed. After a little he asks a nurse for some paper and crayons, and gives them to Leela and me, asking if we can draw him pictures to hang up around his depressing room. He and my mom think that I am so distracted by the reds and purples that I am not listening to their conversation.

"Do you want to bring the girls down to Florida for Christmas this year?" I heard my grandpa ask while my mother helped him fold his clothes.

"I don't want then near you if you're going anywhere near that stuff," she responded.

"Kathy, I haven't drunk in months. You don't have to worry about that anymore," he said, his voice even more quiet.

"I've heard that before."

They whisper to keep their secrets from me.

While awaiting the arrival of my grandfather and college decision letters, I comfort my mom, who always misses Grandma most during the holidays. I hold her while she lets a few tears escape, and ask her what I can do to help. She tells me we need to get rid of any alcohol.

I help her carry bottles of wine from the kitchen to the dark and cold garage, and place them, along with my father's rum, in a box in the corner among tennis balls and my sister's old rollerblades. I take the beers out of the refrigerator and walk them across the street to my mom's friend, who is grateful to take them. She laughs about how these will help after her long week, and I return to my house, where my mom is double checking to make sure it is all gone.

It has been years since my grandfather has been in the "institution," and I haven't seen him take a sip of alcohol, but my mom still gets paranoid every time we are with him. We do this same ritual every year, running through the house getting rid of the alcohol, and I always assist without question. My parents still talk about my grandpa in whispers, but they don't try as hard to hide things from me. Either they realize my eavesdropping skills were polished by the time I was in eighth grade, or they think I'm mature enough now that I'm seventeen to be let in on the secrets. I decide to take advantage of this.

I glance over at my mom, who is now frosting gingerbread cookies with dark chocolate, and quietly ask her why she worries about getting rid of all the alcohol when Grandpa hasn't drunk in years. She stops frosting the cookies, slowly washes her hands, and sits down, gesturing for me to sit down with her. The story starts out calmly, with

Secrets

(continued)

how my grandpa was such a good father for a while. But she can't remember that part of her childhood because it is overshadowed by the nights he came home drunk and yelling, all the events he missed that he should have been at, and how he never knew about what was going on in her life. Within ten minutes, all the secrets have been laid out on the table among the gingerbread cookies. With a heavy sigh, mom tells me about the time my grandmother told Grandpa to choose between his family and booze, and he walked out the door. He returned half a year later, disheveled and broken, begging for her to take him back. She did. Grasping her hands together too tightly, Mom tells me about how Grandpa hadn't been invited to his own niece's wedding because she was afraid he would get near the wine and make a scene. Grandma, Mom, and my uncles went, while Grandpa stayed home chugging beer in front of the Yankees games. The secrets flowed out of her like Moscato being poured into a tall wine glass, and I let them wash over me. When the ten minutes are over, Mom is emotionally drained. She goes to her room to wait until my Grandpa arrives. He's coming to our house in New York from Florida, because now Christmas with the palm trees reminds everyone that Grandma isn't there.

When he does, I run down to greet the cab. Leela brings out a Christmas cookie for him, and everyone is hugging. After catching up, everyone goes back to his or her business, and Grandpa asks Mom if he can borrow her car.

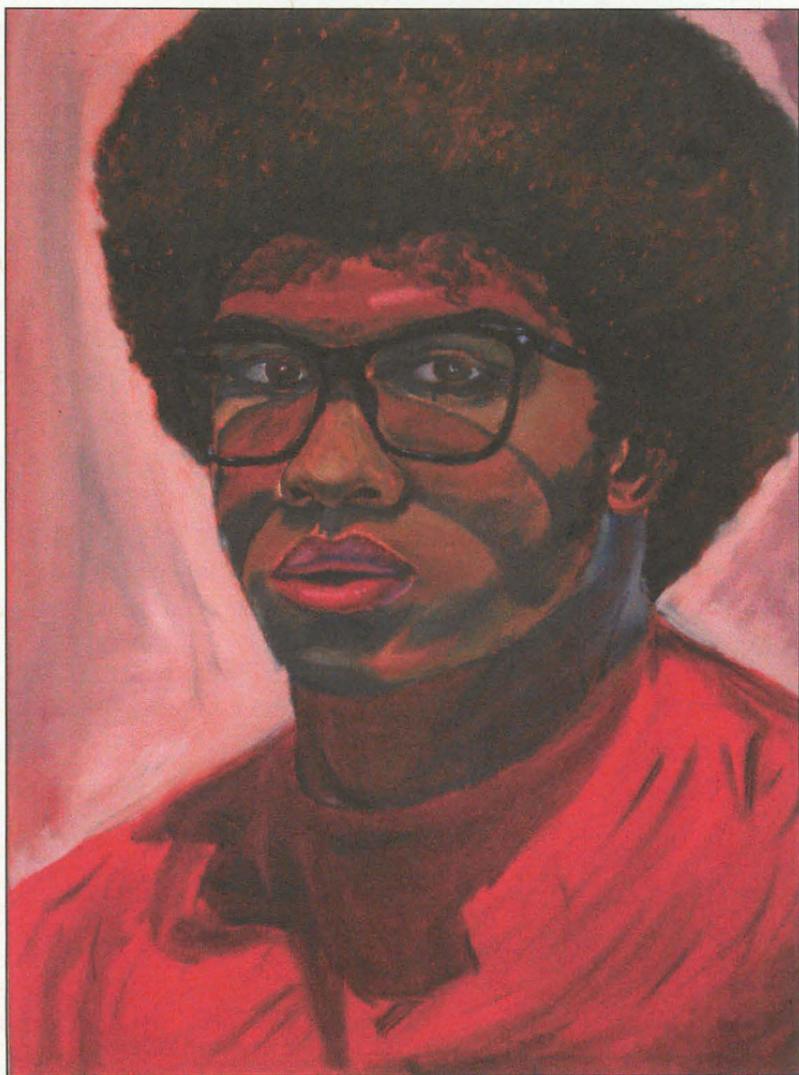
"To get a newspaper," he says, and she agrees.

I curl up in the shadow of the Christmas tree and read *Pride and Prejudice*. Two hours pass before I realize Grandpa isn't back yet. After the stories I just heard, I get panicky, and ask Dad if we can go look for him without telling Mom. The first place we drive to is the Three Village Inn, where Grandpa used to stay before we added a guest room to our house three years ago. My dad pulls up to the front of the inn and, although I offer to go inside and look, he jumps out and says he rather do it. He looks nervous as he walks through the front doors, and after turning back to see if I am watching him, he makes a quick left into the pub.

I wait in the car getting anxious, cracking my knuckles, and hoping my mom hasn't realized that now three of us are gone. My dad comes out and says the bartender described a man that could be Grandpa, saying he had had too much to drink, and they had had to check him into a room. They wouldn't give my dad the room number, so he wants to do a quick walk around and see if we can see him through the window. I tell him that's a little extreme, and he says my mom is going to want to know exactly where he is and exactly what he's doing. I stop cracking my knuckles and cross my fingers, hoping that we won't see Grandpa passed out in any of those rooms.

Despite my dad's arguing that I can wait in the car, I get out, and we begin walking around the inn, peering into the windows. We pass three and I am feeling better, six and I am almost feeling safe. By the time we reach the eleventh room, my dad is ahead of me. He glances into the room, turns around and tells me we can leave. As I make my way to the window to look in, he stands in my way. Although he's covering the man's head, I recognize the sneakers from the legs dangling off the bed. On the other side of my father, I can see an arm flown across a pillow in an unnatural way, with my grandpa's gold watch on the wrist.

I close my eyes. I want to stand outside the Three Village Inn and cry. I want to cry because I'm sad that, once again, my grandpa has let down my mother, and I want to cry for all the anger I should have felt throughout the years, but didn't because so much was hidden from me. I look up at my dad, feeling like a little girl again. In this moment, I am so appreciative of my dad for trying to hide the drunk, who, just a few hours ago, had been standing in my living room as if he were a changed man. I wish I were eavesdropping at a door, discovering these secrets that way because, even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have heard the whole truth. My dad takes my hand and guides me back to the car. He lets me cry for what seems like days. He lets me be a little girl again. He whispers in my ear that it will all be okay. He lets me hide from the secrets. At least, he tries.



Untitled
Elijah Hamilton-Wray

Twelve Moments of Clarity and a Misheard Song Lyric

Divine Crow Award Winner*

Cameron Schneberger

Clear is the name of a state achieved through auditing and describes a being who no longer has his own reactive mind, the hidden source of irrational behavior, unreasonable fears, upsets and insecurities. Without a reactive mind, individuals regain their basic personality, self-determinism and, in essence, become much, much more themselves.

- Church of Scientology Website

1

When I was twelve, my father sat down with me on a hill covered in dandelions overlooking a lake crowded with newly-hatched goslings. He showed me his new tattoos and explained to me why atomic bombs make mushroom shaped clouds.

2

My babysitter said I could have the dress Audrey Hepburn wore in the opening of Breakfast at Tiffany's if he could take pictures of me in it. I slipped into the dress while he readied the light. I tried to push my penis between my legs and he said, "Don't bother with that."

Now I'm eighteen and a picture of a boy in a Givenchy dress is featured in the Chazen Museum of Contemporary Art and there's a ball of bunched up black fabric hidden behind my dresser.

Twelve Moments of Clarity and a Misheard Song Lyric
(continued)

3

The sun knows your truth,
knows your natural color,
it's not white – it's pink.
it's going to show everybody.

4

"Did you make sure to bleed on them?" Satan asked as he offered me a mint julep.

5

When it comes down to it, he's been penetrated.
It doesn't have to be a penis. A hockey stick
counts. Students said they heard him scream. No one anticipated
that thirteen-year-olds could commit something so sick,
but they did. This is a school. We still have to teach.
The longer we imagine the boy's torn anus,
the football game, the missed touchdown, the rope, the bleach
in his eyes, the more Wright Middle School becomes infamous.
This is not our fault. We are aware of bullies

and we do everything in our power to prevent harassment, but we can't control locker rooms. The victim didn't speak up. We couldn't foresee this act of extreme aggression. This event looms over all of us. Not just the victim, but all the boys who went too far. Their lives will hit a wall.

6

I enthusiastically snatched the mint julep from Satan's hand. "You know I did," I responded, before taking a long dirty sip.

7

As a boy I would throw myself from the roof at night to feel tickling grips of moths clinging to my back. They saved me every time, floating me down to a pile of dead leaves.

8

Dear Cameron Schneberger,

Thank you for your interest in our publication. Unfortunately we currently have no need for your self-portraits.

They are very pretty and I'm sure it took a long time for you to paint your likeness on individual pieces of confetti, but it doesn't fit with our current image.

Sincerely, Arjen DeWitt of FANTATASIC MAN MAGAZINE

Twelve Moments of Clarity and a Misheard Song Lyric *(continued)*

9

Birthday wishes since age 4:

4th Birthday - see the pyramids

5th through 17th Birthday - the ability to fly

18th Birthday - the man who works at the American Apparel

19th Birthday - a lumberjack with drugs

20th Birthday - see the pyramids

10

I counted five pairs of tweezers in his room.

It was noon. He was gone. I made up a story
about two fairies who lived in a house made of tweezers.

11

I wake up at seven in the morning to run the glass bottle over my mother's prickly legs. She wakes up and I tell her she has to be still to be in my perfume advertisement.

12

when the paint dries
when the sirens die down
when our teeth stop clicking
what will you give me?

Love is not just a verb it's you looking bored, maybe



Untitled
Donna Aguilar

I Was Never Much for Metronomes

Trevor Vader

I was never much for metronomes and their tell-tale rhythm
drilling their way up through the floor-boards of my skull—
the relentless clicking haunting my head like the ghost of a piston
taunting me for being off-beat and living in the noiseless lull.
I was never much for melodies, because I can never hit pitches—
all I can do is holler like an artillery man trying be an archer
so I was never much for singing because the sons of bitches
in the choir would always tell me to focus and try harder.
I was never much for tuners, because I hate that damn red light—
always blinking, taunting me and flirting with the edge of the green
like Daisy Buchanan waving at me from across the lake at night
while I'm a tenor in a baritone's body straining for notes I can't reach.
No thanks. I'd rather carouse on the ground than reach for the stars.
Give me the freedom that comes from a "Fuck it" and an out-of-tune guitar.

The Rap Game Speaks

Samantha Voss

Yeah she talk a mean game. She say independent woman like names can come up from inside of you and shine outward. Like "I think, therefore I am." Wink at you like she sly, like she don't go home every night with the tears, and the cries, and the lies flowing from her body.

