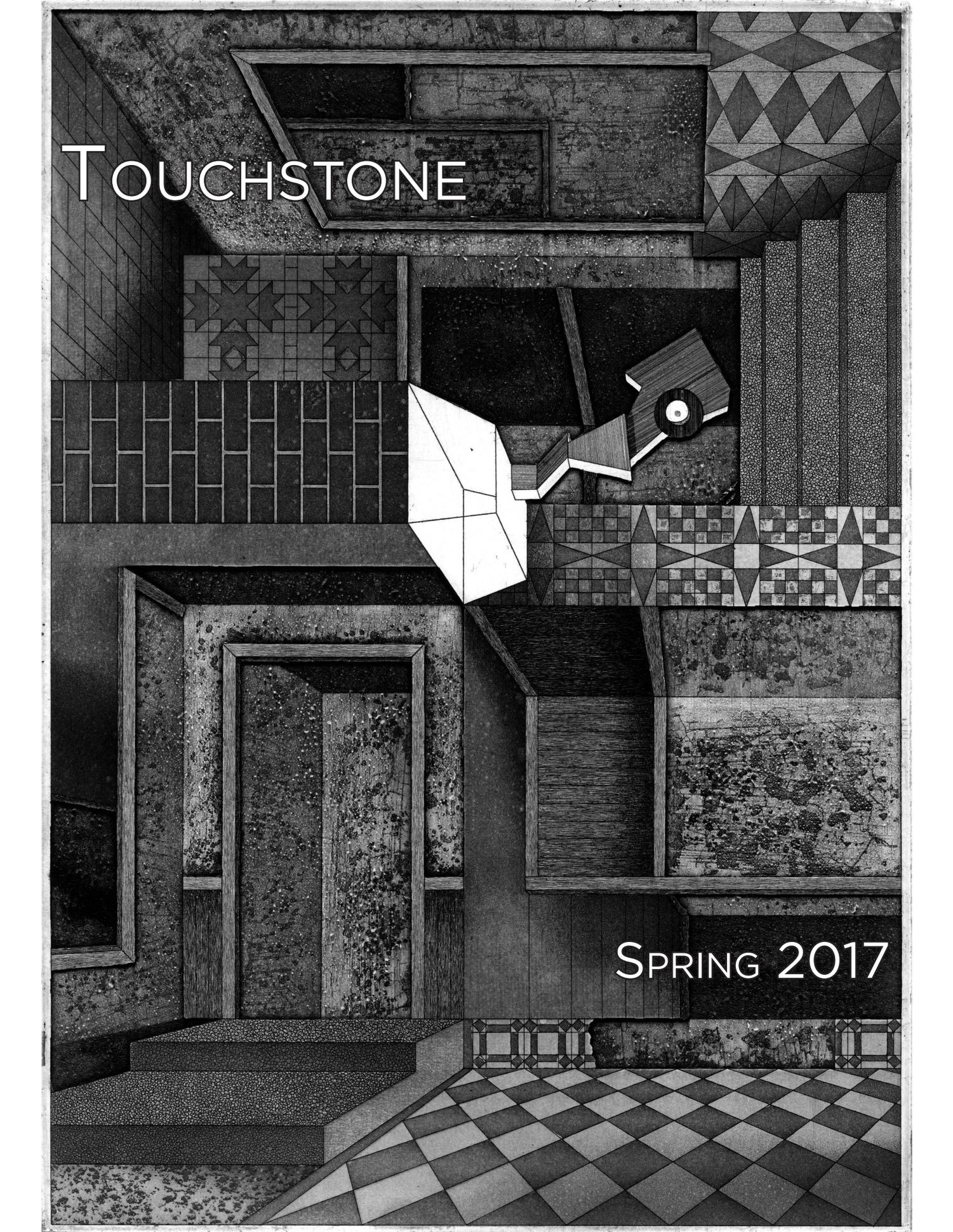
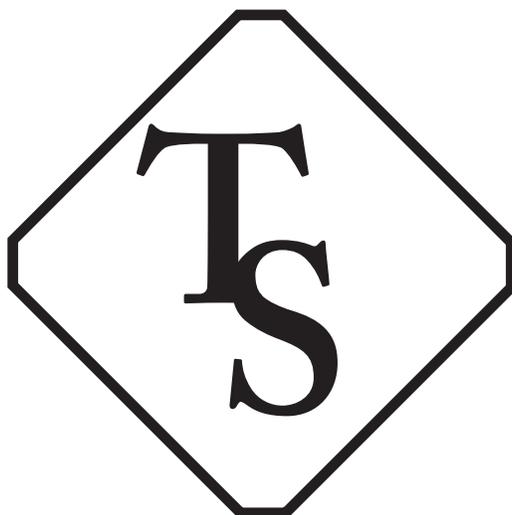


TOUCHSTONE



SPRING 2017



Dear Reader,

There are many things I could say about the contents of this year's edition of *Touchstone*. From tales of weird and unfamiliar places to precise renderings of the familiar, this year's edition provides a range of feeling threaded by exquisite awareness and observation of the world we inhabit. Grief, love, God, nature, and UFOs are all accounted for in these pages, and the individual works often blur the lines of difference and defy expectations.

Of course, if these pieces do their job (and they do—trust me on this), you'll come to your own unique emotional responses, and you certainly don't need me telling you what to feel. So, in lieu of further analysis, I'll simply express gratitude:

This magazine would never have seen the light of day if it weren't for the hard work of many. Specifically, I would like to thank Kira, Shelby, Minadora, Christopher, and Anna, who each took charge of their respective editing teams in order to read, select, and edit the work that ultimately appeared in this year's issue. In addition, I would also like to thank the members of each team (who are listed individually on the next page)—your effort and sacrifice of time does not go unnoticed.

Of course, curating material and preparing it for publication isn't all that goes into publishing a literary magazine. There's a ton of behind-the-scenes work that actually happens *behind* the behind-the-scenes work, so thank you to Elizabeth and Joe for your dedication and contribution to a smooth submissions cycle.

Thanks are also due to the Kansas State English Department, specifically faculty advisor Dr. Kimball Smith, department head Dr. Karin Westman, and Creative Writing Track head Dr. Katherine Karlin.

Enjoy!

Dylan Pyles
Editor-in-Chief

TOUCHSTONE MAGAZINE

2017 Staff

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF	Dylan Pyles
FICTION EDITOR	Kira Frank
FICTION ASSISTANTS	Nicholas Cady, Phillip Howells, Haley Lively, Catherine Williams
NONFICTION EDITOR	Shelby Palmer
NONFICTION ASSISTANTS	Jamie DeTour, Whitney Horn, Madison Toner, Joseph Turner
POETRY EDITOR	Minadora Macheret
POETRY ASSISTANTS	Daniel Gillespie, Maxwell Malone, Rebecca Razey, Malorie Wagner
ART EDITOR	Anna Grauer
ART ASSISTANTS	Alexandra Dau, Carly Haight, Zachery Vandorn, Victoria Vontz
CHIEF COPY EDITOR	Christopher Sheffer
COPY EDITING ASSISTANTS	Jenna Bochmann, Macy Davis, Jami Harrison, Abby Monteil
SUBMISSIONS MANAGER	Elizabeth Potter
PROMOTIONS MANAGER	Joseph Turner
FACULTY ADVISOR	Dr. Kimball Smith

TOUCHSTONE MAGAZINE

2017

ART

Brandon Williams	Cover	Subtle Transitions
Rachel Hermes	6	Lilies at Dusk
	69	Morning Light
Timmy Wolfe	7	Trip Acid
	31	Spider Plant
	70	Frame No. 1
Jacob Brooks	8	Thinking Out Loud
	30	Ask Them if They Dream
	32	Please Wake Up
Feature Artist, Peter Dingley	51	Interview

FICTION

Brenna Leahy	9	Loneliness
Judson Easton Packard	18	My Brother Painted Eggs
Jacob Valdez	42	V Praze
Megan Zeman	49	Best Laid Plans
Whitney Horn	62	Company
Anna Meyer	78	Oblivion

NONFICTION

Riley Gay	14	Like Butterflies and Fireflies
Darby Huddleston	26	Bruises
Connor Syrios	34	Moon Pollution
Tiffani Lawrence	71	Funeral in First Position

POETRY

Maia Carlson	2	Before Abel
	4	Any Winter
Matthew Champagne	33	Honey
Judson Easton Packard	68	I Can Only Say It in Writing

BEFORE ABEL

Maia Carlson

I was born at the crossing of two bones,
which is like the crossing of
two words, who have to break
each other
a little
just to fit.
Words like shatterglass and thunderkite,
cinderglass and bitterbite.

I was born at the crossing of two bones:
jawbone and
fangbone.
Two beasts met with irreconcilable differences, I suppose.
Isn't that just the way of things?
With an ashdown snow
and a bleakblown wind,
an old woman with pebbles
for eyes and stretched hide
for a face
saw fangbone and jawbone locked,
two corpses
cuddled in the ashdown snow.
I've seen Irish Elk, with their antlers thus enmeshed,
snugged up tight like lovers
with their hands in each other's ribcages.
Is a religion ever born
of anything less?

I was born at the crossing of two bones
as an Ice-age woman picked up two bare-boned skulls
and saw me
in four glaring eye-sockets.
My flesh-coat gone but a bone-house was enough,
enough for her to see
whatever makes mankind
believe.
I breathed in belief through twin bleached nasal passages.

I've been born a thousand times before.
From the first real sin—
of one brother crossing another
unto death; vengeance is messy
and long-lasting—
to the raising of the jawbone of an ass
to the divinity an old woman saw in kissing skulls,
to wars that stretched across nations.
Alexander was Great—
great for a breakbone, crushstone god like me.
I've never been born so alive as in the battle-
fields he sowed me in.

Immortal doesn't mean living forever, perhaps.
Perhaps.
Perhaps it means being reborn again
every time someone has a bone to pick with another.

You remember Cain
but I remember Abel.
Because Cain kept on breathing
the smokesweet air
of another God, didn't he?
But Abel got to pray to me.

ANY WINTER

Maia Carlson

There is this urge as I perch on my porch and tip my frown towards
the stubborn, root-bound

rose, the trailing

vine, the valiant

weed, looking at me like blithe

dryads with their peridot eyes

and periwinkle smiles.

There is this urge to bring them all inside before Winter can get her claws on them.

I feel like a greedy god who will not share. An amnesiac, stupid god, who willfully
forgets year after

year that plants love

the earth first,

and me

a far distant second,

even though I'd never set loose

Winter's cold hounds on them, never crush the heads upon my lap with fists of frost.

But I'm a heart-sore god who dies a little in the most pathetic way when I see

all the earth's green things

bending their heads

to the bitter, biting chill

their supplicant hands rimed

with frost

while I'm warm and toasty inside, all of Summer's spoils at my altar.

Surely I have room for them all? Surely my current fussy, root-bound nestlings—

my haughty, secretive orchids

whose flowers I've forgotten the colors of;

my African Violets with their velveteen lips

and persnickety hearts;

that plant I lost the name of,

but who grows uproariously as a testament to my mothering—
wouldn't mind just a bit more chlorochrous company? Another refugee from Winter or two?

It would only be for the winter, I tell myself. Only for the winter, until they love me first,
until the warmth of my hearth

can sink into their roots,
 until they live on my exhale,
 bloom when I inhale.
 I'm like a cat closing its paws
and sinking its sickle claws into soft feathers, and saying, "I'll only only love you *so* hard."



LILIES AT DUSK
Rachel Hermes

Oil on panel
36"x24"
2016



TRIP ACID

Timmy Wolfe

Ceramic
14"x9"x2"
2016



THINKING OUT LOUD

Jacob Brooks

Oil on canvas
36"x36"
2016

LONELINESS

Brenna Leahy

In the car, on their way back from her grandmother Mae's house, Abigail felt that they were not alone. It was a girl this time, red hair with curls that lay coiled like snakes against the pale skin on the girl's neck. She sat in the back seat next to Lila's sleeping form as if she were waiting for something. Abigail met the girl's eyes in the mirror, as she held on tight to the steering wheel. There had never been an episode in the car before. There seemed to be an unspoken rule that Abigail should survive the encounters. The girl wasn't smiling or grimacing, which was unusual. She looked decidedly neutral. Her even gaze left Abigail feeling cold and alone.

Distracted by the girl, Abigail drove directly through the intersection at MacArthur, past the glaring red light. Abigail heard the screech of tires to her left. Her eyes snapped back to the road, and she jerked the wheel of her car to the right and slammed on the brakes. *Don't over-correct, don't overcorrect*, she heard her grandmother saying (screaming) in her brain, echoing through her. Her breath was coming in heavy gasps, and her body was electric – she could feel everything, her heartbeat through her fingertips, the jerk in her neck as the car slid down the lonely road. Lila sat up and rubbed her eyes, as the car stopped skidding along the road. A bruise was starting to form on her forehead from where it had knocked against the one plastic part of her car seat. Maybe if Abigail cut her bangs, it would be covered?

"Mommy, that hurt!" she said as she rubbed her head. Abigail was sure the bruise just looked so purple because it was dark outside.

"Just a bump in the road, sweetheart. Go back to sleep," Abigail said as she forced her voice to be soft and sweet. Abigail kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel, so Lila wouldn't see them shaking. She glanced in the mirror, looking for signs of the other car before she pulled back on the road. There was only a line of trees waving back at her. It was an ominous wave. The trees knew her. They saw what she had done, and they wouldn't forget.

Abigail glanced back into the mirror. The girl was gone. There was no one in the back seat but Lila. At least this time, Abigail hadn't had to watch. In the car, there was nothing to do about it but wait for the end. Five seconds, then silence.

Lila was sleeping again. Abigail doubted she would remember this when they arrived home. She was always such a heavy sleeper, such a good baby. Abigail's hands still shook as she switched through the radio: country, country, "Jesus saves," commercial for erectile dysfunction, commercial for the Humane Society, Spanish, country. It was late enough that her concern about hitting a deer was less than it would have been at dusk. It was early enough that Sam wouldn't be able to say anything about bringing Lila down so late without sounding like he was crazy. He probably wouldn't even notice the bruise. *This was so stupid*, she thought, as she drove on.

Abigail was exhausted to her bones. The roads were mostly deserted, with an occasional car gliding by. She smelled terrible, like Mae and her childhood, a mixture of clothing washed

with no soap and ramen. She had brought the scent into the car with her. Lila was coated with it now. It was on her clothes, in her hair. She'd probably swallowed a bit. Abigail tried to keep her mind in the present, as they rushed past fields of corn and wheat that all looked the same. She thought about Lila, soft and warm in the seat beside her. She thought about her soft brown eyes with lashes that reached far up and far down, spidery soft.

When Abigail and Lila had arrived at Mae's that afternoon, everything had looked the same. Mae had the same hair—short, spiky, and dyed black so aggressively that it looked purple under the right lighting. The house itself was the same. Rickety and barely standing, it perched on the ground, miles away from the nearest town. Vines reached up, grabbing the sides of the washed out boards and pulling them down towards the earth with determination. The vines added the only color to the otherwise faded boards. Mae was waiting for them when they pulled up in their car. She waved broadly from her perch in the garden, the sun shining at the perfect angle on her dyed raven hair to make it an alarming shade of purple. Abigail held Lila's hand tightly, as they walked towards the house.

"Hello, *ma chérie*." Mae said in her delicious, low voice, pitched low and husky from years of smoking. She wrapped Abigail, then Lila, in her thin arms.

"Hi, Mae," Abigail said, smiling down into Mae's lined face. She was still so beautiful. Mae had one of those rare faces that never lost its beauty, even after years of sadness and neglect. The lines looked like they had been earned, and Mae wore them with the same nonchalance that she wore everything. Abigail envied whatever it was that made her beautiful.

Lila ducked behind Abigail, shy of the stranger in front of her. Mae had met Lila only a handful of times in her life, and Lila was only four. Young enough that any lapse of memory could still be forgiven.

"Come in, come in. I have some soup," Mae said, waving them up the steps and into the broken house.

Inside, the smell was the same. Abigail suddenly wanted to leave intensely, but she forced herself to sit down at the table and ate the soup, one spoonful at a time, while Mae chattered on about her garden (the radishes were doing well this year) and her last trip into town (it did not go well), and Lila pretended that her spoon was an airplane. Abigail felt herself losing focus on the conversation, as the atmosphere settled around her like a blanket. She wanted to scream.

"Do you want to know why they keep coming back?" Mae asked softly, looking at Abigail with pity in her eyes. Abigail considered pretending like she didn't know what Mae was talking about for a moment, but she decided against it. Mae had always been open about what she saw, and she had always told Abigail exactly what would happen to her. Abigail hadn't believed her because she had wanted so badly to be normal. She hadn't wanted to inherit a damn thing from Mae, whether it was this broken down house or visions of broken souls. Abigail finally let her pride slip just a bit, for the sake of her sanity, and nodded.

"Wait here," Mae said, and walked to her bedroom. As she waited, Abigail pressed her thumb into her other four fingers once, twice, three times. She liked the way it felt when her nail dug into the soft pads of her fingers.

When Mae came back, she was holding a photo album. It was dusty, and the binding was frayed to an alarming extent. Mae scooted her chair closer to Abigail and handed her the book. The first page was filled with pictures of strangers.

"What is this?" Abigail asked.

"What do you see?" Mae countered.

"Just pages and pages of strangers, Mae. Why are you showing this to me? I need your

help,” she said, as she flipped through the book. It wasn’t thick, but there were still many pictures, glued in and faded to the book. Some were newspaper clippings; others, Polaroid pictures, yellow with age.

“For so many years, I didn’t know what was happening.” Mae began, looking small and frail.

“First, you see a person. You don’t feel threatened at first. You feel oddly at ease, even though they act so erratically that any self-respecting woman would hear all of the alarm bells at her disposal going off. As soon as the eyes begin to turn, though, cold seeps into my heart – her soul. Afterwards, I can’t think straight for days. You remember what it’s like, I’m sure. And the disappearance is always the same. The melting. But I think you know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you?” Mae asked. Abigail nodded slowly. She hadn’t specified what she’d needed help with on the phone, but of course, Mae would understand.

“I had hoped this wouldn’t happen to you. Sometimes it skips a generation,” Mae said, “but that is clearly not the case. You look exhausted.”

“How did you know?” Abigail asked quietly, hyper aware of her daughter, who was now running between rooms. Apparently, she was no longer shy.

“You have been very vocal these past few years about your thoughts on my sanity, *ma cherie*. I can’t imagine you would bring your daughter with you, for the first time in years, if you didn’t believe me on some level. Now, do you want to hear my story?” she asked.

Abigail nodded, looking down at her hands.

“When I first starting seeing them, my mother sat me down and told me this story. She called it a history, but I’m still not completely convinced. A long time ago, when my great-great grandmother, Rebecca, was a young girl, she saved a witch’s life. The witch decided to grant my great-great grandmother one wish, and only one. Being young and hungry for love, she asked that the witch allow her to see the one who would love her most in the world. The witch agreed and granted her wish, but what Rebecca didn’t know was that there isn’t just one true love for everyone. There isn’t just one type of love either. When Rebecca found the one she thought was her one and only, she began to see all the others she could have loved fade away.” Mae stopped to pour herself a glass of water.

“The pictures are proof, at least to me. When I fell in love and began to see them, I made sure to remember their faces. I looked for them everywhere, and in this book are the ones that I found. It helped me to see them, to know that they were alive,” Mae said.

