the
noise
and
heat
of
being

issue 63
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from the editor

I guess the trouble started—as all of the best troubles do—while reading. In his novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo delivers a contemporary world terrified of death and mired in a sort of suburban sameness. But that isn't what scared me. What I saw instead, what the *Colonnades* staff came to see, was what he called “the noise and heat of being,” the artful or artless living we undertake every day. It sounds like a passive story. It sounds like a story that happens with or without us, and yet we still want to disagree with Shakespeare when he calls life a story “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” So where are we, then? How can we talk about living in a contemporary world?

Thankfully, some of the answers came—as all of the best answers do—while reading. Here’s where we found them. You’re holding them. These works—quite simply the best student prose, poetry, and art—gave us a lens through which to view our quiet and desperate struggles today. And it is such a comfort. What is the noise and heat of being? It is a lurking sense of “Unease,” as Lina Patton shows us in her aptly named poem—“a distant sound of breaking.” It is in the fears of Katie Whittaker’s “On Vulnerability,” never knowing how much of ourselves we can bare to others, how much we should. It is the lonely math teacher, problematizing his life to figure all of it out, whom we meet in Jay Light’s “Word Problems.” And the silver lining? We’re still here. Despite it all, we are still capable of wild yelps and fantastic temperatures. Which is a hell of a victory.

It is truly my honor and my greatest pleasure to present this edition of *Colonnades: The Art and Literary Journal of Elon University*. I have so much faith in this art, these stories, essays, and poems. I love all of it. This is art to embrace and confront the modern world; let’s not be scared of that. Let’s cheer it on. I hope this volume can share with you something like answers, can articulate in some small way what this work is that we call being. I would like to thank my editors, some of the finest humans, diligent and professional, who are sure to go on to great things. A big thanks to Drew Perry and Tita Ramirez, who are more than just our advisors and certainly more dear. Thanks to our beautiful and enthusiastic staff readers, who make this publication possible. And finally, thank you. Thank you for picking up this book. Thank you for all of your noise, all of your heat. Thank you for being.

cody greene
I am judging this contest from a small house in Florida where I have been given a grant to write. This means that I have been thinking a lot about writing, specifically why we write, and what we should do with the privilege we have of being able to alter and capture fragments of our experience. It’s a potent gift.

Reading this magazine, I was reminded of something that I feel is at the core of my questions. I felt so much pleasure reading through this work because it frequently surprised me. I found myself drawn back into myself, wondering at a strange phrase or curious juxtaposition. We write to make the world new again, or maybe more accurately, to wake the reader up to just how odd the world consistently is.

This work has done that for me, and I know no higher compliment.

In these pages, I found imagination, unusual imagery, tenderness, confusion, awe, and spirit. In other words, I saw the complexity of being alive. I saw in many of the pieces the wonderful ability of a writer to marvel at things larger and stranger than she could ever understand. And really—what more can we ask of art?

Of course, it was difficult to choose winners, but that is the end result of contests. So, on to the winners of this year’s magazine awards in literature.

I was startled to come across the story “Rabbit,” one of the most striking pieces of student fiction I’ve read in a long time. Here, an odd premise (a taxidermist sacrificing rabbits to stave off a bad spirit) weaves with biblical ideas and superstition. In a very strange and deeply original way, this story reminds us that we are living with belief as our guide—and that it might not be as foolproof as we imagine. What a gracious ending this story has, too. It is so very difficult to end fiction well.

The poetry winner, “By This Time Tomorrow I Will Have Cannibalized...”
My Left Arm At Least,” reminds us that language can be at its most powerful when it’s at its most playful. Though the poem does descend into less playful territory by its close, I felt its heat and strength came from the assertive, plucky voice evident throughout. This poet’s voice jumped out and waved its arms, not content to lie still on the page. It yearned to boogie. I appreciate that. I love that.

“Hambun Nihonjin / Half-Japanese” will take the prize in nonfiction. Nonfiction often relies more heavily on perception and thought than its more plot-driven neighbor (fiction). “Hambun Nihonjin” had a searching tone that matched, elegantly, the project of the piece: a young person wrestling with an unclear identity. The writer has a wonderful eye for detail and sound. Her sentences, too, sparkled with precision.

It brings me a lot of joy to see writers working at a young age with such intensity and seriousness. I wish all of them a long, rich future. The world is a wild place. There is always something to say about it, as well as a new way to say it. Just remember to look out for the thing that makes you turn your head, the experience that brings anger or confusion: there is a gem in it, most likely. I’ll leave you with some good words by the writer Richard Ford, words which many of you writers already innately understand: “Find what causes a commotion in your heart. Find a way to write about that.”

Robin Romm is the author of two books and a chapbook, as well as numerous articles and book reviews. Her story collection, The Mother Garden, was a finalist for the PEN Center USA prize. Her memoir, The Mercy Papers, was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, a New York Times Editor’s Choice, a San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year, and named one of the ten best nonfiction books of the year by Entertainment Weekly. Her writing has appeared in many magazines and newspapers, including The New York Times, The UK Observer, O Magazine, Slate, Salon, and The Atlantic. She lives in Portland, Oregon and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Warren Wilson.
We live in an age of pervasive digital imagery and second-hand experience. So much of our experience and understanding of the world, of our knowledge and interactions in it, rely upon the virtual. Perhaps this explains why I chose a drawing for first place, to emphasize the significance of mark-making as a primary experience with the body and eye. But before this begins to sound like a Luddite polemic, let us remember that it is not possible to live in a constant state of primary experience. Man has always relied upon other means, from writing to printing to photography, to know the world he inhabits. Artists, too, have always used such means to enhance what they see in the world in which we live, to communicate something of the experience of our relationship with this world and pass it on to others.

It may come as no surprise, then, that I chose the drawing Bipolar for the first prize. I did this not because the drawing is beyond compare, but for what it represents and what that representation can mean. Bipolar refers not just, perhaps, to the condition of the artist, but can represent all of us. “I was of three minds,” Wallace Stevens wrote in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” and we all are. We all carry within us dichotomies and contradictions, but it is really their melding which defines us, and this drawing is a metaphor of this process. We are in many ways the sum of our contradictions.

Many of the other works also show alternate avenues of thought—the landscape Rusted Air with its prophetic warnings; Celandines as an intimate, almost vintage view of a landscape now long disappeared. Both carry profound meaning in our climate-changing world.

Consider also the discussion of the “other” so relevant in our suspicious society, as prompted in Curiosity, with the stare of the young girl at the photographer. Who is really the other here? What are the cultural implications
of objectifying the young girl?

Each of these artists is at the focal point of experience in their work. Some are more distanced from it because of the technologies used, while others instantiate their presence and the work through the directness of the process. A drawing is very direct as a physical experience—its physical presence acts as a record of that experience, while the digital photograph is in many ways a form of found object, chosen in much the same way Duchamp chose the found objects he saw and then displayed as art. What is important to remember is the necessity of a transformative process to provide meaning. Poets lift words up to another level of experience, and visual artists do something similar. The best of the works shown here accomplish this transformation. Assigning prominence to a singular image and idea from all the works in this journal was difficult. No doubt there will be many who will question my choice or even the rationale, but in the end this may be the best outcome, as critical discussion gets us thinking and looking beyond our preconceptions. These works show how ideas and images can transform our understanding and experience of the world. It is, after all, ideas that are ultimately at stake in the world. Ideas pique, sometimes even anger, but it is through this process we better comprehend the world around us. I leave that discussion for the artists and readers to take up.

Mark Iwinski is an interdisciplinary artist working with photography, printmaking, sculpture, book arts, and site-specific work to reveal layers of absence, history, and memory in our landscapes and cities. Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he received his MFA in Sculpture in 1991 from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He has shown nationally and taught art at The College of William and Mary, Dartmouth College, Colby College, and Cornell University before moving to Durham, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife and daughter. He is a 2006 Constance Saltonstall Foundation Grant recipient for works on paper, the recipient of a 2008 fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts for his rephotography work, and in 2010, he became a North Carolina Arts Fellow.
## two-dimensional art

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## three-dimensional art

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Or maybe it's how, miles below the thick plastic cups filled with travel-sized ice balanced on trays advertising tropical places and dividend rewards, the world is moving very fast. Cities laid out flat in maps of blinking lights strung out like highways, cars swerving through six lanes, and building tops reaching up but obscured in drifting clouds and thick fingerprints etched across three-inch window glass. Crossing time zones has never been easy, invisible lines dividing from Eastern to Pacific, hours swallowed up by the gaping sky. Thin edges of smooth coastlines, gentle concave indents of valleys, and the raised ridges of hazy mountain ranges merge into one idea of a microscopic Earth, one small and conquerable planet. It's the idea of seeing everything and nothing. Maybe it's the feeling of being stagnant, framed by the cold metal of armrests and recycled air, lit exit signs always waiting to guide you home.
isaac newton’s sex life

rob shapiro | poetry

It’s easy to imagine him, apple in hand, sitting alone at a desk, finding pleasure in the laws of motion—his tongue cartwheeling as he adds fractions of a whole, toes curling in frustration, trying to reason gravity.

But isn’t there some understanding of gravity, some unspoken truth, you can’t find in a telescope or calculus? It is the pull between two bodies, after all. It’s right there in the freckles and birthmarks along a naked pair of shoulders, like a palette of stars and constellations your fingertips can softly trace. It’s there in the bitter taste of perfume found, sweetly, on the neck, tugging you back tangent to each other’s curves. And when is gravity’s pull stronger than that moment in the middle of the night when you’re finally back at rest, and you watch a lover leave to check her makeup in the mirror, just for a minute, just long enough to feel that the dark has never been so crushing, and your bed never so empty?
I am the man who throws the rabbits to the river. I do it because I have to, for the town. It's my job, and no one else is going to do it. It's a service just like electricity and running water and the post office. It's maintenance. I am a maintenance man.

I have a taxidermy shop, too. It's on First Main Street, which runs parallel to the train tracks and Second Main Street. I can stuff just about anything. I do mostly cats, though. Occasionally there's a quail or beaver or some other game that'd look nice on the mantle, but usually it's just women sad about their Fluffys or Quincy's or whatever the hell these women name their cats. I see more tears over cats in cardboard boxes than Reverend sees at funerals. Not that we're not a religious town—we are. We just prefer the grief that you can hold in your hands, even if it's just the skin stretched over armature. Makes it ours.

The river runs right behind my house. I'm in the crook of its elbow. My land's maybe ten miles from town.

It started when Claire, this grad student, came to town with a yellow pad of paper and a tape recorder. She said she was collecting an oral history of our region, and she needed interviews and data and such. Man, some kind of line outside her office, the little room off the side of the post office. Everyone in this town wanting their story recorded in her little box. Everyone knowing we'd earned it: those neat little paragraphs in some college-press book, our voices all dressed up in shirts and ties. Not enough good happened to this town, and we deserved it.

Talk in the barber shop has always been about the big leagues. There's always some noise about someone's daughter on the West Coast or a son gone to Wall Street. People always leaving, packing suitcases black enough for any weather, not kissing their folks goodbye at the station, not seeing anyone's big, dumb heart breaking. Kids in this town are selfish that way.

But Claire. Brass tack, that one. She didn't make anyone feel quaint and stupid. She didn't even make anyone feel important. But everyone knew that because she was here, that meant we were important, which felt damn good.

She'd been in our town for about ten months, and she'd walk faster than anyone. The mayor had already planted a tree in her honor, something the town could tie ribbons around and point out on tours, because everybody knew
after her college book came out we'd post signs to mark our landmarks, and hundreds of tourists would roll through like Disney World. Someone would open a shop selling t-shirts and mugs. We'd build a university and another library. The president would visit. The whole thing. Our little farm town would earn its keep on the map. Claire did that.

But then the flood. And we're still talking about it nine years later, crossing our arms in front of the statue we made of her, watching our little ones try to stack the smooth river rocks at its base.

The rest of us were fine because we were ready for it. But Claire got caught in her car, taken by the river. They found her body two days after and shipped her back up to Minnesota where she was from. The whole town sad we didn't get to host her funeral. But did they give her a statue up in Minnesota? No. That's this town.

That's when I started to see it. The river takes what it wants unless you give it what it wants. It takes the ducks’ eggs, the seed off the ground, the dirt right from the trees’ roots, and then the one important thing that had happened to us for as long as anyone could remember.

My father was in taxidermy. Hell of a hunter, too. We had ducks all over the house growing up: duck paintings, wooden ducks on the wall, stuffed ducks next to the telephone and the radio, ducks on glasses, plates, mirrors, everything. He always believed that you could love something and kill it, too. That hunting's not some sort of victory or cruel sport or anything. It’s honest and good and as human as opposable thumbs. It’s a birthright.

We read the Bible after dinner growing up, usually from the Old Testament. My father read the Jacob and Esau story at least every couple of months. To him, Jacob’s was the biggest sin—bigger than Cain and Abel, or Rahab, or Moses striking the rock. To take from your brother something that was promised him. Once, my mother even made stew, just like Esau’s, so we could feel the warm guilt of theft and cunning settle in our guts as our father read the story again. The carrots and beans and rabbit sank like stones in my stomach. I felt like I had a whole pillar in me, all twelve tribes of Israel wandering my intestines slowly, dragging the lining of my stomach with them.
After Claire, the whole town got spiritual. I had stopped going to church by then, though. Kept my religion at home. I heard about the pastor’s sermons in town, how he was always talking about Paul and missions. Those sermons were bigger than the town, and that just seemed mean. What we needed then was a new lamppost or something, something that could be ours and sturdy. We needed to keep the word, not spread it.

I remember it was a Sunday when I found the rabbit in the river. I always start my days by the river before the sun’s up, when the water’s still gray and it’s too dark to see anything in it. That’s when you can see God, because you can’t see anything else. But I saw the lump of fur this time, so I waded in up to my chest to grab it. Didn’t seem right for there to be something in the water, plus I figured I could probably fix it up to sell in the shop if it wasn’t too far dead already. It wasn’t bloated yet, and I couldn’t find any cuts. She must’ve just drowned. I wondered if she had babies that were washed out by the rain the night before, too. So I started to walk up out of the river, pretty chilled now, and something in me stuck. My boots sank into riverbed, and I couldn’t move. I pulled against myself, against the water creasing around me, and I thought of Claire in her damn car, that steel frame pinning her, and I could feel the steel in my boots plunging me into the mud—damn boots—and I didn’t realize I was squeezing the rabbit so hard. When I felt the pops of her back, I let go, startled. So the little lump of rabbit started to float on down the river, and I felt the mud give, and my foot sludged forward.

I pushed my way to the bank, and everything felt bigger than it was. The rabbit was gone, and I was out, and I knew this was just like when Moses’ mother let the river take her baby boy. Before the plagues and the parting of the sea, the Israelites were first saved by that baby in the water.

So that’s how it started, and I’ve been keeping up with it for nine years now. I knew it wasn’t a one-time thing because it was a rabbit, and rabbits are for multiplying and sacrificing, so that’s what I have to do. I have to keep the river from taking anything else by giving it its due.

The Israelites sacrificed a burnt offering twice a day, either a bull or a goat or sheep or a pigeon. Rabbits were unclean. But I guess with Jews and Gentiles being saved now, rabbits are allowed to be sacrifices, too. I started with twice a day, shooting a rabbit at dawn and a rabbit at dusk and throwing it to the river. I liked dawn and dusk best because I couldn’t see anything in the gray water but the rabbit, just like that first day. Couldn’t see its blood or the fish nosing at it.

Twice a day was working just fine—no floods, nobody hurting in town, business not bad either. Things going along just fine. But the rabbits started
thinning out behind my house, and I had to stay out longer and longer to get one. I set traps and bought another gun, but I could tell I was taking too many. So I cut it down to one a day, starting every day out at the river same as before. Let the dusk sacrifice go. And after a week of one-a-days, nothing in town had changed, so I figured it was all right.

But after nine years, I’m running out of rabbits. It takes me at least four hours every morning to get one. And the ones I get are small and mangy—they look like they either just got here, or have been here longer than I have. I’ve taken the whole middle class of rabbits, the mothers and fathers who go to work every day, hop off to some corporate burrow and come home at five. I’ve left only the elderly in their nursing homes and the kids, probably practicing “Duck and Cover” in school because of me. But I won’t see another Claire go. I figure if I can just hold out till the Year of Jubilee, the tenth year, maybe God will send more rabbits like manna.

I load my gun and close the door behind me. I walk a good mile and a half before I settle into the dirt to wait. The fog’s still thick, and everything’s the color of worms. I don’t ever bring food with me because it wouldn’t be right to sacrifice on a full stomach, but I’m feeling especially hungry this morning.

I hear something and freeze. Damn it—a deer. He looks right at me, ears sticking out straight as an arrow through his head. His eyes are clear and quiet. He twitches and then bolts back into the fog. I don’t hear anything else for an hour after that, not until the sun starts coming up, cutting the fog out of the leaves. And then I see one: a little brown rabbit keeping everything but his ears hidden in the grass. I blink, gather my breath, and aim the barrel at him as slowly as I can. But something in the woods clicks, and he is gone.

Normally I’m a little pleased when this happens because it means I’m being tempted, and the devil doesn’t tempt you unless he considers you a worthy opponent. I don’t mind that he tips his hat to me every now and again. But it took me four and a half hours to even find a rabbit yesterday, and I can’t keep opening the shop late in town. I can’t have people waiting on me, their dead pets in their trunks or backseats, wondering why I’m always late. Besides, I always have more customers in the morning. I guess it feels weird bringing in something dead late in the day, especially when the sun starts to drop off. I think it’s the drive home that would kill you, everything outside your windshield a weird blue and too much like the movies. The whole sky looking pained over your late cat, and you trying to make sense of the sky’s hurt. That just takes the grief right out of your hands, and you’re left grasping at nothing
like an idiot, and you’re the smallest idiot in the whole world.

I’m out here another hour and a half when I see another. Big, too. I move to shoot it, and this time it’s my fault. I’m too hasty. I miss wide left, slam the gun down, and smack the ground with the palm of my hand. “Fuck damn it,” I yell, and there is a silence after that so thick my eardrums press against me. Two missed in the same morning.

I wait four more hours. It’s day enough now to send the rabbits to their burrows. I’m hungry and worn and feel like Job, so I pack it up, figure I’ll try a new spot.

I’ve gone nine years. I’ve been feeding that river for nine years, and I’m sure as hell not quitting now. The town’s been getting on just fine because of me.

One darts right in front of me as I’m walking. I fumble with my gun and unload into the grass from my feet to about twenty yards out. I don’t aim, I just keep shooting until I’ve cleared through the pellets. I drop nine shotshells into that little patch of land. Pushing the grass with my boots, I comb the area. I’ve never had dogs for this kind of thing because I was raised believing that hunting is man’s art, and letting a dog interfere is irreverent. So I’m used to poking around the dirt for game, but after crawling over the whole area, even on my hands and knees, there is no rabbit.

Three rabbits. And I know it’s the trinity or Peter being tempted, but that doesn’t make me feel less shitty.

It’s noon now, and I’ve got to get to the shop. I trudge the mile and a half back and feel like I’m under a microscope, because I know God’s watching. I keep my eyes closed for as much of it as I can. When I get to the river, I can’t look at it. But I have to, and I see the ripples are veins, blue with oxygen. It’s foaming at the mouth. I dry heave from the hunger and am grateful there is nothing in my stomach to offer.

Rina pulls up to my shop same time as I do. There’s a paper box in her backseat. I see her cut off her engine and put both hands on the steering wheel, and her shoulders go slack. I get out of my car and don’t touch hers—I know not to touch a woman’s grief until she has offered it. So I unlock the shop, flick on the single bulb for the display in the window. I’ve got a pheasant, a quail, a fox, a raccoon, and two gophers, all looking different directions. They’re all mid-stride, too. I have a knack for animals in motion. The quail has his wings spread and is pinned to a painted corkboard. Kids love him.

I went to a taxidermy convention once. I ordered a few dozen Bio-Optix eyes and heard some of the greats from Van Dykes give seminars about the
 personas of the figures, the importance of using the right jawset, and about how to market stuffed animals as Christmas gifts. An all-American gift. But I've never had trouble with business. I talked with a man with a hell of a mustache from Indiana about how his shop had seen better days, how he hadn't seen business boom since his father owned it. “People just don’t see taxidermy like they used to,” he said. “There used to be glory in what we do.”

“Well, my town still believes in it,” I said. “Fact is, it's weird to be in a house without a stuffed animal somewhere. Just something we do.”

Rina pushes open the door with her back and holds the box tight to her chest. “Hi, Rina.” I draw it out slow and put a hand on her shoulder. “Is it Trudy?”