*She ain't nothin' but a woman.
She ain't nothin' but the fulcrum
where her legs meet.*

And yeah, I told her I fucked her and now I own her, her sense of self starin' shocked in the mirror. It get clearer and clearer that only a woman make herself feel like this, take it to heart and wear part of it like a wound, the unsoothed pieces raw and showing.

*She ain't nothin' but an easy target.
She ain't nothin' but a garment.*

Yeah, I wear her out like that. Self-respect shed like the sad clothing on the floor while she moan for more. We all know I ain't gonna give it to her. Watch her come back to the hand that hit her. The crawling.

*She ain't nothin' but satirize.
She ain't nothin'
unless I tell her
otherwise.*

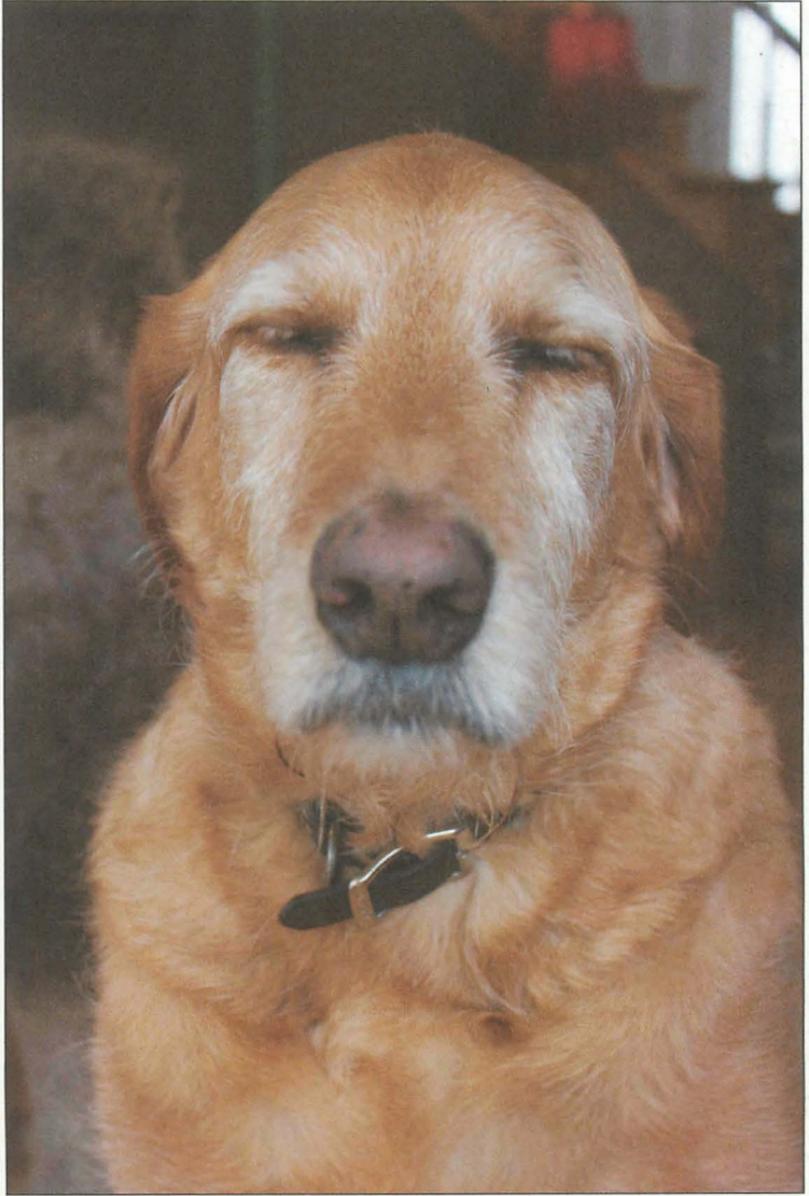
Dear blue guitar pick

Lily Uribe

Don't worry too much about losing
yourself. Your brevity is expected,
your brothers are sold by the handful.
Everybody knows that everybody
goes. Scraps of plastic cost 25 cents
plus tax and can be replaced with
the flip of a coin. Guitar picks. Shells.
Single socks. Pencils, still young.
Tell me, does it shiver
your skin to be a thing that helps
people feel found, but to be so easily
grazed away yourself, your face
blended into static? Do you
mourn?

Or what if to be lost is a beginning,
the main act, the open road? And us, just
a stop along the way, a preface, people
on the dock who wave at unfamiliar
ocean liners. Do we come to you in packs
of ten? Grasp. Shake. Cast. Scatter.

If you were born out of design
and I, not chosen but perfectly
chanced to play a supporting role,
know this: You have changed me
forever. Recall that your body and mine
once made music
when you are lost, begun, sunk
into the murk, (or the stars, or the nothing?)



The Philosopher
Chelsea Miller

A Date with Fear

Kira Boneff

Wedged somewhere between
the timeline ticks
of the grandfather clock
and the A minor chords
sweating from the piano's black back
lies the key in which
Fear speaks his name.

He unbuttons his trench coat
with hands made of birds' nests
and drags a nervous twiggged finger behind his ear
to flake off the rotting skin.

When Fear was a child,
he composed a symphony of shadows
and played it for the girl he loved.
He yanked the puppet strings
and she screamed pushpins
into the eyes of the living.

The sound of Fear's breaking heart
raised goosebumps on mothers' arms.
They locked their front doors
and swallowed the keys.

Listen to the Story

Kendal Kurzeja

She lay motionless next to his hulking figure in the dark, willing sleep to claim her, but it never came. At the base of the window Sean had cracked five minutes after he got up to use the bathroom and three minutes before he was asleep, the beginning stages of a small puddle appeared. Every few seconds, it would ripple and grow as fat drops of rain blew in with the cool breeze from the storm. Ava watched the process again and again until her eyes stung and watered. She pressed her palms against her lids so firmly that pricks of light shrouded her vision even after her hands were gone.

It would be a long while before she fell asleep. The urge to leave his room, to cocoon herself in the softness of the bed she could hardly call her own anymore—it hadn't been touched in two months—was stronger than most nights, but she knew not to go. Tonight Sean had been particularly sweet, and it would upset him if she didn't take notice. And anyway, it was dark, her roommate was probably asleep, and she didn't know where Sean had thrown her pants. She shivered; it was too late in the year for the window to be open, but she knew better than to touch something of his without asking. She absently stroked the large bruise on her upper arm. Although it was dark, she knew all too well the precise color yellow of the fist-sized outline that faded into patches of deep blues and reds. There was never more than one on her body at a time. They were manageable singularly, much easier to explain away.

He mumbled unintelligibly, and Ava held her breath before rolling smoothly to the edge of his bed. It was colder without him touching her, but she didn't want to risk waking him with her restlessness. She curled up on her side, attempting to create and retain as much of her own heat as possible. After a few minutes staring wide-eyed at nothing, she abandoned trying to force sleep. It was too cold, and her hands refused to stay still. She allowed them to wander over the battlefield that was her body in an attempt to warm herself. Sean told her that her body was too sharp for her face. She had been steadily losing weight over the past year, and she could feel as she worked over defined shoulders and hipbones. Her hands were white in the bit of light that streamed through the window. She toyed with the moon's beams on her fingers, enjoying the harsh shadows they cast on the floor beneath her. Ava's left wrist was sore and still clicked even though the cast had come off three months before. After she fell down the stairs, Sean didn't touch her for an entire month, not even to hug her. Instead, he sent daily gifts to show her how much he loved her. She ran her hands down her freshly shaven legs and traced the almond shaped scar on her knee. She smiled, allowing her mind to wander into the place that held her most treasured memories until she recalled the one of the night they met.

Their faces had gleamed in the pulsating light, and their tentative laughter had been lost to a sea of deafening bass and shouted conversations. A shattering glass from her

right made Ava jump. A nudge. A sly smile. And then they were running. Out the tired screen door, through waist-high sea grass that bit at every inch of exposed skin, and over sand as cool as the night air that their flushed bodies welcomed readily. The further away she ran from the lake house, the faster she needed to go. Her heart pounded in her ears in time with the rhythm of her bare feet as they sailed over the familiar landscape. In that instant, she was free. Free from her father and his venomous, damaging words, free from college applications and senior projects and friends who weren't her friends. Free from obligation. With each lungful of air, she marveled at the beauty of her surroundings: the sky peppered with brilliant stars stretching all the way to the black horizon, the weeping willows sharing a lifetime of secrets in hushed whispers, the soft breeze contrasting the vitality of the evening. She had never known a night to feel so alive.

She glanced over her shoulder, surprised to meet his eyes; he was so close! Her head snapped forward, but not before she could see to avoid a piece of shin-high driftwood in her path.

"Shit!"

They collapsed in a heap of breathless apology on the shore. Having freed himself from the tangle of damp, sand-covered limbs, Sean laid on his back with a resounding flop, chest heaving from exertion and the joy of their escapade. She righted herself, trying vainly to calm her disheveled hair and steady her breathing.

"Whoa, hey, Ava, your leg!" Sean sat up quickly to scrutinize the gash on her knee with soft, sure hands. "Are you okay? Does this hurt?" He gently prodded the area just beneath the pooling blood.

"I'm fine," she shooed him away with a wave. "Really," Ava said when he didn't look up. "Sean," she tried again, "I get hurt all the time. You're worried about the girl who not only concussed herself during a game of badminton, but also took out her partner in the process."

She saw the stirrings of a smile before he met her eyes. "Maybe I shouldn't be with someone so hazardous to my health."

"Jerk!" Ava objected, reaching to smack his bare shoulder. He caught her pale hand easily, holding it for a beat too long. For the second time that night, she was alarmed by how close she had let him get to her.

His childishly blissful features arranged themselves into something much less playful. Questions danced behind his eyes, and hesitance painted his every movement. His intensity captivated her, and she was unable to look away; she wanted to memorize every part of that face. His perfectly tousled, black-as-night hair grazing skin the color of pennies. The subtle crookedness of a long-since healed broken nose casting a slight

Listen to the Story

(continued)

shadow in the white of the moonlight onto his lips, poised to perform whatever task he willed them to do.

"You are so beautiful." His eyes flicked: lips, eyes. And then he faltered, his gaze mingling with the grains of sand between their knees. Ava released a lungful of air in an involuntary sigh.

"So beautiful. And smart. And," he made a sound then, half scoff, half disgust, "brilliantly funny." He tossed his hands in the air fitfully and ran them through his hair.

"Sean."

"What—" But her lips were on his then, secured by the completely out of character placement of her hands on either side of his beautiful face. It only took a moment for instinct to overpower his uncertainty, and he took the lead. They fit together perfectly, she thought.

"And," he said, taking a moment to catch his breath again, "a great kisser."

Ava let the scene play on repeat, warming her bones and soothing her troubled mind.

All too soon, it was morning. Before the rest of her was even awake, her eyes flew open and were searching the way they always did when Sean was sleeping beside her. From her position, she could just make out the time from the clock on his desk. 10:39. Ava had work in twenty minutes. Most of the things she needed for the day were in his room, in the top drawer of his dresser, except for her blue coffee shop t-shirt. She silently cursed laundry day, realizing that, in order to get the shirt from her room across campus and make it to work on time, she would have to leave within the next five minutes.

She deliberated only momentarily before delicately swinging her feet to the floor. As she stepped to get up, though, the bed frame creaked, and she froze.

"Mm...Ava?" he mumbled from behind her. She remained on the edge of the bed, silently promising favors to every god she knew of to lull him back to unconsciousness. "Hey, I'm talking to you," he insisted, banishing all traces of sleep from his voice.

"Yeah," she whispered, standing, facing away from him.

"Where are you going?"

She sighed, "Work. I've got work at 11."

She heard him sit up and stretch as she scanned the floor for her jeans.

"Come back to bed."

She closed her eyes and bit back the "no" before it could pass through her lips.

"I *said*, come back to bed." He was behind her now, teasing the waist of her underwear and grazing the back of her neck with his teeth. "Please," he murmured and her body was alight with anxious goose bumps.

Ava shied away from his touch, but he pulled her back to him swiftly enough to force some air from her lungs. He grabbed her wrist, and she flinched from the sudden pain, but her discomfort only made him tighten his grasp.

"Sean, I have to go..."