“How do you make it stop?” Abigail asked Mae, after a moment of stunned silence. Abigail didn’t want to believe her because she had written Mae off long ago as completely insane, but this explanation was better than nothing.

“Fall out of love. If you truly can’t stand it, you have to distance yourself from everyone you love. I did it for a time. In the end, I found that it wasn’t worth the loneliness. I would so much rather be mad than alone, wouldn’t you?” Mae said.

“Thank you for talking with me, Mae,” Abigail said, as she put Lila in her car seat.

“You’re welcome any time, my love,” Mae said.

As Abigail pulled away, she looked back to see Mae kneeling in the garden, her lips moving as she sang softly in what Abigail knew was French. Abigail thought about the first time she saw a vision.

A week after Lila was born, she had been home with Sam for a few days, living in their

little starter apartment, surrounded by a myriad of other little apartments. It was in the evening, around seven. Abigail heard a knock on the door – three raps in quick succession. She walked to the door without thinking it was strange because sometimes Sam forgot his keys when he left in the morning. When she opened the door, she was surprised to find a woman standing there, smiling.

The woman stepped towards Abigail with her hands out, still with her mouth stretched in a red smile. Abigail stepped backwards quickly, her hand protectively hovering over her belly, an old habit.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Abigail asked as her back hit the wall. “You need to leave right now. This isn’t your house.”

Even as she spoke, she knew on some level what was happening.

The woman reached out towards Abigail, as her eyes began to turn black. It blossomed from her pupils over her brown eyes until her eyes were completely black. Abigail was frozen against the wall; she couldn’t stop looking at this strange woman’s eyes. The clock above the baby’s crib, the one she and Sam had proudly bought when they moved in together, ticked loudly five times. Neither woman moved. As Abigail stared, the woman began to, for lack of a better word, *melt*. Her eyes went first, black bleeding down into the tan of her skin, mixing together so she got darker and darker, all the parts of her blending together until she disappeared through the generic blue carpet. Abigail stood and looked blankly on. No one appeared, as she stared at the open door. No one appeared, as she slid down the wall and put her head in her hands. In the next room, the baby began to cry. Sam had come home that day to find her staring into space blankly, blindly.

“Abi?” he asked softly, moving closer to her.

“Do you see her?” Abigail asked, gesturing helplessly to the wall. Sam obediently looked at the blank wall. It was beige, with a crack that ran along the length of it.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Sam asked.

Abigail shook her head and looked down at the floor. Lila was asleep in the crib next to her. Abigail opened her mouth to tell him what she saw, what she had been seeing, then closed it again. The moment had passed anyway.

It looked like what Abigail would imagine an acid trip was like. The first time she saw it, she felt like the most accomplished surrealist painter, as she watched. And, for a brief moment, she wanted to claim the terrible beauty for her own, to capture the swirls and drips, falling like melting wax, and keep them.

Abigail pulled herself back into the present, as she parked the car and gathered Lila in her arms. Sam was probably worried. It was later than she’d thought. As they walked through the door of the apartment, Abigail smelled burgers (one of the two things Sam was good at making) and smiled. She set Lila down and watched her run into the kitchen to see Sam.

“Hey, babe,” Sam called.

Abigail walked into the kitchen, smiling, and hugged Sam tightly, taking him by surprise. “I love you,” she said, with her head buried in his chest.

It was seven o’clock on a Friday, and there was only one customer in the seedy bar where Abigail was currently working. The man was overdressed. He had blonde hair long enough to be considered edgy and a beard that was trimmed to perfection. He was dressed like a stereotypical lumberjack, if lumberjacks wore suspenders and dress shoes and looked too slender to pick up an axe. The problem with this particular fake lumberjack was he was gasping deep and long gulps of air

and trying to carve symbols into the wood of Abigail's bar with his fingernail. The carving was not happening, but as Abigail watched from the corner of her eyes, his constant scratching broke off some of his nail, and he began to bleed on the freshly cleaned bar. He didn't seem to notice. That was definitely against sanitation codes. She wished her manager were here to clean this up. He was always late.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," Abigail said, her voice calm and sharp, as her hands trembled.

He didn't look up. Abigail grabbed some paper napkins and pushed them across the bar slowly, careful to avoid the blood, hoping to God that this was just a junkie. The man looked up at her suddenly, with a sharp jerk of his head that displaced a strand of ridiculously shiny hair over his eyes. Abigail stepped back as her heart began to audibly pound. She was sure he could hear it. His pupils were dilated so much that she could barely see the blue of his eyes. She figured cocaine was his drug of choice, but it could've been something else. She figured that she shouldn't care what he was on, as long as he didn't hurt her. Almost as if he heard her thoughts, he relaxed back in his stool, looking at her like he was starving. As she watched from behind the bar, the blackness in his eyes spread like a disease until the blue was covered, then the whites.

Abigail could feel her heart beating faster and faster even though she knew what was happening. It resonated through her body, and every pound made her hair shake, the impact rippling down the length of it. Her back against the wall of bottles, she closed her eyes and counted slowly down from five. *Five*. She could hear his stool scraping against the floor. *Four*. Patent leather shoes slapped slowly across the floor. *Three*. The footsteps came closer, behind the bar, then stopped. *Two*. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek, smell his scent, sharp and laced with toothpaste. *One*. She felt nothing. Abigail opened her eyes and looked cautiously around. He was gone, just like she'd known he would be.

The bell dinged as Abigail's manager walked through the door. He started to smile at her, then stopped. She smiled at him halfheartedly, as she crossed her arms and looked around to make sure no one else was hiding in the shadows.

"Is everything okay?" he said, somewhat nervously. Abigail got the feeling that he was a little afraid of her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Abigail said.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Abigail hesitated as she looked at his concerned face.

"Actually, I feel really sick. Do you think you could get someone to cover my shift?" she asked.

He didn't even hesitate before saying yes. Abigail drove home, passing by buildings that grew progressively derelict. This part of town was always waiting. She entered her apartment eagerly. Soon, she and Sam would have saved enough to move to a better part of town. The visions hadn't gone away, and if Abigail had anything to do with it, they never would. She was still afraid when she saw them, but she would so much rather be afraid than alone.

LIKE BUTTERFLIES AND FIREFLIES

Riley Gay

NONFICTION

*I*t almost reminds me of asking someone to look at your throat when it's sore. It begins with an itchy throat, continues with an itching desire to diagnose the well-being of said itchy throat, and after awkwardly craning over the bathroom sink to get as close to the mirror as possible without also blocking the light, it usually ends with you placing a flashlight in someone else's hand and asking them to confirm your suspicions. The moment that follows, however, is what I'm really talking about: head back, tongue flat, breath held, uncomfortably helpless and honestly quite silly-looking as you allow them to stare prudently at your inner being.

The dreaded response to this interaction, of course, would be for the person to reject your certainty of having an inflamed pharynx and for you to consequently regret ever opening up your mouth for them to examine in the first place.

I suppose it might not actually take much boldness to ask someone to look at your throat, but there's no denying the requirement of vulnerability. By inviting someone to peer inside of you, you confine yourself to two results: the joy of including them in your intimacy or the pain of isolation replacing your intimacy.

If you were to tiptoe over, open my skull by the hinges, and peer inside, you would see that my deepest thoughts center around childhood. I think I have always loved childhood. And I don't mean that I just love kids. I do, but it is the intangible part of them that I love. It is their state of being. Their existence. The unexplainable and thrilling nature of being small, yet full.

"Have you ever wished you could meet yourself as a child?"

"What?" My friend's eyebrows raised expectantly, but her eyes didn't even look up.

"Like have you ever wished you could chat with a toddler version of yourself? Or hold yourself as a baby?" I looked down to find my arms cradling an invisible infant, and I smiled hesitantly. It was one of the few times that I felt safe enough to pull this thought from the depths of my mind.

"I've never thought about it."

I could tell she was not the least bit as intrigued as I was. Her eyes darted back to me a few times before succumbing to the magnetic pull of her phone screen, and I was alone once more. In moments like these, I thought that maybe there would never be someone whose deepest thoughts were connected to mine, that maybe I would never find someone willing to step inside my circle.

•

There is a boy with hair the color of dust and cheeks the color of blood.

There is no distinction between dust and blood and boy.

I haven't been able to stop watching the video of Omran, a tiny Syrian boy who was pulled from the rubble of an air raid. He sits patiently, the grey of his dust-covered body screaming against the orange ambulance seat. His small hand reaches up to rub his tired eyes, and his small hand comes away with blood. Omran's body is the canvas of the war: ashes and crimsons painted thickly and crudely.

The president walks to the wooden podium and grips it tightly for a moment. The silence is speaking before he is, but soon he begins to read a letter written to him from a little boy in Scarsdale, New York.

DEAR President obama,
Remember the boy who was
picked up by the ambulance-in SYRIA?

In his letter, the 6-year-old shared with the president how he wanted the Syrian boy to come live with his family. Since the Syrian boy wouldn't have toys to bring, he said he would share his. His little sister would be "collecting butterflies and fireflies for him." He would introduce Omran to his friends and invite him to birthday parties and teach him to ride his bike. The president's left hand moved in rhythm with the sentences as he read the scrawled words of the letter. It was an example of the pure "humanity that can be displayed in a child," he told the crowd. "We could learn something from him."

We will ~~not~~ give him a family
and he will be our brother.

I watched from the other side of the screen, as the black and navy suits clapped at the president's words. I wished I could see their eyes. Was their applause a reaction — or a response? I wanted to know if these two little boys had helped the crowd step inside my circle.

Welcome.

Something inside of me seemed to cry out to the figures on the television.

Stay here with me.

On the way home from school one day, I asked my mom to take me to the public library to find a book. "It wasn't in the library inside our elementary school," I told her. "It was for older kids." When we arrived at the library, I scoured the shelves until I found the little, pink book I was looking for. There was a tree with a hole in it and a bird flying into a soft night sky. The title was constructed in intricate, red letters, and above it, a sentence was scrawled in cursive:

The Timeless Classic of Growing Up, and the Human Dignity That Unites Us All.

That day on the playground, my fifth grade teacher had asked me what my middle name was. Surprised by her question, I had stammered my reply: “Elizabeth.”

Although the joyful squeals of recess surrounded us, I remember the world being still in that moment. Mrs. Swaney hummed under her breath as she continued to observe the playground. “I always pictured you as a Riley Jean,” she stated. I blinked stupidly at her.

Jean? Fifth grade was the prime of my tomboy years. I played football at recess. I hid my pigtails with a bandanna tied around my head. My knees were always scraped, my fingernails lined with dirt. Why in the world would my teacher think that my middle name would be such a boring and girly name?

“My favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee,” she continued. She turned her chin towards me and smiled. “Have you ever heard of it?”

I slowly shook my head as thousands of book covers began to whirl behind my eyes. I was certain that I had explored every last inch of the library shelves, but I had never seen any books about mockingbirds.

“The main character is a young girl named Jean Louise Finch.” She glanced at her watch and reached for the whistle that hung around her neck. “You remind me of her.”

My mom sits on the carpet beside me as I flip through the glossy pages of photos. I laugh and point to a picture on the corner of a page.

“Did I really do that?”

“Oh my goodness,” she laughs with me as she looks at the picture under my index finger. “Yes, you did. And it nearly gave me a heart attack every time.”

My own face looks back at me with plump cheeks and golden wisps peeking from beneath a denim bucket hat. I was inside one of those red plastic cars with the yellow roofs that you used your feet to drag around like you were part of the Flintstones family. In this picture, however, the soles of my tiny shoes could be seen propped on either side of the “steering wheel.” I was ready to soar down the inclined driveway without anything stopping me.

“You were fearless.”

As more pages turn, I watch my eyes grow greener; my hair, darker; and my cheeks, less full. I am jealous of my mom. She got to know this little girl. I imagine what it'd be like for the curled pigtails and pink overalls to be on a living, breathing body sitting next to me. It gives me chills.

The summer after my first year of college, I came home to work for my church. There was a whole crew of us twenty-somethings that were working with the middle school and high school students, and we couldn't have asked for a better summer.

The sophomore and junior girls were mine, and I loved them. They were swimming in a parallel universe that I desperately longed for but couldn't quite reach. The funny thing, however, is that they desperately wanted to dive into my own pool of dusty stars and planets. They spent the summer leaning over the fence, asking for a closer look at my backyard of constella-

tions, and I spent it urging them to be amazed by their own stars.

There is a story in the Bible where Jesus pulls a child onto his lap and says to the crowd around him, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

It makes me think that the entrance to heaven is not the pearly white gates we always think of, but maybe more like an old quilt strung over the kitchen chairs that serves as an entrance to the perfect rainy day fort. Maybe “becoming like little children” means getting on our hands and knees and crawling into the reality that our pride has grown taller than we have over the years.

I have gone from wondering what it would be like to meet a child version of myself to wondering why it is that I wonder these things. After all, the little girl in those photos was still me. I didn’t miss anything. I was there the whole time.

Perhaps I feel that there’s something I’ve lost along the way. Or that the child version of myself was the truest and purest I’ve ever been. Maybe my love of childhood is how I deal with my shame and inadequacy; or maybe it’s how I run from it.

For a while, I thought that there would never be someone who shared my deepest thoughts, that I would never find someone who was willing to step inside my circle. My closest friends had stepped inside at times, but they were only visitors.

It took time for me to see the joy that comes with visitors.

Scout Finch was the first to come, shortly followed by Cal Trask, Liesel Meminger, and that scoundrel Huck Finn. Clare Abshire came with time. And then, of course, there is Omran.

And the little boy from New York. And me.

Golden wisps, denim hat, and all.

Perhaps the reason my favorite stories are my favorite stories is because they sing the same song as me. And perhaps the reason I cherish these visitors so much is because I know I’m not the only one they visit. They wrap childhood in warm curiosity and leave it for us to unravel. They turn the intangible into something we want to grab and keep and never let go.

For a long time now, I have been trying to cling to the beauty of childhood with all of my strength, swinging my hands harshly through the air and becoming deeply distraught each time it slips sweetly from my grasp. But maybe childhood can’t be kept in a jar. Maybe the joy comes from trying to catch it, from holding it in your cupped hands, and from watching it flutter back to where it belongs.

MY BROTHER PAINTED EGGS

Judson Easton Packard

*T*wenty-five years old and my mother tells me I have to come home immediately, Roger's in the hospital, an overdose. At this point I had been living out in San Francisco for almost three years, only making my way home for Christmas and weddings. I started to get some of my poems published when I was in high school, and I'd been working for the Chronicle, writing posts for their blog, and some of their online only content. I had a total of four editorials published in the paper in the year I'd been working there, which some coworkers told me is more than what most people ever get. Honestly, it was relieving to have most of my pieces get posted online. Neither of my parents go on the computer much, this was 2008, but just last Thanksgiving I heard my dad tell someone he didn't "do the online." It was kind of nice to have that kind of distance. My parents asked for clippings of everything I've ever had in print media, then they would do one of a few things. They told me they didn't get it if it was a poem, this was usually coupled with my mom crying and asking me why I'm so sad. Each of my editorials led directly to my parents telling me they didn't agree with my views. My dad actually called me a "leftist puppet" after the last one. This is the life I stepped out of temporarily in June to come back to Coleville, Illinois.

My dad picked me up at the airport. I saw him as I came out of the terminal, broad shoulders and a John Deere hat, one all of the siblings chipped in and bought him, tired of him only wearing things he had gotten in giveaways, leaning against a beat up white Chevy. Everything about it screamed normalcy, but as he walked towards me, there was a tremor to his movement, some kind of pull between his shoulders. I knew there was something terribly wrong. His eyes never left the pavement. The man who once yelled at me in a Friendly's parking lot for not making eye contact with our waitress walked to greet his son with green eyes tied to the sidewalk. It was not his regular handshake to meet me but a hug. Dad has given me three hugs in my adult life. One when I graduated from college, it came with a pat on the back and a grunt of "Make me proud." One when I moved to the West Coast, this one felt a little softer, but it was still accompanied with a "Never forget where you come from" that sounded more like a warning than a mantra. And this one outside the airport, when he managed to hold his tears back until he started to speak, choking through "Roger's gone." We stood there until a cop came up and told us we'd have to move the truck. My father clutched in my arms, some small, broken thing I did not recognize leaning against me for support I did not ever think I would be asked for.

Sometime after Midwestern pizza and memories, I was left alone with my mother. She was never one to shy from the hard moments.

"You were his favorite sibling."

"He told me that actually. Not like it would have been hard to guess."

He and Peter never got along, especially once Peter had kids, and Molly wouldn't talk to him after he got out of prison. She said she couldn't be a part of the "cycle of enablement" that

was our family.

“You should write something, a poem for his funeral.” I hadn’t considered the possibility my mother might want me to do this. I’d thought I might speak, but only if I wanted to. “He loved your poems.”

“He said that?” He’d told me they were important to him while he was locked up, that it had been big to be in touch with me, but he’d never even used the word like.

My mother’s brown eyes rested on mine. Roger had the same eyes, brown but never-ending.

“Every poem you sent us, he’d take the signed copy home with him. He had them all hung up in his apartment.”

I can still picture my brother with a bottle of Bud Light pressed into one hand, his other pointed at a line in one of my poems.

“Fuck.” I didn’t know what else to say. A longing had stretched itself along the length of me, it came with the knowledge that I’d never get to talk my brother about any of them. But underneath it, growing from somewhere around my stomach, was a warmth in picturing him poring over my every last word, searching for the details of himself, our family. “Yeah, Okay. I’ll write something.”

My mother kisses my cheek. I had one week. Mom told me she still cries when she reads it. My father keeps a copy in his truck.

Twelve years old and I sat on the seat of my bicycle, parked on the crest of a hill near Mrs. Hogue’s house. An egg rested in the palm of my left hand, turned upwards, cupped between my fingers. The sides of the egg were mostly smooth, but it had those little bumps on it, just big enough to catch on the grooves of your fingers. Mrs. Hogue had lamps on either side of her doorway. Up-turned, flower shaped, projecting that off yellow color that you get from thick old glass. I didn’t want to put my bike on the sidewalk, there was a streetlight and too many people to watch from windows, to catch me in the act. I was certain that throwing an egg at a teacher’s house would be a felony. I mean, I wouldn’t understand the word felony for another four years when Roger got arrested for felony possession of a controlled substance, but I was sure that if I got caught for this I would be living behind bars. No sidewalk meant I had to choose between leaving it in the wood line or her driveway. The wood line seemed like the better option to me, I could see myself disappearing between paper birches and sugar maples. Dad taught us a bunch of trees when we were growing up. I retained enough to have very specific fantasies.

All of my scheming, the careful placement of the bike, the half-baked excuses I churned off on my ride over, and I was still standing at the end of the walkway up to Mrs. Hogue’s door in full view of the neighborhood. There were only streetlights on the corners, but everybody in town kept their outdoor lights on at night so you could see what was happening on the street. I had spent probably fifteen minutes debating on what the best technique to egg a house was. I settled on cocking my arm all the way behind my back, firing the egg overhand. The goal was to hit the center of the door, that way she’d see it right when she opened it, might even think someone was knocking. I guess a window would have been just as good to throw at, but I couldn’t get that picture of egg running down the front door, that ugly red door, out of my head. For an art teacher her whole house was a nightmare of a color palette, a paint splatter of yolk placed right below the knocker would fit right in.