She shakes her head. “Dex. The kids had him in his harness in the driveway, and Paul didn’t see him and backed up over him. Well, he started to, and then the kids were screaming, and he slammed on the brakes, but he had already gotten some of the ribs, and he was too far gone, so I took the kids, and Paul—”

It sounds like she hiccups, and she bends her head into her shoulder,
eyebrows pinching toward her nose. “He . . . shot Dex straight in the neck. To put him out of his misery.”

I nod slowly and keep my mouth frowned. “May I?” I say and motion to the box. She places the box on the counter. I lift the lid toward me and keep nodding. Good Lord, it’s a rabbit. Are you kidding me? I wait seven hours to shoot a rabbit, and Paul just runs one over?

But then I’m mad at myself for breaking the tenth commandment. So I force myself to just think logistics, to be professional.

Shit. If I’m going to do this one, it’s going to be tough. The whole neck is blown, and that’s normally where the skin is loosest. Going to be a hell of a patch to pull off. And goddamn—what happened to the little fuck’s legs? But the skin looks good there, at least. That’s all I need.

“Rina, I can’t promise anything,” I say.

She’s nodding very fast now, both of her hands near her face. “I know. I know, Robert. I know. Just—”

“I’ll do my best. Should be ready in two weeks or so. I’ll give you a call.” I take her hand in both of mine and try to sound very soft. “Any particular pose?”

She squeezes my hand. “Make him look happy.” She puts her free hand on her stomach like she’s pregnant and closes her eyes. “He was happy,” she says quietly.

It’s always either happy or peaceful, so I’ve gotten good at learning the logistics of each, at least for cats. A happy cat has at least one foot off the ground, and his eyes are pointed up. You capture the peacefulness of a cat in one appendage: the tail. If you can get the tail right, no one’s going to see if you got the cheeks plump enough, or if you kept the paws slender and graceful. No one’s even going to notice whether you got all the lumps and creases out of the stomach so long as you’ve got the tail right. But a rabbit? I guess just pointed ears and good arch to the back. Maybe on its hind legs if the stomach skin isn’t already pooching.

I’m still nodding. Rina slides her hands out of mine and is nodding, too. “You take care of yourself, okay?” I say. She forces a smile and walks to the door. As she leaves, she turns for one last glance at the box and flips her hand up in a wave.

I try to be professional, I really do. But this rabbit is a gift from God, I know it. So at the end of the day, I load the box into my trunk and lock up shop. I have rinsed the blood off the rabbit. It is white with brown spots. I carry the
box down to the flat bank and toss the rabbit far into the river. It flips over itself a few times in the air before it splashes and bobs. It is dusk, and in the sky, the clouds are Rina’s hand on her stomach, but then they are Moses’ hand over the Red Sea. The rabbit bobs along slowly, and I watch until it is out of view. Manna from heaven.

The next morning I set out into the woods, walk two miles, set up against an oak tree. I’m in high spirits.

I don’t see anything for five hours, so I head back. I’m not worried, though. I was provided for yesterday, and I’ll be provided for today. I walk back to my house, and there’s Paul with a knotted grocery bag. He has his hands on his hips as he watches me walk up. “Morning, Paul,” I say.

“The fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck is this?” Paul shoves the grocery bag against my chest. It’s wet. I unknot it, and there’s Dex the rabbit. “You want to explain this to me, buddy? You want to tell me exactly why I found my fucking rabbit, the same fucking rabbit my wife brought you yesterday, washed up in my backyard? You want to explain exactly what the fuck is going on?”

I can’t tell him about the river. He’s a father, for God’s sake. He doesn’t know anything about a sort of caretaking that isn’t as immediate as changing a diaper or cleaning up applesauce. But I’ve got my shop riding on this, too. My family’s reputation is built on the honesty and integrity of that shop. We’re professionals.

“You little shit, I’m talking to you!” says Paul. “What did you do to my rabbit?”

“Hey, you’re the one who ran it over in front of your kids,” I say, and shouldn’t have said it.

“Ran HIM over, asshole! And that was an accident! At least I didn’t try to drown him. Jesus, do you always do this?”

“I didn’t drown him. I was working on him here, see, and I . . . well, I, all I did was, I buried him close to the river is what I did. Buried him too close down to the river’s all I did because he couldn’t be stuffed.”

Paul looks at me real sharp for a second, and I think he believes me, but then I see his jaw pop near his temples. “You’re like that guy in the news. That cremator, who just sold regular ashes instead of people.” He grabs the wet grocery bag back. “You’re that guy. You’re sick, man.”

“Paul, listen, I—”

“No, man. Listen, fuck you.” He points at me with two fingers, the other
three still gripping the bag. He walks to his car parked in my driveway, sets the bag in the trunk, and drives off.

When I pull up to the shop, Officer Cassidy is waiting by the door. He watches me get out of my car. “Morning, Robert.”

“Morning, Cassidy.” I unlock the door and walk in. Cassidy follows. “Listen, uh, Robert. We need to have a conversation.” He has his hand on his holster and swings his knees out as he walks toward the counter. “I just got off the phone with Paul, and frankly, I’m concerned about what’s going on. Can you tell me what’s going on here?”

I lay my palms flat on the counter. “Officer Cassidy, this is all a misunderstanding.” I’m not much for lying, but I knew Paul would call Cassidy, so I gave myself the ride to the shop to get my story straight. I can’t go telling Cassidy about the river—it’d just upset things around here. After Claire, we all know better than to go upsetting anything. We all do our part to keep things from stirring up. My part is the rabbits...

So I spit out the lie just like I practiced.

“The rabbit’s body wasn’t, you know, in any shape to be saved, so I buried it, and an animal must have carried it to the river or on over to their house or wherever.” I don’t break eye contact. “And I brought it home in the first place to try to work on it there. I was going to call Paul in the morning, but it was late and all, and you know how the raccoons are around my house. They’ll dig up anything.”

“I want to believe you, sir. I do. But poor Rina is all kinds of distressed over this. And the kids. I just need to make sure your story holds water, no pun intended.” He chuckles at himself, and I’m mad that he finds any of this funny.

“Yes, sir. Look, this whole thing doesn’t sit right with me. You know I love this town, and I love what I do, and I wouldn’t ever go trying to mess that up,” I say.

“All right. You stay sharp, now. I’ve gotta get this whole mess straightened out with an investigation. We’ll get this whole thing straightened out. Thanks, Robert.”

“Thank you, Officer Cassidy.”
He pulls his pants and holster up on his way out. Some excuse for an interview. Claire wouldn’t have tried that. She would’ve been taking notes, looking right at you with her head tilted, marking the tempo of your conversation with her nod. She’d probably hook you up to a lie detector before Cassidy would. She’d get you to talk.

Cassidy’s always been one for keeping things quiet, which we all do, but if anyone’s supposed to make a little noise, it’s the law, right? I know what I did and why I did it, and I know it was right, but Cassidy’s not doing his job right, and that just doesn’t sit well.

I go home to catch a rabbit. I haven’t hunted at dusk for a few years now, but I didn’t get one this morning, so I don’t have a choice. I’m feeling good about yesterday and today, though, so I head out only a mile. But after an hour or two in the dark, I’ve got nothing. I head out further. I stay out till 5 AM.

Nothing. The only things moving in the woods are raccoons, coyotes, mice, and a few owls. I’ve got nothing. I have about an hour before the sun comes up to find a rabbit for today. The Israelites said the day started at 6 AM, so I have until then or else the river doesn’t have its rabbit.

Nine years the river’s always had its rabbit. Nine years.

I consider using a different animal, but it was a rabbit from the start, the manna was a rabbit, and it can’t be anything other than a rabbit. I’d be sacrificing Cain’s shitty, second-rate fruit instead of Abel’s sheep.

I wonder what will happen come sunrise if I don’t have that rabbit. Will I turn into a pillar of salt? Will the ground swallow me up? Gnats? Lion’s den? Leprosy? I hear something and fire off a shot. A host of birds explode out of the bushes, and I just hear feathers and flapping. I shoot into the air three times. I hear a thump about ten yards off. Sure enough, I’ve shot something. A dove. Fuck. Sure, it’d stuff nice and fetch a price in the shop, but damn it. I wrap it in my handkerchief and put it in my breast pocket.

I start to make my way back toward the river, hoping I’ll find my provision on the way. But I get to the river—it’s pushing 6 AM—and I still have nothing. I can start to see light on the sky. I’m about forty percent sure I hear something, so I shoot. And then I shoot the other direction. I feel something near my ankles, so I shoot straight down between my feet. I kneel, run my fingers over the pocked earth, and feel only dirt, hot from the birdshot. I stand up quick and fire three more shots straight down, anger knotting up in my arms. The sound occupies my whole ears, but it isn’t bigger than my ears, and I start crying. The
sun is starting to stretch across the sky. Everything is gray and blue, and my ears are ringing.

I wade out into the water. The current is languid and weak. I think I feel its hunger, and I am hungry too. And suddenly thirsty, so I drink. I slurp with noise and no grace. I am ravenous. I am up to my chest in the water, and I let my arms float up to my shoulders, my fingers spread wide to filter the water as it pushes through. I push back, push my palms together until they meet and the water is forced to cascade around the triangle my arms make. I am ready for the rapture, or for punishment, or to be drowned. I am ready. I close my eyes because the sun is wholly up now, and it’s too late, so I spread my arms again to receive my fate.

Ten minutes pass and I’m still here, arms still spread in the river. Nothing is different except it’s light out now. I can see the banks, the ground eaten up where I shot it, the fog starting to lift. I wade out of the river because I guess my rapture isn’t coming in the water. But it’ll come today.

I pull the dove out of my pocket, its whole body soaked, and lay it in the crater I have made. I walk to my house to dry up and get dressed for work. If absolution’s coming today, I should dress smart.

In town, I am expecting Rina and Paul and Officer Cassidy to storm the shop, throw my gophers and the pheasant around, and sue me or something. Make sure this incident goes on my headstone. Cassidy’s the first one.

“Morning, Robert. What are you working on?”

“Just cleaning up a bit, I guess. No new projects in the works right now.”

“Good. Good. Listen, about yesterday.” It would figure that Cassidy brings the law down on me today, so I’m expecting something big. “I’m not too worried about this one. I know you’re just trying to do the right thing, and no one’s trying to hold that against you. Besides, we’ve got a lot of paperwork on our hands if we’re going to do anything about anything.”

I stand up straight and cross my arms across my chest. “So, that’s it? It’s just going away?”

“Yes, sir. We’re not going to keep something like this tied to you. I already talked to Paul and Rina about it, and they’re still mad, but they’re not looking to press charges. You’re off the hook. Wouldn’t do right to trouble this town with a trial and all.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it, Robert. That’s all she wrote.”

“That’s it. All right. Good. All right, then. Thanks for stopping by.” I’m just
nodding like an idiot, confused as hell.

Officer Cassidy repositions his hat, nods, and heads out.

Sometime near noon, Paul comes in. He sulks up to the counter and grabs it with both of his thumbs. I didn’t think Paul would be the one to carry whatever it is God has coming for me, but the Lord works in mysterious ways. “Listen, Robert. Can I say something to you?”

“Is it something you’ll need Officer Cassidy for?”

Paul chuckles. “No, no. Cassidy already tell you? We decided not to get the law involved after all.”

I nod. My ears feel hot.

“Look, Rina and I and the kids have all been through a lot lately, you know? And when I found that rabbit, I just, I put it all on you, and that wasn’t right.”

I’m mad that he’s apologizing.

“Not that it wasn’t a shitty thing to do,” he says. “You’re still a dick.”

I think for a second he’s going to take a swing at me.

“But I’m not looking to stir anything up, all right? I’m not going to cause a shit storm. Nobody likes this place shook up, and we don’t need any more river stories. This town’s had enough water. Just next time, bury the dang thing a little better, will you?” Paul smiles, and I think maybe I should slug him so he’ll have to hit me back.

He laughs again, claps my shoulder, and turns to leave. “Damn rabbit,” he says.

“So, that’s it?” I say. “No charges? No more anything?”

“Geez, Robert. You say it like it’s a bad thing. Let’s just forget this ever happened, okay? Let’s just forget it square and square.”

“Yeah, okay. Yeah. That’s for the best.”

So Paul goes to leave, and I’m left wondering what the hell to do because something’s gotta happen.

“It was me,” I say. “I did it, and I meant to, and I did it because I had to. I throw rabbits to the river every morning because I have to, because of Claire, and it’s the only way I can keep this town alive. I’m a good neighbor, Paul.”

Paul looks real mean and scared for a second, but then smiles a little. His eyebrows are still pushed together. He says, “All right, Robert. All right. Look, what you do in your spare time is none of my business. I don’t give a damn what you do outside your shop.” He puts his palms up and takes a step back.

“No, but I did it on purpose, see?”

“What are you trying to tell me?”
If I tell him everything, something will happen. They’ll kick me out or hang me or something, and I know that’ll make me a martyr, and I’m ready for it. I say, “For nine years now I’ve been hiding something, but I should say it now.”

“Christ, is this about Claire? Did you have something to do with that? The fuck are you trying to tell me?”

“No, Paul, I didn’t touch Claire. But I’m saying that after the flood—”

Paul puts his hand up to stop me, laughs again. “Jesus, Robert. Had me worried there for a second. Look, don’t worry about it. Just let it go. I don’t care what you’ve been doing for nine years. It’s done, all right?” He’s walking out now, but then he stops, turns, and clasps his hands. “Well, wait a second.”

I deserve this. Whatever Paul’s about to do, it is sanctified. If he punches me square in the nose, pulls a knife, goes for my throat. An eye for an eye. This is good. I have earned this.

He opens his hands again, his fingers pointing at me. “Let’s say you and me strike a deal.” He points to the display case. “Give me the pheasant, and we’re good. I’ve been needing something for the basement—we’re refinishing it, and that bird’d look real sharp with what we’ve got.”

“You want the pheasant?”

“Yes, sir. Fair deal, right? We’ll just do the trade and move on. Keep moving.”

“That’s all you want to make this right?”

Paul shrugs. “Look, the kids are still upset. And a bird like that’d be good for them. Simple as that.”

I cross my arms and tap my fingers on my arm. “Yeah, Paul. That’s fine. Take the pheasant. That’s fine.”

Paul untacks the bird from the display and is on his way. The weather is bright, and the town’s starting to pick up, same as it always does. The biggest difference I can see is the open space in the display. That’s the biggest difference in the whole goddamn town.
desperate desire

laura brentrup | stoneware and acrylic paint
The arms of the cross cut
against the tree tops—thick
like matting, full of leaves—
as we pass the chapel
beside the interstate.

It is white and the only
colorless thing for miles
that contrasts the October orange.
Its sides loom above us and
our sunburned cheeks, making us
feel small and insignificant as your
calloused fingers drum against
the faded dashboard.

I remember my old church,
with its cedar pews that
smelled like wood stain,
how they made me think Heaven
would smell like freshly cut trees
and Hell like charring ones—

the same Hell I feel worthy of now
because we are sitting so close,
your hand between my thighs;
because of last night,
and the night before that
in the woods behind the bar;
because we wanted it to feel wrong,
your skin shining a hazy blue
from the neon letters of the store front.

You run your hand between
my breasts as the old car radio
plays something that sounds like a hymn. It makes me wonder about the Virgin Mary, and how she must never have felt a religion like this.
speech
jr riegel | ceramic
by this time tomorrow i will have cannibalized my left arm at least

Yesterday, I knew, just looking at it, that I was going to have to eat my arm, the pale and smooth underside, where it all meets my shoulder. Medium rare. Garlic salt. Worcestershire sauce. Cooking, how could it smell so different than cow, which I love? And while I’d rather eat my right arm, it being more attractive, the left it must be, scars and all. There is more to be done with the right. It is good at holding hands. It is better at pouring drinks. More importantly, it is the cooking arm, the one more used to sauté pans. And I will own up entirely to the fact that the butchering has me concerned. But how can I not eat it when it’s there? I’ve read about Jain ascetics, the ribcages and organ failure, completely at peace and starving themselves in the name of enlightenment. I realize that silverware—tools for the science of eating—is all about control, how to manipulate, how to pierce.

And isn’t it strange, how cannibalism isn’t the worst violence we can do to ourselves? Not dismemberment—though I have been worrying about the butcher block and the blood stains—but the way we can be made sure, can be made to feel that we don’t deserve to eat, to be made full. Let us erase lines in sand and let us decide what to pick at the salad bar. This is what I like about the word *cannibal*: I can call it “can” and “able.” These are great things in the kitchen. And so, I have sharpened my boning knife, though I haven’t decided on the skin, whether to make it crispy or to flay it altogether, but I have decided that of the twenty-seven shirts in my closet, nearly all will look good with the left arm sleeve rolled up and knotted, and stitched at the dangling cuff.
22 colonnades
never far away

colin keaveney | digital collage
Every weekday for seven years, my sister and I took the H28 bus to our school in West London. It was long and off-white, striped with yellow and blue. The H stood for Hounslow, the dirty part of London that nobody saw or cared to see, a place I was scared of for my first several years living there. Inside the bus, skinny yellow poles stretched from floor to ceiling, big red buttons jutting off the side of each one like a wart on a finger. When I first started taking it, the cost was only forty pence a ride, so in the morning my older sister and I would scour the house for four twenty-pence coins. We would search for the profile of Queen Elizabeth reflecting out of a purse, her royal head slightly raised but laying against the silver like a fish flopped on the ground out of water.

Once on our way back from school when I was twelve years old, two boys got on the H28 and sat in the last row, one row behind my sister, two rows behind me. Because the bus was always so empty at this time, we normally sat in different rows, enjoying our independence from the other sister. And we always sat in the window seats even though there were often the stains of eggs dripping on the other side of the glass. The boys were wearing overlarge sweatshirts, unzipped but hooded, the kind of hood-wearing that had nothing to do with the weather. They were young, too, perhaps only a few years older than I was, although they were clearly not coming back from a day at school. These were the types of boys I had nightmares about, nameless boys attached to loud mouths that shot out West London slang. Each vulgar word that blasted off from the tongues of the boys behind me—easily, needlessly, for aesthetic purposes only—stung and then stayed risen under my skin like a chill bump. After ten minutes of listening to them I was shivering. And then, true to my prediction, they addressed my small presence on the bus.

“Hey you in the green, wiv the brown hair, why you on this bus for?” I couldn’t speak. “Come over ‘ere and sit wiv us.” My heart galloped heavily, sinking deep and then propelling upwards, and I could see my chest move up and down with it. It’s interesting that our hearts beat strong when we feel weak, like there is a mind inside the heart that consciously attempts to make up for the weakness, to get the balance of weak and strong back to being even.

“She’s fit,” I heard one of the boys say to the other, as though I couldn’t hear them, knowing that I could. “You should come out wiv us sometime.” I had forgotten my MP3 player that morning, so I could not pretend that I couldn’t
I continued to look forward, watching the gum-stained streets roll by, the graffiti on the public bins, the rows and rows of ugly narrow houses, and I imagined the slender staircases and creaking floors that I knew to exist within them.

“Actually, she don’t have no tits yet. The gewl behind her has much better tits.”

“Yeah, she’s flat, that uva one, but wiv a fit face.” I wanted to cry. I couldn’t though, because if I cried I would just be a baby with no tits.

Throughout this conversation, I could almost feel the effervescence of my sister brewing behind me, scared but wanting them to stop talking, and feeling that she should be the one to do something being two years older than me. At this point, she turned her body around in her seat and stared at them. If I hadn’t known before, I knew I loved her then.

“What’s your problem? Stop messin’ with my sister.” I could hear her fake confidence, the slight English slang in her voice. That was her defense, her firewall. It didn’t work, however, because she wasn’t English enough yet. They looked surprised at first but then started smiling.

“We ain’t doin’ nuffing,” interjected one of them quickly before she finished her sentence.

“Shit, she ain’t English. You from America?” My sister had turned around and wasn’t talking to them anymore, perhaps only having enough energy for one remark.

“I fink she’s from Australia.”

“Naw, blud, that’s American. We got ourselves two American gewls on this bus.”

Then I closed my eyes, willing myself into invisibility. Perhaps I was thinking that if I couldn’t see me, they couldn’t see me either. I lived in this type of fear for the majority of my early adolescence. I didn’t like talking to new people who might say things I couldn’t anticipate. I didn’t like going places where I might encounter these fickle people I didn’t yet know, people who were always in my head sitting cross-legged behind bushes of fog, their eyes peering out at me like raccoons in the dark. “Let’s go on an adventure!” my grandmother always told me. “I hate adventures,” I said. Then she said that life is going to make me have adventures whether I like it or not. But at the time I didn’t pay attention to life as much as I paid attention to my fear of being seen. Sometimes it was all I had, my only definition. At this time I was so soft and malleable and concerned with other people’s thoughts that any London thug could take a sharp point of my body and smooth it down, turn my fingers into
stumps, my feet into dainty tulip shapes, my shoulders into the curved round of a twenty-pence coin. Eventually I became so smoothed down and rounded out by other people's touches that no distinct part of me was visible and I could be picked up and thrown, or kicked into an empty field. I would have been happy in an empty field.