But he was driving her toward the bed with vices for fingers and an oppressive wall of muscle against her back. "You don't have to go to work. I told you that I'll take care of you, right? I've always got you." His lips trailed down her neck and over her shoulder as he unhooked the tiny clasp beneath her cotton shirt. His hands clumsily found their way under the bra he hadn't bothered to remove entirely, which left her restricted not just by his hands, but by her own clothing.

Panic boiled in her chest. "Sean, *please*," she choked.

With a chuckle, he pressed her down against the mattress. "Shh, shh," he whispered. "It's Saturday morning. People are sleeping." The last word slid from his tongue like a snake.

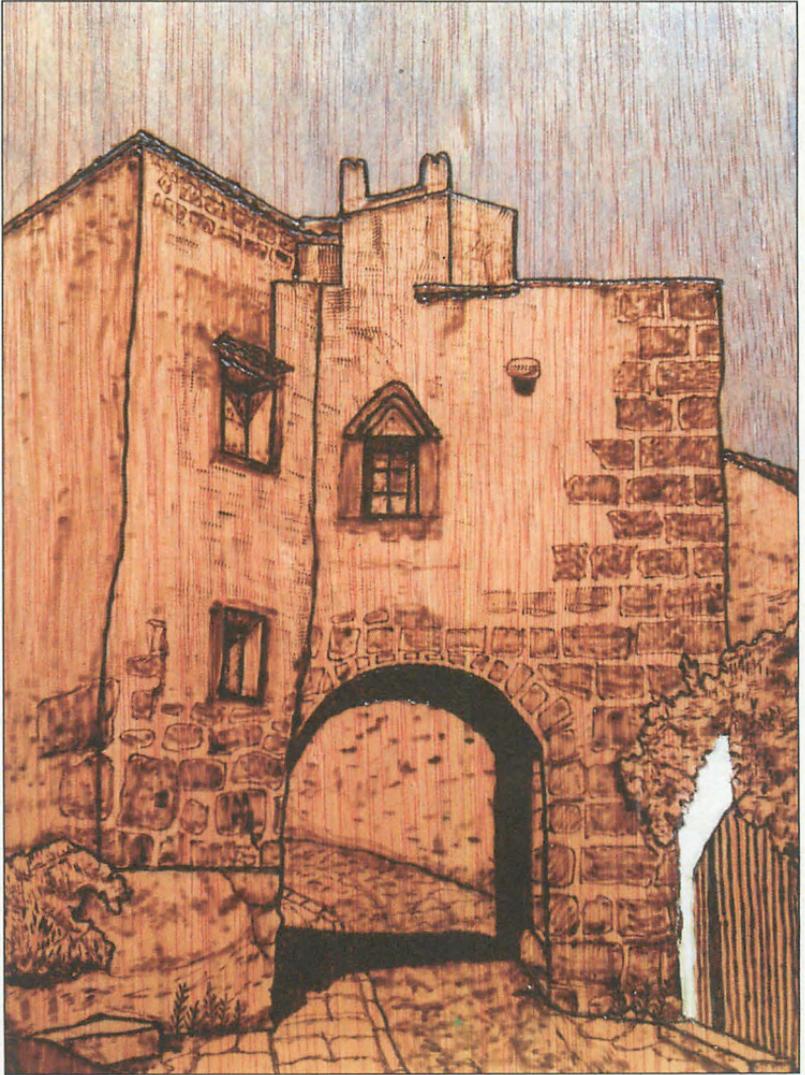
Ava pressed her quivering lips into the pillow in front of her, stopping the tears before they started, hating her body's response to his blistering ego and insistent touch that left invisible scorch marks everywhere. When had she stopped craving those hands? When had they changed from her safe haven to her personal prison?

Sean groped at the clothing separating him from her, the only defense she had left.

"Please. No." It was no more than a whisper. Small, frail, pathetic.

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked upward, pinning her slight body to his. "Shut up!" He grunted, crushing his pelvis against her.

Her body quivered, and her mind slipped from its attachment to the scene around her and back into the memory that she had used to take her away so many times before. Before, before, before.



Untitled
Allison Hammerly

How to stay alive

Shelby Newsom

1.

Give me a goddamn tragedy. Stop talking about airplanes,

I don't want to hear you say it was me who started this when
you bought the ticket and spent those hours by yourself.

Let's not talk about it.

I want to speak but I want you to stop the words from coming.

Let rockets fly in December, sparks catching only to fall
with the hushed embers of snow. I want to see them flare.

When you touch me, let your hands be frostbite to my skin. Show me
your white teeth in the dead night. Bring your finger up to my lips.

Quiet. Dig your nails in.

Bring winter with you.

2.

Take me for a drive somewhere new. Leave me at the top
of the Ferris wheel on the empty boardwalk alone.

Pull your shirt off and let's go swimming.

Ripple the tide with your body.

Swim out farther and

I will follow you until the bottom

half of our faces exist only underwater. Dive

below, don't come up for air.

Let me panic this time.

Hide the moon behind the clouds for just a moment.

Let's swim back to the shore only to get lost

in the yawning woods in the city blocks

in your sheets in each other.

Wherever we go,

let us be lost

with sand deep in our pockets.

3.

Throw water onto the fire and watch it sizzle and transform into smoke.

Stop pretending.

Pass me the tiny bottle of scotch hidden

in your pocket and watch me take a long drink from it.

Let's have it be different this time. Don't abandon me

in a coffee shop in a foreign city, but take me

to the brink

How to stay alive

(continued)

of the frozen pond in the woods on skates. Make me think that
this time,

you are here to stay. Beg for me to believe you.

Let's kick off our skates and walk barefoot

in the snow until we can no longer bear it.

4.

Let them forbid us to go somewhere.

Let them try. When we can no longer see

the stars at night,

I'll tell you the secret I've been

keeping locked inside.

I can't decide if you'll cry or not.

I still have that burn on my left shoulder that you gave me. It's not the only scar
you left

on my body.

5.

You pick up the phone and call me. Hang up. Pull out
a cigarette and smoke it

to the bare bone. Until

there are only ashes.

Flick it off your fingers,

watch it fly.

Tear me

like the pages from an old book.

Make me whisper in the wind and fly. When I open my eyes,

I can't decide which one of us will

say it first.

Bursting (a paradelle)

Katherine Rapin

I pluck ripe fruit from a wandering, prickly vine.
I pluck ripe fruit from a wandering, prickly vine.
Juice stains my fingers and the inside of the basket.
Juice stains my fingers and the inside of the basket.
My wandering fingers inside the basket of a prickly fruit,
I pluck and juice from the vine ripe stains.

I could fill a pail with this bursting feeling.
I could fill a pail with this bursting feeling.
It waits, alive, just behind my collarbone.
It waits, alive, just behind my collarbone.
This pail; could I fill a collarbone with it?
Behind my feeling waits, just bursting alive.

You awoke to a bowl, brimming on your bedside.
You awoke to a bowl, brimming on your bedside.
My bounty I have brought you with the berries.
My bounty I have brought you with the berries.
I awoke to have your berries with you, a bowl.
You brought the brimming bounty on my bedside.

Your collarbone awaits the feeling of my fingers,
for stains on the inside are wandering, ripe.
Behind the vine you fill the basket with berries.
Fruit; it awoke your brimming pail I brought from my bedside.
I pluck my bounty, alive and prickly, to a bowl.
With this juice I could have you just bursting.



Metropolis
Gabrielle Montesanti

Self-Portrait with Circumlocution

Kelsey Baak

I'm polaroid film and skillet. I'm
sailboat and old maps of the USSR
pinned to ceilings for sentimental
value. I'm Mahatma Gandhi.
Tibetan prayer flags flapping in
the wind are my voice. I'm the
flurry of activity in the kitchen
Thanksgiving morning; pots and
pans make up my shape. Paring
knives my fingers. Golden brown
skin covering the bird's breast:
my eyes. I'm the girl who trips
over her own feet, dancing with
each step I take. Stomach growls
measuring the passing of time. I'm
hesitant turtle, untrustworthy of
surroundings. I'm tennis shoes
and unopened letters,
postmarked Australia, UK, Brazil.
That constant ringing in your
ears; you can't overlook me. I'm
ropes knotted up, twisted with
feeling unexplored. I'm pen and
scars, a mess kept silent.

On Boring Days

Cameron Schneberger

My father moved us closer to vultures and goldenrod, so we'd learn to cut our palms and messy our pastel on boring days,
soft braids of kernmantle rope lets me build harnesses to hoist myself into the trees or down the well on boring days,

Too many strawberries, too many mattresses in the neighbor's front lawn, the same neighbor with three daughters:
Melody, Rapunzel, Prudence boarding the school bus in Pendleton dresses and their manure smell on boring days,

Three weeks later the neighbor is a pervert and the girls are in newspapers. I whisper with other kids about the sin
in a hayloft palace, we break to kiss faces by lantern, if tipped we're in a tower of all hell, On boring days

I walk past mattresses into the ranch house to search the rooms for what the cops, robbers, cats didn't claim: a razor,
kind my dad's dad uses with a shaving brush. Why's a rebel instrument the only item in the bathroom? don't dwell on boring days.

I take my treasure back to the palace and my new friends say "Red, show us your razor" I cut slits in my shorts,
What are summer clothes to girls who wear wool year round? What are boys with bug bites to a blade's croon on boring days?



vegan feminist bitch

Clémence Saillant

Runaway

Emma Gougeon

In my brief 18 years of life I have found that the only therapy that works is walking. I've seen all of the shrinks, I've tried drugs, but guess what. Those don't work. The only thing that works is walking. I just keep going until I can't remember what time it is or where I am or most importantly why I started walking in the first place. Just walking from life as it was into the life that it will be as my heart beat slowly morphs into the sound of my feet hitting the pavement.

I always choose an interesting location. This is the start of a new life, the setting of a new novel. It has to take place somewhere that reflects who the character is. Right now, I'm walking in the library. It isn't the most conventional walking location, but it paints the picture of what my next life is going to be. This time, I'm going to be smart. I think the last time I was in a library must have been when I was five years old. I love reading, but I order my books online. But now, as I walk through the rows of towering stories I realize that the new and improved Eric Schafer likes the way his long fingernails get caught on the edges as he brushes past the old pages. I grab a random book from the shelf, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, to see what else the new me thinks of used books. I like the creaky noise it makes when I open the stiff binding that hasn't been used in a while, like the sound of my feet as I walk on old floorboards. As I flip through the pages the scent of dusty forests soars through my nose and the folds and tears in the pages let me know that this book has a history. I feel like the condition of the much-loved book tells a story separate from that which is written on its pages.

When walking it can be easy to get lost in thought and wind up in the place I started walking from. I remember one time I decided to walk in a park; a reasonable enough place for a stroll. Everything was fine as I walked past the old couple holding hands on a bench and the kid playing Frisbee with his dad. In fact, I was starting to develop the new Eric. This Eric liked the way the wind made the leaves on the trees dance like a wild fire. He did not like that there was gum EVERYWHERE. Under the metal monkey bars: gum. Under the wooden benches: gum. Under his brand new sneakers: gum. I learned all of this about the new me, but that was it. I began to realize that parks are actually pretty monotonous and after about my fifth lap I ran out of new observations to make. So I started thinking about school and about Rebecca and how she kissed Billy and how I hurt him and about that hard wooden chair I sat in for what seemed like hours as my mom talked to the cops and how while I was in that wooden chair I was thinking about Rebecca and how she probably never really liked me because she never seemed like she did and why would she anyways? And before you know it I am in the middle of a park punching myself in the leg while all of the squirrels and the

kids and old people just watch in astonishment, all because I didn't pick a distracting location. That's why now I walk in libraries and shopping malls. There are lots of things to build a life around there.

I get to the section of books on world travel, so I pick up a guide to France. One time I was walking in an art gallery and I saw so many breath taking pictures by French artists that I decided I would start saving money so that one day when I couldn't walk any further I would just buy a ticket to France and start fresh. I started learning French on my own and by now I'm pretty much fluent. The book points out different tourist hot spots like Versailles and Notre Dame and I imagine walking down those beautiful streets. I can smell the scent of fresh breads inviting me into the boulangerie and can see the portraits of tourists being painted by artists on the streets. I imagine standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower and for a second I'm not alone. For a brief second Rebecca is there with me, batting her long eyelashes, giggling in the jolly way that only she can. But I catch myself and just need to clench and unclench my fists a couple times and the feeling has passed.