There was no audience when I let the egg fly. It was on the darker side of what you got

from eggs, that kind of tan, off pink color with speckles that made you think less of freckles and more of birthmarks. My arm swung hard around the corner of my shoulder, the egg made a perfect arc on its way up her path. It didn't quite catch the knocker, instead hitting the top left corner of the door. I remember being so excited just to have been close. Maybe I was caught up in that or just marveling at the way the little tan grenade moved more into the light, how it was finally fully illuminated in the moment before it splattered against tacky red paint, but I was caught completely off guard when someone grabbed my arm.

"Danny? What the hell are you doing?" Roger's hand clung firmly to the skin of my forearm.

"Riding my bike." Brown eyes locked onto my green as I brought them up slowly, pupils meeting pupils. He must have already been staring at my eyes, waiting for them to connect with his. "I threw an egg."

I never learned to be much of a liar, especially not when it came to my siblings.

"I saw. Did you think you were being sneaky?" He didn't wait for a response. For all his dramatics he never learned to let a moment land. "Why?"

I started to answer but was cut off by a noise from Mrs. Hogue's porch, the doorknob signaling her approach.

"Fuck. Let's go."

He tugged at my arm, and we took off down the street. I could hear her screaming about kids and calling the cops, but we were far enough away that even if she did they'd have never found us. For all my careful planning, I didn't even consider the fact that I left my bike behind. It stayed there for two days before I was able to get away from home to get it. Roger's car was parked around the corner. We settled on the Plaza Diner as our next stop before we returned to our conversation, not that there were many other late night options.

"Why the hell are you throwing eggs at Mrs. Hogue's house? She give you a bad grade on a pot?"

"She told me I couldn't draw, like I sucked at it."

"She said you suck at drawing?"

"Not exactly? She looked at a picture I had drawn and said not everyone was creative." Roger snorted, my cheeks burned, and I brought my pinky and the hard edge of my closed fist down against his leg. "It's not funny. She's a hag. Mrs. Hag."

I did my best to say it as if I came up with it, as if it was proof that I was creative. Roger went to the same middle school, that nickname was already floating around then.

"Did you only bring the one egg?"

"I'm a good shot."

It was more defiance than boasting. Sneaking one egg out of the house raised a big lump in my throat. I was scared my parents wouldn't just know what I had done with it, but they would come down on me for wasting food, which was a big deal in the house. With four kids every last scrap got eaten. The idea that my parents would be able to tell that an egg was gone and that it had left by way of my jacket pocket was honestly laughable. Keeping track of food was never something that anyone was really capable of. If you wanted something you had three choices: put your name on it and pray like hell, hide it, or eat it right then.

"Daniel Connors, starting pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, actually got his start hurling eggs." I crossed my arms, not willing to give in to Roger's teasing. That was just his cue to keep going. "He had egged every teacher's house in the neighborhood before he finally threw one against Coach Reid's house, who immediately offered him a spot on the team."

“Shut up.”

I laughed through gritted teeth, and Roger took the sharp left turn into the Plaza Diner’s parking lot. There was a mostly empty strip mall in the same lot, the surrounding area just not supplying the business to keep open any kind of department store. The plaza is still about the same today, only now the video store has closed. I knew Roger would never tell our parents, but I still made him swear over late night pancakes. In a family of food hoarders, nothing was more sacred.

Ten years old, and we all packed into a minivan, a green Astrovan with wood paneled doors. There was a farm expo that my dad decided it would be good for us to go to, educational. Mom rode in the front; that was non-negotiable. I was stuck in the middle row with Molly, Roger and Peter taking the way back for themselves. There was very little difference in the comfort of the seats but the further back you rode the less our parents would talk to you, the less our parents talked to you on car rides the less chores you would get assigned. Until I figured that out and started waiting outside or, when I was willing to take some bruises later, in the van, I was always in the middle row. We may as well have been sorted by age. Roger is six years older than me, five for Peter and Molly, twins who were supposed to be the last addition to the family. My mom still calls me the best anniversary present she ever got. I was born in February. Their anniversary is in May.

The Farm Expo was up near Ridgeport. It seemed far at the time, and we had to drive all the way out into the country, but it was nice to get to see other parts of Illinois. The expos were half fair, farmers coming from all around to show the freakishly large products of this year’s growth, and half convention, manufacturers sending sales reps to show off their newest equipment. Any kid who went to it would be stuck wearing farm equipment shirts for months after. The John Deere ones weren’t that bad; you could pass that off with brand recognition. The ones for the new brands of seeders though, those just let everybody know that your parents would take you to anywhere but a store to get your clothes, if they could avoid it. I got a lot of hand-me-downs too, which meant generations of farm expo, church camp, and little league shirts. Dad’s family were farmers. He grew up on a farm, his brother still worked it, and his sister had married a farmer. Dad worked for a company called Securitas. They ran security for banks.

Roger and Peter disappeared as soon as we got to the expo. They said they were going off to look for jobs. That excuse worked on our parents, somehow. Molly’s eyes met mine, and I knew we were both sharing the same thought. *Bullshit*. Anytime we went to one of these things they’d run off looking for girls and excitement. Peter eventually found a recruiting booth at one of them. Dad always knew someone and dragged Mom along on those conversations. That left Molly and me. She always acted like she had something better to be doing, like I was ruining her day. Every time it was the same line.

“Guess I have to look after *you* then. *Somebody* has to make sure you don’t get lost.”

I always got the feeling she liked spending the time with me. We’d wander around the expo going in between the sales booths and the farm booths, always finding our family at the Farmer’s Olympics at the end, where she could publicly part ways with me. There was a tractor pull, some riding events, and a mix of lumberjack events. I wanted to learn to throw an ax, but Mom wouldn’t let me have my own, and Dad would never let anyone throw one of his tools. The two of us wound up at the games first this year. Two boys from school found Molly through the fog of the crowd.

“Don’t embarrass me during this conversation.”

She didn’t need to give me an or else. Once had been enough to never doubt that she would deliver again.

“You got a boyfriend?”

“Just keep your mouth shut.”

When I was eight I told a boy Molly liked that she wet the bed until she was ten. She made copies of pages of my journal and handed them out in school. I still had people calling me Danny Diary the year I graduated high school.

“Molly’s got a boyfriend.” I managed to get it out just before the boys walked up, late enough that there was nothing Molly could do but give me a hard look. It was enough. She knew I wouldn’t open my mouth again.

The two boys who Molly turned to smile at both tensed trying to control the conversation, both melting at every feint of my sister’s. It was less two bulls locking horns, than it was two bees bringing pollen to their queen. One of them had dimples and black hair, the other one a flat line for a mouth and sandy blonde hair. He looked nice standing next to my sister. That may be why I remember what they looked like. She has the same green eyes that I do, plus Mom’s curls, their color somewhere in between sunflowers and a dead maple leaf. She flirted so much when we were kids. Five different guys tried to ask her to prom. She never dated much though, for her it was always all talk. Molly stood to my left totally engaged, having fully abandoned me, I turned to take in the rest of the expo. I saw Roger slip into an equipment tent with somebody who looked like they worked there, some guy I’d never seen who’s got an old ratty jacket and a nice new backpack. Even then I didn’t think my brother should be alone with the kind of person who works at a fair.

I slipped away as Molly told the boy with dimples “Stop, you’re going to make me blush in front of my brother.” She didn’t turn to see me leaving.

The tent I followed Roger into was full of mostly rusted out shelving units with all kinds of supplies on them. Milk crates, the plastic kind that always announce exactly who the owner is as if possession of the crate itself was some kind of thievery, filled with batteries and lights and all the little extras you might need to put on this kind of expo. Somehow, even though the tent was only there for a week-long event, there was dust on everything. If I wasn’t following Roger I would have filled my pockets with AA batteries. They must not have heard me come in, unlikely that they could, the doorway was just triangles of canvas which you folded out of your way. Still I took the time to find a proper hiding spot, settling on one in between some shelves where I could see them. I knew Roger would kill me when he found out I was spying on him in public, not that he was particularly nice about it when I did it at home, but it was all part of the fun. We all followed each other around. Anything you could find out about what your siblings did in secret might get you out of chores for a long time, depending on how bad the secret was. Roger was across the tent; there was a little table at the other side, probably for the counting and assembling of supplies. The guy I’d never seen before, greasy brown curls in his hair, had his backpack out, on the table, and open.

“It’s good shit. The best you’re going to find around here, that’s for god damn sure.” It was the stranger talking, his voice deeper than his body would suggest.

I was craning my neck trying to get a view around the shelves, around their bodies, to whatever it was that they’d taken out of his bag.

“You can get this whenever?” My brother’s always soft voice responded.

“Yeah, easy man. Whenever, wherever, whatever you need.”

“Easy, tiger.” The stranger didn’t laugh. I could picture my brother’s smile, even with his

head turned away from me I was sure he was flashing his brace straightened teeth in all their pearlescent glory. "Let's do it, man. I got people to meet."

My brother's hand slid into his back pocket and came out holding more cash than I had ever imagined at ten. My eyes widened, there was the slow intake of breath you get as you reach the final moment of a movie. He handed the money over to the guy he'd been talking to who fanned it out, counting each bill against sunlit sides of faded green tent. I shifted a little, trying to count along with him. He reached into his backpack and came out with a Ziploc bag of something and handed it to Roger before putting the pack squarely on both shoulders. I shifted a little more, trying to see around my brother to what was in the plastic bag he had been handed. It was the first time I ever saw cocaine, not that I recognized it. Some dust from the crate I was leaning on puffed up and across my columella, a word I wouldn't learn until my sister told me it, home from medical school, telling us exactly what was hurt when Peter broke his nose in basic, and I sneezed.

"Who's there?"

"Fuck."

My brother's hand slid back into his pocket, depositing the bag there. I tried to get out of the tent before I was caught. I didn't. The stranger grabbed me by the shoulder, getting more fabric than body, and he was stronger than he looked.

"What the hell are you doing, kid?"

Roger came around the corner and saw me immediately. His eyes did a weird thing that I didn't recognize as shame until years later.

"Danny? Let him go, man." The stranger looked at Roger. His face said that he was supposed to be the one in charge of the situation. His eyes were thankful that he wasn't. "He's my brother."

The stranger's hand came off my shoulder, flattening my shirt as it went.

"Sorry, little man. See you round, Rog." He ducked out of the tent flaps and out into the expo. I never saw him again.

"What are you doing, Danny? You following me?"

"I saw you come in here with that guy. Molly was talking to some boys and I just wanted to see what you were doing. I wasn't following you around the expo, just came in here to see what you were doing I swear."

Roger was nice to me most of the time, but he'd put a bruise or two on me when the situation called for it.

"What boys was Molly talking to?"

Whenever things got close to something risky to Roger, he'd always pivot.

"Some guys from school, I don't know their names. Where'd you get all that money?"

"Don't worry about it." He winked. "Let's go find Molly. Keep your mouth shut and I'll make it worth your while."

I was already used to the bribe system my older siblings had. When they did something they didn't want our parents or anyone else to find out about they'd buy me something to keep me quiet. It worked out for me. With three older siblings I got a lot of bribes.

Twenty-one years old and I sat on the hood of a Buick outside of the Illinois River Correctional Center. Roger was finally getting out, the guards showed me where to wait. He asked for me to be the one to come pick him up. His lawyer, an old friend of our mom's named Thomas Beckwith, went inside to fill out all of the paperwork. I was excited to see him out and in his own clothes

again for the first time in five years. They found him with sixty grams of cocaine. He only did half the time he was sentenced for, out on his first chance at parole. Roger was always well liked, well behaved if you ignore the drugs; no one was surprised to hear he'd be out on good behavior. I wasn't waiting long before Roger came out, shaking hands with a few of the guards on his way. Those kinds of theatrics were everywhere in Roger's life. I still don't know if that show was for me, the guards, or my brother. He looked so casual, wearing jeans and an old shirt from one of his high school bands. The band wasn't even that good but Roger's old girlfriend, the one he really loved, the one our parents really loved, had painted it, and it was honestly beautiful. There was a sheaf of butcher paper tucked under one of his arms.

"You going to let me drive?"

I punched him in the arm. It's not just my dad who doesn't do well with hugs.

"Welcome back to the world, dickhead."

He laughed and threw his head back.

"Glad it's you." We just stood there for a minute, Roger not seeming to want to move. "Can we stop for a beer on the way home?"

"I'm not going to let you drink and drive on your first day out, man. Don't think your P.O. would approve." He started to groan; I knew the routine that was coming. "I had to sign so many forms to be allowed to pick you up, Rog, no way I'm about to be part of you going back."

The whole conversation stretched out in front of me. He'd say okay, and then make a joke, then bring up some story from when we were kids, and finally say please in a real soft voice. I was going to lose, but I wasn't really trying to stop him from getting a beer on his first day out.

"Plaza Diner?"

His eyes lit up. As much as he enjoyed talking me into things, there was something special about just being handed this.

"You buying?" He was smiling as he asked it.

"Appetizers and a beer. Mom's going to kill me."

He rolled the window all the way down on the ride there, putting his hand and sometimes his whole head out into the wind.

In the parking lot he took the butcher paper out from the backseat of the car, and handed it to me.

"I made this for you, or, fuck, I don't know. I painted it after reading one of your poems."

It was a watercolor painting. He told me over lunch that he'd taken a bunch of art classes in his five years, that it helped pass the time. The poem that inspired it is one I wrote in college. It's about when our grandfather taught me to slaughter a chicken, and how I cried the first time I had to do it. It wasn't when I actually killed the chicken; it was plucking out the feathers. We always gathered the eggs when we stayed at our granddad's house. I was so used to running my finger through those feathers, soft in a way hair can never be, brushing the back of each hen we would pass. I was shaking as I plucked each feather, trying to hold in the noise of sobs. Our grandfather just stood and watched, I knew he'd just tell me I had to finish, that you couldn't abandon your work. Roger's painting was of eggs, uncooked, unbroken, laying in the center of the page with blood coated feathers haunting the edges. I have it hung up in my bedroom, next to a copy of the poem that inspired it. I feel weird having my own poem on my wall, but it just didn't feel complete without it.

"Thanks." My brother was not a masterful painter. He meant it when he said it was a way to pass the time. It was clear what everything on the page was though, and it really fit the poem. "It's really—"

“Can we do this later? It’s been awhile since I had a good burger.”
I bit back a smile.
“Yeah, for sure.”
Lunch was cheeseburgers, fries, and more laughter than I have had since.

My Brother Painted Eggs

I wish you had sent me another painting,
maybe one I had not inspired.
I would gladly make my walls your canvas.

My words rimmed the edges of your bedroom,
a fact you failed to mention
maybe to avoid my questions, did you really

read them that often? You will never,
would never tell me even if
I had asked, which was your favorite?

Tomorrow I will wake missing a piece,
bits of my self ripped away
like a peach that has been nibbled, left to rot

my edges have grown soft, browning.
You live in the corners of
every diner, making your home underneath

beds of fries which taste as golden as they
appear. Each day I tuck you
into my pocket, carrying every bit of you

I can hold on to. Someday I will crack an egg
and you will pour from jagged
shells. Carelessly, I will burn your underside,

overcook your yolk, dribble bits down my chin.
I never learned to cook,
though I treasure afternoons you tried to teach me.

BRUISES

Darby Huddleston

NONFICTION

5:52 A.M.

The convoy of KSUPD vehicles soundlessly pulled out of the parking lot, and the barrage of red and blue lights dispelled down Claflin Road. I rubbed my eyes, peering after them, making sure he was really gone. It was nearly six o'clock in the morning and the dark horizon above an onslaught of trees didn't promise a November sunrise for another hour or so. There was a frosty stillness outside; everything seemed to be sleeping but me. Meandering back inside, I methodically paced the main lobby waiting for further instruction. Waiting for my supervisors to finish speaking with the girl whose mascara was smeared on her cheeks from crying all night. Waiting for permission to go to bed. Pacing was something to do: making a circle over and over again, maybe sometimes an oval. Thirteen steps exactly. Or sixteen when I lost my train of thought, or glanced upward to check the time.

After some time, my legs became bored with their monotonous circle, and I leaned against the nearest wall. In measured staccato, a clock above my head clicked at me in Morse Code. I closed my eyes and tried to decipher the message:

SLEEP. Unquestioningly, I adjusted my breaths to its battery-powered rhythm. Counting seconds rather than sheep, I began to feel drowsiness weigh down my limbs. But images swam in the dark behind my eyelids to the beat of metronomic ticking above me. Angela shoved to the floor, screaming. Tyler dragging Angela by her ankles, by her hair.

Tick.

The purple, hand-shaped bruises on her neck. The missing pieces of his flesh in Angela's fingernails.

Tick.

Blackmail and threats on her phone; the 243 calls he left her. Policemen groping her injuries, photographing contusions.

Tick.

Tyler with his hands behind his back, wildly craning his neck behind him; hungrily looking for her.

Tick.

“Darby?”

Chase and Bethany, the Residence Life Coordinators of Haymaker and Ford Hall, emerged from the office doorway with their heads bowed. The three of us exchanged a half-hearted smile; it

was clear how exhausted we all were. Chase shook his head with a small frown and readjusted his glasses.

“It seems like just about everything is wrapped up here,” Bethany said. She glanced carefully through the office door at Angela, who was choking on violent sobs and hugging herself tightly. She was muttering to herself amid heaving breaths. I realized I had been staring for some time when Chase politely cleared his throat and shifted his weight lethargically.

“What we need you to do is submit an Incident Report as soon as you can, so the police can process the information in the morning. Make sure it’s thorough—this will more than likely be read by the Office of Student Life, and used in a court hearing.” Chase stared down at me, making sure I understood. “Write down everything you saw and heard, and be as accurate as you can. Put all the facts into chronological order, and be as unbiased as possible. I need you to do it right away, before you forget anything.”

I nodded wordlessly and bit the inside of my cheek, certain that my voice would give away my disappointment. It was apparent that I wouldn’t be going to sleep any time soon, and it took all the willpower I possessed not to roll my eyes. Once Angela had been escorted back to her room and Bethany and Chase left, I trudged down the dimly lit hallway to my room, huffing and puffing under my breath.

8:41 A.M.

Thank You! Your Incident Report has been successfully submitted, the webpage said. Closing my laptop, I slumped in my recliner and could only let out a feeble moan. Running on half an hour of sleep, staring at a bright computer screen for two hours, and writing a four-page report, my eyes were burning, begging to be closed for a little while. Covering my face with my hands, I slowed my breathing. Behind the dark backdrop of my hands, the last five hours unfurled before me again: bruised legs, pulled hair. Calloused hands clenching ankles: dragging, struggling. The muffled sound of hysterical sobs echoed in my ears, making my head spin slowly like a record.

Get some breakfast, said my left-brain, or maybe my stomach, *get some food in yourself*. My legs mindlessly obeyed, slowly plodding down an empty stairwell.

I wasn’t hungry, but I lifted one leaden foot after the other to the dining center. Fortunately it was still early in the morning on a Saturday, and the few tired faces that were munching toast or slurping oatmeal were ones I didn’t recognize. I wanted to be left alone as my wild and winding thoughts attempted to sort themselves out; seeking purpose and reason, like AP Lit students furiously searching their novels for symbolism and theme. This time the authorial intent was unknowable to me, and God did not offer hints in elementary motifs or dialogue.

Someone in a hairnet slapped wet eggs on a plate for me, and I quietly managed a “thank you.” It felt like coughing up gravel as the words left my throat.

My mind moved in slow motion as I lifted my food to my mouth while I dumbly stared outside. Withering grass. Blueberry yogurt. Bike racks. Scrambled eggs. The sunrise. It was all I could do to process one thing at a time. The whole picture—morning color peeking through the trees, my half-eaten breakfast, the purple bruises on her neck—it was too overwhelming, like looking at the sun. Which reminded me that my eyes were still on fire, so I closed them while taking a sip of milk. Weakly, I sighed to myself.