Two years later, the H28 was so crowded that my sister and I were sitting side by side in a pair of seats at the back. I was sucking on chewy strawberries that I had bought for five pence each from the corner store by our school. As strawberry gelatin coated my tongue, a different pair of boys got on the bus and sat in the seats directly behind us. I wasn't worried about them today because it was so crowded and I had my MP3 player. At each pause between songs, I heard them chatting behind us with tongues that took words and stuck them together, so that their sentences were slides. At one point I heard the scratching sound of a lighter trying to ignite. And then I felt it, a small place of warmth on my back, heat growing in a circle like a rose blooming, each hot petal flicking

awake and licking my skin. If only it really was a rose. I wished that every time English boys opened their mouths to swear, rose petals came out instead, landed gently in their hands, and looked quietly up at their shocked faces. And then because of beauty’s ability to lighten anger and tone, I wouldn’t need to be scared anymore, and I would always be walking on streets of rose petals as though the world was trying to woo me like a relentless lover.

The next week my sister and I were on the bus again and sat in the back row where the boys had been sitting. We saw a crater carved out in the plastic back of the seat in front of us, and we knew that it had been melted away by a flame. I felt the ghost heat, reached behind me, and put a hand to my spine as though expecting there to be a round hole in my sweater where fabric had been burned away.

When I was sixteen, my friends and I encountered a drunken man on the bus. This happened after eating at a pizza restaurant in Hounslow, after the six of us waited at the bus stop for twenty minutes in the dark while receding into sober, after-dinner tiredness. When the half-empty bus arrived, we found seats all spaced out from each other so we wouldn’t look too clingy, too precious, too much like teenagers who had mothers. An older man hopped on the bus through the open back doors looking rather disoriented, as though he had been sucked into a black hole and the bus was what lay on the other side. He was wearing a long coat and a sweater vest on top of a button-down shirt, but the alignment was slightly skewed. The doors closed behind him, and he turned to stare at everyone, bottle in hand, his eyes lingering longer on the girls in our group. He started to talk. He asked us where we were going and why we were going there, how old we were, what schools we went to. The males in our group did the talking. And then, as one of my friends was responding, answering his questions, the man interrupted.

“Couple’a hours ago my wife told me she wants a divorce.”

At first, something hovered with all of us on the bus. I think it was the compassion we wanted to give him. But we weren’t yet experienced in the art of losing love, so none of us knew how to siphon off his hurt, none of us knew how to carry it. None of us had secrets to exchange with him.
“That’s too bad,” one of my friends said. “I’m sorry, man.” I was sorry too, but I didn’t want his eyes to turn and focus on my anxious ones, to see the large gold hoops in my ears, the giant coat I held in my lap on top of my frail, stocking-covered legs.

“So I got some booze, you know, to drink.” He was leaning against the windows of the bus now, still unwilling to sit down. Perhaps if he sat he would never get up again. “I thought I would just drink for a while.”

“Fair enough,” one of the boys said.

Then the man walked over to me and the other two girls and crouched down to face us in our seats. His big eyes were tired, and his breath stunk of vodka and ash. “Can I ask you ladies a question?”

There was a pause, and then a hesitant “sure.” He put his bottle down on the floor of the bus, and I watched the alcohol slide around inside of it threatening to tip the bottle over. If it spilled, we would have to get off the bus and wait for the next one, like what happened when a lady puked all over the floor last year. He swiftly turned and pointed one dirty finger at my friend’s chest.

“What size are you?”

She looked to me and back to him, “What do you mean?”

“Your bra size. What’s your bra size?” He asked it as though he were a child simply wondering if someone could tie his shoe.

“It’s none of your business,” she murmured coldly, and the man leaned back from her, immediately looking apologetic, but not at all embarrassed like I felt he should be.

“You look like you could be a C,” he said, swinging in toward her face again, his hands sliding sweaty on a yellow pole. When it was clear that she was not going to respond to him any longer, he said, “All right, I was only asking. No need to get angry.”

With that, he picked up his bottle and sat with the boys, telling them that he was kicked out of his house, that he was just riding this bus because he didn’t know what else to do, where else to go. Sometimes, when I think back on this man now, I have the ability to make him beautiful, to give him a story, to give him big blooming bluebells for eyes. I wonder if he is still riding the bus today, right now, on an endless cycle. I wonder if he sits slumped on the back of the bus holding his bottle of vodka, his upturned jacket collar casting a shadow.
on his face, and when the bus driver pulls into the big station at night to rest
the bus with all the other buses—a cave where they come to sleep in peace like
bats, where they no longer exist as the staple objects of city life but as tranquil,
lonely engines—he doesn’t see the man back there, doesn’t ask him to get off,
because he is more of a ghost without his wife and without his house, which
defined him. And every morning he wakes up with the sun, gets the crick out
of his back from sleeping on the dirty seats, and thinks of his house and his
wife, the bouquet of flowers he should have bought for her. He prays that one
day she will step on this bus by chance, perhaps on her way to the grocery store
after her car breaks down, and she will grab his dirty hands and take him home
with her.

I keep getting older. I was seventeen when I heard my younger sister crying
to my mother in her bedroom on the third floor. She was crying because a
man on the H28 had a camera and had dropped his arm by his side, trying to
be discrete, and snapped an image of where her short skirt met her thigh. She
didn’t say anything to him, but tried to pretend she didn’t see. I don’t know
what I would have done if that had happened to me at her age, at the age when
I kept fear stowed like a large cardboard box in the dirty closet of my body.

But that all happened to my sister, not to me. What I know for sure is that
I took an earlier bus home that day, that the man with the camera passed
over me and hit my sister instead. Perhaps as I sat on my bus, he hadn’t yet
reached the bus stop yet. Perhaps he was still at his house deciding which
camera to take, which lens would provide him with the most satisfaction. But
I didn’t know he existed as I rode past the stop that he had not yet reached.
I didn’t know he existed as my sister approached the bus behind me that
would eventually pick him up. What I know is that I loved my ride home that
day, I loved the different languages in my ear—South Asian and European
overlapping—and I was thinking with sadness of my last bus ride home that I
would be taking a year from then. I was thinking that I needed the experience
of riding the bus, that there is something essential in fear that rises and falls as
people step on and off the platforms.

At the time, there was a little girl who had been sitting next to me on the
bus. She might have been six years old. She couldn’t speak English so she just
sat with me, quietly, as though I were royalty. She was a present I would never
be able to open, decorated in ethereal blonde hair and small blue eyes and
ribbons of pigtails. The bus brightened with her on it, and every day I looked
forward to having her little body next to mine. It was like having a doll that
chooses you, that walks up to your doorstep, instead of you having to go to the store to pick her out. How strange that my bus journeys brightened as my sister’s began to dim—that the little girl and the camera man existed at the same time, that I got her, and my sister got him. And isn’t that a sick fact, one that speaks of how we deal with ugliness as we grow within it?

I still slept with a stuffed animal at seventeen. My younger sister still slept with a blanket. I wonder, if I ever found that man, whether knowing that would have made a difference to him. But I also wonder whether it was necessary that my sister experience this ugliness, whether it is a journey that we all have to go on eventually.

When I was nineteen, I was on a bus with four friends heading toward inner-city Charlotte, North Carolina. In the current state I was in, I loved being on the bus because it reminded me of London. It made me think lovingly of the H28, even with its grouchy bus drivers and melted plastic seats, the time one of my English friends wrote her number on a piece of paper, opened the awkward bus window, and threw the paper at a boy she saw passing in the street.

A big African American man got on the bus carrying nothing but two drumsticks. He was wearing a large and dirty winter jacket. He sat in the little cubby of four seats that my friends and I were sitting near and started asking us where we were from. He said he would teach us to play the drums. I asked to go first, and he drummed on the empty seat next to him, showing me a beat, a different rhythm with each hand, and then passed the drumsticks to me to see if I could replicate the pattern. I did, and we were jamming, his head nodding up and down with the beat, his palm jumping up from his knee like a cricket with a complimentary pulse. As I drummed, I was wearing the coat I used to place in my lap to cover up my legs on buses in London.

Something about the drumming—and the beat of the bus going over cracks in the road, and the way my feet tapped with it all—loosened the air, freed everything tense to fall away. Invisible particles were breaking apart from their bonds, and were floating distances from each other, and I could feel my whole body becoming part of this aura of relaxation.

“I think you got it,” the man told me, his protégé. I nodded and continued to watch my drumsticks bang on the bright mosaic pattern of the fabric bus seats. It makes sense to me now to think that the rhythm was shaking apart the colors on the chair, the colors that resembled a field of bright Gerber daisies, and that the rhythm dispersed them, and that I watched them run away from one another the way petals move after a bucket of water is poured into a pile of
them on the ground. Except the water was the melody and the branches and twigs of it caught petals in their current and pulled them along through the air. And then the beat was so big and holy that I saw all of the patterned seats exploding outwards in this fashion, the colorful triangle shapes jumping off of the fabric that had previously sewn them in, and the triangles morphing into petals in the sky. They were everywhere, like confetti free from gravity, giving the impression that time had stopped because the petals were not falling. And in this moment of timelessness, I knew I had grown into the privilege of seeing now what had always been. Then I watched some of the skinny petals float onto the head of the wonderful stranger who supplied the drumsticks, his face now awe-filled and smiling.
Encaustic exudes depth and luminosity. It is a paint that consists mostly of beeswax with a touch of damar resin mixed with a pigment to create color. The paint needs to be applied at a high temperature to keep the medium fluid, then fused with a heat gun or blowtorch to bind the layers of paint together. The paint can be built up into layers to hide what is underneath, or scraped away with a razor blade. The wax medium holds ink and graphite for image transfers and is also a good binder for collaged elements. Encaustic paint can be transparent or opaque, completely smooth or full of texture. Endless results can be achieved with encaustic paint because of its flexibility. Nothing ever needs to be permanent, and that’s the beauty of it.

Celandines started with layers of black, grey and white paint fused together and scraped down to make an even surface. I then added many layers of beeswax. After creating some depth between the surface and the background,
I added some pink paint to accentuate that space. I then took the image of the bright field of flowers and transferred it on top. I burned off the remaining paper, and rubbed off some of the ink. While abstracting the typical landscape and revealing the opposing darker values below the beeswax, I allowed the viewer to look through the landscape on top and into what’s below the surface.

I also like to play up the luminous quality of encaustic paint, which is why *Lucent* is painted on Plexiglas. It consists of many layers of translucent beeswax and some melted oil pastels. I added a photo transfer from my old wallpaper leading into a collaged photocopied flower on translucent paper. I had experimented with real flower petals in other encaustic pieces, and enjoyed their transparency, adding color and movement while still allowing light to shine through. I mounted it a few inches off a white box to allow light to reflect off that surface and onto the back of the painting, illuminating it.
Do you think Montezuma thought to himself, What the fuck is going on? while Spanish steel was pressed to his tanned throat?

I’m sure he was feeling desperate while the apocalypse clattered down around him like the bones of those he once sacrificed, his heavy tears falling on the great steps of some sacred temple while Spaniards pried masks and plates from holy places and people, stripping them bare, calling them nothing.

While watching all this happen, Montezuma must have thought of all the things he knew about his gods. He did not see them then, coming from their temples to keep their son safe.

Standing in his kingly robes, watching his vast empire hit rock bottom, perhaps Montezuma’s ears rang with the words of soothsayers as they conjured sad omens of demise for their former gods. The half-holy blood of Montezuma boiled to find all the death
and sadness was over nothing more than tiny flakes and nuggets of metal—small, rough-shaped skulls of gold.
topographical map of
the milky way galaxy

Now, the three of us spend summers smoking cigarettes on the beach and
improvising cocktails from the 1920s,
which we have to shake before drinking from clear plastic tumblers. James and
I take turns wondering

about the future and how we’ll remember sitting here, in pink deck chairs,
talking about the sky
and the particulars of the Milky Way, how bright and eager it looks in the
naked night, stretched out

over a horizon of waves, and how we're not at the center, but instead spiraling
around its galactic core,
in the orbit of the Local Spur. It’s expanding. It’s accelerating at some alarming
rate calculated by physicists,

and all we can do is sit here and talk about it, how we're probably fucked, but if
we race the expansion
to the bottom, we might score and whittle away our time quick enough.
Dominick speaks up now. “Listen,” he says.

Just that. And we’re quiet. And the ocean settles down, too, while we all go back
to our Manhattans
and roll the humid beach silence over our tongues while we think about how,
exactly, we’re going to waste that much time.
When I am ten years old, my five-person family packs its bags and prepares for a trip to the other side of the world. My mother has long been expressing a strong desire to go, and my Japanese grandfather, my mother’s father, has provided us with the funds to visit for a couple of weeks. It is the first time I travel by airplane; it is also the first time I see my Japanese relatives.

We land in Tokyo and go by train to Nagano, where Ojiichan meets us. He’s a thin man with white in his dark hair, a furrowed forehead, and a distinct stoop in his shoulders. The skin of his face reminds me of old paper, and his teeth are yellowed—my mother tells me later it’s from a lifetime of sake and cigarettes. He nods silently at all of us during introductions, and we follow him to the car; as we drive to his home in the farmland of northern Nagano prefecture, he responds to my mother’s questions in a slow, distant voice. It’s raspy, and this is probably also from cigarettes. Sometimes my mother remembers to turn around and translate the conversation for the rest of us.

My mother has never invested much effort in teaching her children to speak Japanese. My father claims he encouraged her to do it when my brother was born, and afterward as well, but she never did and never offered reasons. Once we are all past the age of fourteen, though—when we are required by the state to learn other languages and are practicing at home—she occasionally seems to wake to the strangeness of us not understanding her own native language and tosses us random words and phrases. We snap them up eagerly, like treats, and we learn very basic things like 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ohayou gozaimasu</td>
<td>good morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arigatou</td>
<td>thank you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sayonara</td>
<td>goodbye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugoi</td>
<td>impressive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One year my mother calls her sister and makes each of us, one by one, take the phone and say, “Otanjoubi omedetou gozaimasu!” It is only after she hangs up that she tells us it means “happy birthday.”

My aunt, uncle, and three cousins are waiting for us in the home they have shared with Ojiichan since my grandmother died. Nobody touches us, but everybody bows and smiles and laughs cheerfully, especially Yoshiko-obasan, who hasn’t seen my mother, her only sibling, in at least twenty-five years. She and my mother have almost the same short haircut, but her fingers are rough and thick from farm work. My mother’s have grown plump from disuse.
The doctor tells my mother at one visit that she needs to lose weight to help her blood pressure. He asks her what she usually eats.

“Rice,” she says.

Under my mother’s influence, we eat rice with most meals at home, and there is always a bag in the pantry. Sometimes my mother will go twenty minutes out of her way to buy it from the nearest Asian grocery store. “American rice is strange,” she tells us. Good rice is thick and sticky when it’s cooked.

When my brother goes off to college and I eventually follow suit, my mother starts using food to lure us back, promising Japanese meals during school breaks as if we need bribing to return home. The first year all three of us are in college, she takes the opportunity of winter break to gather us and teach us how to make sushi. She pours vinegar into the sticky rice and gets me to stir and fan it as she cooks mushrooms and eggs. My sister cuts avocado and cucumber into rectangular slices—we make vegetarian sushi because my brother can’t stand seafood. He threw up once after eating crab meat, and now my mother groans and sighs when she makes fish and he won’t eat it.

We take turns handling the rolling mats and spreading rice across the seaweed wrappings, laying ingredients in strategic strips. The rolling takes a certain technique—not the quick way you roll up a piece of paper, but with a progression that requires moments of pause to press down and align all the elements. My first attempt is overstuffed and bursting in the middle. I take another turn to experiment with different ingredients, but my second try is the same as the first. My mother pokes the rolls and raises her eyebrows at me, but I wrinkle my nose at her and slice the rolls anyway. They taste fine even though they don’t look the same as hers.

One of my favorite Japanese meals is simple: rice and tofu miso soup. The Japanese always keep their rice and soup separate, treating and eating them as individual dishes, but I like to combine the two in one bowl. My mother clucks her tongue fiercely at me when she sees me prepare my food. “Only cats eat it like that,” she says. In the Japanese farming life of my mother’s youth, cats were almost feral and only kept alive so they could rid the animal stalls and sheds of mice. If they entered the house, they were beaten away with broom handles.

I look into my bowl where the grains of rice have grown fat with water. The broth is a dusky yellow-white, miso particles swirling around the tofu and settling toward the bottom. Miso soup is prone to do that: the ingredients separate if it’s left too long, so the rice layers the bottom of my bowl and the tofu sits on top, but stirring brings all the elements together. I often
purposefully let the soup sit for a while so I can combine everything again. It fascinates me, though my mother’s expression as she eyes my food makes it clear that I would be beaten away from the table with a broom in Japan.

I straighten up and defend myself when I see her reaction. “It’s still good this way,” I say, stirring the soup. I watch with satisfaction as the broth and rice swirl, and the two blend opaquely.

I’ve heard stories about my hina dolls for years but never seen them. “They’re very beautiful. We’ll get them down from your grandparents’ attic someday,” my mother tells me. When I was born, I received them from my Japanese relatives as a traditional gift for the firstborn daughter, and they were put in my father’s parents’ attic since our house had no room for them. I have a photograph of me as a baby propped up in front of the display, but for a long time, the picture is all I know of the dolls’ existence, and the figures are too far away to see clearly.

One day as I’m preparing for my first year of college, I pass my parents’ room and see my mother on the floor wrestling with a large box. I have already completed my packing and am not sure why else she would be bothering with a box, so I ask what she’s doing.

“Oh, you’re here,” she says. She turns, and I see her face shining with a broad smile. “Come here. I have a going-away surprise.”

She pulls smaller flat boxes out of the larger one and spreads them around her. When they are all removed, she glances at me to make sure I’m paying attention, then slowly lifts the lids. I see rows of miniature objects: vases, paper lamps, paper-and-wood plants, tables, a folding screen, and flat seats with cushions, all painted in delicate detail. My mother unfolds a multi-stepped display draped in red cloth and holds up two dolls, each dressed in elaborately stitched, colored, and layered costumes.

“These are yours,” she says.

At Ojiichan’s, a lot of excited words pass through the air. My mother and her family exclaim over one another, commenting on the years passed, saying what a delight it is to be back together. That is what I imagine, anyway. The Japanese sounds pass over the heads of my two siblings and me, so we stand examining the tatami floor mats.

My cousins are courteous when we first arrive, but afterward, they generally keep to their rooms. There is a definite age gap: Kimie, the youngest, is at least six years older than me, and Miho, the oldest, is already attending university.
All three of them have studied some English, so they manage a few sentences and questions, but mostly it is a game of charades and looking pleadingly at my mother for help.

Kimie is reading at the table one day, her delicately rounded face hovering close to the pages, when my mother calls me over. “Kimie is studying English,” she tells me. “Why don’t you go see what she’s learning?”

This is my mother’s attempt to make me forge a connection. I’m hesitant to interrupt my cousin, and I don’t know what good can come of this, but I shuffle over when my mother raises her eyebrows at me over the Japanese newspaper she’s reading. Kimie explains to me a little about what exercises she’s completing and what books she has to read, casting glances at me out of the corners of her eyes. Then we’re silent.

“Um… that’s all,” she says, and I retreat quickly with my gaze fixed to the floor.

I always listen when my mother offers new phrases but can make very few things stick. I know the numbers up to ten; I know sora means “sky” and yuki means “snow,” and when it rains, my sister and I cry, “Ame ga futteru!” But I can’t even say basic colors or how old I am. Since I also have difficulty employing the French I learn in school, I make an excuse and say I have become too invested in English to successfully learn another language.

My sister’s interest in Japanese blossoms in her second year of high school. She tries jumping straight into it by checking out phrase books, listening to spoken exercises, and barraging our mother with questions as if trying to breach a fort. The effort sparks a slightly more earnest attempt on our mother’s part to instill the language in us, but her method of teaching is difficult to follow. It is simple enough when she translates a sentence or expression, but sometimes she spouts off a line in Japanese and smiles at us as if she expects us to figure it out. We don’t even know the alphabet.

I try, though. “Okaerinasai!” I say when I enter the house one day, but this is wrong. It means “welcome home”—what I mean to say is tadaima, which means “I’m home.”

My sister knows this. “You got it backwards,” she corrects me smugly, and I mask my embarrassment with a wave of my hand. She laughs at my mistake while I try to ignore her.