I need to keep walking. I mount the stairs towards the kids section. A mother reading to her daughter shoots me a suspicious look, probably wondering what I am doing there without a kid of my own. But I am not here to browse, I am here to become. Every book is covered with smiling animals and talking trees and as foolish as the new me finds this, I can't help but remember the days when a smiling bumble bee would have made me happy. I was once like that, we all were. Even the world's worst human being was once just a kid. When I was a kid I don't think my mom ever took me to a library. I don't think I got to see the smiling animals, but I think if I had I would have really enjoyed them. As I walk past the puppets and tiny chairs I realize that I didn't really like to walk too much as a kid. I didn't really have anyone to walk with.

I walk past several aisles and there are so many books stacked so high I feel like they are all going to come crashing down like a tidal wave, but rather than scaring me the idea sort of thrills me. Several desks are set up in the middle of the library for people to read and do homework or whatever they want. Close to me is a girl that bends over a notebook, frantically scribbling at 100 miles per hour. All I can see is her flying hand and her long curly brown hair. It looks like Rebecca's hair, but Rebecca's hair was strawberry blonde. The red in her hair made the green in her eyes that much more beautiful, like two shimmering emeralds I would give anything to have.

As I get lost in my thoughts I stumble into a bookcase and a few novels fall off the shelves, creating a thud that penetrates the silence. The noise makes the girl turn, but I had been mistaken. The girl with the curly brown hair was Rebecca. We meet eyes for

Runaway

(continued)

a moment and the look of fright and shock is plain on her face. I've seen that look many times before. Why can't she see that I would never want to hurt her? She is the most important thing in this world to me, why would I ever do anything to hurt her?

"Wha-what are you doing here? You need to leave," she growls.

"But I-I didn't know you'd be here. Rebecca please let's talk somewhere else," I whisper. People have begun to look up from their books at the scene we are creating.

"No! No you leave, I have a restraining order."

"I know but--"

"GO."

People start to whisper and rise out of their seats, so I run out the door. And once I get out the door I don't stop. This was not the way this was supposed to happen. I knew what I would say to convince her that I am the one she loves if I ever saw her again. I wanted to see her but not like this. She didn't even give me a chance! And why did she dye her hair? Her perfect, natural hair. I bet Billy told her to do it. Rebecca didn't need to change a thing about her. But now her hair was dyed and she didn't even give me a chance? You know what, fuck her. All I ever did was love her and she hated me. Just like everyone else. Why does everyone always blame me? My dad used to blame me. He'd just hit me as if it was my fault he was a lousy drunk. I always had thought Rebecca was different, but she isn't. She is just like the rest of them. So I'm going to keep going. Usually walking does it for me, but this time all of the emotions, the memories, and the pain come rushing back. Maybe the faster I go the less I will feel.

I run, but every step takes me closer to the darkness of my inner thoughts and further from peace. I've been running with no perception of time or direction until all of a sudden I am there, standing in front of the building I have managed to avoid for so long: Henry Ford II High School. All of the memories I have kept tucked away in a dimly lit corner of my mind come rushing back like an opened floodgate, and I am back in my 11th grade biology classroom. As a Junior in high school, I was pretty used to being the outcast. That creep with no friends. I had accepted that, until Rebecca. She was in that biology class and she always smiled at me, a genuine smile with dimples and all. When Mrs. Mulhaupt asked us to pick lab partners I expected to get stuck with whoever was left, but she came up to me. That's when things started turning around. Biology became the thing that got me out of bed in the morning. Our conversations were what kept me alive. She giggled at my jokes with a laugh that was as soft as snow floating to the ground. I asked Rebecca if I could see her outside of school, but she was always busy. One time, I stopped by her house to see if she was at dance practice like she claimed, only to find her reading on her bed. You'd think I'd be mad, but how could anyone be mad looking

at a face like hers? All she was doing was reading, just flipping pages in a book. But she did it so gently, so gracefully I couldn't take my eyes away. It was like getting a glimpse at an angel. Stopping by Rebecca's house became a ritual for me. It brought me such peace to memorize the perfection of her face, the ribbons of her strawberry blonde hair. I imagined what it would be like to wake up next to those curls. One day in biology, I cut a lock of it when she wasn't looking.

My life had new meaning. No, not new meaning, it had meaning. Period. For the first time I felt genuine happiness. Watching Rebecca, I started thinking of what it would be like if we just ran away together. We could start a family, and I could live in this bliss forever. Until one day, she wasn't alone. I had seen Billy and Rebecca talking together before but I never thought much of it. Why would Rebecca need a boyfriend when she had me? So when I saw him in her room, I wasn't worried. When he sat down on the bed next to her, I felt fine. And then he kissed her.

My mom told me that I hurt Billy, hurt him really bad. I don't really remember, but I don't regret it. He deserved it, Rebecca was my girl. Billy must have scared Rebecca into getting a restraining order from me. I didn't think it would last, but it did. And that hurt more than anything Billy felt. The worst part wasn't the humiliation or any of that. It was looking into Rebecca's eyes, the ones that could see me like no one ever had before, and see fear. To know that as much as I loved her, she despised me. Whoever said its better to have loved and lost was full of shit.

Touching my face, I realize I've been crying. I don't know how I ended up at this place, all I know is I need to leave. I start running again and keep going for so long I can't really breathe. It actually feels pretty good. My hunger for oxygen numbs my longing for something else. I wonder what it would be like to stop breathing all together, so I try it. Still running, I stop the flow of oxygen into my nose and a half crazed smile breaks out across my face. I know I look insane, but it feels so good I don't care. So good that I can't hold my breath any longer because I am laughing. Laughing at how good it feels to stop breathing. Laughing at how funny it is that nothing is ever funny anymore.

A bench calls my name from just up the road so I allow myself to sit for what feels like the first time in a long time. I collapse into the cold metal and decide not to fight the onslaught of memories that fight their way out of the back of my mind where they have been stuck for so long. I breathe in every memory, all of the lonely lunches by myself in the cafeteria, the averted eyes from strangers who I made uncomfortable. I let myself think about my parents, which is not something I often do. I remember all of the times my dad came home reeking of booze. It didn't matter what I said or what I did, if he was drunk he'd find a reason to hurt me. I'd try to convince myself that he didn't

Runaway

(continued)

mean it. That it was the alcohol talking, not him. I remember mom hiding in her room, playing the radio so she could try and drone out the sounds coming from down the stairs. I didn't have any brothers or sisters so I was the only one my dad could place blame on. Things weren't always like that. Sometimes my mom would tell me about when I was little and we would go on family vacations, just the three of us. She said my dad and her always used to hold my hands, count to three and swing me into the air. The thing is I was too young to remember any of it.

The whistle of the wind wakes me from my reverie. Sitting and letting myself feel all of these things doesn't feel like pouring salt in the wound, its like airing myself out. It feels like I had been suffocating on my own thoughts for so long, and I had no idea. Walking might have been a distraction, but it was just a mask. By walking, I was telling myself the lie that I still had hope. That maybe some day things would be different. What a relief it is to not have to lie anymore.

I remember the first time I began my "walks." It was after everything had happened with Billy. I stopped going to high school. I stayed at home while my dad was at work and my mom was off doing god knows what. I spent most of my time reading the books I had bought online. I got so attached to the characters, I felt like they were there with me, telling me their stories themselves. But hearing them tell their stories only made me feel worse about my own. How could I sympathize with what they were going through when I would give anything to be any one of them? So I started thinking up my own stories, writing them down. I'd always make myself the main character, imagining all of the things I could do if the world was at my disposal. The Eric in my stories was braver. He was more handsome than I am. The plot changed, but it always ended in a victory: Eric won the football games, he beat the bad guys, he got the girl. I'd finish my stories, look at the screen, and be happy with the redefined character typed across the pages but sad once I compared them with reality. And that's when I thought, maybe I could do that in real life. Give me a setting and a situation and I could make the character on my own. I can write the stories of my own life and I could be the guy I wanted to be, I just needed a place to start. I'd pick a new location and use it as inspiration for this new me I was creating. But the difference between the characters in my stories and the Eric sitting on this bench today is that I have a history. I have a past I can't change and like any good story, all of these events play a role in who I am today and tomorrow. Each new location I walk in isn't the start of a new book, it's just another chapter. This is a story I can't crumple up, throw in the garbage and start from scratch. It has to come to an end.

When I used to write stories, I would never go into it knowing how it was going to come to an end. I'd just dive right in without a plan, not knowing what would bring my character to a conclusion. I just sort of knew when it felt right. Now that I've tried creating my own life story I feel like I've been waiting for the plot twist that brings me out of the unfortunate events that my life has been composed of so far. That was what was so hard to accept about Rebecca: I thought she was that plot twist. She didn't just break my heart, she took any hope of a happy ending with her. So I sit here and I try to think of anyone I know, anyone who might help me find my happy ending, and I can't think of one. I think about France, about buying a ticket and starting in a setting that is completely new to me. I could do it. I have the money. But the realization comes to me that the problem isn't the place or even the other people: it's me. The character just couldn't find a place to fit. And so I feel like sitting here on this bench, this is when my book has to come to an end. I didn't want it to be this way, but I can tell, this is the only thing that feels right. A stream of cars rushes by and makes fallen leaves dance in the air. I watch them float to the ground and make a collage of colors at my feet. I stare at them while mentally reading the pages of my novel through one last time and it all fits, it just needs this ending. I stand up and let the crunching sound fill my ears as my feet become the pen and the street my paper. I walk straight into the rush of cars and my book comes to an end.

I like a sleeper through thunder

Fiona Carey

I like a sleeper through thunder

like a ribcage in matyasana

like a good friend in a bad time of a sweet spring in a green land

like a sprinkler gone off as a silent rooster's tail in the dead of night

like an early morning with orange sun rising

like a wasp sting on the toe

like a poet, dancing

would explode and fountain forth



Ghostfish
Caitlyn Smith

Bloodbuzz

Dakota Clement

Well did it go the way it's supposed to?
My dress's yellow, soured by the sun
and lifted from the dirt, your faded blue
jeans scratching at my legs. I let them run
their seams against my skin—bright red rot
of light slipped gently over trees that fell
when water washed away the warping knot
of roots that kept them tied to mud. A swell
of blood inside your fingers tells you this
is worth remembering—the cracking lips
and crimson beads, the stain left by your kiss
upon my throat—I want to feel the whip
against my chest, the scarring as it comes,
to burst like sunsick fruit beneath your thumb.

The Plague Doctor

David Landskroener

Dr. William Drake performed an autopsy in 1969 on Robert Rayford, an American teenager from Missouri who had the earliest confirmed case of HIV/AIDS in North America.

Sometimes in the cleanest chambers
speckles appear on white-cell floors.

Sometimes you prostitute yourself
to find the pleasure of outbreak.

Sometimes in New York and LA
the coffins are from Missouri.

Sometimes a third of Europe dies
and sometimes a third of queers die.

Sometimes the hopelessness of love
manifests itself as lesions.

One time a doctor stared ahead
a plague reflected in his eyes.



Untitled
Katie Anderson

Marcus John Parker, 62 Years Of Age, Speaks to Carl Richardson Of The Chicago Tribune, Who Is Looking For A Story

Jordan Meiller

Grace

The nurses, you know, they say
I'm brave they say, and I say all
I'm doin is livin I say what's so
brave about that, but they just
keep goin on about it – one of em,
the one I told you bout, writes in
her little notebook all the time,
she say yesterday she say I show
Grace In The Face Of Adversity,
just like that she say it like a
sermon, like she knows somethin
I don't. But like I was sayin these
nurses, they say I'm brave and all
with that look you know, that look
like I'm going on a blind date with
the Devil's ex-wife.

Whiskey

It's the little things you miss, you know,
bein laid up in here for so long. Like
those quiet Saturday nights, shut the
lights around nine, take the phone off
the hook, just sit back in my chair.
Good chair got age to it, got a history,
not like these squeaky metal beds just
rolled off the line. Sit back, sometimes
put a record on, maybe Fats Waller or
Wes Montgomery, just sit back and
listen for a while. Round ten-thirty, just
before turnin in for the night, if I was
feelin good, treat myself to a glass of
whiskey, just one mind, but one's

Marcus John Parker, 62 Years Of Age,
Speaks to Carl Richardson Of The Chicago Tribune,
Who Is Looking For A Story

(continued)

enough. You don't know a good drink till you've had a glass of single malt whiskey. You can taste the earth in it. You can taste where you came from, where you gonna go. Jello don't taste like nothin.