What weighed on me was exhaustion, the comforting idea of collapse. I felt dead tired. But more than that, I felt reborn in a way; it is a lot of hard work to climb out into the world again when you think about it. 4:05 A.M. last night, I was reborn when I discovered that evil peo-

ple were at K-State just like anywhere else; evil people lived a floor below me in Moore Hall.

I had shaken his hand; I had talked briefly a time or two with him. I remember thinking he had a nice smile.

Childishly, I had forgotten that evil people didn't announce themselves as the antagonist, like in the movies. Real villains prowled into peoples' lives disguised as good friends and caring neighbors and boyfriends who promised, "It would never happen again," ten times over. A fresh layer of my unperceived innocence was ripped away from me at 4:05 A.M. that night that believed domestic violence was confined within the TV screen as I watched *Law and Order: SVU* between the slits of my fingers covering my eyes.

But you couldn't write that in an Incident Report. All you could do was robotically relive the nightmares of your peers that you were hired to clean up. The bare facts, in chronological order. What I couldn't include in the IR was the primal sob I heard from Angela in the elevator when it was all over; the sob that still howls in my ears sometimes. What I couldn't write in the IR was the way I couldn't fall asleep for two more days after that. Or the countless times I caught myself looking over my shoulder, or the dancing images of battered ballerinas in dreams. Or the way I hated myself for being so sickeningly happy that it wasn't me; that my mess of a life wasn't as shitty as hers. Thanking God I had a father that reminded me I was loved at least a few times.

What I had forgotten to put in the IR was the fact that chronological order is meaningless because I still relive that night sometimes, even though it's over. I'm sure she does too, fingering healed bruises that still feel tender months later. But you can't write that in an IR, because that's not the truth. Even though it is what happened.

9:27 A.M.

Pushing around my unfinished eggs with a fork, I felt hollow inside. The undeniable brokenness of the world had slapped me in the face good and hard, and I could no longer ignore its presence in Moore Hall, at K-State, in my heart and everyone else's. But a victory had still been won when Tyler Harrison was led away in handcuffs like a mad dog. One more young woman could live freely without someone to hide from, even though she never thanked me. Even though she screamed and cursed at me when we told her Harrison was taken away. I set my fork down and began swirling the remaining milk in its glass.

I had come alive at 4:05 in the morning because there is deep truth in the midst of tragedy and crisis. There is something exhilarating about shattering facades and facing your demons, even if what's underneath may be worse than you had imagined. My favorite part, the real horror, is that you will never be quite the same afterwards. I had been reborn at 4:05 in the morning because good and evil were seen clearly for a fraction of a second, like lightning cracking the sky into shards of dark glass. Brief as it was, I knew that I had seen it: dazzling and deadly. Some milk spilled out of my glass and I mindlessly dabbed my tray with napkins.

I felt at home wading waist-high in the sandy swamp of someone else's suffering, because picking up the pieces of a stranger's life is so much easier than making small talk. You also come to know yourself in the swirling currents: stuck yet never swept away. The grime and the chafing wet sand keep you grounded, pinned to reality. The messy, slow-moving slop, like quicksand, seeps into your clothes, takes hold of your legs—pulling you under if you let it. Like the crew of a sinking ship throwing dispensable cargo overboard, you find out what really matters to you and what was simply weighing you down. Meaningless crap, like soggy, milk-soiled napkins.

Instinctively, I dove into Angela's swampy mess to pull her out, but the sand and the muck and dead reeds of her life had found their way onto my skin too. It was then that I realized I had graduated from being a novice and second-guessing Resident Assistant. There was far more at stake than pinning up bulletin boards or sniffing hallways for the skunk-smell of marijuana. That was easy. I had been so distracted with planning programs and paperwork, and all the minor details of the job that I had forgotten why I applied in the first place. There were people with real problems that needed help cleaning up, and some of the mess was bound to get onto me too.

And the mess had certainly found its way onto me. Looking down I discovered a glob of blueberry yogurt on my forearm, unnoticed in the midst of my mental ramblings. Wiping most of the blue-purple goop from my arm with my forefinger, I licked off the stuff and examined my sticky skin. Traces of the yogurt were still left on my arm, leaving what vaguely resembled a bruise. Whether the remaining residue would stain my skin or my shirt, I didn't mind in the moment—Angela wasn't the only one left with bruises.

I picked up my tray and left.

Coming back to my room I curled into a ball on the carpet floor, in the dark, ignoring the flecks of sunlight creeping through the window blinds. The hard floor wasn't uncomfortable; it was cool and solid. I needed at least one thing to be solid, tangible, unyielding. With my eyes closed I gingerly clasped a hand around my ankle, feeling for fleshly shackles that could drag me away. There was no other hand but my own, and I carefully massaged the skin in relief. Silent tears dripped onto the carpet as I imagined Angela, just a few floors above me, in the fetal position on the floor. Curled into a ball like I was, in the dark, groping her ankles to make sure she was free.



ASK THEM IF THEY DREAM
Jacob Brooks

Oil on canvas
25"x37"
2016



SPIDER PLANT
Timmy Wolfe

Ceramic
12"x9"x1"
2016



PLEASE WAKE UP

Jacob Brooks

Oil on canvas
24"x24"
2016

HONEY

Matthew Champagne

I have a beehive as my mind.

Those scuttling bugs become restless,

Breathless, when I feed them smoke

From bellows that are not my lungs.

My eyes, my thoughts

As pumps to funnel thick doubt,

Up past my throat-damper neck,

Past my smoke-chamber nose where bee wings,

Multitudinous, legion, crackle and singe me.

They will not flee when the smoke comes.

I am asked if honey is worth the sting

And I respond with a

“Hallelujah! Yes, it is!”

When the fever gets my blood.

And God has a spoon

That can hold oceans.

But that is only sometimes.

Other times, my throat is raw and black,

I do not lick soot from the hearth

And say it is sweet, nor do I

Blow on crawling embers

If my breath will not start a fire

When I feel the buzzing,

But instead I grab

The coals

And hold them to my brow as they hiss

Like bees, bees, bees

And I am the queen.

MOON POLLUTION

Connor Syrios

NONFICTION

UFO, n. Orig. U.S. – An unidentified flying object; a ‘flying saucer’.
- OED

Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.
- Arthur C. Clarke

I heard you had reports this morning of an unidentified aircraft. Don't worry, it was just me.
- George W. Bush

The initial assumption that I had about the people of Colorado's San Luis Valley was that the cross-section of the bar-hopping population and the weird-shit-seeing population would be a significant, large blob of a primary color that would look great on a tourism pamphlet you'd find in an ATV rental shop. It'd be a pretty Venn diagram that might resemble a crop circle, but one razed by an artistically-challenged ET. Inside of that blob you'd see *Believers*. The outliers of the cross-section would be people like me, *Nonbelievers*, but I'd be on the side that hasn't seen weird shit by default.

I'd heard about odd things happening in the Valley before arriving there; strange lights, animal mutilations, and seemingly supernatural events are liberally peppered throughout the Valley's rich, and often baffling, oral and written history. Sand in the Alamosa Basin is supposed to have inexplicably swallowed teams of mules and sheep during Zebulon Pike's excursion into Colorado during the early 19th century, and during the full moon, apparitions of horses have been known to gallop across the ridges of the Sand Dunes. Also, it is in and around that valley where Native Americans, including the Navajo and Comanche tribes, wandered, explored, and cultivated their own heritage, leaving prehistoric pictographs scattered throughout the surrounding cliffs. It doesn't end there. Tewa Pueblo legend holds that a small lake near the Sand Dunes, referred to as *Sipophe*, is a doorway out of and into the underworld that mankind crawled out of at the beginning of time. For every landmark, there is a story. Into the 20th and 21st century, myth and superstition have lived on, but have evolved into something more otherworldly. Legend has taken up a new moniker.

This is best illustrated by the story of one man, a UPS driver, who reported that a UFO ambushed him one day while he was driving with his nephew and his brother down a lonesome road

in the Valley. The object stuck around for an uncomfortable length of time directly in front of him and refused to leave. Naturally, fed up with the powers that be, the man exited his truck and confronted the UFO floating directly in front of him: “Do you want to make contact or what?!” Eventually, it left.

For two days and one night I stepped into that extensive legacy that impresses an ancient, biblically proportioned weight upon the beholder. Once I was there, that wearable history seemed altogether unwieldy and cosmologically breathed. Strangeness is the gospel of San Luis, and I inexplicably found myself at the altar listening for the unexpected.

And I was wrong about the Venn diagram, by the way. It doesn’t exist. The tiny, drive-by towns in Colorado’s San Luis Valley don’t have any bars at all.

They have something else, and I was there to experience it.

“I have no clue what that means,” I told the cashier, a young-ish woman in a red vest. She took the coke bottle I handed her and scanned it anyway.

“That’s our rewards card.” She educated me with a pause and a look that only a local could give to an outsider. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No. We’re from Kansas.” My two friends, Alex and Luke, agreed to go on a camping trip with me on a Thursday during a school week in October. We skipped class, geared up, packed a cooler, hit a Burger King pretty hard, and tore west toward Colorado through the vastness of western Kansas. The first night we’d stay just outside of Colorado Springs in Falcon, the second night we’d stay in San Luis, then the third we’d go back to Falcon. But our primary goal, our ultimate destination, was a small town off the cosmic highway in Colorado’s mysterious San Luis Valley: Hooper. Homo sapien population 103.

It was around 10:00 p.m. that night and we had been gliding across the San Luis Valley, and through Hooper, in a CRV named Christie, searching in vain for the bar that doesn’t exist. Bob Dylan’s “When the Ship Comes In” bounced around the car’s interior as we voyaged across the floor of the Valley, explorers bound to its dusty roads. We went to Center, about 10 miles west, and they didn’t have a bar either. Go figure. They had a gas station, though, and so there we were, picking brains.

“What brings you out here?” She slid the coke across the counter. I gave her cash.

“We’re here for the UFO watchtower in Hooper. You ever heard of that?” My reply sounded strange when it left my mouth. Not only had I never seen a UFO, but I had never seen anything truly unexplainable.

She almost laughed. “I didn’t know they actually had that. But I know that San Luis is known for that kinda stuff.” She gave me my change. The station had several people mulling around the aisles and registers, and we were speaking loudly.

I smiled at her. “So you’ve never seen a UFO?”

“No. Ya know, I’ve only been here for about a month.”

I prodded. “So you haven’t seen one *yet*?”

With some urgency, she said through her smile, “I guess. Enjoy your time here, I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.”

And what was I looking for? Something extraordinary, to put it mildly. I was looking for something strange, undefinable, and evergreen that would turn my head and fill me with wonder, if only for a moment. I was looking for a damn UFO at the world’s foremost and singular UFO Watchtower, with a woman named Judy Messoline at its helm.

We left the gas station, and on the journey back to our campsite in the dark, I scanned the inky, clouded horizon. Why not?

I noticed something strange, something dark, just above the grass to the south of the road. It was reflecting moonlight. I didn't breathe for a moment. As we drove past it, I realized it was the tin roof of a shack.

"I thought I just saw something."

Alex was driving, but he turned his head. Luke was asleep in the back. "Really?"

"Yeah, but it was nothing."

One of us turned up the music.

We arrived in San Luis on the afternoon before the gas station encounter. At Pinyon Flats, nestled gently between the Great Sand Dunes National Park and the base of North Zapata Ridge in the Sangre de Cristos range, we unpacked our gear and set up our tent with the busted zipper. It was a beautiful spot. We grabbed a quick bite at the nearby diner, loaded a few backpacks with water, and took to the dunes.

Through a dried riverbed we trudged on toward the enormous drifts, past parents with their kids and old men with their belligerent dogs. With each step forward our feet sunk further and further into the sand. The three of us exchanged uncertain looks. "This is gonna suck," one of us said. It's the elevation. Each step up the dunes in Colorado's thin air, even the small steps, cost four Kansas steps. But we made it up through pep talks and sandy shoes.

"Hooper is somewhere down there," I said from the top of High Dune as we plopped onto the edge of the sandy ridge overlooking the San Luis Valley. The trek took about an hour and a half. "We'll be there tomorrow." Luke and Alex sat beside me, and I wondered what they were thinking. They agreed to go on the trip out of fascination and the chance to take one last road trip in college. I looked out. Under the wavy low atmosphere in the valley's basin was a collection of glowing specs of light marking the towns. It was a promisingly clear day covered with a curtain of blue sky, with one wall cloud forming in the north that refused to budge. It was a nice spot to think, way up there on top of that enormous sandbox.

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to feel about Hooper's UFO Watchtower. I discovered it online by accident while looking for an excuse for a road trip that would take me into Colorado. When I stumbled upon their website that looks like it hasn't been touched in over 10 years (which it most definitely hasn't), I was immediately sold. Throughout its existence, that website has been visited by users worldwide from around 80 countries, as well as NORAD, NASA, Turner Broadcasting Systems, and the United States Postal Service. I'm not a believer in extraterrestrial contact on planet Earth, but I was undoubtedly drawn to the mystery behind the claims I began to hear and its startling worldwide reach. Even more so, I was drawn to the type of person that would operate a beacon that would attract so much attention that most would consider to be abnormal, untrustworthy, and otherworldly.

Who is Judy Messoline?

A French couple that took our picture on our way to the top of the ridge walked past us as we sat down, and they stood huddled next to each other to shield themselves against the blasting wind and bullets of sand that rode on it like biting autumnal hellfire. They giggled to each other and lit a cigarette.

Two college-aged girls boarded down the peak on overpriced wooden toboggans that we had refused to pay for at the diner leading into the National Park. The first girl sledded down with no problem, but the second one hit a bump, spun, and tumbled thirty feet below us. We winced, probably too loudly. Nothing, not even a floating cigar-shaped object on the horizon, could tarnish our view from up there.

People from all over the country flock to the San Luis Valley for what we were seeing. The valley that stretched out from us holds visitors in an ethereal headlock, with eyes transfixed, making it stark in comparison to the yellow of the dunes and the gray and green peaks of the surrounding ranges. Explorer Zebulon Pike described the San Luis Valley in 1807 with the first English words to be written about the Valley: “The great and lofty mountains, covered with eternal snows, seemed to surround the luxuriant vale, crowned with perennial flowers, like a terrestrial paradise, shut out from the view of man” And there we were, three college kids with matching red beanies, two girls chasing thrills, and a French couple releasing their cigarette ash into the blue sky.

Dinty Moore canned stew was on the menu that night, stuck haphazardly in the fire pit, and as we stoked a small fire in the dying light of the sun, we waited. I had a secondhand mug and a flimsy metal spoon just for this occasion. I went to the car to grab my dinnerware, but only found the mug. Ten minutes later and still no spoon.

“Use your knife,” Luke suggested. I opened it.

“It’s just a pocket knife.”

“Use my spoon, I’ll use *my* knife.” I agreed. He handed me the spoon and we started eating. He paused. “I’m definitely going to cut myself with this.” Alex made a spoon out of a plastic plate and had a hard time, too. I ate fast and gave him my spoon when I finished.

The campsite to the east of us was having a party over their own fire, and the one adjacent to us, just south, had hammocks set up between pine trees. The sun dipped behind the Dunes and filtered through the trees, slowly, like molasses. There was something unspoken floating between us campers, I think. We were soaked to the bone with the same kind of orange light that drenched the Tewa Pueblos and Mr. Pike so long ago. I couldn’t help but feel like I was waiting for something historic to happen there.

“Guys. What if we see something for real tonight? What would we do?” Alex asked.

“Shit ourselves, probably.”

I desperately wanted to experience the night sky from the inside of the expansive Valley of San Luis. I’d never seen the Milky Way before, and I heard this was the place to do it.

I looked up. New, wispy clouds had wandered over the Valley, and the wall cloud we saw from the Dunes was on top of us. A few specs of sparkling starlight could be seen through the haze, but that was all. As dusk turned into night, I began to realize that the Milky Way wasn’t in the cards. This was my chance, and it wouldn’t happen. The thin clouds over the Valley were illuminated with light from the moon, polluting it with its brightness.

Not long after, we left in search of that bar that doesn’t exist.

“Dammit,” I yelled. “I found the spoon.”

It was morning, and we were packing up to head to the Watchtower, and there it was in a cup holder in the door of the CRV. All at once, I remembered placing it there on purpose so I

wouldn't misplace it. We left for the diner next to the National Park to eat breakfast around 9:15. It was the last day they'd be open for the season, we were told. A stroke of luck. We sat down, and the waitress poured our coffee.

Bleary-eyed, I asked the waitress, "Have you ever seen a UFO?" while opening sugar packets. It seemed a little early for UFO talk, but I had to try.

She looked flustered and didn't answer right away.

"I mean, yeah, but not really. Not an unidentified flying object. You know, unidentifiable flying objects used to just be that. Not something else."

We left, and headed for Hooper not long after.

"Guys, this could be weird," I said out loud. I looked to the south of the road and saw the shack with a reflective tin roof from the night before.

Take the cosmic highway, known to most roadmaps as Highway 17, north through the San Luis Valley until you get to Hooper. Then keep driving for about 3 miles and take a left once you see the wooden archway with a white sign attached to it that says: *COME ON IN explore the UFO phenomenon at the UFO watchtower*. Go under the archway and drive until you see a green alien with its hand raised. Then take a right. That's what *we* did.

Waving back to the alien is optional.

All that was missing from the scene at the Watchtower was a Star Wars moisture evaporator. The whole Watchtower consists of a dome gift shop and information center that looks like it belongs on Tatooine, a 9ft tall platform around the dome, and a garden out front made of trinkets and rock formations. The place was empty.

We paid a small entrance fee and looked inside the gift shop.

A sign on the door, titled "UFO SIGHTINGS," told about the many strange sightings since the 1600s and the exact number of sightings at the tower: 56. But the 56 was crossed out with sharpie, and above it, dozens of numbers reaching into the 100s were crossed out. Currently, their tally for sightings is resting at 127.

While looking at the signs, I heard a truck pull up. Luke and Alex were in the garden. I walked around the dome to find an older man with brown hair and sun-weathered skin get out of a pickup truck, leaving several Mini Australian Shepherds whining at the window. He walked towards me, and I shook his hand.

"I'm Stan," he said.

"Stan, I'm Connor. Good to meet you." Stan was a tall man with a black and white goatee. He was wearing an old, pastel shirt with a UFO picture that said *UFO Watchtower* above it and *San Luis Valley* below it. I'd wear it.

"Why the hell do you have a back pack on, Connor?" He clunked my shoulder.

"Bad habit, I guess. I'm in college." He laughed and took us inside the dome.

The interior was lined with bookcases and stands adorned with novelty hot sauce, magazine clippings, t-shirts, toys, and informational posters. Stan walked to the middle of the room to a circular podium and began to launch into his UFO spiel. He opened a 3-ring binder on the podium, and pointed as I flipped through it. Egyptian hieroglyphics, emailed UFO stories, grainy photos of orbs in the garden. A laminated Yahoo News article titled: "Vatican: It's OK to believe in aliens." I told him that I was a writer, and I asked if I could take pictures.

"Go right ahead." I kept flipping through, and he kept giving me stories. One for every page. He talked about the history of the Watchtower. Judy's original intention in San Luis was to

raise cattle, but it wasn't easy. "So we figured out cattle can't eat sand, and we thought we'd take advantage of all of this UFO stuff. That's Judy, we're together." He pointed at a bookrack behind me. I picked up a small book called *That Crazy Lady Down the Road: All About the World Famous UFO Watchtower* and looked at its cover. On the front is a middle-aged woman, Judy Messoline, wearing a pink hoodie and holding a stuffed alien under the crook of her left arm.