“That’s an easy one, too,” she says, grinning. I don’t bother to attempt the greeting anymore.

My sister and I stand in front of a mirror some days and make comparisons.
We are often mistaken as twins, yet individually, she is easily identified as Japanese while I remain generically white. We determine that she has broader cheekbones and smoother eyelids than I do, and she tells me that my freckles might confuse people, but this doesn’t satisfy me. Even my brother gets questions about being Asian, and the only thing I can detect that gives him away is black hair.


She smiles thinly for a moment, and I watch her eyes roam around my face as she stalls to come up with an answer. Then she gives up. “Not really,” she says.

In middle school, I mention in conversation something about being half-Japanese, and an acquaintance of mine exclaims, “But I thought you were just some kind of white!” I am offended: she is also half-Japanese, and I thought she already knew about our similar heritage. Also, I do not want to be identified as “some kind of white.” It sounds plain.

She tries to explain: “You just don’t look Asian,” she says.

I already know this, though. I have grown up with relatives telling me I look like my father, watching people tilt their heads and squint when they find out my mother is from Japan. I quell my indignation every time. It seems unfair that my heritage, my only interesting trait, is not even something that is immediately apparent.
Sometimes I announce my heritage instead of waiting for people to figure it out. I want to be recognized. There is only one instance when a person is able to guess I am part Asian before I can say so, but this doesn’t even happen until I am in college.

In the second week of our visit, I discover why we have really come to Japan. It’s the anniversary of my grandmother’s death, and there will be some kind of ceremony held where all the relatives in the area gather in Ojiichan’s house. I never met my grandmother; we first heard about her death a week after her funeral, via letter because my relatives didn’t yet have a phone on their remote farmland. My mother disappeared for the rest of the day after reading the letter, and when she finally came back, none of us really knew what to say.

When the ceremony day comes, people show up one after another wearing black clothes and somber faces. I am bewildered by all the adults and children who are supposed to be related to us. They stare at us curiously, and we stare back. Then the ceremony starts with everyone performing a series of chants and offerings in front of the shrine to my grandmother, which previously had been sitting in a closed-off room. My mother has failed to instruct us on what to do, so I try to look around discreetly at the strangers in the room. Most of them have their eyes half closed as they hum words in their throats; my mother is swaying a little; Ojiichan is at the front with his head bent into his chest.

As I prepare to go to college, I’m afraid to touch these dolls. They are hard in their faces, soft in their bodies, all frighteningly fragile. I don’t know what to do with them. Instead, I watch my mother set up the hina doll display by herself. The emperor and empress kneel on the seat cushions with their tiny hands held out to clasp fans, a headdress pointing up like a flag from the emperor’s head. Two vases filled with peach blossoms go between them. The rest of the steps are lined with the lamps, small trees, and tables for offerings. My mother tells me Japan has a holiday every year devoted to displaying the hina dolls and celebrating the daughters of a family. We sit back to admire the display. Golden threads glint in the clothes, and the two rulers gaze at us gravely with their red lips pursed.

I face forward again, where a picture of my grandmother dominates the shrine. This is the first time I see her: her cheekbones are high and strong, but the skin around her eyes droops and drags her eyebrows down. I look at the picture like it’s fiction, a painting in a museum. Then I study the tatami mats. □
bipolar

ned dibner | mixed media
“America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

–Abraham Lincoln

In our country, we can fit seven cars, plastic-wrapped, on one very big truck, which means we sit atop the world. We have developed a vocabulary of “isms” because the view from up here requires binoculars and field notes. We watch the world throw stones from the bottom to see who has the best arm, and we call it post-colonialism.

We are splayed, spread and heavy with malls, with roads, with Wi-Fi hotspots, Facebook walls and talk and endless blogs. We stretch the sky to make pockets in the cosmos for marshmallows big as the whole of our mouths. Teeth bleached, jawlines of Clint Eastwood, voices as pretty as our infomercials, all of us. We’ve turned “old” into “vintage”—we yellow the edges of photographs and wear jeans made to look worn and earned as a hard day’s work. In a few decades, they’ll call it preserving, but we won’t admit it even then.

In the victory of Manifest Destiny, we are finally big enough to buy another bookshelf, stuff it with our photo albums, our very smart dissertations, our glossy-print pamphlets: accomplishments glorified in a calligraphic font. We are attractive. So attractive that we cast ourselves in wax, buff out the pocks and shape the joints until our likenesses are soft as putty—doughy, even.
We rally. We have won every war, written every book, named every species. We have watched the world grow hot and heavy, felt the molten lava beneath our cartwheels brim proudly to the surface. We: the children of the earth’s core, the exact purpose of creation and the Big Bang—which are both right because we say so—the moment that every historian has written toward. Galileo was wrong: we are the universe’s center.

We are buying more canning jars, though. More Tupperware, very quietly.
alamance county fair
this time last year

alexa johnson | poetry

i. holier than moonshine

the first time i saw you
was opening night
at the county fair, where
i discovered that
there's something
about a man's profile
bathed in the light
of a funnel cake sign
that splits me
in two.

ii. resting place of *carassius*

when we wouldn't play,
the man operating
the bottle game got surly
because the goldfish
in plastic baggies were going
to die soon, and he couldn't
bear the thought of all
that waste: the white
bellies bumping against
rubber bands, his
thick hands removing
the elastic, the sound
of water and carcass
meeting grass.
iii. afternoon earth

a week after the fair packed up
the deep fryers, took down
the borrowed bleachers,
and got on, you drove us to
the spot where the closed-cage
ferris wheel had stood, and we
sprawled on the flattened grass,
fingertips digging homes
into the dry ground, and watched
the clouds, waited for our bodies
to sweat.
daisy hills
devon lewis | mixed media
When I was eight, I became obsessed with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Kevin Baker did a report on pyramids for Social Studies and spoke of mummies, how their important organs were sorted into jars, and their bodies were preserved. I went to the school library, checked out *The Big Book of Egypt*, and for the next week stayed hidden under my covers with a flashlight at night, consuming the book's contents with a hunger I couldn't quite understand. The Egyptians took something more than just a spirit to the afterlife; they needed their bodies too.

I also knew of Scooby-Doo mummies, the Halloween sort who walked with a staggered gait, slackened jaws, outstretched arms, and the curses of the Pharaohs that brought them about. It led me to the conclusion that mummies could come back from the dead as they saw fit, to chase off intruders in their tombs. They were forever tied to their remains and their belongings, and the idea that the body could be something more than transient, that a soul could slide back and forth from the beyond, ensnared me. So the night after my sister's pet hamster died, we were both huddled together over his grave in the wooded area behind our house, trying to turn him into a mummy so that he could come back to life.

Delicious had been found dead in the morning. My sister, age six at the time, gave him that name. She had been trying to feed him when she noticed he wouldn't move and tearfully ran to get our father. I never had any attachment to the hamster because it smelled like pee, but my sister was heartbroken. It had been a gift from our mother a year earlier. My father scrounged up an old shoebox from his closet and offered it as a coffin. We both had to attend a small funerary ceremony that my sister presided over, where she led us in prayer. *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* was the only prayer she knew—our mother used to say it every night. After that my father dug a small hole, buried the shoebox, and put a rock over it, on which my sister tried to write *RIP* in marker, but only the P showed up all that well.

We went back inside to play Candy Land while my father met with the men from Goodwill who had finally come by the house that day to cart off the boxes of our mother's clothes. I was cheating and gloating about it, which drove my sister into a fit of inconsolable rage, and she threw the game board at me. A
little metal Monopoly dog mixed in with the other pieces somehow managed to inflict a small cut over my left eyebrow. Our father was summoned by our shrieking and ended my sister’s attempts to claw out my throat. He warned us that we were embarrassing him in front of the Goodwill men and that if we kept it up he would ground us both. It was when we were both sitting together in sullen silence that I first proposed the idea of trying to bring Delicious back from the dead. I wasn’t as interested in reviving the hamster as much as I was fascinated by the possibility that it could be done.

Our father was asleep and we were out of the house, in the backyard, at night, with the emergency-use-only hand-crank flashlight and our mother’s old garden spade. My sister couldn’t turn the flashlight fast enough to keep it lit, which made me flinch and snap at her each time it went out. We were both worried. Every noise was our father waking up to discover us out of our beds, or worse, some unseen horror lurking in the darkness, ready to whisk us away into the night for breaking one of the gravest of childhood taboos: being up past bedtime.

It was difficult finding Delicious’ grave at first. The backyard we were familiar enough with from frequent exploration was an alien world in the darkness. When we did find the tombstone, we were both silent and began to contemplate the blasphemy that we were only dimly aware of at the time. When you die you go to Heaven and that’s that, our father had told us. The soul goes to God and the body stays in the ground. But The Big Book of Egypt said otherwise. My sister shivered and told me that it was cold. She had been so anxious about sneaking out that she had forgotten her coat inside. I gave her mine and told her to be quiet. She told me that she wanted to go back. I ignored her and began digging through the loose earth.

My sister did not want to look at the dead Delicious when I removed the lid to the familiar waft of stale urine. He almost seemed as if he really had simply gone to sleep. An owl hooted and I nearly dropped the box, causing his stiff little corpse to slide and bounce against the sides. In the book, mummies were tightly bound with a special fabric, but the toilet paper I had brought was much too large. I attempted to tear smaller pieces for his arms and legs, but they were stiff and difficult to manipulate, and the paper would not stay on. Flashes of a mummified Delicious suddenly springing to life and biting me kept jolting through my mind, making me even more skittish, so I ended up using as much toilet paper as possible to put space between him and me, resulting in a mummy that looked like a lumpy wad. My sister timidly informed me
that Delicious didn’t look like a mummy. I told her to shut up, but I was also worried about what I’d done and what it might mean. What would we do if Delicious really did come back? Can something be the same as it was once it becomes a mummy? Our nerves at this point had been spent, and we both hurried back to the house, eager to be back in bed.

I dreamt of my mother that night. She was wrapped in toilet paper. Her exposed skin was a pallid gray and her eyes were yellow and empty, matted hair poking from between the sheets of paper with worms crawling in and out. She called me and my sister to dinner with a prolonged, guttural moan. My father and sister acted normally, but I was too terrified to even look at her. I desperately wanted to know why she was there, but my mouth wouldn’t say the words. My mother made pained noises as she tried to force her stiff arms to work food into her mouth while my father continued to talk about work and my sister prattled on and on about piano lessons. I finally could not take it any longer and asked to be excused, received a grunt, and then sprinted back up to my room. Then I woke up.

My sister and I were playing *Mario Kart* on the Super Nintendo in the family room the next day. I kept losing but told her that I was just letting her
win. The men from Goodwill were back and were helping my father remove the last boxes of my mother’s things. I was agitated and unsure of what to think of this. The idea of permanence was not something I could fully comprehend yet. My father spoke of souls leaving bodies behind, of not needing these things in Heaven, but even Jesus came back for his body before leaving for good, and I couldn’t picture Jesus ascending naked, so I figured clothing, at least, wasn’t bad. My sister hit me with a red turtle shell and my kart crashed and bounced off the race track. I loudly called her a cheater, and my father yelled back at us to keep the noise down.

On the third day after I had mummified Delicious, I was deathly afraid. I was afraid of him clawing at the inside of his shoebox coffin, of him somehow finding his way back to his cage and hearing his metal running wheel squeak again, or of having a pair of yellow eyes stare back at me. I was afraid of why I wanted to bring back Delicious in the first place. My sister seemed to have forgotten about him, or at least never mentioned him again after that night. She asked me if I wanted to help her play *Oregon Trail* on our rickety old PC. I stared out through the windows toward the backyard pine trees, then back at her, and then agreed. We took turns naming the settlers who joined us, later becoming upset if the ones we liked didn’t survive the trip to Oregon, their pixilated graves left behind on the trail. I avoided looking out the window for the rest of the day, trying hard not to listen for the echoes of tiny scratches on cardboard, or the ghost of my mother’s voice calling for dinner. I tried hard not to imagine the imprint left behind in her clothes now that they’d been carried out the door.
old poet, reading (ii)

victoria doose  |  poetry

He looked not as a poet might, but a professor
with his shoulders hunched into the expression
of knowing he was in for it, the long work
of trying to press meaning into dozy heads,
of distributing words and hoping they’d stick.

And he was an old poet, reading
as a young one might, in lilting tones
of up-down, question-answer, a discourse on
breasts, so many breasts,
and the bowel movements of screaming
dogs, and lovers, and Jews, and writers—

and I thought about my grandfather
at home in his retirement,
encased in his labored memories of
World War II, Korea, submarines,
the Great Depression, farm dust, death,
so much death,

and what he would think about this
old poet reading
poems about the dirtiness of life,
if he would sift the words thoughtfully through his hands,
rub their granules against his wood-hard palms
and tell me those words were rich enough,
good for growing things.
featured artist: meighan cassin
construction
meighan cassin | oil on wood panel
My paintings focus on the stories or illusions our culture upholds about nature and its relationship with people. Humans and nature have an interconnected relationship in which they are constantly influencing each other, even though our culture treats the natural world as somehow separate and defines it as what has remained untouched by human hands. The current state of the environment shows that we do not see it as an essential part of us, but that it is something we can control and use. I’m really interested in our skewed views of nature and wanted to explore these illusions through painting.

I started in watercolor with *Spontaneous Nature* to address the myth that we are not nature. This painting tells the narrative of two people skinny-dipping, something that is done spontaneously to be close to nature. People are drawn to nature when they want to feel a certain way, which is something I was hoping to capture. I’m interested in the way the texture of the dock—a manmade construction from natural materials—and the texture of water could mimic each other and reflect light in similar ways. The person in the foreground almost blends in with the water, blurring the boundaries between the human and the natural landscape.

*Construction* brings attention to the human destruction of nature in the
name of progress and draws a connection between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women. Our cultural man-woman binary creates the same issues as the human-nature binary, which is something I felt compelled to address. With the painting Rusted Air, I wanted to show how industrial elements such as power line towers are a part of our landscapes and have become almost natural to it. We want our natural landscapes to remain beautiful and pure, which are false concepts that we have imposed on nature. The bright, sickly yellow and green reflect this kind of warping. The rust at the top was my way of breaking the fourth wall in a sense and acknowledging the landscape painting itself as a construct. Rust is also symbolic of the way that nature breaks down human materials. I used my fingers a lot while painting this piece, which added a directly human expressiveness.
I have seen fifty-seven weddings in the same room. This is not exact, because I have not been counting. But when I think about it, how I’ve worked at least one wedding a week for the last four summers, it’s easy to add up. I work at the country club in town, the one with the waiting list and the pool with two deep ends. The one where many of my friends belong, where they lie baking in the sun, dipping their freshly painted toes in the water as I carry trays of cocktails to groups of middle-aged women in expensive clothing. Sometimes, my friends ask for some, too. They are one or two years away from being legal, but have had enough experience with alcohol to think this is unfair. “Come on,” they say. “Just pour a little in.” I don’t.

Mostly, I am a banquet server, a waitress for special events. Occasionally, I am on bar duty by the pool, or serving in the restaurant, but usually it’s things that require invitations and RSVPs, the buying of new dresses. I carry trays of cucumber sandwiches at baby showers. I pour glasses of champagne at anniversary parties. I lug chafers to the pool for barbeques, the heavy metal bouncing against my knees. I fetch men gin and tonics at club dinners, often brushing their golf-calloused hands as I pass them their drinks, and they smile at me.

At weddings, each weekend, I help set the silverware for two hundred people. I serve them hot, identical plates of food, ask, “Red or white wine?” I clear each table, balancing trays of clinking glasses, which I once dropped against the wall. I slice the cake. Pick up fallen napkins. Hum along to the music as I wait for everyone to leave. Stay until the last drunken cousin has staggered into a cab, until the last fork has been picked up off the ground, until the ballroom is stripped and emptied.

Mark and Mary are both teachers and enjoy that both their names start with M. There are M&M’s in gauzy green bags tied with white ribbon at every place setting, resting atop ivory tablecloths. They are not fancy tablecloths—I carried them from the cement storage room downstairs—but they are free, and look nice enough. Instead of flowers, there are cakes in the centers of the tables. They are all different. My boss tells me the guests are to cut the pieces, to trade with others, to mingle. I’d want them all. Some are tilting towers of chocolate and peanut butter, some are tall carrot cakes with delicate waves of
frosting, some are modest and plainly butter cream, but will turn out to be my favorite when we try them later that night, after the bride, Mary, tells us to eat the leftovers.

Kayla, a girl I work with who’s two years older than me, always guesses what the bride will look like before she arrives, what color her bridesmaids’ dresses will be. Sometimes, I play along. The ballroom is filled with her choices, her tastes, and what life has led her to have, and we feel like we know her a little. I like to make up stories in my mind about her, imagine elaborate ways she met her husband-to-be. I don’t tell these to Kayla, but I think about how they may have met on a one-way flight to Iceland, or trapped in a hotel elevator, or just in some checkout line, even though I know the truth probably follows a more suburban Western Minneapolis way of life, like being introduced by their parents or meeting at the U. Still, it’s nice to imagine anyway.

Kayla fingers a bag of M&M’s, stares at a cake, and says she will be fat. I laugh, and say maybe, but that she will be interesting. The room is simple, plainly decorated like other weddings I have seen, but it has character. Besides the initialed candy and cake for swapping, there are blown-up poster boards and a projector screen near the bar. The posters have “congrats” and “wahoo” scrawled out in children’s handwriting, and are signed by their students from rooms seven and nine. The projector isn’t on yet, but I’m told it will play pictures of the couple, which I think will be nicer to look at than any of the expensive decorations typically hanging from the ceiling. It all makes me wonder why they chose our country club, though, because it seems they are the kind of people who are more concerned with showing themselves off rather than with a ritzy show. In all the weddings I have seen, it seems few are truly about the love, the people.

There is a long cocktail hour where I pass bacon-wrapped water chestnuts, and the bride has not arrived yet. The room gets crowded. People smile and read my name off my nametag, often mispronounced, but I appreciate them trying. They take two or three. The tray feels heavy on my wrist, and I thank people for lightening my load when they come back for seconds looking a bit embarrassed. The bar is not hosted except for keg beer, and I am happy not to becocktailling and counting change, until Robin—the lady with spiky red hair I’ve always worked with—tells me she’s getting tips, because we never get tips.

Time passes and people hover by the projector as it starts playing. Pictures of Mark and Mary flash across the screen. Mark and Mary hiking. Mark and Mary somewhere with palm trees. Mark and Mary with friends at a bar, looking a little tipsy or just happy. Beyond the projector, I finally see them
outside on the patio. She has red hair and delicate skin. She is older, but not old. Her dress is simple, beaded and lovely. She has four bridesmaids in olive-green dresses that look nice on each of them, and they are all smiling. They hold each other’s waists and pose for pictures. The groom is going bald. He is laughing with the bridesmaids, and gives one a high five. I imagine my friends and me in their places. I wonder if Laura will be the first to marry, like she was voted in our high school yearbook, if I will be a bridesmaid, or if we will all start to move out of each other’s lives like it seems we have already begun to. I keep watching them through the glass door until my boss tells me to keep moving, nods at my tray.

We serve chicken with Parisian potatoes and asparagus. The tables are crowded with plastic cups of beer, which makes it hard to set the plates down. Everyone is drinking, young and old, and it is getting loud. Everyone is kind, though, holding their beers in two hands and leaning back while making room for their plates. Some introduce themselves to me, and I laugh with Aunt Becky when her husband spills on his tie. People eat fast. Some pick at the cake on the table before everyone is done, and no one seems to mind. I think that the bride wouldn’t mind, either, and I wonder if she was always the type of person who wouldn’t, or if life just made her that way.

The bride and groom dance to a song I have never heard of, which doesn’t happen often. It is not Sinatra’s “The Way You Look Tonight” or “At Last” by Etta James. They sway back and forth, her arms around his neck. They have not taken dance lessons, and it looks natural. It makes me think about the man I will marry. I wonder where he is in the world right now, what he’s doing, if we will dance to a clichéd song. I wonder how I will meet him, or miss him, or if I already know him, if he will end up being some guy I passed in my car last week. It seems too hard to imagine, though, finding someone to be with forever. But I tell myself not to worry about it, that I have time. And I remind myself that my parents didn't meet until their thirties, that they happened to end up at the same folk dancing class, that my mom had been proposed to three times prior, that things will work out. I lean against the wall and keep watching them dance, but I can't help but feel that I will never be happy like that...

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i lean against the wall and keep watching them dance, but i can’t help but feel that i will never be happy like that...
into her ear. People hoot. There is a standing ovation. I clap too.