Rats

Unc, he worked back then in the Koo-laid factory (that's just the way he said it, Koo-laid just like that) back then in the Koo-laid factory Unc worked at the vats, they had all the Koo-laid in these big vats and Unc worked there mixin all that Koo-laid in these big vats they had and there were rats Unc said, there were rats back then in the Koo-laid factory and he could hear them scurryin through the vents and pipes and whatnot and sometimes Unc said, sometimes a rat would fall in one of the big vats they had but they didn't want to have to stop mixin all that Koo-laid and dump it all out of the big vat so they said he couldn't dump all that Koo-laid for one rat not for one rat no not for two rats neither he had to wait for three rats Unc said, had to wait till he saw three rats swimmin in that big vat of Koo-laid before they gave up and dumped it all out, and man today's been a three-rat kinda day, for sure.

I have been here before.

Not here, exactly. I couldn't occupy the same point in the universe at the same point in time because that would fuck up the tender fabric of existence, clearly. I haven't even been in this restaurant. It's a relatively local chain; I've been in a different one. I spent two hours in the Mattawan branch after my relevant other spun his car out off of 94-westbound and into a snow bank on New Years Day. We don't use the term "boyfriend and girlfriend" because that is for children, sweaty high school students who give each other hand jobs in the back of the theatre at the matinee showing of a PG-13 movie, nor do we use "significant other" because those two words ironically mean nothing in tandem, nor do we use "partner" because that's too PC and it sounds like we are two people who do science projects together, not two people who read books together and dream about North Carolina together and drink \$8 wine with a \$5 pint of sea salt caramel gelato together and have filthy, embarrassing, raunchy sex together in every room of the house, the kind of sex you only see on HBO, the kind of sex you only have with Marxists, because Marxists are the best at sex – he is relevant. He is my relevant other.

This restaurant is fundamentally the same as the other one.

Same sports décor, same "clever" bathroom signs, same piss-poor beer selection, same laminate tables, same menus that double as placemats, same shit, different day. Same server, even, more or less. His hair might be a bit less floppy. His polo might be less stained. He might stink less of cologne and death. He might not be wearing a knockoff Rolex. But then again, he might be all of these things. This is what minimum wage subsistence does to a person. The proletarian revolution is nigh.

It's effectively deserted other than myself, other than the blonde ponytail behind the bar, other than the table of guffawing bros a few booths down, other than the air, which is thick with grease and dead meat. The (probably sexist) bro with the flat-brimmed cap guffaws the loudest at a (probably sexist) joke. I pick individual flakes of skin off the back of my chapped hands and strain to hear their conversation. I manage to intercept something about "running train" on some poor soul before the waiter comes and asks if I'm ready to order. No, I tell him. Sorry, and I excuse myself to go to the bathroom.

After I watched Bryant's car veer off the road into ice and snow and the heads on pikes of trees that are dead for the season in my rearview mirror, my eyes remained locked on the road and I called him and called him and called him and called him to the nearest exit until he finally picked up after not picking up and I don't think I've ever been happier to know someone was alive. My car found its own way to the parking lot

Novelties

(continued)

of the Family Dollar and turned itself off in an act of self-preservation because I didn't have that much gas. I watched cotton ball snowflakes coagulate on the windshield and bury me alive. It might take a few hours to get my car out, Bryant told me. Maybe you should go home and visit me tomorrow. I gave him a strangled cry. It's so unfair, I said melodramatically because I am a child. I'll just wait, I said heroically as if I was the one swallowed by a snow bank. I'll go get something to eat, I said like the martyr I am. Then my phone died.

I am glad it isn't summer because if it was, it would be too hot to wear stockings and I'd be in a skirt and I'd be sweaty and my legs would have glued themselves to the abused leather on the seats. The bros guffaw again. They order more chips and salsa. I imagine they would order another round of beers if they were of age. They turn their attention to the sporting event that is on the television, and they are completely lost to me.

There is no chime to signify the two young women who enter, just shuffling feet and the wind through the door. They sit one booth over, across from each other, so that on one I can see pale blonde hair like my sister's but cascading down this woman's back in loose curls and is colored naturally because her eyelashes are just as pale. She raises one finger, a lengthy finger, a wizard finger, a pianist finger, to signal the waiter for silverware. There's a tattoo on her right wrist, something scrawled. If it says "love" or "infinity" or "Jesus", I probably like her a little less. Her fingernails are stubby and painted a moldy green. Her chin comes to a point, and I momentarily wonder if she has ever used it as a murder weapon. All I can see of the other woman are the dark tufts of her pixie cut that won't lay flat in the back. All I can hear of her is her laugh, and god, is it annoying. It's a cackle. I lose my appetite. The waiter comes back, and I order a grilled cheese without checking if it's on the menu. I stare at my book until my eyes cross and water. I'm not reading. I'm listening. I'm listening to this conversation that I can't repeat because of the deep embarrassment I feel when I realize why the women are there together. They are on a date. They are on a date, but it is clear that only one of them thinks of it that way.

I picked the same table in Mattawan. The one closest to the door. Tethered to the nearest outlet by my phone charger lest Bryant never find out where I am and leave me to die here thus depriving me of the dramatic death, the death with pomp and circumstance and fanfare that I believe I am entitled to. Worthwhile deaths do not occur in small towns off the expressway. I order a chicken BLT even though I'm a vegetarian. Twelve dull-looking adults in weekend clothes are perched at one of the high tables,

drinking and being merry. The booth closest to them serves as a satellite state: the kids' table. There are only four of them. They are all ordering chicken tenders and staring at me because I am alone. I realize with horror that the Rose Bowl is on television. That is why everyone is here. They are here by choice. When my food finally comes, I eat the whole thing in four bites and belch and I imagine the horrible belch stench wafting towards the children and this makes it better, somehow. I guess the game is exciting. I watch the parking lot for a silver Malibu and when it arrives, I breathe again.

This is not an establishment for people with taste. It's an establishment for people who like novelties. People who arrange their lives different than I do. This is why I come here; I can essentially exist in a vacuum. I don't know if these people won't talk to me, or if I just won't let them. I don't know if we speak the same language, or if I just don't want us to.

The dark-haired woman tells jokes. The blonde woman laughs too loudly. Her left hand rests on the table, searching for a companion. The blonde woman lets the other order for her. I'm not really hungry, she says, batting her eyelashes, I'm just happy to be here, she says, a bit too earnestly. I don't know why anyone would be happy to be here. The dark-haired woman excuses herself to go to the bathroom. As she steps away, the blonde woman and I lock eyes for a time too long to lock eyes with someone you don't know. I look away first. I don't want to watch this. I know what's happening. I have been here before.

I bury myself in Bryant's coat outside the pub. He'd told me he loved me the day before. Maybe too soon. As we clutch each other we both know that we will drive slowly and carefully and 40 miles per hour all the way back to Indiana, even if it takes an extra hour, even if it takes an extra year. You smell like France, I tell him, because I miss France, and I missed him, and I'm cold and my wool hat makes my forehead itch and he's here and not dead in a snow bank even though he's from Northwest Pennsylvania and always tells me he is doomed to die in a snow bank the way I am doomed to love a writer and the way two penpals who ignore pressing obligations to write pages and pages about the Civil War are doomed to be too important to each other when they finally meet within a single thread of time and space and brush hands after a drink too many. He asks me what France smells like. I don't know, I tell him. I'm probably just smelling cigarettes on my own coat.



Dogs at Wat Doi Sutep
Jennifer Tarnoff

You go a fariin go bruk out

Divine Crow Award and Stephanie Vibbert Award Winner*†

Dorraine Duncan

(You went abroad and became loose)

A series of poems based on questions I have been asked by friends living in Jamaica, about my experiences in the US.

“You have battyman ¹ as friend now?”

He asks me, blunt and unapologetic.

I remember him; the fire that he set to that Other boy's poetry book, behind the library that burnt brief but bright.
He said his poems weren't Jamaican because man-to man was a white people thing, and he was proud to be black.

I remember the boys' faces when our 82 year old New York City religion teacher told us that homosexuality wasn't a sin.
They told him, they didn't practice that kind of Christianity, and that New York City had corrupted his priestly morals.

I remember their creased khaki pants, black shined school shoes and diamond socks tapping to digital drums and snares.
Ears to the radio they echoed every word, professing; *from them a par in a chi-chi man car, raise the fire let we burn dem.*

¹ Battyman/chi-chi man- the pejorative word for homosexual males

You go a fariin go bruk out

(continued)

I remember boys going to drama ten minutes late, because none of them wanted to be alone with Mr. Williams, who wasn't married, didn't have a girlfriend and sang and danced. They knew why those kinds of men taught 13 year old boys in high school.

I can hear his breath over the phone, he is waiting.

He remembers me too. Standing by. Silent.

“You find white man yet?”

Displays the Facebook chat window

Which brown girl hasn't secretly imagined that forbidden love story as her own?
The one where her white lover, pink with fury defends the sanctity of their love
to his racist parents, and vows that his first son, to them will remain unknown.

Half-white babies have that pretty hair too. It's not thin and stringy nor short and kinky.
Perfectly coiled curls; not tight enough to break combs but tight enough to hold cane-rows.
Our little off-white baby with braids down to her back and anchored by multicolored beads.
But that's just me fantasizing because jungle fever only spreads to black boys and white girls—

the rest of us are immune. We, caramel and cocoa ladies are the lonelies on the back wall
at prom hoping someone asks us to dance while we fix our dresses and play with our pearls.

I guess we all can be a bit intimidating; rolling in packs like wolves with our loud 'ghetto' cries
echoing across the quad. It seems like the fearless white explorer hell-bent on conquest
and capture has met his match; the intrepid, spirited, bronze goddess with smoldering eyes.

The chat window still eager for a response.

“No, I’m not really into white guys.”

“You start twang² now?”

With a LOL and a smiley face attached

'I just wanted to say your English is great, when did you learn?'

I have an accent, don't say pop and spell colour with a “u”

You go a fariin go bruk out
(continued)

so this must be the reason for your observation and concern.
Thanks, I guess, but I learned English the same time as you.

This accent, thick as the hair on my head is stubborn and kinky,
severs word endings at random and is loud for no good reason.
Even when those who hide it try, their tongues and minds disagree,
for to mask this speech is a disloyalty to our country - high treason.

I wave my flag when I talk, every word – black, green and gold.
I articulate my culture, enunciate my heritage and pronounce
our pride, because my difference, is something I won't withhold.
When I say *wata* its water and *gyal* is girl. I never mispronounce.

I speak clear and slow so you can peek under my accent,
understand my words and never ask me what I meant.
3, 5, 10 years abroad and twanging will never get my consent!

I respond with a smiley wearing sunglasses

“No. Never!”

18 Hour Gestation

Woody Tauke

I

I found a dead bat in the attic.
It was crumpled and stuck to fly
paper. It's leathery wings tangled
amongst those of the flies.
Its mouth open, its eyes closed.

Rigor mortis had left the bat stiff,
unnatural. Nothing had eaten it.

Maybe flies don't lay their eggs that close to their own dead.

II

When I was 9 I killed
a fly. I stalked it from room
to room, watching it smash its head
against the windows and walls.

Against the glass
I cupped my hand over it.
Without thinking
I smashed it.
Like a god or a serial killer
I lifted my bony fist to inspect my work.
Maggots crawled from this fly's abdomen.

Hundreds of them yellow
white and undeveloped.

I used a sock to wipe them away.
I threw it in the garbage.

There is still a stain in my living room,
not from the fly,
but from the maggots.

18 Hour Gestation

(continued)

Maggots not born but brought
into this world by the guiltless
cesarean, of a nine year old.

No blood on my hands,
not even puss.

III

My brother and I waited
for the bus and watched a bird
flying in and out of the pipe, our mailbox sits on.

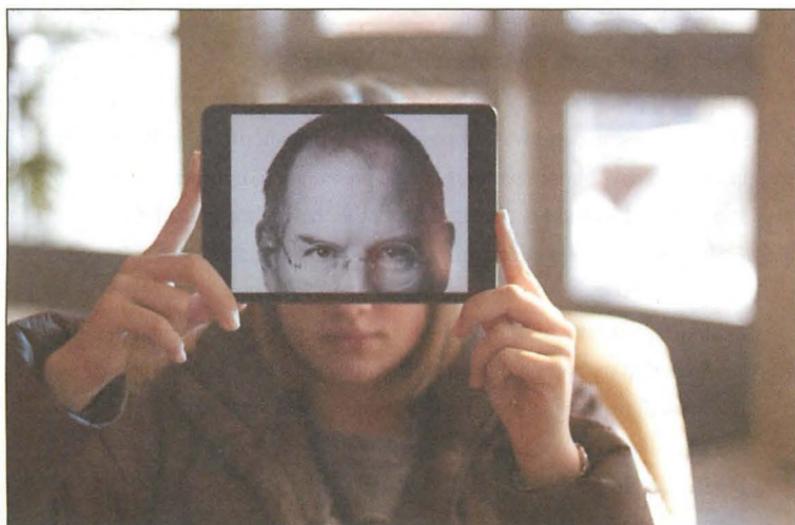
We peered anxiously down the pipe. Like
Cyclops we squinted into the dark at
squirming featherless birds in a bed of sticks.