"Are you married?" I asked.

"No, we're together." We poked around the shop for a few minutes while talking, and Stan abruptly said, "Oh, here she comes." Judy walked in. Outside, she had more dogs in tow.

She was wearing a UFO Watchtower shirt, like Stan, but hers was white. Newer. Her face was kind and framed by cropped gray hair. She wore black sunglasses.

Right out of the gate, after saying "hi" and greeting us with a smile, she asked us, "Have you guys ever seen a UFO?"

We answered honestly with a "No," and she seemed perfectly okay with that.

For an hour and a half, it was just the five of us humans, Stan and Judy's five dogs that they referred to as their kids, and a multitude of alien cutouts hanging out at the Watchtower. Stan and Judy told us how they made their genuine alien dust that they kept in vials in the store.

"We'll have to make some more green stuff to mix in," said Stan with a wink.

Judy and I wandered into the garden leaving Stan, Alex, and Luke to talk under the shade of the Watchtower. Judy kept her sunglasses on, and I asked her about the garden.

"These are the two vortexes." Piles of rocks like tumbled cairns on a mountain pass designating routes of safe passage marked the vortexes. The rocks were surrounded by pocket change, dusty pens, and the like. "They turn in opposite directions and meet in the middle at this spot." She pointed at an arrangement similar to the others. "It's called the Eye of Pieces. This is the doorway into another dimension. Over the years we've had dozens of psychics come out here on their own, we didn't ask them, and they each told us the same thing. And there are two guardians standing by protecting us." She gestured to the center of each vortex. She said they were incredibly tall and glowing white. "People talk to them and ask for things, we've seen some pretty incredibly stuff come from that. Miracles."

"So I take it you're not religious."

She paused. "I do believe in God and I pray to him out here. I just believe you don't have to go to church to be religious. Plus, I feel closer to God here."

"I'm the same way. I think it's the elevation," I said. I looked back to the Watchtower. Alex, Luke, and Stan were laughing and talking under the shade of the platform. One of the dogs was chewing on a green rubber bouncy ball made to look like an alien's head.

"Now, because this garden gives off a lot of energy, we like to ask people to leave a bit of theirs if they feel like it. All of this comes from people. Really, some incredible stuff here." I decided that before we left, I'd go grab that spoon from the car and bid it good riddance. It felt like the right thing to do. As we strolled through the garden, she rearranged some of the objects and nudged things off of the path with her feet.

"I feel like I should rearrange some of this stuff," she said, kneeling down to move something. I looked up and surveyed their impressive property under the cool sun.

"You could just expand," I offered.

"Expand?" she stopped. "What's the fun in that? I'll tell you, I've been out here so many times and I *always* find something new."

It struck me as odd that Judy would take such liberty with moving and altering the state of the vortex garden. After reading her book, I realized something; interaction with her garden enriches her guardianship. She can't truly understand the garden's chaotic intricacies without interacting with it, without owning it by touching it. She's been charged with its ownership.

We walked through the pathways of the trinket garden, past driver's licenses, stuffed animals, CDs. You name it, it's got representation in the vortex garden. People were happy to leave a piece of themselves there. What shocked me was the Kansas License Plate from 2016 with a county tag on it exactly where I'm from in Kansas. My car has a plate just like it.

During our time there, we kept our eyes on the horizon, just in case. In her book, well over 100 sightings in the valley are transcribed, going decades back, many of which happened at the Watchtower. One entry from July 2003 tells the story of a man riding his motorcycle across the cosmic highway at night and finding a giant, partially translucent and rectangular-shaped "magic carpet" fly right above him and zoom off to his right, into the darkness. Another, from August 8 of the same year, describes a man and woman's experience with a diamond-shaped, undulating light that followed their car through the Valley somehow making the night stars disappear. The stories get stranger the more you read.

This place is both a tourist destination for folks just passing through and a headquarters and haven for true believers. "I'm not here to convince anyone," she writes in her book. "I'm just here to give them the facts I've been taught and to tell stories about what we've seen and what has happened here." Judy treats everybody with the same kind of infectious wonder of the unknown that enabled her to open up shop in the first place. She built the Watchtower for the investment and stayed with it for the aliens. She has a job to do, and she loves it. "I built all of this," she'd proudly say as we walked around, circling through the vortex garden.

"What message do you usually have for nonbelievers that come out here, or hear about you guys?"

"I just ask people to keep an open mind. I mean, how arrogant can humans be to believe that we're alone in the universe? I just want people to be open, that's all." I felt solitary within the wide valley.

I replied to her with a butchered Arthur C. Clarke quote about our terrible truth as lonely humans trapped on planet Earth, and I continued: "So what's the common denominator for people that do come here?"

She stopped walking and peered at me through her sunglasses, smiling. "Curiosity."

I turned from Judy and looked back to my friends and Stan. I think they were talking about college football. Judy and I stayed in the garden for a little while longer.

Eventually, she showed me back inside to tell me about a few things that I'm not sure she'd want me putting in writing, so I won't. It was around that time that I stopped her to ask if it was alright to write about our conversations. She didn't have a problem with that. "Some people come in here asking for interviews and I've started asking for money. But you're a kid," she said.

"I like to try to help out the kids."

"Thanks."

"But we get all kinds of people in here. Now I'm gonna go out and smoke."

Around that time, after playing with the dogs and chatting about college and the fact that we had skipped school to visit them (which they loved), several other groups arrived. A van-toting family from Wisconsin pulled in first, then an Israeli couple, and a man and woman that left one of those *Do Not Disturb* door signs on a bush in the garden.

Stan told us he was going back to their house, and he invited us to go with him. So I bought a coffee mug with the UFO Watchtower logo that Judy designed when she worked in Hooper, and a copy of her book. Turns out that she wrote it herself one winter many years ago.

I thanked Judy for her time, and I shook her hand. As I grabbed the handle to the door leading out of the dome, she stopped me.

“Wait, did I give you my card?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Here,” she said with an exhale as she took one from the podium and handed it to me. “Write good. I just want to know what grade you get.”

“Dammit,” I said. “I forgot to leave my spoon.”

We had piled back into the CRV and were pulling out of Stan and Judy’s land after a tour of the entire property. Stan had walked us through their house, into his shed full of tools and equipment, and around the back yard. “I built all of this,” he kept saying.

Once we were off, part of me wanted to turn around to leave the spoon. But we kept driving. We drove back toward Pinyon Flats, but turned south, swung around the mountain, and headed for Colorado Springs. That was it. Hooper was in the rearview. Christie the CRV took us back home, miles away, back to class and back to Kansas.

That little speck in the valley, with glimmering trinkets left by thousands and thousands of people from across the world, sits in waiting like a softly pulsating beacon in the cosmos, for anyone with any level of belief or unbelief to visit. But whether anything or anyone answers it isn’t really its purpose. The simple truth of Judy, Stan, and their UFO Watchtower is that it’s just there. It’s there with the history, the legacy, the unbreakable legends of the San Luis Valley. I suspect that it always will be.

Take the cosmic highway north through the San Luis Valley and stop when you see aliens. That’s what *we* did. Maybe you’ll find that the UFO Watchtower is altogether normal in its strangeness, steeped in optimism and nostalgia that its two lovely, happy, and smiling operators wear like a rain hat, deflecting bad vibes and potentially bad ETs. And please note: the grey ones are good, and the reptiles are bad.

And waving back to the alien is optional.

V PRAZE

Jacob Valdez

Peter hugged his coat closer as he walked alongside the Vltava River. The coat was over sized and drooped off his tall, thin frame, letting the cold in when the wind gusted up off of the river. It was two days until Christmas 1991, and a light coat of snow dusted the rooftops and street. He thought the whole city looked like a fairy tale with its spires and cathedrals all reaching up to the heavens.

The cold chilled him to his bones. It reminded him of Alaska. Days spent listening to static at an outpost in the middle of nowhere, monitoring dead Soviet airwaves. He was grateful for the opportunities the Army had afforded him, like the money he saved to move, but he was glad it was over. Glad they weren't needed since the wall came down. Glad the world was starting to be a nicer place.

He lit a cigarette as he turned on a street and headed into the city's interior. He drew deeply. The burn of the tobacco mixed with the cold air giving him a peculiar tickle in his throat. It wasn't unpleasant, just different. He liked the cloud of smoke blended with the condensation from his breath; it seemed thicker and heavier than regular smoke.

Gas lamps hung from buildings on either side and the light reflected off of the fallen snow, making everything glow slightly orange. Peter looked at people as he walked past them and noticed a woman in a red coat and high heels. He never could understand how these women did the high heels on cobblestone, but damned if it didn't impress him. He could hear the clacking from her heels grow quieter as they moved apart.

He stopped outside of a pub and could see some people at the bar inside through the front window. He entered and was hit in the face with the overpowering aroma of tobacco mixed with cannabis that was characteristic of any pub with personality.

Peter fumbled through the words for "one beer please" to the bartender who nodded in understanding. Beer in hand, Peter descended a spiral staircase in the back corner of the pub into the cellar. The smoke burned his eyes. The whole room felt sort of claustrophobic with its narrow cold brick walls. Half a dozen people were scattered about, mostly surrounding a Foosball table. He took a seat at a booth in the corner furthest from them.

He pulled a notebook out of his bag and sat it on the table in front of him and thought about what he wanted to write. He partly came to Prague for inspiration. He heard about the fall of its Communist government about two years ago and stories of how the city was the epicenter of a cultural renaissance. He was here looking for his muse. Something to fuel pen to paper. He didn't want to go to college, and he definitely didn't want to stay in the army; he read *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka while he was in Alaska and he wanted to be a part of the place that it came out of. Maybe it could show him whatever it showed Kafka, and he could carry that on in his words. He was never a math whiz in school, but he got words. They made sense to him. He just wished he could write something he liked. He would over think things and shoot down any

idea through constant critical self-review before anything really took off. He could get a paragraph here or there, but it was never anything he thought was good or worth developing.

He reached around in his bag for a pencil, but his hands found the letter he had written home instead. It explained, as best he could, why he had left after only being home for a few weeks. How suffocated he felt trying to figure out what to do after the army. Everybody was telling him he had to do this or he had to do that, snap to and if he didn't then he was pissing his life away yadda yadda yadda; he just couldn't deal with it. Especially after eighteen months in Bumfuck Nowhere, Alaska, with nothing but the static and four other radio observers to keep him company. It was overwhelming.

It had been almost half a year since he had talked to his parents, or anybody back home. He had meant to call, to let somebody know where he was and that he was safe. After a while, the guilt compounded on itself and he didn't want to face the people he had left. The letter usually stayed in his bedside drawer, but he had thought about mailing it the night before and had slipped it into his bag. He had almost forgotten he brought it along.

This was a common theme in his life. Even on smaller, more trivial things like his visa. He had filled out the paperwork and was basically all set. He just never really managed to get to the embassy. He had delayed getting a bank account, delayed getting his landlords' signature on some form, delayed everything he could possibly delay. When there was nothing else to put off, he made excuses why that day wouldn't work, and before he knew it he was an illegal immigrant!

He was still looking at the letter when a man sat opposite him in the booth. This, in and of itself, wasn't particularly odd. People shared booths all the time. When he looked up from the letter the man stared directly at him. The man didn't have a drink. His face looked scrunched up, almost like he was thinking really hard about something constantly.

"Hello, soldier boy," The man said.

"Excuse me?"

"Soldier boy. You were in Army, yes?" His tone was presumptuous.

A pit developed in Peter's stomach. Half the reason he came here was to disappear. Anonymity. He moved to stand up, but one of the man's hands shot out and pinned his wrist to the table. Peter tried to pull away, but the man's grip was solid.

"You overstayed your visa." The man kept his cool, collected demeanor despite physically restraining Peter.

Was he immigration police? No way, his English was too good for that. And his accent didn't seem Czechoslovak. It was sharper, more guttural almost.

"Who are you?" Peter asked.

"Is not important. I have a favor to ask you. If you say no, I go to immigration office and have you deported." Peter stopped trying to pull back and the man released his wrist.

He could feel the man's grip tighten around him. He felt like he couldn't even raise his arms from his sides, constricted by the weight of the man's power over him in this moment.

"Tomorrow you go to the Charles Bridge. On the side near to old town around noon. Look for the men with the birds." The confidence in his words was unmistakable. Peter was backed into a corner, and the man knew it.

The man stood up to make his exit. Peter wanted to say something, to resist in some way. The man looked back to him one last time. "Dasvidaniya," he said as he left.

Peter sat there awestruck, his heart racing and his mind trying to process. After a few minutes he was able to hold his hands steady enough to hold his beer to his mouth without spilling any. He drank it fast, followed by another, and another.

•

The next day, Peter rode the tram from his flat in Zizkov to the Charles Bridge. He paid about \$100 a month for a room in a shared communist-style flat with a roommate in the run-down corner of the city. It was gritty and rife with other expats trying to squeeze out an existence. He wondered how many of them were running like him, and how much longer he could afford to do it. He had spent through a lot of his savings and giving English lessons under the table barely brought in anything.

All Peter knew for sure was that the last thing he wanted was to be deported. He watched the city change through the tram windows. It became cleaner and more polished. Graffiti tags and sex shops became murals and Christmas market stalls the closer he got to the bridge.

As soon as he stepped off the tram, he checked his watch. It was about 11:20. He was early to try and get a read of the area before he met these men with the birds. Peter had been to this square many times on his way to watch the performers and musicians on the bridge.

He walked into a building on the east side of the square. It was a building for Charles University, the largest university in Czechoslovakia. Peter walked through the big open atrium and ascended the stone staircase. There was a little student cafe on the 2nd floor that gave him a bird's eye view of the square. He sometimes came here to try and write. He wasn't a student, but it wasn't like anybody could tell with the constant traffic in the building. Plus, this view of the castle was worth the risk.

Peter ordered an espresso – thank god for students who spoke English – and took a seat by the window. He lit a cigarette and watched the entrance to the bridge and the square below. All he could see were tour groups. They were usually led by one person with some stick or pole distinguishing themselves from the rest and leading the tourists like cattle. His mind wandered as he waited.

Peter thought about his parents. He wanted to call, but he didn't know what he would say. 'Oh hey, I'm being extorted by a strange man. Also, I've been hiding in Czechoslovakia, now illegally, for the last few months, how are you?' He said the words in his head and mouthed them with his lips exaggeratedly.

No, he had to get through this first. Then he could focus on the next thing. He knew that his situation was directly his fault and the only way to get through it was to push ahead.

He wondered if his family filed a missing person's report. His mom probably made them. Was there an investigation? He had tapped and closed his checking account before leaving and bought his flight with cash, so there wasn't much of a paper trail. No way, if they knew he was there they'd have done something to reach out.

Shit, what time was it? He looked at the clock on the wall but it was broken. He checked his watch, 11:40. Where were they?

He spied them making their way through the crowds on the bridge. Three guys, probably about his age. Two of them had birds on their shoulder and a couple more birds followed them in the air. Peter watched as they set themselves up at the end of the bridge closest to him.

He still had some time, so he decided to watch them. Their scam seemed pretty run of the mill. Two of them would stand out in the path of tourists and offer to let them pet or hold their birds. One of them had a Polaroid camera so they could sell tourists shots of themselves with the birds. If the tourists had their own camera, they would press them for donations for the birdseed they had provided or to reward their bird taming skills. Most people didn't care to argue over a measly coin or two and would just give it up. Every now and then, the third would shadow the

tourists as they watched the birds and pickpocket them while they were distracted. And since the bird keepers expected a donation it couldn't have been them, right? They even let the marks keep their picture for free since they were such nice people. Real class act.

Peter made it down to the two bird handlers with a couple minutes to spare. The pickpocket was nowhere to be seen. He didn't really know how to start the conversation. For a minute Peter just kind of stood there. He looked at them and they looked at him, but nobody said anything.

"I was told to meet you."

The hum of the crowd had sort of died down, but maybe they couldn't hear him.

"I was told to meet you." Louder this time, but still nothing.

He was beginning to get frustrated when he felt a pat on his shoulder that made him jump. It was their third musketeer. He was smiling, his beard was wiry, and his teeth were yellow. The other two looked kind of dirty, and they smelled pretty ripe. The birds probably weren't doing them any favors either. They looked a lot older now that he was right in front of them. Their skin all looked the same. It was leathery and aged by the sun. The only real difference between them was their hair. They could have passed for brothers if they each shaved their head and beard. The pickpocket was brunette and the bird guys were blonde. Each one with a poorly groomed beard and a sort of short and stocky look about them, with thick round faces.

"They don't speak English. Only the script, it makes it harder for tourists to argue with them," the pickpocket said. He was obviously the brains here.

"The opening of our borders brought us much opportunity." He continued as he led Peter down a winding narrow side street with his long arm corralled around Peter's shoulder. The crowd thinned, and eventually it was just the two of them on the road together.

"This is your part." They stopped a little ways from a currency exchange, and the man handed Peter his backpack. It looked full, but it was surprisingly light.

Peter unzipped it, inside were all sorts of different colorful European currencies sorted out and bound together with rubber bands. The spoils from their operation, no doubt.

"You want me to exchange money for you?" Peter asked.

"It looks, how you say, suspicious if I go and try to change so much different money. But you? Mr. USA, world traveler. Of course you change money in Prague. Is no problem."

Peter wasn't even nervous when he exchanged the money. He had lived here cash only for the duration of his stay and was knowledgeable of just how much you could convert without having to show some form of identification. Unfortunately, because of this, they had to go to over 10 separate exchanges. By the end of it, his grab bag of euro-money was now more than fifty thousand Czechoslovak crowns, around two thousand American.

Peter and the pickpocket walked back to the bridge the way they had come, uncomfortably close. He didn't smell nearly as bad as Peter had initially thought. Maybe it really was the birds.

When they arrived back at the bridge, the pickpocket released Peter from his grasp. Peter tried to leave, but the pickpocket called after him.

"Peter! For you."

Peter turned back around. The man was smiling at him and holding out his hand, as if to shake. Peter took the man's hand and was pulled into a tight embrace. He felt the man slipping something into his pocket before he released him.

"Until next time! Come find us, or we'll have to find you." The man said before he and his compatriots departed, leaving Peter alone in the crowd and feeling uneasy. He reached into his pocket and his hands found what felt like a wadded up napkin. He pulled out what instead turned

out to be about two thousand crowns, enough to cover the next month's rent.

By the time he arrived home it was dark and cold. It had begun to snow again. His hands shook too much to unlock the door with his key. He tried ringing his buzzer, but to no avail. He decided to just run his hand down all the buzzers until somebody let him in.

It only took about a minute until he heard the signature click of the lock releasing. He pushed his way in, immediately relieved to be out of the cold. He warmed his hands over a radiator in the hallway to thaw them out enough to work his keys.

Peter unlocked the door and found his roommate, Luke, with two girls. Luke was a Brit, very laddish. His arms and legs seemed too long for his body.

"Hey Mate! Sorry I didn't buzz ya in. Just a bit pissed. This is Klara and Misa, say hello girls!"

Both of the girls waved and smiled at Peter from across the room.

"Dobry Vecer," Peter said in the best Czech he could muster. Both the girls giggled, but not in a patronizing way.

"We can leave if you want, mate. Don't mean to disturb ya."

"It's not a bother. Would you mind if I hung out a bit? It's been a weird day."