The night gets later and it gets louder still. The bride cries during the toasts, which are funny and then sad and then happy. They all address the passing of the groom's father, the missing chair next to his mom. People drink more. A guy named Charlie asks if I'd like to finish his beer, or maybe come to the after-party. His eyes are bloodshot and he is nice, and maybe a little sad he is at a wedding alone. I am flattered even though I shouldn't be, but also hope he doesn't remember asking me in the morning, because I think he'd be embarrassed.

The bride and groom leave before most people. The keg is tapped, but people do not mind fishing twenties from their wallets now. The bride hugs her parents, his mom, her grandmother, her friends from college. She winks at them over her shoulder as she leaves, gripping the hand of her new husband, fingers intertwined, which I notice, because I think it is important how people hold hands. Their guests stay late, stay happy, and many taxis are called that night. The room is not empty until 2 AM, and I am cleaning until four. But I don't mind. I pick up glasses off the floor, eat the leftover bags of M&M's. I let the chocolate melt in my mouth and watch the slideshow, which is still playing. I watch their smiles and keep moving.

Tonight, there are white satin tablecloths and four different kinds of flowers, so I straighten my bowtie and button my sleeves all the way to my wrists. I gather my hair and pull it back tightly, press my fingers to my eyelashes to curl them just a little more, to feel a bit more like a girl in the starchy uniform that has finally started to fit. I never let anyone see me in my formal uniform, always changing at the club and hoping I don't know any of the guests, only truly feeling comfortable when I'm surrounded by coworkers dressed exactly the same. Once, my brother saw me in my bowtie before work and almost hit his head on the kitchen table he bent over laughing so hard. Since then, I just keep it in my car.

I know we will be told to look our best tonight, though, because the ballroom is the most beautiful I've ever seen it. This will be a show, I think, as I stare at the three golden chandeliers draped with thick folds of white gossamer, pinned where the walls meet the ceiling, forming an arc, then falling to the floor. The chairs are rented, gold and twiggy, the maroon ones we usually use tucked safely out of sight. The napkins are gold, too, which I know has cost extra. I wonder if people will appreciate the metallic color as they wipe the crumbs from the corners of their lips, the sweat from their forehead.
I know the bride will be beautiful, not beautiful like they say all brides are, but striking, like the ones in the magazines. I’ve noticed this pattern over the years: the more stunning the room, the more stunning the bride. I think it has something to do with valuing appearances, but it seems most weddings are about appearances, so maybe it’s just luck. I tell Kayla she will have blonde hair and bridesmaids dressed in red to match the petals on the table. She says the bride will be tall and brunette, with bridesmaids in black. This is black tie, she says, excited to be caught up in the extravagance.

She is right. When the bride arrives, young, tan and toned, with dark hair twisted high on her head, she is followed by three women in strapless black dresses. Kayla winks at me. The bride is wearing a fitted gown that fans out at the bottom, in what I’ve learned is a mermaid style. I wonder how many she tried on. I wonder how it’d look on me. I watch her arm muscles flex as she hugs a man in a suit who is not the groom, but who I think might be her brother, because their noses look alike. There are a lot of people there, most of them older, wearing bowties like mine or sparkling dresses to their knees, but many look the bride’s age, and almost as exquisite. When I see the groom, I am not surprised he is tall-dark-and-handsome, as I’m sure the bride described him once, maybe to her friends the first time she met him, or to her mom over
I am assigned a section near the head table, where the family of the bride and groom will sit. This makes me nervous, but also a little proud, since it shows my boss has finally started to trust me. Four years ago I was always assigned the corners of the ballroom, the tables with the chicken finger kids’ meals and coworkers they didn’t really want to invite. I don’t blame my boss, though, since at sixteen I was always so nervous, always thinking I was doing something wrong. Some nights, I’d ask her three times about how to angle the coffee cups, even thought about bringing a protractor to measure their handles to her response of 135 degrees.

I bring the father of the bride a drink, a Grey Goose and water. He will have six throughout the night, and never say thank you. His wife drinks wine, and tells me to fill it high. The groom’s parents don’t drink as much, and sit at a different table. It’s strange, I think, that the bride and groom will now have four parents, four people to call Mom and Dad over Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners. I wonder if they will—I’m not sure I would, if the words would feel too fake hanging in the air.

The father of the bride stands and gives a speech. It is well-rehearsed and fluid. He says all the things you would expect him to say. The mother of the bride joins him at the microphone and thanks all her friends for coming, comments on how beautiful the room is. People clap in agreement, the women nodding as they smack their palms together tightly. Some of the younger ones don’t clap as loudly, maybe thinking about their own weddings, maybe wishing those folds of white gossamer didn’t look so nice. I hope that they are not jealous of their friend, that jealousy starts to disappear with age, because sometimes, all I can think about is how Maria and Kailey are out on Tommy Fickler’s boat, and I am stuck here, filling up the glasses of people I will never really know.

Dinner is served. I set the plates down fast and finish my section before Kayla. I relax and weave through tables, clutching a silver water pitcher that feels cool and smooth in my hands. The bride rests her hand on her new husband’s. She eats her lobster and steak duo in small bites, concentrating on everyone else’s plate more than her own. She looks nervous, a little, maybe hoping that everyone’s meat is pinkly medium like it was during her tasting. They are sitting on one side of a long straight table, and I feel bad for the ones on the ends. Her husband smiles a lot, and leans over his plate to talk to his friends down the line. He has one very crooked tooth. I wonder if she has ever asked him to fix it.
People finish eating and start drinking more. The bride floats around the room, kissing cheeks, and being told she looks perfect. I watch her while I continue bringing her father drinks, and anyone else who taps my elbow as I pass. I bump into her once, say excuse me, but she doesn’t notice.

The bar is fully hosted, from rail to premiums, which makes me happy, as I don’t have to deal with counting change. It means people will stay later, though, and I may be here until the middle of the night. The first time this happened, my mother was worried, but soon learned to hear my key turn in the middle of her dreams. But people do not stay too late, and I am surprised. Robin gives me two thumbs up as the bride slips off her heels and it is only 1 AM. She has kissed everyone goodbye, and it is just her, her parents, and the groom left. Her mom tells her everything went perfectly. She agrees. She does not look as happy now. She slings her heels in her hand, and says, “Goddamn it, my feet hurt.”

During the weekdays, when there are no weddings, the ballroom is empty. On Sundays, after everything from the night before has been tucked away, Marcus and José roll the tables on their thin edges to the closet, stack away the chairs, and the room is big and bare and flat. Sometimes, when I have a second, when the event I’m working is in the lull between plates being placed down and being picked up, I go into the ballroom and sit under the biggest chandelier, the one in the middle of the room, look up at it, stare through the golden metal that bends and shines and holds light together, and imagine the next wedding.

I wonder what colors will bounce across the room, matching each other and the bride. If there will be a band, unzipping and clinking and pulling out instruments as we set the silverware down, one place setting at a time. I imagine the flowers, match their pictures in my mind to the names I’ve slowly learned, wonder which they’ll choose. And I think about the tables, what they will look like, how many and how close together they’ll be, how many people will come to celebrate love, or just drink and dance and be around other people.

I stretch out my legs and arms, let myself fall onto my back, and feel the floor beneath my body. I knead the carpet with my fingers, still looking up, and try to imagine my own wedding—see myself as the bride. I scan each space of
the room, try to picture the details. I can't see anything, though. I can't imagine a wedding based off some type of pure and flawless love, because I haven't felt that yet. And I don't want it to be about the napkins or the entrée like so many weddings I've seen have been. Still, I stare at the light of the chandelier, close my eyes, and keep trying to see it. I imagine everything white, everywhere. The walls transforming, their old, swirly green wallpaper becoming clean and crisp and pallid. The carpet, the one I'm feeling, turning pale and colorless, too. The maroon chairs white, the flowers—their stems—white and firm and long. Everyone, my mother, my father, my brother, my best friend, myself, the man whom I am meant to be with forever, dressed in bright, even white. But when I open my eyes and turn my head to the side, stare out into the familiar open space, all I can see is the empty ballroom—the walls, the floor, the ceiling. □
He’s in the hospital, was my mother’s trained response, automatic from years of saying it.
My grandmother would reply, Oh, shuffle her dentures, and, with the precision of Alzheimer’s, forget.

He still got around after he died, my grandfather, because it seemed much nicer to me to make up little stories for her.
Maybe he was out walking the dog they gave up, doing the shopping, or sometimes he was just coming right back.
It didn’t matter; even after she couldn’t remember who I was, she would land on the same phrase, again and again, as we waited for my mother to return with chocolate swirl ice cream, a small distraction from the ruthless pursuit of the only worry my grandmother was still allowed.
I’d sheepishly enjoy my coned relief, guilty of waiting for the day when she would finally forget Claude, too.
Here’s the thing: when I met Karl three years ago, he was wearing a shark costume and was so drunk he couldn’t take the head off.

I was standing in the concession line at a minor league baseball game. When I turned away from the counter, carrying a Coke and a hotdog smothered with everything, some guy in a shark costume started waving at me.

“Howdy,” I said. The shark man pulled at his shark head. He tried twisting his shark neck. He did a shark dance. “Do you need help?”

“No,” said the shark man. He stumbled. “No. But, hey, my friends are having a party later at our house on Sixth and Walsh. You should come. We have lawn ornaments.”

This is the truth: the first time I saw Karl in that goddamn shark suit—and the surprisingly frequent times he wore it afterward—I wanted to fuck his brains out. God knows why, but he seems to have that effect on a lot of women, so I don’t have to chalk it up to a sad personal failing. Honestly, I never thought of Karl in a romantic way, aside from the occasional sex fantasy, and really, those were few and far between. They usually involved him saving me from drowning or killer whales.

“Sorry. I have a boyfriend. And I don’t know your name.”

“Oh,” he said. “Right. Well, my name’s Karl. Bring him and bring your hair.”

I didn’t have a boyfriend, but I did end up leaving the game around the sixth inning because I don’t really like baseball, and the possibility of partying with a bunch of guys wearing shark suits was surreal and strange enough that I ended up shotgunning Miller Lites with Karl and his costumeless friends, who eventually removed the shark head so their comrade could get more drunk. I spent the night on his Spider-Man sheets while he sprawled out on the dirty carpet, explaining the intricacies of the Marvel Universe and anti-heroes.

Eventually, I convinced Karl to give me the shark head and to stop identifying me by my hair color. Now he calls me LP, short for Lollipop, because I wear a lot of neutrals and, obviously, the hair. It isn’t exactly an improvement, but at least it’s a little more personal.

Now when we go out, Karl likes standing next to me because I highlight his best qualities—allegedly his height and dark hair—so he stays close to me when we go to bars. Of course, Karl doesn’t need the contrast, because he’s just
the kind of charismatic that you learn to stay away from if you’re smart. He’s also the proud owner of a newly crooked nose—the slight left turn makes him look more approachable somehow, and has increased his success rate. The nose, along with a temporary black eye and busted lip, was the result of a fight with some guy who wouldn’t leave Cindy, one of our favorite bartenders, alone.

It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but lately Karl’s been pretty reckless. Just after New Year’s he found out that he has acute multiple sclerosis, and since then he’s lost all sense of caution, doesn’t take the time to consider the aftermath.

After Karl told us the news, he disappeared for a while, and I started watching a lot more of the History Channel, going online to find ideas on how to engage seventh- and eighth-graders who aren’t interested in ancient history. I wasn’t planning on staying here after college, but lately I’ve been starting to think I could settle down for good here. For the most part I like the job and the area: the pay isn’t good, and I’m not interested in school district politics, but I like the kids and the freedom to do whatever I want during the summer, all the holiday breaks.

Most of the women who teach at Lincoln are at least ten years older than
I am, so I don’t see them much outside of school, aside from the occasional dinner at their house with their husbands and kids. I get along with everyone well enough, but I like to have a good time, so without Karl and the rest of the guys, I would be pretty lonely. It’s not that I don’t have female friends or know other people, but they are like brothers to me—they make me feel secure, less responsible.

In February, Karl called to apologize and had us over for a cookout. He looked happy but tired around his mouth, his lips. Over burgers and beer, he told us how much he appreciated our support and how lucky he was to have us around. Then, a few weekends later, Karl insisted we go to the beach, so a bunch of us, blazed and obliging, drove to the summer homes along the waterfront at 2 AM. Chris parked the car in someone’s driveway and walked to the water. Karl broke into a jog over the cold, damp sand and then flung himself, fully clothed, far gone, into the water and started swimming, which he can’t do very well.

“This feels great,” he yelled, cutting the water with his arms. “This feels fan-fucking-tastic.”

We stood along the shoreline, just far enough back so that the tide wouldn’t come in over our shoes. I felt angry, and as we watched him dunk his head
into the water again and again, I wanted to scream. It hurt to watch him act so stupid, but at the same time I almost envied him, how he could be so uncaring and do whatever he wanted because he knew he was going to die. I felt bad for feeling that way, then even worse for myself. I waded out to meet Karl, and he reached for me, grabbed my fingers, but I couldn't feel him because my hands were numb.

“Hey, LP.” Karl pressed his forehead against mine and slipped his hands around the back of my neck. “Hey, that's my girl.”

“You're a real motherfucker, Karl,” I said. I thought about how one year, during summer conditioning, my high school soccer coach made us run in the lake, despite the beach being closed due to high levels of E. coli. He told us it'd be fine if we kept our mouths shut and our heads above the water. “I fucking hate you right now.”

Karl refused to get out until John, Adam, and Chris joined us, their thick sweaters filling up with water and rising to the surface.

After our late-night swim, Adam had a long talk with Karl and made it clear that if he pulled something like that again, he wouldn't need to worry about the disease killing him. Karl got upset at first, said Adam was a shitty human being, and told us to go to hell because we couldn't possibly understand what he was going through, but something must have stuck, because he started drinking less and seemed a little happier.

Things stayed pretty quiet until March, when Karl went on a week-long whisky binge, drinking every night until he couldn't even sit properly. One night he punched through John's porch door because he couldn't get it open to smoke a cigarette. There was blood and glass everywhere, and we had to tape cardboard over the hole.

Karl refused to come back inside, so we gathered some sheets and blankets and sat outside with him on the porch while he vomited over the railing. After he fell asleep, John fireman-carried him back to the living room couch, put a trashcan within arm's reach, and I cleaned the blood off his hands with some damp napkins.

“He can't keep this up, LP,” John said, picking up the glass with his fingers because he couldn't find a broom. “First strangers, now my goddamn door? Next he's going to punch a wall and break his hand. He won't be able to work. He'll be a goddamn accountant with a broken hand who even can't use a fucking computer.”

“Who knows? Maybe he needs to break his hand.” I threw the last bloody
napkin into the trash. “Do you have any Neosporin?”

“You’re crazy.” John stared at me. “He’s not one of your seventh graders. He’s a grownup, LP. He doesn’t need Neosporin. He needs to get his shit together because it still matters what he does. He’s not dead yet.”

One of my favorite sections in the textbook we use is about feudalism in Europe, so I took my time covering fealty oaths and what it means to pledge that kind of service to a human being, to give your whole self to earn something. But, as it turns out, feudalism is particularly uninteresting to middle schoolers. It also turns out that restless students cause trouble, which can result in an outbreak of adolescent cruelty.

After one particularly stressful week, Karl took me to the park, bought us soft pretzels, and listened to my story about how one girl filled another girl’s desk with tampons and pads after the student bled through her skirt.

“I just don’t get it.” I put my head on his shoulder. “What would possess a kid to hurt someone like that?”

“LP, you can’t stop people from doing what they want. The only thing you can do is try to teach them a little decency. You know, lead by example.”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how I can help.” I turned my face up, and he kissed me. I was surprised, and his mouth was urgent, like he was trying to swallow my lips whole, like he was still hungry.

When the weather got warm, Karl and I started going for long walks. We would stop a few times a week at the Italian bakery where my grandmother works. She always told Karl how good-looking he is and gave us a bag of garlic pepperoni balls. Sometimes we kept walking around downtown, stopping inside the local art galleries with pictures of ships and historical landmarks. Karl hates that stuff, but I can’t stay away. Sure, I don’t really care about sailing, the lake, or that the peninsula is always migrating—I just enjoy beach motifs and watercolor schemes. The thing is, the only place you really see those sorts of things is in cottages, and there is a part of me that wants to have my own. A little place filled with driftwood, where I’d have to take a gravel road to the beach, where I could watch sunsets. The best kinds are the ones with lots of clouds, layered with shades of maroon and plum. My father once told me those kinds of sunsets look that way because of carelessness, because people used to dump garbage and chemicals in the water until someone figured out it was harmful.

“LP,” Karl would murmur, his teeth pulling at my earlobe, as I stared at
expensive watercolors or necklaces made of sea glass. “LP, let’s go home. Let’s have some fun. Let’s get moving.”

When I first noticed the tremors, we were in bed, naked, and watching reruns of Law and Order. I thought his legs were just spasming, the way limbs do that funny shaking thing sometimes, like you’re shivering but you aren’t cold. It reminded me of how my ex-boyfriend’s forearms used to shake when he held himself up while we had sex. I thought it was sort of funny, almost cute, and I remember kissing the length of his thighs before wrapping myself around him. Later, after doing some research on MS, I found out that the spasms were a symptom.

We stopped sleeping together not long after that, and for a while I missed it, the different kind of closeness between us. I don’t mean the sex, because that wasn’t great, even though Karl was pretty good with his mouth. It’s more that I appreciated he was choosing to spend his time with me, instead of going out and screwing as many attractive women as he possibly could.

I didn’t break it off because the attraction faded, or because it was impractical, or even because he was going to die. I did it because we weren’t going to fall in love, and it seemed like an unfair way to waste the time we had left.

Lately Karl has to pee constantly. He hates having to hunt for a bathroom while bar crawling, so he’s taken to peeing on the side of buildings and in alleys while we form effective semicircles to hide him from the police. The precaution is more for us, really, because Karl decided he doesn’t give a shit if he gets cited for indecent exposure or public drunkenness, although once he admitted that he would feel bad if some kid out past curfew ended up seeing his dick.

“I wouldn’t want to give some boy a complex about his size, you know?” Karl slurred, after urinating outside Citibank, and later on the steps of the science museum. “I mean, what if it was one of your kids, LP? I don’t want that on my conscience.”

Chris has started planning a road trip for him. Nothing too far, nothing too busy—maybe a national park or an extended camping trip. It’s not some fucked-up parting adventure, although at first he jokingly insisted on leaving
Karl out in the wilds to survive on mushrooms and his own urine. It'll be nice, I think. Good for them. They'll fish with their bare hands, relive their Eagle Scout glory, and Karl won't have to worry about finding a bathroom.

Last night Karl came over because we hadn't spent much time together recently, much less time alone. Karl's started sleeping with Cindy—the bartender—which doesn't surprise anyone. From what Adam tells me, aside from staying late at the bar, Karl's taken her to the movies, even paid for a few fancy dinners. I understand he needs this, that he deserves this, so I don't mind so much that he doesn't always answer my calls. I'm his best friend.

Karl made pierogies and we started on some boxed wine, which I'm not at all ashamed to drink, especially on a teacher's salary. After dinner, he made a quick trip to the gas station for a pack of cigarettes, and by the time he came back I was dancing around the living room half-naked, with the shark head on. He leaned against the doorway and lit up right there.

“LP.” He exhaled and rubbed his cheek with his free hand. “LP, what the hell are you doing?”

“What does it look like, Karl?” I didn't stop. “I'm dancing. Come fucking dance with me.”

I can't explain why I stripped down to my bra and underwear. I just remember sitting on the couch, my stomach getting hot and itchy, and my brain getting louder and louder, telling me to stop sitting around, acting so calm and rational, like my best friend wasn't going to die, because he was, and probably any day now.

“Is that ice cream?” I asked. “What kind of ice cream did you get?”

Karl stood there, not moving, and watched me flail about until he realized I wasn't going to stop anytime soon. “You’re losing it.”

He tried to take my hand but I jumped away, twisting my body violently and feeling the sweat drip down my neck, down my spine. “Karl, you really need to put that in the freezer before it melts.”

“LP, LP, LP.” He grabbed me tightly from behind. “Goddamn it, Liz.”

In the three years we've known each other, Karl has only said my name twice: when he told me he probably only had a year left to live, and after the first time we had sex. So I stopped.

“Are you okay?” Karl set me down on the couch and pulled off the shark head, which pissed me off, because it's rude to take things from people, to skip asking permission. I stared at the wall and slid my uncomfortably warm hands underneath my legs, grabbing at the cool leather. I decided the living room
could use another coat of paint, something less beige.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey. Look at me.”

I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in any of it anymore. I closed my eyes.

“Give me that,” I said.

Karl passed his cigarette. After a few minutes of silence he got up and kissed my forehead. “Don't move, okay? I'll be right back.”