We felt father to those birds,
whose mother was off on errands.

The next day
we saw it on the ground.
The baby bird flat
from the Mail Truck.
It's eyeless sockets already
dry from the morning sun.

Its broken body writhed
with maggots. Thick maggots. Long and hungry.
We watched their acidic
mouths as they devoured the bird.

I felt ashamed to be missing two teeth
to be akin to these creatures.



Singularity
Duncan Polot

The Old Man of the Lake

Divine Crow Award Winner*

David Landskroener

I glanced over at the girl on the computer next to me. Yep, she was on DeviantArt. Every day during study hall she was on DeviantArt. The only two things I knew about her were that her name was Jasmine and she was an artist. She was very quiet and never interacted with anybody else, and although I had sat next to her every day of the past year in study hall, we had never spoken.

She caught me looking at her computer. I saw a pretty cool picture on the screen of a girl sitting in the shade of a giant mushroom, like *Alice in Wonderland*, except instead of a caterpillar there was a giant penis on top of the mushroom. Jasmine scowled and angled her screen away from me.

“Sorry,” I said awkwardly. “Wasn’t really looking.”

“I hate people,” she said. I nodded and turned back to my work. I was looking over my notes for a presentation I was supposed to give that afternoon on Robin Hood. We were supposed to have chosen partners for the presentation, but there were an odd number of kids in the class and Ms. Terius didn’t bother having me join another group. But whatever. It spared me from interacting with other students, and I was able to choose my own topic.

I couldn’t shake the Alice in Wonderland penis picture from my mind, though, and I was determined to try and do that most herculean of tasks: making a friend.

“Did you draw that picture?” I asked Jasmine.

She glared at me. “Yes. Leave me alone.”

My face reddened.

“Sorry. It’s really good.”

She ignored my compliment. I went back to looking over my notes. The presentation was supposed to be five minutes long. Five minutes too long. Being in front of people, especially the stuck-up overachievers in AP, was a huge fear of mine. But I told myself that once the presentation was over, spring break was all mine and I’d be free. The bell rang and I headed to AP English.

My presentation sucked. I tripped on my way up to the front of the classroom and I dripped sweat all over the podium the whole time. I noticed Ms. Terius looking down and taking notes the whole time, which she hadn’t been doing for the other students.

But like all things, the presentation eventually ended and I finally had that load off my back, and once the bell rang I felt a shudder of temporal relief. I wouldn't have to come back to this purgatory for a week and a half.

We were heading up to Oregon the next morning to camp with my aunt at Crater Lake National Park. I wasn't a huge fan of camping, especially because I always had to share a tent with my brother. He sang in his sleep and wasn't exactly the quietest farter. Plus he was pretty overbearing.

I was bored. My bags were already packed. I could have watched a movie or something or gotten my guitar out, but no one was on the computer, and it was a rare occasion when no one was on the computer. So I sat down, went to DeviantArt, and made an account. I made my username RobinHood12 because that was the username I used for everything and I was obsessed with Robin Hood.

I poked around the site a bit and saw some pretty cool drawings. I found the chat part of the site and scanned the list of chat rooms, but they were all about role-playing games and photography and Creepypasta, so I decided to just go to the main DeviantArt room. I got in there and was fairly amused at the scrolling feed before me. People were talking about *The Hunger Games* and One Direction and Miley Cyrus/Josh Hutcherson slash, stuff I really didn't care about, but I went ahead and tentatively typed, *Hello*.

Instantly I receive a bunch of replies.

hey!

welcome mr robin hood :)

Whats up

Welcome to the chat!

All of those greetings in less than ten seconds. More greetings than I had received in real life in the last two years.

It's good to be here! I typed. I'm new to DeviantArt.

Aww glad you decided to join us!

u need to get some art man

we're all little deviants here.

Hello. Would you like to chat?

This last message came from someone named HimOfNottingham. I was intrigued. Nottingham? That was a buzzword to me.

Sure, HimOfNottingham, I replied.

My inbox began flashing a second later. I went to it and opened his message.

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

Hello. Do you have another form of instant messaging on which we can chat privately? I prefer Skype.

Hmm. Well, why not? I was practically an adult. I could give information out to whoever I wanted, and plus there was no reason to believe this guy was sketchy. And it was only Skype.

I gave him my username and logged in to Skype. The contact request from HimOfNottingham was already there with a message.

Hello, Luke. I hope you are well.

Wait. How did he know my name? My Skype username was the same as my DeviantArt one, RobinHood12, and my name was nowhere on my profile. Was he someone from school messing with me? Everyone always made fun of me about Robin Hood. But maybe he was someone else.

I confirmed the request.

Hello, Luke.

The message popped up instantly. I realized that in basically two minutes I went from logging into the DeviantArt chat room to now messaging on Skype with this total stranger. My parents were extremely adamant about being safe on the Internet, but I was curious and needed to know more about this guy. I wasn't stupid, though, and I knew I had to be careful.

Hi, I replied. What's up?

He responded in a second. *I am just enjoying this beautiful day. What are you doing?*

It was 9 PM here. I wonder where HimOfNottingham lived.

Pretty much just talking to you, I responded. Pretty bored.

I want to be honest with you, Luke. My name is John and I am seventy-six years old. I guarantee you that I am no predator.

Woah. I paused. Seventy-six? That's pretty old. And he can type that fast? The way he talked, something told me he wasn't someone from school playing a joke on me. But who was this guy? I didn't care how old he was. A friend is a friend. Old people are pretty cool and usually harmless. He said he wasn't a predator, which was kind of weird for him to just say right off the bat, but I suppose he was just being truthful, and old people don't really know how to converse that well on the Internet.

Well I'm sixteen, I said.

It is a pleasure meeting you, sixteen-year-old Luke. This appeared literally just as my finger was lifting up from the enter key.

Maybe he was a spambot or something. There was only one way to find out who he really was.

Do you want to video chat quickly? I asked. *Just so I can see your face.*

He didn't reply. It didn't even say he was typing a reply. I waited. Five minutes went by. I sighed. I might as well just go back to DeviantArt and find some other people to talk to. People around my age. I'd just gotten excited seeing Nottingham in his username and thought that maybe we could talk Robin Hood.

I went back to DeviantArt, but the moment I started logging into the chat room the little Skype notification noise went off. I went back to Skype. John had replied.

We can do that.

I stared at the screen, a little nervous. I was about to Skype with a total stranger. An old man. I hoped my parents or my brother wouldn't come downstairs. I hovered the cursor over the video call button, unsure if I wanted to proceed with this. But then I thought about Jasmine at school, and giving that presentation, and the snickering from the class, and traversing that same lonely path through school every day.

I clicked.

Boo boo...boo boo...boo boo... Skype droned on and on. My heart sank. He wasn't going to answer. He was just trolling me. It beeped and beeped. I sighed and moved the mouse to exit out and stop the call.

But just then the Skype beeping stopped and my call was answered. The screen just showed the Skype silhouette, though. His camera wasn't turned on.

"Hello?" I ventured.

"Hello Luke," a light voice replied. "How are you?" It really did sound like an old man, slow and calm. Kind of like Mr. Rogers.

"I'm good. I don't think your cam is turned on, though." He could see me and I couldn't see him. It was a little creepy. I considered turning off my cam.

"Forgive me," he said. "Here we go." His screen swirled for a bit, and then I saw his cam.

The screen showed a blue sky and a wide expanse of water. The camera seemed to be bobbing slightly, like it was on a boat. I was confused.

"Um...hello?" I said.

"Hello, Luke."

He said nothing else. I didn't know what to say.

"Yeah, uh, your cam isn't...I can't see you."

"I can see you and I can see myself," John said. "Are you sure the problem is not on your end?"

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

"I'm pretty sure it's not," I said. "I see me, but then on your cam I see like the ocean or a lake or something."

"Very interesting," he said. "Is it odd that you see this?"

I didn't know what to make of that. "Um...yeah, kind of. Are you on a boat somewhere or something?"

"No," he said. "I am not on a boat."

"Well...I don't know, I just can't see you." I squinted and made out a faint line in the distance on his cam. It was pretty high up, like there was a cliff or something against the water.

"I am sorry that you are having problems," said John.

I ended the video call. It was a little too weird for me, for him to be able to see me and me not being able to see him...and what was that on his cam? Where was he? A message from John quickly appeared.

Do you no longer wish to talk to me, Luke?

I thought for a minute. We didn't really know anything about each other. Maybe we could talk for a little bit longer, and I could see what the Nottingham in his username meant.

Yes, I said, but I just feel uncomfortable because I don't know who you are.

You can discover who I am. Ask me anything.

Ask him anything? There was one burning question on my mind.

How do you know my name?

Again, it was amazing how fast he responded. It wasn't even two seconds.

I am a moderator of the chat room. I see the email address of everyone in there.

I was confused for a moment, but then I thought about it. If you Googled my email address you'd find my name. This made a little more sense.

Oh, I see, I said.

Do you trust me now?

Did I?

I think so, I said.

Good. :-)

That emoticon looked weird, like out of place amongst his stilted and formal language. Did I really trust this guy? Well obviously, not completely. But if he was a moderator of the DeviantArt chat room, he had to be at least kind of legit. His username, though, HimOfNottingham...why that name? Did he like Robin Hood?

So...what does your username mean? I asked him.

I am him of Nottingham.

Very helpful.

What does that mean? I asked.

I am him of Nottingham.

You know what, ugh. Whatever.

Do you like Robin Hood? I asked.

No.

I felt disappointed. Great. So much for sharing a mutual love.

I like Robin Hood a lot, I said.

He didn't reply. I waited. I suddenly noticed that he had gone offline.

Hello?

Are you there?

John?

Hello?

?

No reply. He was gone. The door to the basement opened and my brother came downstairs.

"Hey, time for me to use the computer," he said. "If that's okay."

He always said that, "If that's okay." Usually it wasn't okay, but there was nothing I could ever do about it.

"Yeah, fine," I said. I logged out of Skype and DeviantArt.

"Ha, DeviantArt," Mark sneered.

"Yeah," I said. "Is that a problem?"

"Nah, I figured you'd be the type," he said. "And I mean, you don't really have anything else to do. You gotta make friends somewhere."

I hated it when he pulled that card on me. He had a nice large group of friends. I decided not to say anything.

"Who were you Skyping?" he asked.

"No one," I said.

"I heard you talking. Who were you Skyping?"

"No one. I don't have any friends. You know that."

"You're such a liar. You were Skyping someone. Was it someone you met on DeviantArt? I bet it was. You're gonna get murdered."

"No," I said. "Leave me alone." He smirked as I went to my room. I lay on my bed thinking about what had just happened with John. It was pretty strange. I was sad he

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

had disappeared, but he probably wasn't even real. Whatever, I had tried to make a friend and it failed, yet again.

I played Temple Run on my phone until I fell asleep.

I woke up at a quarter to one to a sharp beep from my phone. I had a new text, which was basically a pop-the-cork occasion. It was from an unknown number.

Hello, Luke. I hope you are well.

John. How did he find my number? Creepy. It was him, I assumed. But to make sure, I texted back and asked. I got a reply a second after I sent my message and my suspicions were confirmed.

I am John, Luke. I acquired your phone number from your Skype profile.

I forgot that I had put my number on Skype. It's a sad world. When we're alone and provide the world with every available mode of communication to us, no one ever contacts us. And yet popular people don't even need a Facebook to be popular.

But John had contacted me. I texted him back.

Oh cool. I didn't know what else to say.

I apologize for leaving you so abruptly on Skype. Matters arose.

At least he wasn't mad. I didn't know why he would be mad, so I was glad to hear it was other circumstances that forced him to leave.

It's okay. I just thought maybe you weren't real.

I am real. :-)

The smiley emoticon again. Something about it was off. I turned on the light next to my bed.

So where do you live? I asked him.

In my home.