Luke's eyes seemed to light up at the prospect. "At long last!" he said triumphantly. Peter thought it was cool how excited Luke seemed to be.

"I've got just the thing, actually," Luke said as he rustled through the pockets of his trousers.

He eventually produced a little baggie filled with a white powder. "Blow," Luke said as he poured some on the table and began sorting it into lines. Peter had smoked plenty of weed, but he had never really been into anything harder. But at this point, what was really the risk?

Peter watched Luke and the girls do their lines before he did his. It seemed self-explanatory enough. He bent over, plugged one nostril, and snorted as hard as he could. The powder seemed to fling itself down the back his nasal cavity and pepper the back of his throat. He was hit with a sudden burn that almost immediately gave way to a tingling numbness that slowly spread throughout his whole head.

Luke passed Peter a beer from his backpack. "Branik, it only tastes expensive," he said with a smile. They talked and hung out with the girls for a few hours. Luke apparently came from a banking family in London, but didn't have the taste for the life. Peter was so attentive that he didn't even notice the girls leave.

"So when did you come to Prague?" Peter asked.

"I did a few years in the Royal Marines, spent some time hitchhiking, and just sort of landed here."

"No shit..." Peter trailed off.

Luke looked at him curiously.

"Did I ever tell you I was in the Army?"

"No way man, that's wild! What did you do?"

"Airwave monitor. I was at a post in Alaska for like a year and a half."

"Well, fucking merry Christmas man!" Luke exclaimed as he divvied out more cocaine. Peter hadn't even realized it was officially Christmas.

The second line wasn't as intense as the first one, but Peter's brain was definitely racing at a mile a minute. He thought about the man in the bar and the bird-men. They dominated his mind.

"I'm in a bad spot," Peter said, absently. It was halfway directed to Luke and halfway to

nobody in particular. More of an open proclamation.

Peter could feel the weight alleviate itself as he explained his illegal residency and the strange men he had encountered.

“And they paid you?” Luke seemed more interested than concerned.

“Yeah, but I don’t know where this goes. Or if it stops. I’m getting desperate here, man. I’m terrified if I try to leave the country I’ll get picked up at the border or something. But just sitting here is waiting for him to call me in.”

“That’s a fucking pickle if I’ve ever heard one mate.”

The silence in the room grew tense. Luke was the first to break it.

“You should call your parents.”

“Fuck that.”

“No, seriously, mate. You’re right; we don’t know where this goes. And if it goes south do you not want them informed?”

Peter stared at his fingernails. In his coked-up state, he had nibbled them to nubs. He ran his thumb over the edges of his nails as he went over things in his head.

“I’ve got an idea, but I’m gonna need your help,” Peter said, with a newfound clairvoyance.

“I’m all ears mate.”

Peter knew it was risky going into the immigration police, but it was his best bet. He went with Klara as a translator to explain the situation the day after Christmas. You would think the one part of the government whose job it is to specifically deal with foreigners would have people who could speak English, but think again. Peter didn’t know whom exactly he was involved with, but he knew they had access to immigration records, which probably meant there was a guy in the immigration office. Peter hoped this fledgling democracy would highly value his unique situational capacity to expose this individual and his cohorts.

The plan was simple; he would go to meet the bird-men again. This time under the watch of the immigration police and wearing a wire. Before heading to the square, Peter had slipped his letter in the mail, but not without adding a few lines to explain why he waited until then and the situation he faced.

The bird-men were in the same location doing the exact same thing. Peter pointed them out to Luke from his café observation post.

“Cheeky buggers...” Luke said upon witnessing the finesse of the scam.

“Proper professionals, man. You see what I’m stuck in? And that guy from the bar definitely spoke to me in Russian.” Peter could feel his hands go clammy as he tried to psych himself up.

It’ll be nice and easy, like last time, he thought as he strolled across the square. He could feel the eyes of the immigration police upon him, although he had no idea where they were. His heartbeat echoes in his ears as he approached the bird-men.

“Ahoj,” Peter called out.

“Aha, I knew you would not make us look for you,” the pickpocket cheerfully called over. “We have a lot to do today.”

“Let’s go,” Peter said, trying to seem enthusiastic and reaching out for the backpack. The pickpocket stepped back and out of his reach.

“No, not the same work. Come with me,” the man said. He took Peter by the arm and again began to lead him, but this time across the Charles Bridge.

“What’s the job?” Peter asked. But he was met with silence. The man’s grip was almost

prodding, Peter's heart raced. The audio device was cold against his skin, and he was worried it protruded against his sweater.

They stopped and looked out over the river in the middle of the bridge. The silence was tense.

"So, what are we doing?"

The pickpocket reached directly over and grabbed the recorder through Peter's sweater. Fuck, he knew. As soon as he felt it, the man gave Peter a hard push, trying to send him over the side and into the Vltava. Peter tried to brace himself but he slipped on an icy patch and went flying towards the edge of the bridge, bag and all, as the man ran off into the crowd.

Peter managed to grab ahold of a giant crucifix statue and dangled from it. He wondered why nobody was coming to his aid. He tried to pull himself up, but his grip wasn't secure and he was slipping. He could feel his hands start to scrape against the hard corner of the statue and bleed. The warm viscous blood only served to further loosen his grip. Just before letting go, he heard somebody yelling his name. It was Luke!

"I'm here!" Peter yelled from the side of the bridge.

Two hulking immigration police officers pulled Peter up from the side of the bridge and planted him back on the ground. At the end of the bridge he could see the pickpocket on the ground, handcuffed.

"The other two ran off when you lot went over the bridge," Luke said to Peter.

Peter could see an officer dump out the pickpocket's backpack. Dozens of Czechoslovak passports with various identities came pouring out, seemingly cementing the immigration link.

"Klara says that they're saying this guy's a Russian. Is he the one from the bar?" Luke asked.

"No, he was a different guy," Peter responded.

Klara relayed this to the officers on scene. They discussed among themselves as a paramedic treated Peter's hand. They talked to Klara for a while longer before she turned back to Peter.

"So, these guys are some sort of mafia," Klara began. Peter couldn't say he was really surprised.

"So what happens now?" Peter asked.

"They say you are not safe in public here while they look for the other man. They want you to help the government's case, but you can't, how you call, go by your identity. Like witness protection, but inside Czechoslovakia."

"Do I have a choice?"

Klara again talked to the police before responding. "They say if you don't, then they must charge you for conspiring."

Peter wanted to be mad, but in the end, he couldn't be. After all, this was what he wanted, right?

BEST LAID PLANS

Megan Zeman

*T*welve *piqué tours de dedans*, six double *pirouettes*, all *en pointe* and framed by two *penché arabesques*. No big deal. It was the day of my American Ballet Theatre audition, and I had five more minutes to warm up before I was unceremoniously shoved into the cattle call line with the rest of the dreamers. Keep in mind, I had never executed this sequence perfectly before, but I was dancing on the stage of The Met. If anything extraordinary could have happened, it would have been on that stage on that day.

Since arriving, there had been three pre-audition melt downs, fifteen minor injuries, and at least one stage mom heart attack. Still, I was the happiest I'd been in months. Even the smell made my chest do a happy whooshing thing. When you stick 200 normal girls in a room, the smell is probably a combination of Bath and Body Works scents and Starbucks. When you stick 200 dancers in a room, the smell is some delicious blend of sweat, vomit, antiseptic wipes, hair-spray, Chanel No. 5, and iron. The iron smell of course coming from the thousands of bloody foot wraps strewn everywhere, and the Chanel coming from the helicopter stage moms. Home sweet home.

I'd stretched so much that my muscles were shaking a little, but that was okay. Once I got on stage, all of the nerves and the shakiness would turn into muscle cramps and stiffness. "Number 433?" That was my rehearsal cue. I pushed myself out of second position and absently fiddled with my bun. I stepped over bleeding and crying girls and tried to steady my legs, so they wouldn't see me shake.

Once in the rehearsal hall, I began my dance without music. Odette's Lament had been permanently drilled into my brain, and it would help my technique if I could do the whole piece without music anyways. I pushed up onto *demi pointe* and allowed myself forward. I felt the sore muscles of my back resist the near impossible position, but as I did with most things, I completely ignored them and exhaled, leaning forward slowly. Every single muscle in my body was shaking with pain; that's how I knew it looked good. I glanced up at my 2 o'clock spotting point and burned the image into my brain. That spot is the only thing that would keep me from falling on my ass in front of the most prominent ballerinas in the world. I floated back down ("There needs to be beauty and grace in your *fingernails*, Beth!") and began the hardest part of my sequence.

Piqué tours de dedan (spot), double *pirouette* (spot spot), *piqué tours de dedan* (spot), double *pirouette* (spot spot). It was all going great up to that point. My abs were clenched so tightly that I thought I may vomit, but my facial expression was light and pretty. I could feel the grace in my fingernails. Then it happened. I *pliéd* with my *pas de bas* leg, pushed up onto *pointe* with my supporting leg, and SNAP! I crumpled to the ground.

A 98-pound wadded up paper ball that didn't quite make it into the trash can. The pain paralyzed me for a moment, and I stared dumbly at my leg. My shoes were frayed and holey al-

ready. I had only gotten them a week before. Before my brain could really register what happened, I popped back up. This couldn't be happening. Not today.

I limped over to the barre and began slowly making circles with my toes. If all my years as a ballerina taught me one thing, it was how to look beautiful when in seemingly unbearable pain. I was on my tenth rotation when the door to the practice room flew open and slammed against the wall. "Time's up, *Lezzy*. Oh, sorry. *Lizzie*." I rolled my eyes in time with my foot.

"Courtney, you're looking particularly malicious today. Tell me, is Satan recovering nicely from being dethroned?" I watched her perfect, white teeth disappear behind her lips through the mirror.

"Oh, very funny, *Lezzy*. That's a great one. Now, if you'll excuse me. You're cutting into my rehearsal time." She set down her duffel and began taking off her warmups. Her hands crossed in front of her impossibly flat stomach and grabbed the hem of her sweater. A huge butterfly fluttered from my throat down into my lower belly. I snuck a peek at the line of smooth stomach before quickly grabbing my bag and warmups. Trying not to limp, I made my way quickly out of the rehearsal hall. "Break a leg today, *Lezzy*," was the last thing I heard before the door shut behind me.

I hobbled past a hundred skinny, blonde girls doing a hundred pretzel-like stretches and found my little corner. I plopped down and began rummaging through my bag for a fresh foot wrap (let me tell you, the smell coming out of that bag could bring down a fleet of adult elephants). There was one at the very bottom of my bag, all crumpled up and dotted with dried blood. But once I took my pointe shoe off, my ankle began to swell. Like, a lot.

Suddenly, my right foot was on fire, and I panicked. Hyperventilating, the whole works. The realization of that day and my injury were all crashing down around me. Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god. I couldn't dance *Swan Lake*. There was no way my ankle would hold out. There was also no way I would get into *ABT* without that sequence. The only other dance I had prepared was *The Red Shoes*, and that wasn't nearly classic enough for a major audition. It was fast paced, sassy, and a little racy. But, I didn't have much of a choice.

I ripped off my other shoe and limped over to the sign in desk. I grabbed the red Sharpie from the desk attendant's hand and furiously started scribbling. My baby pink pointe shoes (a cool \$180, might I add) were now fire engine red. "Number 433, on deck." I went back over to my duffel and grabbed my iPod. I even shot up a prayer to Martha Graham to appease the dance gods. As I was limping down the tiny cement hallway of Lincoln Center, holding Sharpie red pointe shoes, and an old iPod, I couldn't help but laugh to myself.

I had been rehearsing for this audition my entire life. I could dance before I could walk. I knew *Swan Lake* before *Snow White*, and I had been in the *Nutcracker* before most kids were in preschool. That *Swan Lake* sequence was my ticket in. I allowed myself to giggle a few seconds more before pushing open the backstage door. Dancers are great because of their passion, not their technique. *Red Shoes* certainly had passion, and so did I. I forgot about Courtney, expectations, tradition, and my ankle, and stepped onto the stage.

PETER DINGLEY

Feature Artist

The tactile can be seen as the antithesis of the virtual. How we carry messages is exponentially changing. Technology is an aide to my desire to create. I aspire to design objects that encourage exploration and discovery through play.



Peter Dingley

feature artist interview

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about your background, and how you found yourself doing art?

I like solving puzzles through creation. You have an idea and then you use your hands to make it happen in the real world. I played with Legos as a kid and my parents encouraged me to be creative with physical toys rather than video games. Doing something with my hands was meditative and allowed me to be present. Clay is more active and involved with the whole body, which is why I fell in love with it.

Q: Could you explain your process and where the inspiration for your work comes from?

My process comes from me wanting to change my environment and then the next step is material, then color. Deciding how I want to interact with it and then deciding how I want other people to interact with it.

I think the most important art comes from connection between people and their environment. It comes from being present, which is more important in the modern day more than anything.

Q: Are there any specific artists that have inspired your work?

Number one: Isamu Noguchi. Some others are Jun Keneko and Stuart Davis because their work is internationally known and their relationships and their understanding with using color in space is most influential to me.

Q: What is the hardest step in creating for you?

Finishing a piece and then starting another one. I need to take some time to figure out what I have learned from the last piece so I can use that information to move forward with my next work.

Q: How has your practice evolved over time?

I have allowed myself to care less about what the material is and more about how it works visually. I have moved past the caste system when if you're

doing ceramics, all that you can use are traditional ceramic materials. Ceramics is about taking everyday objects and elevating them. The most important thing is allowing myself to get messy and utilize happy accidents. The energy from that allows me to do something else and change things.

Q: Could you describe a real-life situation that inspired you?

When I was young, I rode on a school bus that almost hit and killed somebody. It was the first time that I reflected on death. I felt empathy for the woman we almost killed. Being that close to death made me feel like I needed to make things to make my life worthwhile. When I make something, I capture myself in that moment. It's significant to me that the objects I capture in clay are more permanent than my physical body.

Q: How do you know when you're finished with a piece?

When it is answering the design question that I want in the most efficient way. I'm done when the work doesn't need any more information to answer the initial question I asked.

Q: Do you collect anything?

Yes, Hot Wheels of Japanese cars. I also enjoy collecting other artists' pots. And dust.

Q: What is your art-world pet peeve?

When people viewing art say "My kid could do that." It's more about the purpose behind the act of creating rather than ability of any individual.

Q: Do you have any hobbies?

Yes, cars. I love working on and modifying cars.

Q: Where do you see yourself going from here? What is next?

Continuing to find studios to make new work in and meet new people.

Q: Do you have any advice for young artists?

Always be making and always be observing.

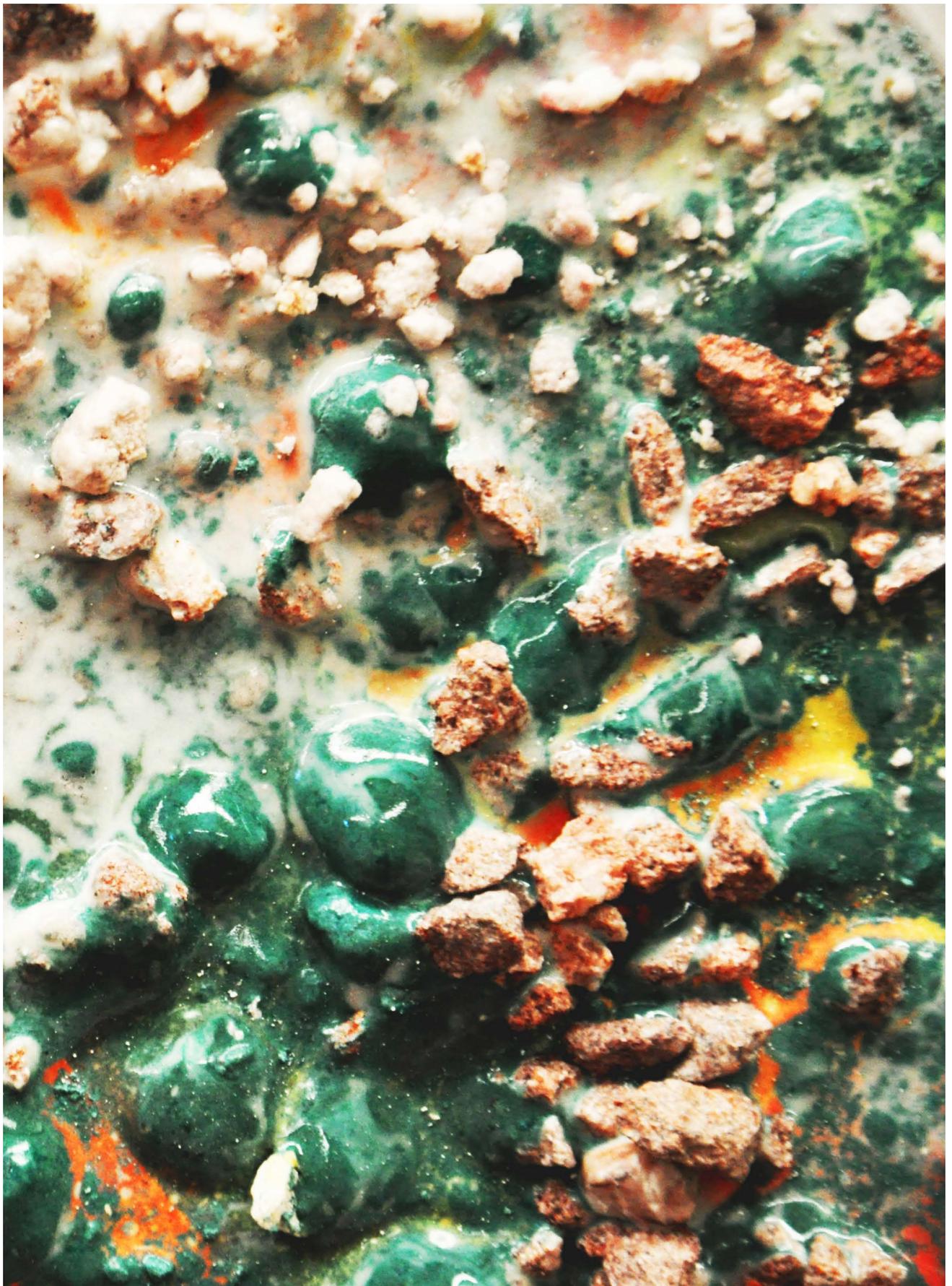






Peter Dingley
Feature Artist





Peter Dingley
Feature Artist





ARTIST BIO

Peter Dingley received his bachelors degree in art from Millersville University in 2016. He is currently creating and exploring with clay at Kansas State University. Growing up, his family encouraged his desire to create by providing endless tupperware bins of Legos.

COMPANY

Whitney Horn

Remember the girl from work?" My voice doesn't shake. It shouldn't, not at this point in our marriage. *God, don't worry so much, Sasha.* I hold my knife and fork in midair, waiting for my husband to look at me rather than the TV over my shoulder. "Josh?"

"Sleep with her yet?" His eyes still stare past me. The fork misses his mouth, and he has to try again. He chews slowly.

I reach around and turn the damn television off. "Wolf Blitzer can wait."

He blinks. "It's Jim Cramer. Finance, not just news."

"Josh, dammit—"

"Jeez, Ladybug, don't bite; I'm listening. The girl at work..." He looks down at his plate, creates another strip of chicken to spear, swirls it around in teriyaki sauce.

"Her name is Vanessa. She's cute, just your type."