It wasn't until I heard the freezer door shut that I noticed the room was spinning and I didn't know if I wanted to laugh, cry, or vomit cheap wine all over my carpet.

Karl put a cold hand on my cheek, and when I opened my eyes he was holding a glass of water. “Drink.”

“Where's the shark?”

“Drink.”

“Fine.” I took the water. “Where's the shark?”

“I threw it away,” Karl said. “Then I took out the trash for you because you probably won't be in great shape tomorrow morning. You're welcome.”

My face didn't feel like it was a part of my body. It was burning. “That's how we met. It's important to me. You can't just do things like that.”

“You don't need a shark head. I’m here.” He leaned in and his lips brushed the top of my ear. “So, how about it, LP? Can I join your dance party?”

I wanted to tell Karl I couldn't imagine not having him around, that I was tired of being the responsible one, that he can't just do whatever the hell he wants, that there are consequences. I wanted to tell him that I can never decide if I want to fuck him or kill him. I wanted to tell him how wrong it was to throw away the shark head when he knew that as soon as he left I would stumble down the dark driveway, tear open the garbage bag, and feel my way through the rotting fruit and half-eaten dinners until I found it.

It wasn't that I was in love with him. I just didn't know what to do or how to say it.

“All right, Karl.” I stood up, unsteady but better. “But you better keep up.”
landscape #7
ned dibner | stoneware
the noise and heat of being
The small, calloused hand of a boy you don’t really like
kneading its way past the hem of your skirt
in the humid back of the afternoon school bus.
The taste of aluminum. Walking across thawing lakes.
Rolling your forehead along the cool car window
when passing the crunched, splintered fronts of trucks,
saying to yourself, “That’s not blood, it’s antifreeze.”
Feeling places where pages were ripped out of books.
The scraping of fingernails against hard tiles and grout
when you look for the diamond from your mother’s wedding ring.
Watching the stewardess cry. Hearing about the scruffy old man
who knocked on your friend’s door
with his pants scrunched and circling his ankles,
asking to rub her feet. Throwing batteries in the trash.
The first time you see an open casket: the girl from your college
dorm hall, the one you used to brush your teeth silently beside.
The swelling hum of a car behind you while you run along pavement
with sweat rolling into the corners of your mouth.
Riding an elevator with a crying middle-aged woman
to the eleventh floor, the gin on her breath heating up
the little space and air you’re sharing.
Watching the scab on the back of a stranger’s pale calf
peel and crack. Hearing your neighbor hack down his trees.
The distant sound of breaking: the restaurant platter,
or the slick, straight bone of your brother’s forearm.
Please show all of your work on a separate sheet of paper and attach it to this one. Maybe it’ll help me figure all this out.

1. John is planning a romantic getaway with his fiancée, Sally. They can stay at a hotel in Aruba for $400 a night, a bed and breakfast in Massachusetts for $250 a night, or a ski resort in Taos for $337 a night. Which vacation will remind Sally how much John loves her?

2. Sally has four cookies. John has seven cookies, but Sally wants to eat Lamar’s cookies instead for some reason, even though John made the cookies himself and clearly put a lot of time and effort into making those cookies. Why is Sally such a whore?

3. Sally and John decide to end their engagement. John sells the ring to a pawn shop for $400. If he bought the ring for $750, by what percentage did the price change from when he was still happy?

4. A pizza restaurant cuts their pizzas into different numbers of slices based on the size of the pizza. A medium pizza has six slices, a large pizza has eight, and an extra-large has twelve. A medium slice is 6 inches long, a large slice is 8 inches, and an extra-large slice is 10 inches. Using Heron’s Formula, determine the area of a slice of a large pizza. If John is used to ordering a large to split, how many extra pieces of pizza will he eat to try and forget that Sally’s gone?

5. The equation $y = -5x + 3$ measures the slope of Sally’s feelings for John over the course of their six-year relationship. How happy was she at the start of the relationship? What is the cosine of Sally’s disdain?

6. At the local liquor store, a fifth of cheap, decent vodka costs around $9. A fifth has twenty shots in it, depending on the shotglass. If a lonely teacher were to spend $27 on vodka per week, how many shots does he get per dollar? Does this mean he might have a drinking problem?
7. A half-empty house has eight rooms. One room is shaped like a triangle, one is shaped like a circle, three are shaped like rectangles, one is shaped like a parallelogram, and two are shaped like squares. How many corners are available for someone to cry softly to himself in?

8. John starts to have recurring nightmares about dying alone and notes to his psychiatrist that he's had twenty-five such dreams in the past three weeks. On average, how many of these dreams does he have per week? Why should this seem troubling to John?

9. John decides to burn a photo album filled with pictures of him and Sally. If each picture takes two minutes and eleven seconds to completely burn, and there are fifty-four pictures in the book, how long will it take for every memory to be gone? Will this action make John happy or fill him with regret?

10. Sally once told John she'd love him forever. If she started loving him five months after they started dating, and stopped loving him two months before they ended their six-year relationship, what percentage of forever did she actually love him for? Why did Sally lie?

BONUS: John decides to buy a pet in a last-ditch effort for companionship. The pet store has five dogs, twelve cats, fifteen birds, thirty fish, a guinea pig, and a hamster. How many more nights will John lie awake in bed wondering if life's just a cruel joke? Will things ever be okay again? Please give your answer in both degrees and radians. □
When I was ten, I realized for the first time that sadness was unacceptable. My parents were hoisting my dog, Polly, into the car on the blanket we took to soccer games, the one with the slippery weatherproof lining on the outside. They hadn’t told me they were taking her away, instead choosing to usher me to the basement with ice cream and a movie. Polly normally would have jumped into the back but her legs hadn’t been working for a few days. She had been dragging herself around like a mermaid, pausing every couple of steps to rest. Mom made my sister and me roll her outside to go to the bathroom and get some air. That day she hadn’t left the garage at all, not even when my dad put hamburger meat on the steps inside. Instead she chewed on the carpet, ripping it into pieces and leaving fuzzy shreds on the ground.

Mom closed the back of the van, and then saw me standing at the door, having snuck back from the basement. I asked where she was going. I wanted to come. I was the one who always went places with Polly; why hadn’t they told me she was going somewhere? Dad didn’t respond but got into the front seat of the van.

“Honey,” my mom said, “Polly’s sick. We’re going to take her to the vet and she might not come back. She’s really old,” she added. “You know what happens when dogs are old, right?”

I knew that once Polly had gotten old she had started passing wind a lot more. She became more quiet and patient and didn’t jump through the gaping holes in the fence that boxed in our backyard. I said this, but my mom shook her head.

“She’s going to die, Katie.” My mom’s voice was stern, almost exasperated. “Things die when they get old.”

My dad pulled out of the garage and carried my decrepit dog up the driveway. A scream welled up in my throat, and something like anger had begun to push at the back of my eyes. My mom seemed to sense this feeling. “No,” she said. “We don’t cry about things like this. People and animals die, and they’ll go to Heaven, and that’s just what happens.” Then she knelt down and hugged me, putting her hand on the back of my head, holding me steady for a minute. “It’s okay. If you want to cry, you can cry right now, but then dust yourself off and keep going. It’ll be okay.” She squeezed a little more tightly before letting me go, and I felt lost, waiting for this designated time to feel.
My mom was taking me prom dress shopping. The day before she had taken my brother to a wilderness program. She had found pot in his top desk drawer, apparently the last straw after months of struggling with him, trying to force him to cooperate and live by the “house rules.” I knew she was stressed about it, that my brother’s bad behavior had been eating at her for a long time now, and I thought the shopping trip might be as nice for her as it would be for me. We would be able to get out of the house, away from the hole he had punched into the living room wall and the family picture he had swiped off the shelf in the hall, sending it flying, hitting the ground and cracking the glass right through our faces, like our heads had been split and glued back together.

We walked together, a little more quiet than usual. Not that I was especially good friends with my mom. She had told me once that if I thought of her as a friend, then she wasn’t doing her job as a parent.

I tried on dresses, and she would make comments, usually something nice followed by something that was supposed to be constructive, like, “Why do you always stand like that? Can’t you stand like a lady?” Or, “Well, Katie, if you don’t suck it in a little, obviously it’s not going to look right.” It was sort of putting me out of the shopping mood.

We had finished with our fifth store, and I was ready to leave. Mom was being silent in a way that seemed to imply that she had something to say. I had a feeling she wanted to talk about my brother Matt, but at the same time, that seemed terribly out of character. We were in a mall, for God’s sake.

There was a TCBY on the way out, and I knew Mom would love some. She was always hungry for their soft serve. No frills, she would say, just like frozen yogurt should be.

“My treat,” I said, pointing at the entrance. In reality, it was on her since I didn’t have a job, so it was her money sitting cold in my bank account.

“Sure.” It wasn’t the answer I was hoping for, but it was better than nothing.

Holding our cups, we walked around JCPenny in big circles, not saying anything. My mom had a tendency to chew her yogurt, just like she seemed to chew her words, prolonging the entire process. We stopped at the furniture section, and she sat on the edge of a bed with an ugly green comforter, one that looked vaguely like something my great aunt would own. She set the yogurt on the decorative nightstand, as though she owned it and was going to go to sleep now.

“So I hope this was fun.” It didn’t sound like she cared too much about how much I had enjoyed it, to be honest.
“Yeah, Mom. It was great.”

“Well, I know you kids like me the most when I’m buying you something.”

The yogurt suddenly didn't feel quite as cold as the blood stopped moving to
my fingers, stopped circulating period, leaving me cold and empty and wanting
to yell at her because she was angry at me. I had wanted her to finally open up
and just talk to me and let me help her out, help her talk through everything
that had gone wrong between her and my brother, and while we're at it, the
rest of the family and the way they couldn't talk to each other either. And it
occurred to me that there wasn't a reason I couldn't yell at her.

“Mom,” I said. “Shut up.” It wasn't a yell. In fact, it came out more quietly than
I had meant, caught partially behind my teeth, and I wished it had stayed there
in verbal limbo, not quite out into the air yet but far enough from my throat to
count as speaking. She studied my face. I could see tears push her contacts off her
irises, right there in the middle of JCPenny, sitting on a bed that didn't belong to
anybody. It was sad, but also a little scary because I had made her feel so bad that
she broke her biggest rule.

I had the impulse to give her a hug. Instead, I wrapped my arms around
myself and waited for her to stop, for us to go home, for me to pretend like it
never happened, and for her to wash her face of the tears and emotion that had
almost given her away.

Once a week during the summer, I would walk to my friend Emily’s house
to talk and drink tea. I’m not sure when this tradition began, although I can
trace it roughly to when she decided to become a psychologist. It has always
been therapeutic to sink into her couch and sip Earl Grey Breakfast Blend from
absurdly tiny cups. She would ask me question after question about my life,
what I was reading, how my family was.

I rarely knew what to ask her, though. When I thought of something to
say, I would often roll it over in my head until it was tame, unobtrusive. As we
talked she would sit, legs crossed, picking at the knit wool socks she wore year-
round.

Emily’s house was painted in warm colors, ones that you only see in the
pack of crayons with the sharpener in the back, colors that were named things
like Burnt Sienna and Tumbleweed and Atomic Tangerine. Her mother clearly
had a strong love for decoration. Wrought iron sculptures hung on the walls,
and black-and-white pictures sat in delicately worn frames on shelves and
tables. And cats. There were cats everywhere, in the suspended reality of art
but also in the flesh, eating and meowing and sometimes making noises that
sounded like chewing too fast. They sat and stared in that exceptionally put-
upon way cats have of looking at strange new people.

Except one. I had thought it was a stain on the living room carpet when
I first walked in. He was completely sprawled on the floor, like he had belly-
flopped from the ceiling. “He’s kind of stupid,” Emily said. “Mom thinks he
jumps off the furniture and just falls. I also think maybe he can’t see so well.
It’s really sad, you know. I bought him because I felt kind of bad.” She looked
genuinely concerned, picking him up off the floor and propping his legs under
him like kickstands. There was a long pause. “Did you know my dad has been
dead for thirteen years?” She didn’t look at me, instead focusing on holding
the cat as it tried to worm its way out of her hands. I did know. There was a
picture of a younger her with her dad that sat on the top shelf of her closet. In
it she was wearing a paper birthday hat and pointing at something or someone
out of the picture. Her dad sat next to her, smiling the same smile she has now,
so tall the photographer cut the top of his head out. When I had asked Emily
about it once, she pointed out that he died of brain cancer and had even kind of
laughed. I tried to make some sort of noise back, but it didn’t sound right. Too
“Sometimes I try to buy something that maybe he would like,” she told me, her voice a little unsteady. “He always talked about getting pets. I don’t know why we never did.” The cat was trying to escape more desperately than before, almost convulsing with effort. She either pretended not to notice or ignored him, because she kept scratching between his ears, her other hand clenched tightly on his stomach, pushing fuzzy fat through her fingers.

“I really wish he was still here.” I had never heard her talk this way. It struck me as incredibly sad that she thought she couldn’t talk to anyone but me about it, and I was a massive disappointment, even though we had been friends for years. I should have known what to say to her to make her feel better, or to at least take her mind off of this. Between wishing that the moment would end and wondering if my palm was too sweaty to put on her knee, I caught myself thinking about why we had never talked about this before, if maybe on some level she knew I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I was the kind of friend you have fun with—going shopping, trading clothes for dances—not one you share things with.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “But thanks for listening to me.”

I nodded. “Of course, Em.” And then, “I’m sorry, too. Maybe I should give you a minute by yourself.” She didn’t say anything, but I was feeling pressure in my stomach that I translated to a need to use the toilet. I didn’t look at her when I got up and walked quickly to the bathroom, closing the door quietly, waiting for her to feel better.

We had been sitting in a car for six hours, and all my boyfriend Andy could talk about was Mighty Taco. To be fair, it wasn’t only him. His parents, sitting in the front, also raved about the food, how cheap it was, the taste—which I was sure was going to be too spicy since they doused most of what they ate in Rooster Sauce. We were driving to their family Christmas, a day or two after the real thing, and as snowflakes slipped around the car like confetti I could feel myself becoming closer to them. The conversation, the way they talked so openly, swirled around me like the weather outside, and I felt comfortable and at home.

We met the rest of their family at Mighty Taco. It was funny to see them clustered around small plastic tables, a broad array of Americanized Mexican
food in the center like a Thanksgiving spread. It wasn't the formal affair I had expected, but they were talking and smiling and excited to see each other, laughing through enormous bites of soggy taco shell. It was his mom's side of the family, five women and one man, most of them tall and slim like she was, poofy blonde hair and the same blue eyes I saw in all three of her kids. I ate everything they handed me, trying to be a champ, knowing that Andy eats the most, and there is no reason his girlfriend shouldn't do the same.

That night I stretched out on the air mattress they had set up for me in the basement, feeling content. I was so surprised that they had let me into their family traditions that easily. I realize that's kind of how it's done when you have a significant other, that you two are obligated to go places together and give up holidays with your family periodically to spend them with strangers. My family had always been so particular about that. Very rarely did boyfriends or girlfriends get invited to Christmas brunch or Thanksgiving. I remember one time my sister was allowed to bring her boyfriend to my grandparents' Fourth of July party, but that was mostly because it was all outside and physically possible to create distance between you and someone else, never being trapped within the same four walls.

My stomach was starting to twist. I could feel the burning mass of Mighty Taco moving down my intestines. I bounced around on the air mattress, feeling it scoot across the floor, trying to get to a position where I could curl up into a ball. It wasn't helping. I grabbed my phone and called Andy, who was sleeping on a couch in the living room.

I didn't give him the chance to say hi. “Which bathroom do I use if I'm going to be sick?”

“What? What do you mean which bathroom? Come upstairs.”

“But is anybody awake? Are you the only one up there?”

“No, my mom and Aunt Judy are here. Katie, just come upstairs.” Then I heard him cover the speaker and say quietly, “Yeah, Mom, she's sick, but she doesn't want anybody to know.”

“Andy! God. Fine. I'm coming upstairs.”

More accurately, I crawled up the stairs, trying to keep my stomach as compact as possible, thinking that maybe if I could stay in this ball shape, I could expand my stomach a little and let the digesting tacos inhabit more space. But the tile was cold, so I pressed my cheek into the floor, feeling loose dog hairs stick to my face like whiskers. Then Mrs. Nadel appeared. She always wanted me to call her Ginger, but I thought that was too casual. I didn't want her to think of me as the girl who got too comfortable with the family too fast.
But it looked as though that moment was going to come whether I wanted it to or not. She was squatting down next to me, rubbing my back, and suddenly there were more hands, trying to help me up but not understanding that what I really wanted, or needed, was to stay on the floor and become invisible.

“Mrs. Nadel, I really just need to use the bathroom. Could you tell me where it is?” I moved my hands away from my stomach and onto the floor, pushing myself up, trying not to brush away the hands that were trying to help. “Okay, sweetie, it’ll be all right.” She pushed my hair off my face, and I thought I should give her a hug, but decided against it. It occurred to me that this was weird. They were being really nice, Mrs. Nadel yelling orders at people for cold wash rags and Andy picking me up to take me upstairs to the bed that had been vacated for me, but I couldn’t stand for them to see me this way. It was a strange toss-up, between not wanting them to see me like this but also wanting to be polite, to not tell them how badly I wanted to be alone but how I knew I would feel awful if I turned them down.

Andy stayed behind, sitting on the edge of my bed after everyone left. “I know that was rough for you,” he said, smiling a little as I closed my eyes, willing my stomach to stop revolting against the rest of my body. “But you should probably just try to let them be nice to you. They’re not mad at you for needing help.”

Dad and I were both trying to go to work on a frigid January day, one of the many where we woke up three hours early just to plow ourselves out of our driveway. He had offered me a job for the month, knowing I needed some spending money and perhaps some time together. We worked in Nesquehoning, at a shop where they manufactured hydraulically-powered water pumps, although he didn’t work in the shop. My dad could do the metal work, but he was better at the communication aspect because he didn’t waste time with pleasantries. The idea was to make the sale, and he was good at it.

My shovel broke that morning, sweat mingling with melted snow as we shoveled a narrow path for the car, and I had to use a bucket. It still had dirt clods clinging to the inside from the summer and stained the white drifts with brown. Dad smoked as he dug, the cigarette glowing just enough to illuminate his face when he inhaled. He looked tired, I thought. It was etched in his face, like something he couldn’t get rid of, a weight around his eyes. The skin there had turned a light purple and seemed thinner, cellophane holding in his eyeballs.

I liked the drives up, but not in the cold. His car didn’t retain heat well, so
it usually took the entire two-hour ride for the car to warm up a little. Talking helped to take our minds off of it.

“Gram BJ hasn’t answered the phone in a few days,” Dad told me as he drove. He broke out another cigarette, cracking the window. I zipped my coat up farther, accidentally catching the flappy skin under my chin, and crossed my arms. The cold still burned my ears. For some reason he always opened the window for a smoke just as the car had finally heated up. Ashes swirled like dandruff on the black leather. We were quiet for a long time. I pulled my neck down as far as I could, the pointed front of my jacket pushing my glasses into my face between my eyebrows.

“So what do you want to do?” I asked, my breath hot against the fuzzy inside of my coat. My tone was a little ruder than I had intended. He sighed, filling the car with smoke, and in the pause I looked at him and noticed our faces were alike, and suddenly I felt nervous, the kind that you get from sitting still for too long, the kind that eats at your leg muscles and begs you to extend yourself somehow.

“Work.” He gave me a small smile, the cigarette hanging on his lower lip like a gritty string bean, slightly bent from having been in the package he’d sat on. “Those pumps won’t sell themselves.”

Later, I sat on the ground in front of a cabinet in a work room, scraping old tape off the drawers with a butter knife from the kitchen supplies and thinking about how terrible it was to be stuck all day in an office. Once in a while he would walk by on his phone and remind me to not scrape the paint. I nodded, trying to hide the spirals of beige that had already begun to cling to the serrated knife edge. He had spent most of the morning talking to somebody on the phone, his left hand dug deep into his pocket. It looked strange. After the time he accidentally left his wallet in his pocket and Mom put it through the wash, he stopped putting anything, even his hands, in there.

“Lunch time,” he said, and waved me toward the conference room in the back of the office. It used to be a sort of headquarters for a catering company, with lots of swinging doors and thick layers of green paint on the walls. Some of the decoration was still left. There were bland paintings and a framed picture of the previous owners at a party, looking like a slightly drunken version of the picture that comes inside the frame when it’s brand new. Giant deer heads glared down at us. One had a Coke bottle jammed between its lips and a sign
around its neck that read “Fun kills.” They all had watery eyes. I wondered how taxidermy works on an eyeball.