Ugh, obviously.

And where is that?

Here.

Why was this guy so cryptic? Whatever. He probably just lived in like a really small town somewhere and didn't want me to have a way to find him. Like I would have even tried to do that.

Okay...so what do you want to talk about? I asked.

What are your interests, Luke?

This is how friends are made, right? Sharing interests.

I like movies, and I listen to music and play guitar, and I read, and I love Robin Hood.

Like, it's an obsession.

He didn't reply instantaneously this time. After a couple of minutes, I plugged my phone into the charger. I waited. Finally, right as I was just about to fall asleep, I got a text.

I love Robin Hood as well.

Really? I thought he said on Skype that he didn't like Robin Hood.

That's cool. I thought maybe you didn't because of what you said on Skype.

I misinterpreted your question. I love Robin Hood.

Hmm.

What's your favorite Robin Hood movie? I asked.

Robin Hood, John replied.

Which one I said? Russell Crowe? Disney? Men in Tights?

All of them.

Yeah, well, not all Robin Hood movies were good. But he was entitled to his tastes.

I love the 1938 version with Errol Flynn, I said.

I love Errol Flynn and I love Robin Hood.

And the conversation went on and on, both of us asking each other random questions. We texted for literally five more hours until Mom came to wake me up.

"Why are you awake?" she said.

"Oh, I was just watching a movie on my phone. I couldn't sleep. I can sleep in the car."

"We're leaving at 6:30. Be ready." She left.

It was eight hours from Modesto up to Crater Lake. I was trapped in the backseat with Mark, who fell asleep as soon as we pulled out of the driveway. I put on the *Prince of Thieves* soundtrack and continued to text John. In my world, I was telling a seventy-six year old man about my life and my family and my hobbies and my spring break plans. In my parents' world, I was just playing a game on my phone.

I think what intrigued me most about John was his identity. Who was he really? Every time I asked him a question about himself, he would give a generic answer or say something kind of bizarre. When I asked him what his favorite kind of breakfast food was, he said, I eat what is edible. When I asked him if he was married, he said, I am married to the law. When I asked him what he used to do for a living, he said, I am still employed. He just seemed like a crazy old guy. Although it was so weird how fast he replied. I'd send a text and receive a reply in less than a second. At least I didn't get bored waiting for a response.

A couple of hours later, Mark woke up and had to use the bathroom. "If that's okay," he said. We got off at the next exit and stopped at a gas station. Mark and my mom

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

went inside while my dad pumped gas, and I got out and stretched for a little bit. When I got back into the car, I checked my phone.

Why did you stop?

John's text jolted me.

What do you mean? I asked.

Why did you stop texting me? You have not replied for two minutes.

For a second I thought that he was like maybe stalking me and asking why we stopped the car.

We're getting gas, I said. I had to stretch.

I am glad you are still here.

Mark and Mom came back.

"Who are you texting?" Mark asked.

"Um, no one," I said.

"Oh really? You've been texting since I woke up."

"Texting?" Mom said. "He's been on his phone all morning playing a game..."

Luke, were you playing a game or texting someone?"

I didn't get why they were jumping all over me.

"I wasn't texting anyone," I said. Mark grabbed the phone out of my hand. I tried to get it back, but he turned his back to me and held it down in his lap.

"Luke, who is this guy? Little John? WTF?"

I had put John in my phone as Little John. Yeah, the whole Robin Hood obsession.

"No one," I said. "Give me my phone back!"

"Is he the guy you were you talking to on Skype last night? Is he from DeviantArt?"

"No!" I said. "He's no one. Just a friend."

"You're talking to strange people online and giving them your phone number?"

Mom said incredulously.

"Geez... Mom, they've exchanged hundreds of texts...and they go back to like midnight! They've only been texting for like ten hours."

"Mom, no!" I protested. Damn this family.

"Luke, I think I should take your phone," Mom said. Mark handed it to her.

"Why?" I said.

"Because you pulled a very dangerous stunt. People get killed meeting people on the Internet. I saw a movie about it once."

Dad got in the car.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Mom began scrolling through the texts. "Luke, who is this person?" She read

a text I had sent him. “We’re going to camp at Crater Lake with my aunt for a couple of days.’ Why did you tell him that?”

“He’s just a friend—”

“I don’t even recognize this area code,” Mom said. She turned to Dad. “Matthew, Luke’s been texting this stranger he met online... Little John? Is that code, Luke?”

“Like from Robin Hood,” I muttered.

“Luke, do you know how dangerous that is?” my dad said.

“No, he’s not a stranger, he’s—”

“Then how do you know him?” Mom asked. “And have you really only been texting him since midnight?”

“He’s... my friend Jasmine’s cousin. He came with her to school yesterday and I met him.”

“Your friend Jasmine,” Mark snorted. “You don’t have any friends.”

“John’s my friend,” I said. “And is that why this is a big deal? Because you don’t think I have any friends and so any time I text is suspicious? I’m allowed to text.”

“Explain this, please,” Mom said, reading from my phone. “‘I am John, Luke. I acquired your phone number from your Skype profile.’ Please don’t lie to us.”

I was defeated.

“Okay... yes, I met John online. And I know how dangerous that is. But he’s not dangerous or anything—we Skyped and—”

“You Skyped?” Dad said. “When did you meet him?”

“Um...”

“Don’t lie.”

“Last night.”

Dad exhaled loudly. “Son.”

“And you told him all about us, where we’re going... you may as well just have given him our address and garage door code,” Mom said.

“Fine. Take my phone. I’ll stop.” I was so embarrassed. I just wanted this ordeal to be over.

“I’m taking your phone,” Mom said. “I’ll have to think this over. Please don’t lie to me again. And don’t talk to strangers online, or Skype them, or give them your cell phone number. Let’s just hope to God that he doesn’t show up at our campsite.”

“Alright. I’m sorry,” I said.

Mom put my phone in her purse and Dad pulled out of the gas station. We got back on the highway and continued on our way. Lonely and miserable, I fell asleep.

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

We probably stopped for a couple more gas or bathroom breaks, but I was asleep the whole time. I didn't wake up until we arrived at the campground. No one had bothered to wake me up while we were driving, and now I really had to pee. And I was starving. I saw Subway cups in the cup holders and could sniff bread in the air.

"Thanks for saving me some," I said sourly. Mom handed a sandwich back to me.

"There you go, Mr. Smart Aleck."

I hungrily tore into my sandwich while Dad got out to confirm our reservation and get a map of the campground.

"Where's Aunt Libby?" Mark asked.

"She called and said she won't be here until around 4:30," Mom said.

Dad got back in the car and we drove off down a gravel road until we got to our campsite. We all got out and started unpacking everything. While Dad and Mark started setting up one of the tents, I walked a little ways into the trees, breathing in the fresh piney air. I was still kind of annoyed and uncomfortable with the fact that my family had found out about John, but I tried to push it out of my mind. I unzipped and peed behind a tree. It was beautiful here. The sky was blue, the air was cool and clean, little red birds chirped and hopped around in the pine boughs. I'm glad I was wearing a hoodie, because the temperature was barely scraping fifty. Mom had said it was going to be fairly cold. I finished peeing, zipped up, and continued walking into the trees.

The trees started to thin out, and soon I came out onto the top of a cliff. I was pretty high up, and below me was the lake. I had never been to Crater Lake, and the view astonished me. The lake was like quartz, brushed with the tiniest bit of swelling, and I made out the pencil line of a wake behind a boat. There was a cone-shaped island off to my left, and in the distance I could faintly see a few snowcapped peaks. I also noticed a little white speck bobbing in the water near our side of the lake.

"I love this place."

Mom stood next to me. She breathed in deeply. "Your Dad and I camped here while we were pregnant with Mark. So beautiful."

We stood there silently. The wind blew a little stronger and I put on my hood.

"Luke." I turned to Mom. She held my phone in her hand. "What you did was stupid. But we all make mistakes. Just please don't text this guy again."

"Thanks Mom," I said, taking the phone and pocketing it. "I'm sorry."

"We should go back to the campsite. They're probably done already setting up the tents."

We headed back to the campsite. There was now another car parked there, and I saw Dad, Mark, and Aunt Libby sitting and talking in a circle of folding lawn chairs.

Aunt Libby got up when we approached.

"Hi Luke!" she said, giving me a hug.

"Hey," I said.

"Got your Maid Marian yet?" she asked with a grin on her face.

"Not yet," I said.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find her soon enough. You're a handsome young man."

She was an aunt, alright.

"I was thinking we could go on a boat tour," Dad said.

"They're doing those in April?" Aunt Libby asked.

"Apparently it's been a warm winter, and there's no ice on the lake."

"Huh," Aunt Libby said.

"The last one's at 5:15, and we could make it if we start heading over there now," Dad said.

"Hold on," I said. "I need to get something out of the car." I opened the door and ducked down to check my phone. I had two new texts, both short, both from John.

I hope you still want to be my friend.

Enjoy your visit.

I started to text him back, but then I noticed there wasn't any service out here. I sighed and slammed the door shut, putting my phone in my pocket. I joined the others and we began walking.

"This is Wizard Island," our guide, Shanna, said, turning off the motor and letting the boat rock gently in the water. "It was created approximately 8,000 years ago, when Mount Mazama erupted violently in this very same location and left behind a volcanic cinder cone."

Wizard Island. I looked up at the steep conic incline and thought about Hagrid coming to that island out at sea to tell Harry he's a wizard. It was getting colder, and I shivered through the thin cotton of my hoodie. Everybody else was in their winter coats, but I had forgotten mine back at the campsite.

Shanna restarted the boat and we began gliding through the water again.

"There are no indigenous fish in the lake," Shanna said loudly over the motor, "but sockeye salmon and rainbow trout were introduced in the first part of the twentieth century. Unlicensed fishing is allowed, but only May through—oh!" She abruptly killed the motor. Next to us in the water was what looked like a white tree trunk bobbing vertically.

"Sorry, folks. I always forget about this guy. This is the Old Man of the Lake.

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

He's an old tree who's been here at least since the 1880s."

Aunt Libby took a picture. Shanna continued:

"If you stack the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty, and Washington Monument beneath the Old Man, you still wouldn't reach the lake's deepest point. It's the deepest lake in the United States and the ninth deepest in the world."

I looked down into the clear waters of the lake. The trunk went down and down. I couldn't see where it ended. It felt strange to be in this tiny boat with so much water beneath us.

"The part of the Old Man above water is bleached white from being exposed to the elements. Despite his age, he can support the weight of a man."

"What makes it stay upright?" Aunt Libby asked.

"No one knows for certain," Shanna said. "The popular theory is that when he fell into the lake, rocks were caught in its roots, and when the rocks eventually dislodged, the bottom of the trunk was so waterlogged that the tree remained vertical. But no one really knows. He travels around, though, and boats have to be careful."

"What kind of tree is it?" Dad asked.

"There's no official way to determine because he's so old and weathered, but most scientists think he's a hemlock."

My phone went off. Someone was calling me.

"Oops...sorry," I said, trying to get it out of my pocket. Mark took out his phone and looked at it.

"Man, how do you get reception out here? I don't have any," he said.

"I don't know," I said. I finally got my phone out and saw who was calling me.

It was John.

Everyone in the boat was staring at me.

"Oh, oops, it's just an alarm I set," I said, silencing my phone and putting it back in my pocket. How could I have been getting a call? I took my phone out again and looked at it. It said I had a new voicemail, but there were no bars and it said it was searching for a signal. And yet somehow I had gotten a call. Weird. Maybe it had just been a weird bubble of connectivity or something.

Shanna started the motor. "Alright, we're going to leisurely start making our way back to the dock now."

After the tour, we went back to the campsite. Dad grilled hotdogs and Mom and Aunt Libby mixed hot chocolate in a big thermos. I wandered around the campsite with my phone, holding it up and trying to get reception. It was getting dark. I drifted

into the woods and walked towards the lake. As soon as I broke out of the tree line, I got a bar of reception. I quickly called voicemail and entered my password. I had a weird feeling in my stomach as I waited to hear John's message.

The message started. I heard a faint garbled voice that sounded almost female, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. There was a sound like an engine starting, and it slowly faded away. Then there was mostly silence, pervaded by a soft swishing sound, like waves. This went on for a full minute, and I was about to hang up. Then I heard John's voice.

"Do not leave me, Luke. Why did you leave me? Why did you ignore me? Are we not friends? I hope we are still friends, Luke. I will contact you again at 12:47 AM tomorrow morning. Your time."