"Blue eyes is your type, Bug, not mine." How does he know that I'm thinking of her blue eyes tightening right before she orgasms? And his blue eyes when he does the same, how they're two different shades, hers a little darker than his, and that if I focus on just the eyes when I'm sleeping with either of them, sometimes I forget which one is inside of me. "Keep in mind that you have brown eyes," he says. His glasses slip down his nose as he goes for the potatoes, and he slides them back into place. If only he would get contacts like I tell him to. But damn, his dimples and that plaid button down he's wearing, a slight variation of every other after-work shirt he owns, mixed with those thick-rimmed glasses, make for a nerdy look that he knows drives me crazy. I've wondered before why he refuses the contacts, and if it's for my benefit or my annoyance.

If he got contacts, I could see his eyes the way I get to in bed: clear, unobstructed.

"Everyone loves blue eyes."

"If you say so."

I chew through an especially rubbery bite of chicken and then say, "She's coming over next week. It's my day off, and her last flight of the day lands here. Can you stay out late on Wednesday?"

"Sure. Making her dinner?"

"Yes. Don't you dare say anything about my cooking."

"Just don't make her chicken, and you'll be fine, Bug."

"When I want your advice on dating, I'll ask for it." I smile to let him know that I don't really mean that, and the crinkles that escape out from under the frames of his glasses prove that he understands.

I turn to hand her the wine glass and find Vanessa with her fingers intertwined below her chin, forming a shelf for her face. Gentle curls, loose from her ponytail, frame the heart shape of her

face. On it, her freckles dance like paint splatter across her round cheeks each time she smiles, and the smile infects her eyes too, the dabs of sky blue bordered by thick, thick eyelashes. Those curved wisps cast shadows across the freckles, almost down to her lips, themselves two careful streaks of peachy pink that cut different angles, depending upon her mood. Everything must be arranged with intention on that face.

She blinks and takes the glass from me. I watch Vanessa's fingers run down the neck of her glass, up and down. Her grip is just tight enough. I shiver. Vanessa must like the wine because she takes a first gulp, then follows it with a few more sips in quick succession.

I put my glass to the side, untouched, and arrange the thawed chicken breast on the cutting board to begin creating strips. Peeking through my bangs, I catch Vanessa staring down the hallway.

She turns back to me. Our eyes meet. "Is that a Georgia O'Keeffe?" she asks, pointing at the oil painting of a cavernous bull skull.

"Um, yeah. Josh bought that at an art show in Indianapolis a few years ago. Nearly emptied his personal bank account to get it." Leave it to Josh to hijack my date without even needing to be here. Maybe I should have taken Vanessa out instead.

"You have an original painting by one of America's most recognizable artists of the last century in your house?" Vanessa walks over to the painting, reaching a hand out, but not quite touching it. I follow her, and wrap my arms around her waist. *Please don't think about the money, what Josh does with his money.* It doesn't matter, I've learned. That lesson has been taught a few times already. My fingers trace lines across her blouse under her belly button, but she doesn't seem to notice. She's still staring at the painting.

"Don't you think her flowers always look like vaginas?"

She's not even looking at a flower painting, so her mind isn't even entirely here. She's somewhere else, with past viewings of past paintings with past people. *Get her here.* "And what do her skulls look like?"

"Bones." She doesn't laugh, and I don't know if I'm supposed to. Josh would know, and Josh wouldn't let Vanessa slip out of his arms and go back to the kitchen, leaving me in front of a painting that I see every day and never really think about. Now I will.

Back in my kitchen, I pull out four, no five, potatoes and wash them in the sink, attacking the skins with my scrubber.

"Here, Sasha, let me peel them?" she offers, hands extended across the bar. I dig around for the potato peeler and bring the trashcan next to her seat.

She peels the potatoes with efficiency. The insides are white, newly touching the air and her fingertips as she dices while I marinate the chicken. There's something in the way she undresses the potatoes with careful hands. She's never careful when she undresses me or herself. It's always rushed, and something always gets torn – usually a buttonhole.

Vanessa describes the museums she's visited using her free miles on her off-days. She shows me a pixelated version of her favorite Edward Hopper on her phone. I tell her that the center of the painting is a plain white wall. "Can't he paint something a little more difficult to master?" I ask, thinking that even I, who hasn't taken an art class since elementary school, would have trouble messing up a cream-colored square.

"But that's the best part. His aim is turned away from everything – the sea outside, the living room where the action happens, where the people live. Plus, if you don't get a wall right, people really notice. You know that straight lines are the hardest thing to draw, Sasha?"

I just nod and turn to my chicken again. We could talk about anything else. Art and finance, that's all I ever get from Josh, and our arrangement means that I can get something else from the women I date, but this is just the same.

Right as the chicken is losing its pink, the garage door opens. *Fuck, Josh. Just one night, which you agreed to, was all I asked, and I can't even get that.*

"I'll be right back," I tell Vanessa and rush to the garage door.

I cross my arms as he opens the door. Josh's head is already ducked down. As he tries to walk around me, he must see how mad I am. I get in his way, grab the doorframe, examine his shoes, his features, his hands that can't seem to figure out what they should be doing. They start clenched, then decide that, no, palms outward is more pleading when forgiveness needs to be asked for. Damn right, he should beg. I always respect his boundaries, his other women, his dates.

"It's only eight, Josh."

"I know that."

"What are you doing home?"

"I left some reports on my desk. I didn't mean to interrupt your date. Let me grab a few things, and I'll leave again." He pauses. I stare. He stares back. "Okay, look." Josh exhales and reaches out toward me. I recede. He tugs on his sleeves; he tugs on my nerves.

He let his curiosity get to him. I knew I'd regret asking for the house some way or another. Thanks, Josh, for being that reason.

"Sasha, if I promise to not come back until you text me, can I please get the reports? I'll sleep in my car if you want, Bug."

"Fuck it. I'll just get them. Where are they?"

He describes where in his office I should look, and I stare at my tapping foot while he talks. As I glance up, I notice his gaze is on my tapping foot too. Good. He should know that I'm done with his shit and whatever convoluted idea he has that has driven him here.

"Josh, stay here," I say. So what if I sound like I'm talking to a dog.

I head back down the hallway, making my naked feet beat against the carpet as loudly as possible. It isn't very successful. As I round the corner, Vanessa scurries away from the wall, and she must want me to know she was listening, because she easily could have escaped back to her chair in time.

I want to say something, I do, and I think about it. *But, no, be alluring, be kind.* This is still my date. Instead, I mold my face into the mask I wear for aggravating passengers at work and hope that Vanessa doesn't notice the similarities.

"Everything okay?" she asks.

I shrug, and in the motion, try to push out my breasts. "Josh just needs some stuff for work. Then he's leaving."

I am mid-step on my way to the office when she responds, "Can I meet him?"

"Do you want to?" She couldn't possibly. None of my girlfriends have ever, would ever.

Before I can make my brain work correctly again, Josh has either gotten impatient or heard Vanessa's request because he walks into the kitchen and comes to a halt upon seeing her. *We get it. You're both hot. I have good taste. This is awful.*

He reaches his hand out to her and says, "You must be Vanessa. I'm Josh. I've heard a lot about you."

He must remember how Claire hated that I told my husband so much about her. It wasn't even the sex details that she was concerned about.

“And I hear that you’re a fan of Georgia O’Keeffe,” she says

Josh looks over to the painting, as do I. And we’re back to this again. “Art in general, but yeah, she’s a good one.” He laughs, and it sounds like he’s flirting. Looks like it too, as I tune out their art talk and analyze his leaning across the counter toward her, and how she props her hand against her face, leaning toward him too. If Josh and I were out and saw a couple like this, he would tell them to get a room.

Vanessa asks if he’s staying for dinner. Her smile is genuine and full. I’ve seen her work smile, and this isn’t it. Josh needs to leave.

“Of course not,” I say.

“Why not?” He stands up. If he’s trying to be intimidating, he’s failing, and if Vanessa weren’t here, I would tell him so.

“Josh.” I layer the one word with a warning that I know he can’t miss, so neither will Vanessa, but I’ll have to live with that.

“What? You’re drinking my wine, in my kitchen, and your guest asked me to stay.”

I remind Josh that it’s our wine and our kitchen.

“Ladybug,” he says. “You’re just hungry. We should all eat. I’m already here.”

Josh asks Vanessa to pass over my wine glass, which he then hands to me with a private wink. I down what’s in my glass and fill it up again, not registering the taste at all, or the wetness, just the cool heat the drink shoots down my throat.

Vanessa asks about more of the artwork in our house, which Josh describes to her while I finish the chicken. She refuses my offer to show her around the house after Josh tells her that the O’Keeffe is the only original. That’s a little bit of a lie, but I’d look like a bitch correcting him.

Finally, Vanessa turns away from him. “What’s your favorite piece in the house?” she asks me.

That’s easy, at least. “There’s a picture Josh hung in the hallway upstairs. It’s a spiral staircase lined with gold, extending two or three stories.”

Josh had forced me along with him to an art show in Sioux Falls a little after our one-year anniversary. Most vendors had at least a few potential buyers, and one woman in particular had a swarm around her booth, which looked to me as if she was selling bland pictures of the ocean, but hey, if that’s what bland Midwesterners craved to replace the green and yellow sea, I could at least feel validated in my good taste.

The vendor next to her was an old man wearing a gray golf cap, and his stall was empty. He didn’t have a theme like the popular lady, so I encouraged Josh to go take a look. After all, fewer people meant more chances that something great had been overlooked.

A few-minute search found a picture of a solitary staircase, and I asked how much it was. The old man waved his hand and explained the importance of the piece.

“He said that he took the picture in a hotel in Brussels. The locals had told him that the hotel was the most beautiful building in the city, especially the ballroom. He had gone to take pictures in the ballroom, but got caught on the stairway. It was magnificent, he said, and he spent a few hours capturing it perfectly.” I grab Vanessa above the knee and squeeze. The blue fabric of her dress glides between her skin and mine. She leans into me, resting her chin in her hand and smiling. It feels good, the way I had wanted to feel when I suggested an official date, so I weave the story more artfully:

“So when you got upstairs,” I asked, “what did it look like?”

“I never found out,” he told me. “I decided that whatever was up there couldn’t be more lovely than my imagination. You decide,” he said, and I was sold. We would have bought the

picture no matter how much it cost.”

Josh is pulling plates out of the cupboard. “That was the most excited I have ever seen Sasha about art,” he says through a smile.

“Oh, shut up. The food’s done.” I’m starving and done talking about art.

My eyes turn back to find Vanessa staring at Josh. She waits a moment, and there’s the tension I was hoping for tonight, but it’s not my tension to feel. Vanessa barely flashes her eyes in my direction before rotating back to Josh again. “It smells delicious, doesn’t it?”

He chuckles, and I notice Vanessa seems to be examining his shoulders. “My wife, master chef.” I wonder if Vanessa catches his sarcasm and if I care either way.

I had planned on Vanessa and I eating at our dinner table, but with Josh’s arrival, I haven’t set it up, and I don’t really want to work out sharing the table three ways anyway. We can eat at the bar; we’ve been congregating around there anyway.

I make Vanessa a plate first, and then myself. Josh gets his plate last, and offers to stand since we only own two high chairs. *Works for me.* I can sit in between them.

My first bite doesn’t taste like anything, but Josh adds basil to his own chicken, and after a bite, to our plates as well. So the meal isn’t perfect.

“So, Josh, you don’t mind that your wife dates women?” Vanessa asks.

“Not if she brings around beautiful women like you.” He winks at her, and she blushes.

I drop my fork. It clatters onto the counter. “Stop it. Just stop it, Josh. Stop flirting with my date, and stop hijacking my night, and stop making my food taste better, and stop being so charming, and stop being good at talking about art.”

Vanessa takes another bite of chicken, and before she finishes chewing that one, she stuffs more potatoes into her mouth.

“Calm down, Bug. I’m not trying to steal your thunder or anything. I’m just being friendly.” He reaches his hand out toward my arm, but drops it before he touches me. He does not even want to know what would happen if he did that.

I take a deep breath. It doesn’t help. “I am calm.” If I can’t even manage one freaking date with Vanessa, if all we ever do is fuck late at night in a new hotel room each time, then why are we even here?

“I didn’t mean to start anything,” Vanessa says, her mouth finally clear. Her chicken is gone, and she has her hands folded in her lap. Her thighs are pressed tight together, the least inviting pose she could possibly present.

“Then you shouldn’t have flirted with my husband,” I snap at her. There is no delay between the thought and the vocalization, and I can imagine that her raised eyebrows and tight lips reflect my own features.

“I’m a lesbian, Sasha. I wasn’t flirting with him. I was being nice. Which is apparently too much for you tonight. I’d like to go to the hotel room the airline assigned me now.” She stands up, leaving her fork resting against her half-full plate.

“I can drive you,” Josh offers. Of course he can. At least that comment stays in my head. Or under my breath.

Josh looks at me, and he’s not angry, or even annoyed. His frown is a warning that I’ve said enough.

I let them leave in silence, and then I sit there.

And I sit there.

And I sit there.

I stare at my plate, her plate, his plate, our plates all together, and I can’t even balance two

people in my kitchen at the same time if I've slept with both of them.

The bed sounds perfect, but I only make it to the couch before I slump over, one leg curled up, the other extending off over the arm of the sofa. I throw my arm over my eyes and my head pounds, from the wine or the fight or both.

Time passes. The garage door opens, and I know that I'll always think of this night at the sound of it. Josh finds me on the couch and looks at me. He sits down on the floor near my head, reaches for my hair and pets it. I let him because I don't have the will to fight him.

If I were him, I'd make it worse. I'd tell him, "Look what you've done." It's what keeps playing in my mind.

Josh doesn't say anything.

In the morning, the sun hits my face, and I wake to find Josh slumped over on the floor, his arms bent under his head. Sleep sounds better than being awake, so I drift off again.

Josh is in the kitchen doing the dishes when I wake for a second time. I wander in. There are two glasses of milk on the counter. Josh drinks from one, the sweat of the glass remaining on his palm after he sets it back down.

"Drink it, Sasha," he says to me, and I notice he doesn't use his nickname for me. It's that bad.

I CAN ONLY SAY IT IN WRITING

Judson Easton Packard

I want to write poems where I hide birds in your body,
giving finches the beauty of your fingers or your heart,
but the birds I love most are already plastered to pavement,
and no one wants to be compared to a corpse. I want to

write poems about falling in love with the perfect person,
as if perfection was a thing my words could breathe
into existence, but my throat starts to tighten
just using the word friend, and I am a much better liar

in person. I want to write poems where the world is bright and alive,
and you read them and then appreciate the small beauty in a shell
or a leaf or the curve of your arm, but I don't even
like reading those, and I can't make anything beautiful without

breaking it first. I want to write poems that matter, but ink runs and
if people don't care when someone is murdered in the street then there
is nothing I can write that deserves more than a passing glance as you
click through more pictures and advertisements than you could

ever follow. I want to write poems that have any message
other than I am broken into some shape that is tragic and clever,
but I only know one trick, and it is how to twist a knot in your stomach
with the parts I leave floating just close enough to see a silhouette.



MORNING LIGHT
Rachel Hermes

Oil on panel
36"x24"
2016



FRAME NO. I
Timmy Wolfe

Ceramic, Xerox Transfer
12"x9"x1"
2016

FUNERAL IN FIRST POSITION

Tiffani Lawrence

NONFICTION

My family doesn't usually dwell on death. I believe there is some sort of inherent understanding between us that life will go on without us, and so we had better jump back into the flow as soon as possible. For a while, reality cracks in the face of death, like a mirror we didn't know we were holding. After staring at the shattered glass on the ground for a moment, we slowly begin to pick up the shards. The first shard is the shock, which gradually fades away as the logistics of spreading the news, funerals, and money must be dealt with. The second is our memories of the dead—this is the biggest piece, the one we like to stare into for a long time before we put it away. There are smaller pieces, different for every death, but we keep picking them up, brushing the sparkling pieces away, until the floor is clean and life seems almost normal again. We put on a good face and we get through the day. And then the next day, and the next, until it doesn't hurt so badly anymore. Maybe it's not a good way to handle death, but it's what we do.

My family doesn't rush anyone to move on, or even talk about moving on much at all. But there is a kind of practical recognition that there is nothing to be done about death except to get on with life. Each individual deals with it in their own way, but we all know without saying it. In some parts of the world, the entire village stops when someone dies. No one stops for death in our "village" except for the cars that pause briefly to watch the funerary parade of vehicles go from the church to the cemetery.

And yet, since my childhood, it seems as though my immediate family—my mother, father, and I—have been caught up in a string of deaths that never ends and rarely pauses. I used to think it was normal, or that we just knew a lot of people. But I'm starting to wonder if maybe it's not. When I talk to friends my age, I realize their experiences with death have been few and far between. Maybe they don't remember it very well, or maybe their parents kept it from them.

I remember my Grandpa Virgil. And his death, which struck my father's family when I was nine. There were others in my family that died before him, but I remember them only by the grainy photographs that taught me their names. I remember Grandpa Virgil in my real memories. I remember him by the flashbulbs in my head that light up whenever someone says his name, like a marquee on Broadway. *Flash*. He is sitting in his recliner, balding in a U shape, grinning with his cheeks in the way I inherited, eyes scrunching into the same bright brown sparks I see in the mirror. His eyebrows are dark; his hair is silver. He is wearing slippers and laughing because he is with his family. *Flash*. I am crying in the darkened living room of my home, my dad's gigantic arms pulling me in, trying to help me accept that *Grandpa Virgil has cancer, sweetie. And it's looking pretty bad*. I don't understand

really, I just know cancer is bad, bad, bad, and that Grandpa will die. I push my father away, to curl up and hug myself and rock back and forth shaking my head. I can't stop doing this for a long time. *Flash.* My father's entire family is walking through a cold alley at night. We have just finished dinner. A good steak dinner with the whole family. Daddy tells me that this meal was Grandpa Virgil's last wish. Grandpa sat at the head of the table and laughed all night. I make sure to hold his hand on the way out. *Flash.* There is a hospital bed in Grandma's small, bright living room. Grandpa is laying in it. Somehow smaller than usual. I like to think it is just because I'm growing. He smiles to see my family.

Then he is gone. I don't go to the funeral. My parents don't want me to remember him that way.

They were right and I am grateful for it. I don't remember him that way.

It is the summer of the same year. My Uncle David has died. It's my dad's side of the family again, but no one seems that sad. Except Aunt Loretta. *He was very sick*, my parents remind me. That must be right, he was in a wheelchair in all my memories of him. And of course, the pool is open so I can't be sad, really. I can swim for hours, circling and diving under the blue chlorine water, thinking of him every now and then. I am sad for Aunt Loretta, and for my cousin Chris, who is mean to me next time I see him.

I didn't go to that funeral either. I hope that my family was sad, and that I just didn't see it. Sometimes I have trouble remembering Uncle David's name.

It's November, and I'm in fifth grade. I am ten now, and I feel very large in my double digits. I am in Mrs. Avery's class, and at conferences she tells my parents that I have trouble sitting still. I like Mrs. Avery because she is perky, but she is watching me too closely, too closely, and I have to grab the bathroom pass and run. She rushes out to find me pacing the hallway in front of the big sunny windows, desperate and lost in my own confusing grief.

My cousin Mike has died. He was my father's nephew, and the oldest of all the cousins. He was a big, handsome man in the military. He yanked the back of my dress with a laugh when I went running by at my Uncle's wedding. I remember laughing too. A minute later, he helped me clean up when I got the drippings of the chocolate fountain all over my dress. He carried me back to my mom, and I was worried about getting chocolate on the clothes he told me were called "blues." But then he was dead. Somehow. We don't know how. Aunt Marianna and Uncle Bob didn't show up at family gatherings again for a long time.