The conference room was illuminated by the snow drifts outside, a dull glow like an underwater pool light. Dad was already at the head of the table, looking at his hands, pulling at the family crest ring he could no longer push over his knuckle. I sat next to him, waiting for him to set the grocery store salad or greasy McDonald’s bag on the table. He didn't move, so I didn't either. I wondered for a minute if I was supposed to have gotten the food. He didn't ask me to, did he? I had been so preoccupied with the tape and the numb sensation creeping from the tips of my fingers into my palms that I hadn't paid much attention. He's going to fire me, I thought. He saw me scrape the damned paint off. The backs of my legs began to sweat. He said, “My mother just died.”

I didn't know what to do. He said it matter-of-factly, quietly; it was almost just a breath. I stood up, thinking I should hug him. It felt wrong. I had never comforted my own dad. I sat down again. He had clasped his hands like he wanted to talk to God instead of me. “It'll be okay,” I said, and as soon as I did I wanted to take it back, knowing that this was the kind of thing that never changes. It wasn't okay for her to be dead. But I still felt the overwhelming need to comfort him, so I stood and draped an arm around his shoulder, a sideways hug. His head leaned against my arm and I felt him inhale sharply, like a hiccup held in his mouth. I felt like crying, but I don't think it was because my grandmother died.

When I pulled away, the crook of my elbow was blotchy and wet, and I fought the urge to say It’s okay again. As I struggled to think of something eloquent yet comforting, he looked at me, eyes dark and slightly filmy. “Don’t tell anyone in the office,” he said softly, and left me to sit at the table surrounded by empty chairs and the decapitated deer that watched as my eyes pooled with water. It was the most alike I had ever felt to my father. Neither of us would be sad. I would wait until that night in the shower, when all the water would run together and down the drain as though it had never been there.
On a sweltering day in July, a friend and I popped into an antique store in my hometown of Lexington, Virginia. The store mostly offered an abundance of kitsch and virtually useless knickknacks, but amongst the random findings were, every once in a while, antediluvian treasures or awesome, dated clothes and records. On this certain occasion, I was lucky enough to come upon a box filled with old cameras. In the box was a brown and tan camera bag, containing an old Pentax K1000 35mm film camera in exceptional condition, several lenses, and a couple of color filters. All of this loot was offered to me at a price of forty dollars. What a steal.

I had little experience with shooting film prior to buying my Pentax. Throughout the rest of the summer, I enlisted friends and family who were knowledgeable about the process to teach me the ins and outs of film.
photography. It’s a wonderful thing, having a machine act as an extension of yourself, capturing moments that you wish to remember always. I would find myself daydreaming about a certain composition or lighting that I wanted to capture, and I would go on spur-of-the-moment adventures to seek it out.
There is also something about developing pictures, rather than immediately seeing them on a digital screen, that brings out the magic and excitement of the process. Photography has turned into a beloved hobby of mine, and I hope to be continually amazed and inspired by the brilliant medium of film.
in case we can’t stop

jenna dawkins | poetry

Let me touch you in the places you like and I like. The ones that have some kind of history we want repeated, where muscle memory refuses to forget, like fingers of musicians after years of silence, the turning of the key I never gave back in the door you never lock.

We are this way for now, and I notice wrinkles beneath your tired lips that are new, that have attached themselves to you like flies to the brightest light while we weren’t looking. And I wonder when you last saw yourself, how time always passes at its own pace, somehow feeling too fast or slow.

We are like the fall, the one we hate, when all that is left is what we can, or won’t, remember. I think of nights when she is home, of the dip I leave behind in bed. I think of her smell, one I could never identify, or replace, and despite everything, I envy her, wish I was her, or could know her if things were different.

But this is who we are, and how we are, and in a delicate silence, I’ll creep my lips along your chest as you drift to sleep, telling me first not to go, that our secret is safe. But today is the first day of winter, and I know it’s time to leave the key I’ve held for so long, knowing you’ll only ever notice if you choose, for once, to lock the door behind you.
the parade

alexa johnson | digital photograph
I’ve got a full twelve minutes before Tripp comes up the front steps, dragging his feet, wearing out the soles of his sneakers like always, and starts yelling *Mom this* and *Mom that*, asking for a check for some useless field trip. It’s twelve minutes depending on how Elaine takes the stop signs in the subdivision that branches off from ours at the top of the hill. A few last minutes I can spend laying into the punching bag in the garage to get ready for tomorrow night. It depends on whether Elaine is getting any from any of the dads in the neighborhood. She’s had two this school year already: a mechanic and a paper pusher. She takes her time at stop signs when she’s having an affair. I know. She’s told me. And I’m still not sure how she can be so casual about the things she tells me. I’m not a petty woman, but for Christ’s sake, Elaine will fuck anything. And I don’t envy her. I stopped wondering a long time ago what our life in this neighborhood would look like if Tripp’s dad hadn’t moved out to go do whatever or whoever he’s doing now. I just wish there were more stop signs along the bus route. I wish Tripp didn’t have to come home from school sometimes.

Monday he got off the bus, and the report card was bad. Tuesday he got off the bus, and he’d been in the principal’s office for most of recess, had been helping a few of the bigger kids taunt this shrimpy eleven-year-old they’ve all started calling gay. Wednesday, instead of asking me why I’m fighting a woman named Patti Alvarez on Friday, he asked me if I knew where his father was. It’s Thursday. Tripp’s been trying to be the good student, great at science, but he’s still fucking up outside the classroom, and I’m trying to be as good as I damn well can in the ring. We’re both succeeding, and maybe that’s the problem. He needs me around more, for the science fair that I missed today maybe, and I need to be around less, because I hate science and because it turns out I’m pretty good at amateur mixed martial arts.

I’ve got a bus route too, which is what pays the bills, but it’s short, which means it pays less than my old route. Tripp demanded I switch this year, now that he’s in fifth grade, saying, “Mom, it’s so embarrassing.” Ten years old and telling me what I can do. I don’t even know. But I’m a good mom. I am. So I did switch, and now Elaine has my old route, and maybe I am a little bitter about it. But with the shorter route I’m home a good forty-five minutes before Tripp is, my bus parked and cooling by the time I can hear his, and I start getting
anxious like I have been lately, and it makes my eyelids heavy and my jaw tight. The anxiety—and Jesus, I know how bad this sounds—gets easier when I punch other women in the face or get even with Tripp for something passive-aggressive he's done. I just need him to meet me halfway. I just need him to act his age, maybe his age plus a few years.

Back in the living room, I could use a few more minutes to slip into mothering. Elaine's diesel tears up the quiet autumn of our neighborhood, and like always, she honks her horn as she passes our house. Tripp scuffs his shoes twice on our stoop. I punch the chair cushion. I should be worried about what I'm going to say to Tripp after skipping his science fair to train, but instead I'm worrying about how my knuckles are a little more tender than I'd like. I want to feel brand new in the cage tomorrow. I don't want anything in the way.

I'm still in a sports bra and gym shorts, hands taped from working out, but I did make time to bake a half-batch of crisp chocolate chip cookies, the only recipe my mom left me, so when Tripp comes in and throws his backpack down the hall, shooting me this sidelong glance, I point to the plate on the coffee table. There are two glasses of milk, too.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Thought you could use it. It's been a long week." I'm not going to say any more. I don't want to say any more. I know I missed his presentation, but I was with Mick. I was training for this big match. He's eating cookies, looking down, and it feels like he's accepting an olive branch. "How'd the science thing go?"

"Fine. I didn't win. But Mrs. Freeman gave me a good grade."

"Look, Tripp. I'm sorry I—"

He starts nodding, a thing he's been doing lately when he doesn't want to talk and when he doesn't want me to talk. It feels like Tripp hates what I do in the ring. Maybe it isn't the best influence on him, but I don't even think it's the violence. He loves Kill Bill. I think he just doesn't like me doing the punching.

We sit in the living room, and he nods, and I take the dishes into the kitchen. When I hear his bedroom door close—slowly like he's sneaking—I go back out to the garage to work on my kicking game. My legs aren't as strong as they should be.

After I've done laundry and a couple dishes, and Tripp is in bed, I'm ready for a beer and my pre-game ritual. I watch Pride and Prejudice the night before a fight, every time, the one with Kiera Knightley. It's every bit the preparation daily cardio is. It's superstitious, I know, but I've definitely had rounds where every punch I land is like some happy echo. Mrs. Darcy. Mrs. Darcy. Jab,
jab. Mrs. Darcy. Hook. Mick calls during the scene where Lydia, the bitch, parades her new husband around as if she’s finally made something of herself, and I’m holding the phone a little tighter for the part where Elizabeth gives Mr. Wickham a dirty look. She gives everyone dirty looks, and that feels like something I’d do.

“It’s the part where she steals Lizzie’s man?” Mick says.

“Yeah. It’s that part.”

“Lizzie should fight her sister. Good match-up.”

“Lizzie would win. She’s like me. Lydia is scrawny. She’d break easy.”

“Good girl. That’s what I like to hear.”

Mick’s still on the phone by the time Darcy’s on screen again, not saying a lot, but on the line, and that’s about the same time Tripp comes down the hallway and grabs a glass of water from the kitchen. There are a couple leftover cookies too.

“All right, Mick. I’m gonna let you go.”

“Sure, kid. See you tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

I think Tripp’s going back to bed, but he hunkers down on the other side of the couch and I don’t know if I need to say anything to him or not. He drinks water slow, and I match him one for one with my Corona. He stays with me through the end, and I rub his arm halfway through the credits and start collecting things for bed.

I know I have a problem with aggression. Tripp’s dad always used to tell me that. “Leslie, why are you so angry? Why are you so angry with me?” I never mentioned the girl from the office. I never mentioned Elaine. He never really saw me angry until he said he had to leave. Then I mentioned the other women. Remarkably, I can keep it all in check when I’m in the ring, as if aggression doesn’t even come into it. If anything it’s a pressure valve. Right now I’m smacking Mick’s raised mitts with only a little enthusiasm. He knows it, but it doesn’t matter. We both know I’ll be tearing it up in the fight tonight. Mick and I have been training together ever since we met at the gym when I first started thinking about punching things for fun. That first day, I may have flirted with him some because he was only one of a couple guys in the gym still wearing a shirt, so he looked more confident, and even with it on, you could tell how he was built. But that was before I saw him in the ring, before I saw him flying in that cage, crashing into other men with variations on Muay Thai I’d never even seen, and just as proficient on his back when his Brazilian Jiu Jitsu got to work. I said teach me. He said sure.
And it sounds stupid, especially when I’m hitting things, but I still catch myself looking at his jawline, the skin at his neck and collarbone when he starts to sweat, but I also know I could never sleep with Mick. I’ve seen men break their shins on him, how their bones poke out. I’ve heard him crack ribs in three deliberate and pronounced strikes. I’ve seen his face bloodied, the way he’d run a gloved hand across his forehead to wipe away his blood and that of whoever he was fighting, and how he’d be all smiles, shaking even. His real name is Mickey.

This morning, I made Tripp his favorite lunch. He likes cold quesadillas for whatever reason, so I wrapped a fresh one from the microwave in tin foil and set it in his insulated pack along with cut cucumbers, a bottle of water, and a Ziploc bag filled with a handful and a half of M&M’s. I put a paper towel folded into thirds in there too. I’m going to make a full batch of my mom’s chocolate chip cookies when I get home. I know I haven’t been fair with him, and I know my brand of mothering probably isn’t what he needs, but I do just want him to be happy. I think he said something about a math test today. I’m sure I’m going to forget to ask him how it went. Mick is disappointed with my uppercuts. So I hit him instead of the mitts. He smiles.

Only a couple of other women train here, including one sixteen-year-old girl who gave up on cheering, softball, basketball, and wrestling. Sometimes I spar with Becky, a newlywed from closer in to the city, who always comes into the gym in her pearls before changing. She’s really quiet, professional about how she lives her life, but then she’ll start talking about how goddamn good her grappling and striking is, and it isn’t quite as easy picturing her baking breaded chicken for her husband. Otherwise it’s all men, a couple really good-looking ones, and for the most part they’re kind, can keep their machismo in check. Mick tells me this one new guy is afraid of me. I think it’s because I stared him down while I was taping up a few weeks ago. His standing game is shit.

I’m a weapon now. I’m maybe not the best, but I’m certainly not a civilian anymore. Mick tells me as much, tells me to try not to get into the kinds of bar fights he used to. I remind him I’m a mom. He likes this angle.

“Tripp coming to your match?” Mick is washing up with a water bottle and I can’t tell what’s sweat and what’s water. That means it’s harder to gauge how tough of a workout it was.
“You really want my kid watching me hurt other people until they tell me to stop, don't you?” He keeps asking about this.
“T don't know. Could be good for him.”
“No. Abby's watching him again, after she gets my braids in.”
Mick laughs, puts a glove over one eye and says, “Good ol’ Captain Abby, eh?”
“Yeah. Wrong eye though, smart ass.”

Abby is braiding my hair close to the scalp so there's nothing to grab on to in the ring, and Tripp is kind of being a little shit. That's not fair. He's still sensitive about my lack of involvement and interest in hurting people, so he's taking it out on me and Abby. He's brought a friend home from school, something I'm sure I'm supposed to have remembered but didn't. A kid named Brad. Abby was already over helping me with a couple things by the time Tripp and Brad came in. Brad actually jumped when Abby rounded the corner with the cookies we baked.

Abby has one eye, and she almost always wears a patch, except if her head gets sweaty, which is something that tends to happen in the kitchen. So when the boys came home and Abby missed them out of that left periphery, all Brad saw was her eye-hole. That about set the tone for the afternoon. Now the boys are in the living room not-so-secretly making fun of Abby while they play video games.

When her family still lived at the beach and Abby was seven, her dad was addicted to raw oysters and bourbon—salt and burn together. She was fascinated with the shucking. Story goes he went down the hall for a piss, and she started in on a stubborn shell with the oyster knife, and when he got back, she was screaming, and the countertop was runny with blood and oyster sea-grime. I used to use her as a cautionary tale to warn Tripp not to screw around with sharp things, which worked better than any time-out. Abby is not the best babysitter in the world—she can literally only keep one eye on your kid—but she knows us, knows what Tripp and I need, and she's cheap. And Tripp likes her, which is a plus, especially these days. They're close, Tripp trusts her, and sometimes when Abby tells me how Tripp was while I was gone, it feels like they have some kind of secret alliance, like Tripp will behave for her out of unspoken respect. I don't mind; I just wish I knew how she does it.

“So, Mom. You've got a fight tonight.”
“Yeah, Tripp. I already told you about it.” Abby pulls my head one way or another, and Tripp and Brad keep asking these repetitive questions, and I'm
annoyed. I could use a mouthguard for the kind of clenching I’m doing.

Brad leaves around the same time my braids are in, which is also when Elaine’s bus powers through the neighborhood for the second time this afternoon, honking when she’s even with our mailbox. She tried to make up after she found out Tripp’s dad was married, so I don’t think she means anything else by the honk other than hello, but it still bothers the hell out of me. She’s on the After-School Special now, which means on Fridays she drives her route twice, once for the regular route, and again to bring all the kids at clubs home. It means she makes even more money from the county. Insult and injury. She lives in our neighborhood, and although I only see her once or twice a month, it’s enough for her to detail her sex life, to talk about how great her high school-aged kids are, to explain to me, to me, how great it is to be a working mom. And anyway, how can she play the other woman so freely when she’s also married with kids? I want to tell her that the men she fucks are scrawny, that the MMA guys I see every week are better than dads. I want to tell her that her kids do drugs and cheat on exams. I want to remind her that she has a working husband, that she isn’t putting up with this shit with only the help of her one-eyed babysitter and her kind, murder-machine trainer. My scalp feels tight.

I don’t know how I can feel so tired by six o’clock. Mick’s small car is in
the driveway, behind the big, yellow bus, and he gives it one polite beep while I grab my gym bag and give Tripp a kiss on the forehead. He lets me. Abby is making macaroni and cheese for dinner. I tell her to pan fry some cut-up bratwurst to add in at the end for Tripp. She says sure, smiling and scratching under the elastic band of her eye patch. I’m at the door when Tripp takes a couple steps forward and says, “Hey, Mom? Can I . . . Good luck, Mom.”

“Thanks, Honey,” I say. “I’ll make you proud.” Tripp never wishes me luck. Maybe I just haven’t been paying enough attention. It’s the most beautiful thing he’s done all week.

I’m rolling my shoulders, staring across at Patti Alvarez, grinding my mouthpiece. Tomorrow, once this fight is in the bag, I’ll have a couple of really nice bruises, and I’ll be making Tripp a grilled cheese sandwich with French fried onions, telling him about how great his mom was. It’s great that he’s showing interest in some of the things I love. Mick’s given me the speech about Patti, how her standing game is pretty great. Her strikes are fast as hell, and she can use those bulldozer knees of hers even in the tightest clinch. She’s my weight, maybe a couple inches shorter than me, which should make it easier to get her on the mat. Ground and pound. I’m 3-0, and this is only Patti’s second rated match, but she won that first one in under two minutes in the first round. Fast as hell.

At this point, you never really hear what the announcer is saying about you, and sometimes you can barely hear your trainer shouting whatever it is he’s shouting. It’s all visual for a little while, at least until the elbows and knees start landing. Patti and I hit gloves once the ref gives the word, and I can see her bobbing, I can see Mick hitting the cage in time with whatever song is playing, and over Patti’s shoulder I can see a girl and boy in the front row. The girl has one eye. Patti throws a couple test jabs my way, lands one that smarts on the right side of my ribcage. I pop her in the brow. The girl and boy have a big bag of McDonald’s between them, and the boy’s hands are wrapped around a fat Coke. Abby shouts something; the sound is starting to filter back in. My son is about to watch me hand some girl her own ass. He’s about to yell something, too.

Mick tells me it’s called tinnitus, the ringing in your ears. He used to study
neuroscience before he started beating up on men. He tells me that the tone I hear when someone hits me is different than the tone he’d hear, that there’s an actual gender difference. Whenever I get hit in the head while sparring, he gets excited, starts shouting, “What’s it sound like, Les? What’s it sound like?” He wants to know.

Patti must have hit me with a spinning backfist while I was looking at Tripp. It hurts that much. She’s on me before I can do a lot about it, but I can feel the way her mouthguard has to settle some force when I lay one into her jaw. Mrs. Darcy. She has me tight against the cage, and her knees come out of nowhere. It’s like she studies anatomy the way she finds my ribcage, same damn place, and hammers in. My elbows get to work when her guard is sloppy. Her face is mine. And Tripp’s watching me do it. Tripp has to see the way my glove comes away from her face a different red than it was when it went in. Tripp sees me gritting, and in pain, and letting someone hurt me if it lets me get into a better tactical position. Abby brought him here. Abby drove him here and stopped for McDonald’s on the way. And that isn’t like her. Abby’s usually so good at knowing what’s best for Tripp, and what’s best for me. And then there’s the kids’ meal, and Patti’s fist in my face, and I know that either no one’s going to meet me halfway, or I’m just not working hard enough.

I’m thrown on my back, and my head whips the mat about the same time Patti starts laying in some side punches, working a knee into my ground guard. I stop hearing altogether. Patti pulls me out of a tuck and really starts whailing on me, two-fisted, and as I notice the ref is one of those pretty-boy fighters spotting women’s matches on the side, Patti starts punching harder. What I know: I didn’t tap out. I didn’t really get the chance. She’s fast as hell. Just like they say.

It’s Monday. The weekend was shit. Tripp said he didn’t want to go to school this morning, but that’s where he is now, or where he’s just left; I think it’s later in the afternoon than it feels. He kept telling me that he wanted to see it, that he loved me, he just didn’t like the blood. He wanted to prove he loved me. I didn’t know how to reply to that exactly. I had to give him lunch money because it was tougher getting out of bed than I thought it’d be. The county called a substitute bus driver when I called in sick. Most of the kids on my route will hardly notice the new guy as out of the ordinary. No one even asked why I’m taking the sick day. It was my first in-fight concussion. I was confused for the rest of Friday night while Mick checked me out and took me to see a doctor friend of his, and then into some of Saturday. Now it’s just the cracked ribs I
wish I could do something about. Tylenol only takes care of the usual pains. Abby’s been helping out. She says she feels guilty, but we both know how damn convincing Tripp is, and maybe Mick’s right. Maybe it isn’t a terrible thing for Tripp to see a match.

Now, Mick is sitting next to me on the couch, knocking back his fifth or sixth beer. I lost count. He keeps clearing our empties away because he says they’ll psyche us out. He came over around noon in his old varsity jacket from school with a case of beer under his arm. “Had lunch yet?” he asked. I hadn’t. “Good. We’re day-drinking then.” So that’s what we’re doing, and we haven’t talked fighting since he’s been here. Tripp will be home in thirty or forty-five minutes. Mick’s hand is on my knee. His first two knuckles are scabbed, probably a couple times over because he never lets himself heal all the way. He’s always told me that he won’t let me train the way he does, that I have to really heal. He pokes gingerly with his other hand at my ribs and I flinch. Mick isn’t flirting with me. I know that. Or at least that isn’t what he’s doing right now. Both of us catch smiles sometimes. But right now, Mick is congratulating me for losing, sincerely. He’s proud in a completely separate way than he was from my three wins. He’s teaching me how to lose, and I do need that tenderness.