The message ended. I looked down at my phone, and it said it had no service. I had no way to text John. I gazed out over the lake at the sunset, thinking. I searched for the Old Man of the Lake and saw him below, a faint white speck in the now dark water. John was going to contact me again? Call me? How? And 12:47 was such an odd time, but it sounded so familiar to me. I felt like I had just seen those numbers.

I made my way back to the campsite. Dad was bringing the hotdogs over to the picnic table, which was already set for dinner.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"Just looking at the sunset," I said. Mark looked at the phone still clutched in my hand.

"Can I say something? If that's okay," he added. Without waiting for a response, he said, "I think he was texting that Little John guy."

"No, I wasn't," I said. "There's no reception out here."

"Well, someone called you earlier."

"It was an alarm," I said.

"Okay guys," Mom said. "I trust Luke now. He knows not to talk to John anymore. You weren't talking to him, right, Luke?"

"No," I said. "I was just looking at the beautiful sunset over the lake."

"Okay, good," she said. "Let's eat."

"I know the difference between your ringtone and your alarm tone," Mark said quietly to me.

"I changed tones," I said, glaring at him.

"Well, it's your own fault when this guy comes and rapes you," he sneered.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed a hotdog.

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

After dinner, we played rummy for a bit. Aunt Libby won every game, like she always did.

"I'm the rummy queen," she said afterwards, throwing her cards down on the picnic table. No one denied her that status.

We were all pretty tired and decided to turn in for the night. Mark and I shared one tent, while Mom, Dad, and Aunt Libby were in the other. It was really cold, so we were all wearing three layers of clothing, but even that was almost not enough.

I lay in my sleeping bag, thinking. Mark had fallen asleep instantly, and once in a while he would quietly sing some weird little ditty in his sleep. I was really tired, but the combination of Mark's singing and the anticipation of John's contact kept me awake. My phone battery was almost dead, so I changed the brightness settings to the dimmest possible and put it on silent.

I fell asleep without knowing it. At exactly 12:47 my phone went off, but obviously I didn't hear it because it was on silent.

I did hear a little bit later, however, a loud fart. It startled me awake, and I forgot where I was for a second. Then I saw Mark shift in his sleep and I became fully awake and remembered John. I quickly grabbed my phone and saw that he had called a half hour ago. He had left me a text message.

Please call me, Luke.

I tried calling him, but I had no service. I got up and quietly opened the tent and slipped outside. I walked through the woods toward the cliff top, where I had had reception earlier that day. The woods were quiet, and I was feeling a little nervous and hoped that there weren't any bears or wolverines around. When I emerged from the trees, I got a bar of service. I looked out over the silent dark lake before me, which was illuminated only faintly by a faint sliver of moon. I dialed John and put the phone to my ear.

I heard the distant ringing of a phone. My heart jumped. It was another camper's phone. It had to be. But the ringing seemed to be coming from...the lake. I looked down at the black waters. The phone stopped ringing and I heard static in my ear, and then someone took a breath. I heard the calm, measured voice of John.

"Hello, Luke."

"Hi," I said.

"How are you, Luke?"

"Good," I said. "But my phone's low on battery, so what do you want?"

"Come to the water, Luke."

"The water? Are you here at the lake?" I was a little scared now.

"Come to the water, Luke."

He hung up. I didn't know what to do. It was dark. The path down to the lake was at least half a mile long.

But as much as I was scared, I was also intrigued. If John was here, why was he here? What did he want? Did he live here? Maybe he was a ranger or something. Maybe he just wanted a friend.

I went back to the campsite and grabbed a large metal heavy-duty flashlight, which I could use as a weapon if the need arose. I made sure to be a ways down the road before I turned on the flashlight, so as to not attract the attention of my family. I made sure my phone was on vibrate. Everything was still. There were no birds, no rustling in the trees.

I arrived at the bottom of the crater at the lake access point. I stepped onto the long dock and walked out to the edge. Everything was dark. I pointed my flashlight. The water reflected the flashlight beam back towards me. There was nothing out there.

And then I saw something moving. Something small and white was slowly gliding towards the shore. I squinted. What was it? As it got closer, I began to grasp an idea of what it could be. Weird. How and why was it moving?

My phone vibrated. I looked at the screen.

It was John.

I put the phone to my ear.

"Hello, Luke."

"Hey." I made sure my voice sounded strong and carefree.

"Can you swim, Luke?"

"Yes. I can swim."

"Swim, Luke. Get in the water and swim."

What?

"Yeah, no. Sorry."

So whatever that white thing was out in the water... was it John? Or was it the Old Man of the Lake? Where was John?

"Please, Luke."

"No."

"Luke, please do not force me to beg."

"Where are you? Who are you?" I backed a little bit away from the edge of the

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

dock. I had a vision of tentacles flying out of the water and dragging me in. It was stupid, but I was unnerved.

"Luke, come."

"No."

"Luke, come." This time, he sounded angry. His light demeanor was gone.

"Sorry, John. I'm going. Bye." I hung up. The white object was still there. It was bobbing. Bobbing. Bobbing. Bobbing like John's camera on Skype. I remembered seeing a body of water and a high cliff or something in the distance on his cam.

Crater Lake.

But it had been night when I talked to John on Skype, and his cam had shown a blue sky and bright day, wherever he was.

My phone vibrated. I didn't know what to do. I shouldn't have gone on DeviantArt. I didn't answer my phone. It stopped vibrating.

"Luke." The voice floated across the water. It was light and purposeful.

It was John.

I was silent.

"Luke."

This time it was his angry voice.

"What?" I asked. "What do you want?"

"You."

I couldn't believe I had only met John the night before. The Robin Hood presentation felt like ages ago.

12:47.

1247.

The year Robin Hood had died, according to Thomas Gale, the seventeenth century Dean of York. One of the most trusted sources on Robin Hood, and I had used him for my presentation. Did this matchup of numbers mean anything?

"Why do you want me?" I asked.

"Do you not want a friend?"

A friend. I wanted friends, but I wanted them my own age, I realized. I wanted them at school, where I could be less lonely. I didn't want John to be my friend

"I will be your friend, Luke. Come."

The Old Man of the Lake. The bobbing thing. The camera's perspective. That's what it was. Was John the Old Man of the Lake? Somehow?

"What happens if I come to you?" I asked.

"You will be the merriest of men if you come to me. We will be friends."

The merriest of men. I wanted to turn and go back to the campsite, but the mystery of John's identity would remain, and perhaps go unsolved. Who knows when or if I would ever return to Crater Lake?

"You come to the shore," I said.

There was a moment of silence. And then he spoke.

"I will meet you at the end of the dock."

The white thing in the water began moving closer. I tentatively began making my way towards the end of the dock, clutching the flashlight tight with two hands.

Yes, it was the Old Man of the Lake. It bobbed there, alone and quiet. There was no voice of John.

"Hello?" I said.

There was no reply. Everything was silent except the sound of the waves brushing against the dock and the Old Man. I was slightly bewildered. I turned to leave. Maybe this was all a joke. Someone had a megaphone somewhere nearby.

Something knocked against the end of the dock. I turned and saw the Old Man there, gently nudging the dock.

"John?" I said, going to the end of the dock and looking down at the tree trunk. It was only a foot away from me.

No response. The Old Man continued to bob against the dock.

"I'm going," I said. "I've had enough of your trolling me."

I turned once again to leave.

Thud. The Old Man of the Lake rammed into the dock. The dock shuddered and I lost my balance and fell backwards, the flashlight slipping out of my hands as I fell towards the water...

...and landed on something hard.

I remember our guide had said that the Old Man of the Lake could support the weight of a man, and it was true. I cautiously tried to stand up and pull myself up onto the dock, but the tree began moving away from the shore. I almost lost my balance again and got back into a crouching position, holding on as the Old Man swished through the water towards the middle of the lake. I was absolutely terrified. It was freezing out here, and I tried not to think about how deep the lake actually was and what could be living in it, natural or supernatural.

And then the tree stopped. It bobbed there, far out in the lake. The moon had disappeared behind some clouds and I couldn't see anything. All I heard was the gentle whisper of waves.

"Let me go," I said loudly. My voice seemed to intrude in the sterile stillness.

The Old Man of the Lake

(continued)

The tree buckled and I lost my balance. I fell into the water, limbs thrashing. I grabbed desperately with my hands.

I found a small nub on the tree to hold on to, and I wrapped my arms and legs around the trunk.

"Oh God oh God oh God," I murmured frantically to myself. "John? John? Please. Let me go."

I slowly found myself sliding down the trunk. I tried to scabble back up it, but it was like some invisible hand was forcing me down, into the water. I tried to break away from the tree, but my arms and legs wouldn't relinquish their grip on it. I couldn't stop myself. I slid down into the cold, dark water, my arms and legs wrapped around the trunk, sliding over knots and stunted branches. I felt myself getting dizzy, and I knew I'd have to open my mouth soon. It was freezing, and I could feel the water pushing on me, compressing me. I was just about out of oxygen. I closed my eyes and readied my mouth for inhalation. This was it. John, whoever he or it was, was some spirit or creature of malevolence. I remember being scared by an X-Files episode when I was a kid, about a monster in a lake. That memory must have been a premonition.

This was my end. The instinct to breathe ripped open my mouth.

Oxygen rushed in. I opened my eyes and gasped.

I wasn't in water anymore. I was strapped to a tree in a forest. The trees around me were in strict symmetrical rows, each one tall and thin and topped with the same perfect pyramid of black foliage. The sky was a pure, glowing white.

"Welcome, Luke."

John's voice was coming from directly behind the tree I was strapped to, slithering into my ears. His voice sounded different, low and dark and feminine.

"What is this?" I said, still gulping in air.

"How are you?"

"Let me see you," I said angrily. "Explain this all to me."

"There is nothing to explain."

"No, there is everything to explain," I said, struggling and trying to break free from the tree. There were no visible bonds, but I couldn't move. "Who are you?"

"Look around you, see the price of your sin."

I looked at the trees around me. Each one had a figure bound to it. I squinted at a nearby tree. Was that...? No way. But I'd know Errol Flynn's face anywhere. This person looked exactly like him. But why was he here?

Whoever it was, he was wrong. Everything about him was off. His skin was white and his eyes were black, and he was motionless. All of the people—figures,

creatures, whatever they were—were the same. Women and men, young and old, different sizes—all white skin and black eyes.

“What is this?” I managed to breathe.

“The price of your sin.”

“Who are you?” My eyes were filling up with tears.

John came out from behind my tree and stood in front of me. I couldn't blink or look away.

“You may call me Sheriff now,” John said, dragging a claw down my face and leaving a line of blood. “Welcome to Nottingham.”

The sky pulsed with a blinding whiteness.



Untitled
Jordan Meiller

Some Modern Definitions of Obscure English Words

Jordan Meiller

Abulia (n) – an inability to make decisions;
a belief that others know better; an attempt not to
contribute to familial incoherence, which usually backfires

Decantate (v) – to chant repeatedly; to argue

Exodist (n) – one who goes out; one who seeks
freedom; anyone in this house

Gastrolith (n) – a stone ingested by an animal to aid in digestion;
a hard, heavy object used to keep things down, keep things
in, keep silent; a gravitational oppression, stronger than
Jupiter, that could keep the Universe a secret

Koniscope (n) – an instrument for measuring the amount of dust in the air;
any long-unused object, such as a chessboard, book, or record player

Mutic (adj) – lacking normal defensive parts or organs;
naïve; child-like; something you once were that is now unattainable

Oakum (n pl) – old untwisted ropes used for caulking the seams of ship;
pleasant memories of a past we may never have had

Querent (n) – one who asks a question; a spy; an aggressor; a spark
to rags of knotted emotion soaked in vinegar, but
still easily combustible

Tombola (n) – a lottery in which each entrant must win a prize (which is more
unfair than it sounds)

Verbigeration (n) – morbid and purposeless repetition of certain
words (see also: decantate)

Xenomancy (n) – divination using strangers; divination the only way
you can

Zendik (n) – heretic; magician; son; brother; poet

Last Spring

Madeline Weisner

This is what our days are like—
broken washer, backdoor unlocked,
windows open. Wind chimes. On Saturday
all four of us are asleep at noon, with
bedroom doors ajar.

Music plays.

Tonight we'll drink, talk to strangers,
quarrel with friends.

We'll try not to cry.

We're content here together, but we won't stay long.

At least we don't work so hard that we
don't have time to love each other;
we do.



On Top of the World

Alexandra Smith

2014
KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