It’s the next beer that gets us talking about Friday, about losing. Now his
arm is light on my shoulder like a brother.

“You remember the last fight I lost? Last month? Ricky ‘Top Dog’ Hansen. Damn was he good.”

“Four minutes. First round.”

“Yeah. Fucker was top dog. Jesus. Anyway we got a beer like four nights later.”

“Yeah?”

“Yup. Nice guy. I expected meaner. Had fun. We’re actually sparring next week for kicks.”

“What’s your point, Mick?”

“Maybe you should booze with this Alvarez chick. It sucked less losing to Ricky ‘cause I liked him, ‘cause it turns out he’s pretty cool.”

Mick doesn’t have a wife, and he doesn’t have a son, and ever since he dropped the pre-med and neuroscience track, its only ever been MMA octagons of varying flavors for him. He only has to worry about the one disappointment. I have to decide what’s more disappointing: having your son see you lose, or having your son see you fight at all. I’m jealous of Mick suddenly, the way he’s sitting, how much ownership he seems to have over himself, his bruises, the one butterfly bandage at his brow. Maybe it’s the way his knuckles are almost open. I want to be him. I want to punch things and be rugged and pretty and not have to drive a bus. I want to punch things and not have to care who sees it. I want the fighting to be easier again.

Elaine’s engine revs so loud going over a pothole that the front picture window rattles, and still she honks, peppy baritone bus-shouts, and now Elaine infuriates me and I have to punch something, so I punch Mick, not that hard, in the chest. He hands me a beer and says, “You need something better to do with your hands.” I pop the top, and that’s when I realize there’s supposed to be something else. Tripp doesn’t scuff on the stoop. He doesn’t wrench the door handle like he does. There’s nothing except the far-off bellowing of Elaine’s bus leaving our neighborhood at the end of her route, looping back around to the hill behind us where she lives.

“Tripp,” I say, and I don’t stagger that much when I get up. I’m running by the time I’m out of the house, ribs burning when I reach the Paulson’s up by the right turn before the cul-de-sac. I can hear Mick behind me, and this is what I like about him as a trainer: he doesn’t stop me. When I think about it, I didn’t even hear Elaine stop at the Paulson’s. She just didn’t. So I’m running, or jogging, side burning, and Mick’s beside me, holding my shoulders when I have to stop to breathe.
“Everything okay, Les?”
“No. It’s Tripp. That bitch never dropped him off.”
Mick looks a little confused, like I did during the last couple hours of the concussion amnesia. “Les, he’s just over there.” He is. He’s walking, but slowly, has been since the Alberta Drive stop I’d bet, judging by the way he’s scuffing his sneakers.
“That’s not his stop.”

When we get up to him, he looks nervous, like he’s done something or he’s hiding something. But he’s the most important thing there is right now, so when I hug him, and he forgets about the ribs and hugs me, I grit my teeth so I don’t make a sound. Mick grimaces, though. I look him over to make sure he’s all right. I don’t know why I’m so worried. Tripp has a left eye that’s a little puffy. I almost touch it, but he pulls away.
“Tripp, are you—”
“I, I got in a fight.” He waits for me or Mick to say something. “This kid was making fun of you for tapping out, and I told him to leave you alone.”
“I didn’t tap out.”
“I know. That’s why I pushed him.”
“And then he hit you?” I try to touch the skin at his cheekbone again, but he puts a hand to it first. It’s not like he has a concussion. I don’t know why it seems worse than it is.
“No. Then his sister punched me. He just started crying in the aisle. But then Miss Elaine pulled the bus over and kicked me out. Said I was a brat with no teaching. She said, ‘Don’t you ever climb these steps again if you’re going to keep being ugly.’”

Mick pulls Tripp’s hand away and starts poking at his face, not all that gently. Then he roughs his hair. “That’s going to be a good one tomorrow, kid.”

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e Elaine is put together with matchsticks. She would be incredibly easy to break. She would be fun to break.
my hands; it would be more fun to have knuckles like Mick’s because of her. Mick has Tripp throwing light jabs at him by the time I’ve figured out what I’m doing, and he’s giving me concerned looks. I’m noticing his jaw again.

“Mick, you want to watch Tripp for a few minutes? Maybe take him home and show him a couple things?”

At the crest of the hill, Elaine Tillman is getting her mail—credit card bills, magazines with special offers. She’s already wearing house slippers. It seems so easy for her, so easy to unwind after the day. It makes sense. She has plenty of outlets.

Her yard is cut by her husband. The front of the house is neat, more yard work getting done weekly. She’s wearing pearls like Becky. I’ve never once seen a bus driver wear pearls, and I know it’s the kind of thing she does for him once she gets home. He must have bought them for her one year, so now they’re around her neck whenever she waits for him to come home. She waves at me when I pick up the pace before she starts heading back inside, holding my side some. I owe Tripp this much. He can be proud.

She opens her mouth, this cavern, and is about to say “Leslie” when I throw one hell of a hook, putting everything I have into it, my ribs on fire when I twist and connect. I feel the way her jaw moves, and Elaine goes spinning, her colored envelopes fluttering around her when she catches herself on the planter beside the mailbox. She stands up, wiping spatters of blood from her chin, and she’s furious, and I’m thinking, Bitch, you don’t even know, because apparently my life has led exactly to this moment, when I’m fighting a bus driver everyone thinks is better than me. Mick says you should always present yourself as the underdog because when you do people believe in you, and if other people believe in you, it’s almost the same thing as believing in yourself. So fine. Maybe Elaine is the better bus driver. But she’s also swaying like a punching bag.

She jumps at me, hands way above her head, really open, so I sidestep and jab. Mrs. Darcy. She’s on the ground covering her face. Mrs. Darcy. She starts waving at me, which is basically a nonverbal tap out, but when I look around, I don’t see a cage anywhere, so there’s a quick kick to the hip, no real damage. This is assault. This isn’t okay, but there are pieces of me that like it. She’s a little bloody, but not too bad, mostly her mouth. I didn’t actually break skin on her face. Her pearls are fine. It feels like a win. It feels like when a ref holds your hand up high, and in that same moment you take out your mouth guard and smile a little, humble or embarrassed, but still proud.

When I look up, Tripp is coming up over the crest of the hill, but then he
stays back. Tripp starts jumping up and down. Then he stops and hugs both shoulders, buries his face into Mick’s side. I can’t see if my kid’s crying or smiling. Mick puts an arm around him, and it looks like he’s yelling at me.

Elaine never even hit me, so it’s not tinnitus, but I can’t hear him if he’s saying something. So before I take a step away from Elaine toward home, I tell myself Tripp was jumping for joy. I imagine him running down the hill to me, asking me to teach him how to hook like that. I imagine the way we’re now united in our enemies and how from now on we share victories. He’ll be smiling more, saying, *Okay, Mom, I love you, Mom*, almost every day. We’ll share our bruises. We’ll share everything now. He’ll come to my fights, and I’ll win every match. There won’t be any fights we don’t already know the right punches for. ☐
bag

victoria doose | digital photograph
chad harbach’s

the art of fielding

chris sonzogni | review

My lack of an attention span dictates that I am neither able to finish long novels nor enjoy the sport of baseball, which is why I found it especially surprising that Chad Harbach’s debut, a 510-page behemoth, The Art of Fielding—published in 2011 by Little, Brown, and Company—not only caught my attention, but held it, raptly, for its entirety. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so surprised: for a first novel, The Art of Fielding has received remarkably good reviews from The New York Times and Vanity Fair, among other noteworthy publications.

Harbach’s novel begins in South Dakota, where Mike Schwartz, the catcher and self-appointed undergraduate recruiter for the Westish Harpooners—a small-college baseball team with a serious losing streak from Wisconsin—notices Henry Skrimshander, an energetic and talented high-school senior. Events play out, as they are wont to do in the early pages of a novel, and Skrimshander, the book’s central protagonist, finds himself dutifully enrolled at Westish where, under the close guidance of Schwartz, he begins to train and excel and lead the Harpooners to victory.

Just as Henry begins to settle into college life—he is, as most virtuosos are, socially awkward and committed solely to improving his craft—and is set to break his hero’s record for most consecutive games without an error, tragedy strikes, and he makes his first errant throw. From then onward, Henry’s life becomes intertwined with the lives of four other central characters as the book races forward with disastrous plot twists.

Although some of Chad Harbach’s moves may at first seem predictable or trite—Schwartz, the team’s catcher, playing “coach;” Henry’s turbulent but arguably successful rise to stardom; a character web that grows more and more complex and intertwined, eventually coming to encompass the president of the college and his daughter—a chapter rarely passes (there are 82 in total) without leaving a reader reeling. Harbach writes eloquently and convincingly not only about adolescence and baseball, but about Greek philosophy, Herman Melville, and even bromance: “Sometimes it seemed he could talk freely only two times in his life: out on the diamond and here, in the dark, across the room from Owen. . . Your words wouldn’t come back to haunt you but would land
softly on Owen’s ears and stay.” Harbach’s writing is at times morose, but also often simultaneously funny, haunting, and startlingly honest. There is phallic humor and at least one messy divorce. There are repeated references to baseball superstitions. There is yearning.

And, throughout, there is the sort of character-driven plot development that every good novel has at its core. The few mistakes or slip-ups that detract from *The Art of Fielding* are more than adequately compensated for by Harbach’s simply beautiful prose. Harbach is not only acutely aware of the discipline that athletes subject themselves to, but also the strength of their determination to succeed and the problems that they face in pursuit of perfection. The beauty of *The Art of Fielding*, however, is how easily he merges the twists and turns of star athleticism with a startling authorial presence that is never heavy-handed and must be read to be believed.
The Mercy Papers: A Memoir of Three Weeks—published in 2009 by Scribner—is Robin Romm’s account of the last three weeks in her mother’s life. After watching her mother’s health deteriorate from several states away, Romm drops out of her graduate program to stay in her childhood home until her mother’s passing. From there, she documents her family’s brave and beautiful last stand in an ongoing war with pain medication, hospice, depression, and Jackie Romm’s terminal cancer.

From the very first page, Romm’s audience can hear, see, and feel the steady rhythm of this clock ticking down, but the writing also suggests that the only thing worse than waiting for a parent to die would be to give up hope entirely. This poignancy is achieved with masterfully subtle imagery: a dim light cast on an IV tube, a motorized wheelchair, a sponge bath, a dog hiding beneath the bed because of the anxiety in the house. These things force the reader to feel the weight of a single word, object, or moment. With her mother’s life at stake, the decision to move back home, go to a movie, spend the night in a hotel room, or even pet the dog feels as devastating to the reader as it did for her.

The gradual descent of the speaker and her surroundings into a state of distress is distinct from the beginning of the book to the end, and even graceful, as it correlates directly with the decline of her mother’s health. To this end, Romm lays her family and friends bare—yet it is difficult to dislike any of them, even as they dismantle themselves before our eyes, their darkest traits exposed by the impending death at hand. This reality is one of the many things that makes the writing very human and three-dimensional.

To make her grief and loneliness accessible, Romm writes with a bluntness so raw it brings the reader on board immediately. This memoir spares its audience absolutely nothing, and so builds rapport quickly. Romm is at her most honest when she speaks of herself, writing, “I felt so matter-of-fact about it, which makes me feel like a coldhearted person, when really, my heart is so big it has become unfamiliar to me, I am drowning in all its redness, I can barely breathe and see, it’s so swollen and raw from expansion.”

There is a conversation within these pages concerning the fragility of humans, with our desperate need for order and understanding. There is also a
back-and-forth debate in Romm's mind concerning the presence of any larger power controlling it all. But this theme is well-managed and does not dominate the story.

What makes this memoir enjoyable, despite its exhausting subject matter, is the searing tension, which is naturally wrought from the situation. The book is worthy not because of its scope (admittedly and gloriously narrow) but because of its appeal to the audience's most fundamental fear. Yet Romm remains ever-vigilant for her readers and does not let them suffocate under the heavy material. She knows instinctively when to let us breathe with her wit and tasteful humor, and though there is very little tenderness to be found in these pages from the human characters, the animals—including Romm's dog, Mercy—are the ones who carry the smiles, the little kindnesses, and the secrets to eventual healing. The book only documents a handful of important weeks in the life of one family and one woman, but there is a lifetime of growth here, and anyone who has any experience with death and grief will not regret picking it up.
brian allenby of Princeton, New Jersey, discovered his love for photography in high school, and has continued to develop his photographic talent artistically through his position as Staff Photographer for The Pendulum. Brian is a senior graduating in May with a major in Environmental Studies and minors in Business, Geography and Geographic Information Systems, and plans to work in the environmental services industry.

elizabeth amonette hails from rural Lexington, Virginia, where she finds most of her inspiration in the beautiful natural surroundings of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She is a sophomore here at Elon, and is a Communications major and Art minor.

laura brentrup is a senior Art major. She has spent the past four years working in ceramics and painting, and hopes to pursue her passion and study of art in Europe after graduation.

kelsey camacho is a sophomore Creative Writing major from Charlotte, North Carolina. She spends most of her time searching for outrageous places and adventures.

meighan cassin is a senior Creative Writing and Painting major from New Hampshire. She is grateful for four wonderful years at Elon and will miss it dearly. She now must venture into the world, which she hopes to explore as thoroughly as possible.

jenna dawkins is a senior Creative Writing major and Professional Writing and Rhetoric minor from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is involved in many campus organizations, including holding the position of Vice President in Sigma Tau Delta.

ned dibner was born and raised in Durham, North Carolina, and enrolled at Elon over three years ago. He has always loved art and he plans to pursue it after graduation.

jess duffy is a graduating senior with a BFA Dance and BA English double major.

victoria doose is a senior English (PWR) and Art History major. She is from Charleston, South Carolina. She loves alliteration, the hard c sound, and unexpected details. Do not consider it coincidence that the catalyst for
her creative compositions is consistently both the clash and compatibility of concepts.

**claire esparros** is a junior from New Orleans studying Journalism and Photography. Her passion for outdoor adventures, exploration, and theatrical experiences inspire her photographic endeavors.

**brittany garrett** is a senior majoring in Marketing and minoring in French and Economics. She has studied abroad in India and France, and through these experiences, was able to photograph many inspiring people and places. She has also been involved with the Arts & Letters Learning Community since sophomore year, which has served as her creative outlet.

**brittany graham** is a sophomore from Westfield, New Jersey. She’s a BFA Art student, with a second major in Arts Administration and a minor in Art History. She has had work in the Student Juried Exhibitions and the Faculty Selected Show, but there is still much more to come.

**cody greene** is from Virginia.

**eva hill** is a senior majoring in Communications. She is from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and has an interest in film, literature and digital art.

**alexa johnson** believes in the power of comprehensive sex education, well-placed line breaks, thrift stores, and late-night strolls. She is also partial to hot sauce. She thinks humanity would be happier if people read more short story collections and watched more science fiction. So say we all.

**devon lewis** is a senior majoring in Art with a concentration in Painting. She hails from Towson, Maryland and is the current owner and proprietor of Sticker Chairs, Inc.

**jay light** is a senior Cinema major and Creative Writing minor from Colleyville, Texas, which none of you have probably ever heard of—but that's okay. He won't hold it against you. He likes to do stand-up comedy and other things that make people laugh. He also likes cheeseburgers.

**colin keaveney** is a junior Communications major. An enthusiastic cyclist from Connecticut, Colin also loves to travel.

**lina patton** is a senior Strategic Communications major from Minneapolis (Rob, come visit). She measures her life in picas and enjoys the color orange on this page.
**luke lovett** is a senior Strategic Communications and Art major from Washington, DC. To him, art is the creation and inspiration of thought.

**jr riegel** is studying Art, Sociology, and Economics at Elon. He has a great love for ceramics, though, so he’s looking forward to starting a life in clay.

**kelsey reifler** is a senior BFA student from New York. She primarily works digitally, although she enjoys photography and painting as well. Her work deals with questioning reality, as well as how technology and media shape our perception of the world around us.

**rob shapiro**, a junior Creative Writing and Literature major, has never been west of Tennessee, but likes the idea of Minnesota and Oregon. In his spare time he can be found playing with dogs, drinking coffee, meandering outside, and smoking his old-man pipe. At the same time. He likes poetry, too.

**james shaver** is a senior English major concentrating in Creative Writing and Professional Writing and Rhetoric. He hopes that his work extends beyond Aztec rulers and into the reader’s heart. He is overwhelmingly proud to be a part of this excellent group of contributors.

**jamal shuman** is a senior studying Digital Art and Communications. He is from Fayetteville, North Carolina. He plans to go into video game design after graduation.

**christopher sonzogni** is a junior Creative Writing and Literature major transplanted from New Jersey to Emerald Isle, North Carolina. He is currently mastering the art of staying afloat, both in the water and out of it, which he hopes will someday mature into a marketable skill. He spends his spare time writing argumentative notes in the margins of borrowed books.

**kasey thornton** is a senior Creative Writing major with too many minors and part-time jobs. She was born and raised in North Carolina, and she will probably live here forever unless her ashes blow elsewhere after she dies. She believes that the world would be a better place if everyone watched an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* every day. Kasey is a high school percussion instructor in her spare time and hopes to be living at the beach getting her MFA in Creative Writing next year.

**shanna van beek** is a senior from Indian Trail, North Carolina, majoring in International Studies and Creative Writing. She’s working on her Arabic, too. *Shanab* means “mustache” in Arabic, so you can call her that because it’s funny, but “Shannon” is no laughing matter. Here’s your small talk: Dutch, left-handed, very good at guacamole, not good at basketball (please stop asking).
**brad weaver** would often bite his classmates in preschool, gets dizzy when he stands up too quickly, and is a habitual liar. He has found one of these behaviors to be useful in his writing. Being among the last people called during roll throughout his life has left him bitter. He will likely someday turn into one of those crazy cat ladies, except without the cats and possibly not the lady part, and currently occupies his time as a senior Creative Writing major.

**jillian weiss** is a senior Creative Writing major. She is from both the country and the city, and this confuses her, but also stretches her out. She loves strutting on cobblestones and wearing black boots, but also loves grass and stars, possibly a little bit more. She hates that shoes are such a necessity and has written, on multiple occasions, about the anguish of having large feet.

**katie whittaker** is a senior Creative Writing and Spanish double major and Art minor from Coopersburg, Pennsylvania. She thinks best while running and loves languages, reading, and adventures. She also likes spending time with her family and friends.
frederick hartmann
contest winners

fiction contest 2011
judged by jennifer s. davis

first place
jillian weiss
lina patton
kasey thornton
shanna van beek

honorable mentions

poetry contest 2011
judged by dorianne laux

first place
alex trice
rob shapiro
alexa johnson
jillian weiss

second place

third place

fourth place

nonfiction contest 2011
judged by lia purpura

first place
maggie pahos
jillian weiss
victoria doose
natalie lampert

honorable mentions
Colonnades welcomes all submissions of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, as well as visual and audio-visual art. Submissions must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors. Pieces are chosen for publication through a blind reading and ranking process by staff members, taking into account the space available in the magazine. Accepted submissions are automatically entered in the magazine contest.

All pieces should be submitted electronically: literary submissions to colonnades@elon.edu and art submissions to colonnades.art@gmail.com. In the subject of the email, include your last name and the title of the piece (ex. lastname_title). In the body of the email, include only your name, Datatel number, the title of your piece, and genre. Save your submission as the title of your piece and attach it to the email as a Word document (do not paste submissions into the body of the email). You may include multiple submissions in one email.

Each piece of artwork must be saved at 300 dpi resolution, in TIFF format.

The deadline for literary submissions is January 13, 2013, and the deadline for all art submissions is February 2, 2013.
special thanks

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Our Contributors  
Our Readers

The *Colonnades* staff would also like to recognize William H. Maness, a distinguished alumnus of Elon from the Class of ’38. Mr. Maness, an advocate for the arts at Elon, passed away in October of 2011 and will be sorely missed. In 1937, Mr. Maness served as an editor for the first-ever issue of *Colonnades*. It is thanks to his patronage that Elon can invite accomplished writers to campus, as well as sponsor the annual Frederick Hartmann Awards. We would like to thank Mr. Maness for his many years of support and for teaching all of us that appreciation and support of the arts really does matter. Mr. Maness was an inspiration, and we would like to dedicate Issue 63 of *Colonnades* to his memory.