The wedding is the only memory I have of Mike. It is a good one to have. He is kind. I did not know Mike, but I miss him. He was the oldest cousin; I am the baby. I feel a bit lost without my other bookend, even now. Three deaths, one side of the family, one year. Maybe Uncle David's death affected me more than I thought.

My Great Grandma Nedra Dailey died in September of the next year. It is the same side of the family. I did not go to the funeral. *We don't want you to remember her like that*, my parents say.

I do not remember her at all. She is the picture in the photobook. A much younger version of me, perhaps five years old, stands next to a smiling woman with a whisper of white hair in a wheelchair. My father is in the picture too. The memory is silent and static. I realize only

now that Grandma Dailey is who my Aunt Nedra is named after.

There is a brief period where we largely avoid deaths in the family. There are others on the outskirts of our acquaintance, more funerals I don't go to, some that I do, more tears I don't share in. And then, when I was fourteen, days from the 5th anniversary of my Grandpa Virgil's death, my Great Grandpa Ted died.

Grandpa Ted was nice, but in my head he has always been old and deaf. Sweet, but a little hard to relate to. What I remember most distinctly about Grandpa Ted and his wife Grandma Bertie was how much their social interactions with family centered on food. They dropped in just before the meal and were out the door before the dishes were done. What if you wanted to spend some time with them outside of their house or a holiday? They would almost certainly ask you to take them to their favorite buffet. It became a joke in our family. This is what I remember. It makes me smile.

I did go to this funeral. I remember fidgeting in my seat during the service, picking at the hemlines of my clothes. I was sad for a while, but Grandpa Ted was old—and it felt okay in a way. The funeral was at the Amos Family Funeral Home. A place I would come to know unfortunately well over the next couple of years.

Houston's death was a spectacle as large as his personality. He was a showman, a fireball, and a great friend. He was funny and overly energetic and sometimes annoying. And in November of my senior year of high school, at only seventeen years old, he was dead. He died in a car crash, and my community fell apart. He was a prominent member of the choir and theatre groups I spent every day with by the end of high school. I was at dance when they told me he died. We were preparing for *The Nutcracker*.

I am leading class with my best friend Trenna. We are trying to keep distracted middle schoolers on task while Trenna's mom, the woman who owns the studio, takes a phone call. This is our usual job; we are adept leaders—though sharper with the girls than we might need to be sometimes. Trenna's mom briefly reappears to call her to the front room. I continue with the lesson, trusting they will be back. Trenna's mom reappears in a couple of minutes, her face is drawn, she guides me to the front room of the studio and leaves the students to their own devices for a moment. Trenna is on the floor, sobbing. Trenna's mom tells me, tears in her eyes, that *Houston is dead—a car crash—this afternoon*. I sway for a moment, but Trenna's face confirms my fears and I collapse next to her. Two almost adult women awkwardly curled around each other on the floor, hanging desperately to one another, crying, moaning, screaming in pain and disbelief. Later, I wrap my long arms around all the unruly middle schoolers I can reach, and kiss them each on the forehead, my tears falling on their upturned faces, overwhelmed with love and grief.

Because he is young, because it is unfair, the news explodes across the city. A rising star that went out. The line at his visitation, at Amos Family Funeral Home, winds all through the halls and out the door. My choir sings at his funeral, which is held at one of the largest churches in town. I am full of hope fueled by sadness, of love and the joy of being loved. It seems like the whole community is here to celebrate this teenager's life. I sing harder than I ever have, stamp my feet and sway my shoulders. I catch a glimpse of his body in the open casket. It is caked with makeup and so, so dead. Not Houston. I don't look again. I don't want to remember him that

way.

But I do.

I have a lot of memories of Houston, but this will always be my last, and that makes me sad around the edges of my heart. Teenager or elderly person, a car crash or cancer, death disfigures us all.

Two days before I graduate from high school, my Great Grandma Bertie passes away. She's outlived her husband by three years, but the last year or so has been bad for her. Two days after my graduation, her funeral is held at Amos Family Funeral Home. It's weird timing for me. I know I miss her, but I am also spending a lot of my time celebrating something else.

I do my best to comfort my Grandma, who has now lost both of her parents, but I feel inadequate for the task. I am uncomfortable when she cries while she hugs me, and I want to pull away. I don't know why. The room where the funeral is held smells funny—stale, almost—even though flowers overflow the recess in the front of the room where the casket is.

Grandma Bertie is in there. I don't want to look at her, but I tell myself I must, that this time I will face what death looks like. Her face doesn't look like her face. It has too many lines, it is shrunken and small. She was never a large woman, but damn she was so stubborn sometimes that she felt six feet tall. This body in the casket looks incapable of such a thing, like it's a replacement and the real Grandma Bertie is still out there somewhere hobbling around with her walker. I take my seat, and instead of listening to the service that sounds so generic, I become fixated on her hand, because I can't focus on her face. It rests on white satin, wrinkled and ancient looking, but distinctively hers. And as I stare at it, I am hit forcefully with a thought—there is nothing there. This *thing*, this hand that isn't *her* hand anymore, it's just a lump. She looks like a person still, not *my* person, but a person. But I can tell that she's dead. I intuitively know that it wouldn't matter how far away I was, I would be able to sense her deadness. I sway in my seat, hit by a sudden vision of what a field of bodies in a war would look like, what that might *feel* like. I can't get the image out of my brain for a long time. I decide that I hate open casket funerals. I make a point to tell my mom this, so that if anything ever happened to me she would know to keep mine closed. I don't want people to remember me that way.

That summer my Great Great Aunt Vida Flory dies. She was 101. My mom goes to the funeral, but my dad and I have other things to do. We laugh about how she was sharp as a tack until the very end, and how she was deafer than anyone we knew. Now, I use her as a prime example of the longevity of the females in my family, and other than that I don't think about her much.

My Cousin Albert dies at around the same time. He was the husband of my dad's cousin. He was always a happy guy. Large, with dark hair and a dark moustache. I was a flower girl in his wedding when I was little. I felt sad for his wife, but it wasn't a big deal for me.

This seems insensitive now. Clearly it was a big deal.

•

It's October, during my sophomore year of college. I am enjoying dinner at a local burger joint with my boyfriend and my best friend. We are having the kind of friendly animated argument about something trivial that only good friends can have. My phone goes off in the seat next to me, buzzing intensely with my Dad's number on its face. I frown, thinking about how unusual it is for him to call me out of the blue. He makes awkward small talk for a minute then asks me where I am. He says it is good that I am with my friends, and that makes me scared. Then he tells me James has died, rather unexpectedly, and the world cuts out for a moment. All sound, my field of vision, my breath, everything stops as that statement registers in my brain.

James Lawson was a close family friend. He and his wife Bert had always been a part of my life. His ruddy-faced, big-bellied laugh is my most outstanding memory of him; like a Santa Claus without a white beard. He liked throwing big parties so he could give what he had to others. It didn't matter what it was: food, the use of his pool, an ear to listen. When I was in seventh grade they hosted my birthday party, and I can't remember him ever looking happier than when he was watching me and my friends do stupid tricks off the diving board. James had the best board game collection, and every time I came to his house he bought me a huge bag of M&M's, and a pack of Oreos. His joy was to spoil the kids around him and to make them smile.

A year before I got the news at dinner with my friends, James had been taken to the hospital and they had found fluid around his heart. After some more tests, they found out that he had lung cancer. The doctors gave him two years to live with treatment. The cancer spread other places. He died a little past the one-year mark, after taking a big trip with his wife and trying to stay the same happy James until the end.

After this phone call, I thought for a nanosecond that I could get through the meal with my friends and save my grief for later. But as they looked towards me with questions in their eyes, as I opened my mouth to tell them what happened, something inside me broke and the tears hit with full force. I sagged against my boyfriend in the booth just trying to *breathe*, trying to tell them what had happened. My friends shared a look and began the evacuation process immediately, though I initially tried to protest. I barely noticed when my best friend left us outside the restaurant. I wanted to put one foot in front of the other. To get to the car. To move. That was my only goal, my only future in that moment.

It seemed like a long time until we got together to celebrate his life. James loved the Tennessee Volunteers, so his wife covered their house in Vols swag, and did what James loved to do best—she threw a party for all their friends. Our friends got together and drank, ate, laughed, and hugged the evening away remembering a great man. It was fun, but sad.

His wife is still struggling with his passing. For a while she tried to buy me Oreos when she would see me.

Around Thanksgiving during my sophomore year of college, Uncle Dustin had a heart attack. They got him to the hospital and had stints put in, to prop open his veins and keep him around. Our family was worried, but it looked like everything was going to be ok. I left my family with a hug and a smile when Thanksgiving break was over, excited to see them all in a week for the dance performance I was in.

It is the Wednesday before the show when my mom texts me, asking for my call time for dress rehearsal that night. I tell her and don't think much more about it. Wednesday is my busiest day of the week. But somewhere in the back of mind, a suspicious worm of fear wriggles in the darkness. Why would she need to know that and not give me any more context? I ignore it,

thinking I have too much else to focus on that day. When my mom calls me to tell me they are outside my dorm, two hours' drive from where they should be on a Wednesday afternoon, the worm of fear turns into a hellhound of panic and I bound down the stairs to meet them. They meant to tell me in the privacy of my room, but they see the panic behind my eyes and my mom bursts into tears and my dad has to tell me right there on the sidewalk *Uncle Dustin had another heart attack sweetie, and this time he didn't make it through*. It is always my dad that must break these things to me. I stare at them for a moment as my heart breaks for my aunt and my cousins—twelve-year-old twins who suddenly have no dad. Reality cracks in the face of death, this can't be real. Then the tears break too and I can't stop crying.

We eventually get ourselves organized and I call my boyfriend even though he is in class. My family decides to get coffee while we wait for him to get out of class so we can take him to dinner with us. I try to distract myself with a description of my favorite drinks at the local coffee house and making fun of my dad for not liking “frou-frou” coffee and getting a latte anyway. We try to laugh, but I can still see the redness of my own eyes reflected in the redness of my mother's. They drop me off for a moment after coffee to meet my boyfriend, and when he bursts into the room with worry radiating from every muscle, I lose it all over again. I leap across the room, bury myself in his neck, and kiss him harder than ever before—desperate for some affirmation of life and love and security.

When I was five years old, Uncle Dustin came into my life. He started dating my Aunt Heather, and I remember liking him because he was tall, and happy, and threw his head back when he laughed. There was no new gadget too expensive or experience too large if it would make the people around him happy. When he had children, he taught them to be generous too. The twins like to buy me ice cream or win me prizes, even though they are still too young to have much money of their own. Dustin always cracked jokes, played pranks, and loved to have a beer with his friends. He was a good cook who loved spicy food. He worked tirelessly to provide for his family, and in the end this is what we blamed for his death – the stress and long hours of being a car salesman. In my memory, he has a beer belly and never stops smiling. His eyes crinkled when he laughed. Dustin was the kind of uncle every kid is excited to grow up and hang out with—the one that shows you the best mixed drinks, tells you how not to get in trouble if you're doing something you shouldn't be, and unceasingly encourages you to go after your craziest ideas if only for the chance to make memories. I thought that in a couple years, when I was really an adult, he would share more of those things with me and we would be friends.

I was excited to have that relationship with him. I didn't get to.

His funeral was three days after his death. My family told me not to come. They told me not to leave, to finish the show. They knew I didn't have an understudy; there was no way I could leave. They told me he would have wanted me to finish it.

I have never wanted to dance less in my life.

Sometimes I get scared now when I get an unexpected call from a family member. It's like that little worm of fear never vacated its dark corner of my mind. There are so many I still care about, so many still to die. And soon to die. My Great Aunt Marge has ALS, and we are running out of time in her prognosis of two years. My Great Grandma Gish, who was one of the bossiest and strongest women I have ever known, is half lost in dementia but still holding on for now. And everyone else is prone to the fatal accidents that happen to someone every day.

Sometimes I feel anxious when people are later than they anticipated. I have the tenden-

cy to jump to the worst scenario, and I start to panic if my loved ones can't confirm that they are safe. I fear that I have somehow lost them before I was ready. I notice this problem most with my parents, because I am an only child and I am terrified of facing their deaths alone.

When I look back at my memories of the people I have lost, I realize that I remember their happiness. Their laughs and smiles, the jokes they made and what made them happy. I remember their presence and personality, the bodies that I hugged and kissed. I remember, in essence, what made them seem most alive. And when they are stretched out in a casket, those people I lived with become things. I don't understand what is to be gained from seeing someone like that, unmoving, unable to laugh or smile. And then the memory of this *thing* is suddenly connected to the wonderful memories of their life, and that makes me deeply uncomfortable. I don't want to know that there isn't anything in that body anymore. I don't want to lose my memories of them behind this last memory of a dead body, missing all the most important parts, missing the movement that made them alive.

I don't want to remember them like that.

When the lights blinded me for the performance that ran at the same time as Uncle Dustin's funeral, I reached for him. In a dance of swirling fabric and bright lights, a whirl of movement and beauty and life, I mourned his death. In the solo, which had never had a meaning to me in rehearsal, I gave him tribute. The sound of the guitar swelled around me as I reached upwards, spun, balanced on one foot, extended my leg high in the air, and moved through the forms I had trained in since I was a little girl. There was nothing to do about death but move on with life, and dancing was the movement I was made for. *This* was the most powerful way for me to pay my respects, something staring at an open casket could never equal. I gave myself up to an outpouring of the soul and emotions that would not be contained. My family wasn't there, but I danced for them, for our grief and love. I don't know if I danced well, I don't know if I even did the right steps, but that day—more than 100 miles away from the other mourners—I gave him a funeral of my own.

OBLIVION

Anna Meyer

Reese writes the first time off as an accident because she's newly single, and they meet in June over Red Eyes at Whistler. Fucking hell, she thinks, ducking her warm face when bright eyes stare back. The woman chuckles with a hand over her dark lips. Then she uncrosses her glossy legs and slides over.

Reese peeks again. The woman looks older up close. Mousey brown roots show through her auburn hair, and she has thin wrinkles left from smiles, anxiety, and age. The woman holds out her hand. "Venus," she says. Her palm feels dry like crinkled paper.

"So, why are you here, Reese?" Venus asks.

Reese shrugs. "Fancied a drink, I guess."

Venus throws her head back when she laughs.

Reese's face tingles, and she clears her throat. It's multiple reasons honestly. It's London rain, and her mother's constant nagging, and the empty places full of memories of him the night he left for America. And although it seems like it, she didn't follow him here. But she doesn't know this woman, so she settles with grad school instead.

"I want to be a concert pianist."

"Ambitious," Venus says. "When did you start playing?"

"Four. My mum—" Reese bites her thumbnail. "Basically forced me into it."

"She must be thrilled then."

"Yeah," Reese says, which is a proper fucking joke. Her mum thinks she's in the States for law. Believes music's too fickle. She'd have an utter fit. Reese swirls her glass, and the ice clinks.

Venus's lips curl. "I got an MM in piano as well," she says.

"Really?" Reese asks. "What do you do?" She hopes it's somewhat sensible.

Venus hesitates and shifts on her stool. "Last week, I played Mozart for a violinist."

Reese scrunches her nose. At eight, she learned Minuet in G and couldn't escape the infuriating tune, not even in her dreams.

"Let me guess," Venus says, "Chopin?" Her left eyebrow twitches.

Reese smiles. "Debussy."

Repertoire banter must really turn Reese on because somehow they go from talking to kissing to climbing into the backseat of Venus's '99 Nissan because Chicago hotels are too expensive, and neither lives close—and sometimes you just can't wait. Reese isn't sure how long they spend lip-locked and tipsy. She knows she shouldn't let a stranger get away with this shit, but she lets Venus unbutton her jeans anyway.

Reese hesitates. "I've never—"

"Women are way better than men." Venus squeezes her thigh.

"Jesus, I meant hooked up."

Thirty minutes later, Reese's vagina aches from a half-assed fingering job. She'd expected

it to be different. She tells herself she feels nothing, even though the inside of her chest hurts like hell. “Thanks,” Reese says, even though she isn’t thankful. She doesn’t give Venus her number, but the love bites she left on Reese’s neck remain for a couple days. When they finally fade, Reese shrugs it off, and that’s that.

Had Reese actually pursued a law degree at UIC like she told her mother, they never would have crossed paths again.

But come August, Venus steps into Reese’s Concerto I Studio wearing a straight-legged pantsuit and addresses herself as Professor Demay.

It’s subtle the way Venus’s lips curl. Reese’s limbs go numb and bile crawls up her throat because Venus knew. She must have. Reese wishes she could fly across the Atlantic and never look back. Fuck’s sake.

It’s the little shit—the lingering eyes, the side comments, and especially the hand on the shoulder while Reese is playing. By the third class, they’re practicing independently for showcase. Reese is practicing Chopin’s Nocturne in C when Venus walks in. She leans against the cover, scrutinizing Reese’s fingers as they glide over smooth keys, edging closer until her breath is tickling Reese’s hair. It’s kind of dirty, but Reese can live with it.

Everything’s fine until the winter grad party at the downtown Marriott. The early evening hours are typical—composer chat, undergrad mockery, a couple bottles of Moscato—but around two it becomes a proper shit show. Some of her tenure professors are dry humping their spouses, and Reese sees Venus laughing with another woman. Her head falls back, just like last summer.

Reese’s classmate Claire hands her a half-empty bottle of Grey Goose. She’s the only other grad student who knows how to banter.

“Absolutely nauseating,” Claire says, nodding at Venus.

“Innit,” Reese replies.

Claire excuses herself to grab a martini, and Reese presses her lips to the opening and gulps vodka until she can’t anymore, which isn’t the brightest.

After that, it happens almost instantly. Venus halts mid-laugh, nods at her companion, and slinks toward Reese.

“We’re not doing this,” she says, leaning away when Venus grips her elbow.

“It’s fine,” Venus says.

She leads Reese down a hall past identical doors with peepholes that reveal identical beds where strangers fuck and pretend they didn’t.

Reese falls onto the one in room 205. “I don’t want to do this,” she says.

“You can stop pretending now,” Venus replies. Her breath smells like rotten berries.

“I’ll tell, I swear,” Reese says as Venus unzips her dress, tugs down her panties, spreads her legs.

“What will you tell them?” Venus pushes a finger into her. “That you’re already wet?”

Reese doesn’t understand how her body is aroused by something she finds so filthy, repulsive, wrong. She sobs when Venus licks her because she doesn’t really know how to fight back. This is her professor, and another woman, and they’ve done this before, so what does it matter. Reese feels her body stiffen and tries to push Venus’s head away, but it’s too late. She arches as Venus continues to lap at her clit until she’s so sensitive Venus’s tongue feels like sandpaper. Finally, she stops. Venus smirks and wipes her mouth. She doesn’t wait for Reese to dress, and Reese barely registers that Venus never removed any of her clothes.

•

“Where’ve you been? I thought you’d gone home,” Claire says as Reese stumbles outside. She grabs Reese’s waist before her face can hit the ground.

“Venus,” Reese says, which isn’t a lie.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m a bloody fly.”

Claire snorts. “You do talk some shit when you’re plastered, don’t you?”

Reese shakes her head. “Poisonous shit.”

By the time the train pulls into the station, Reese has vomited twice. Claire holds her steady.

The only other rider in their car is a man with a Bears cap and a Whole Foods windbreaker. He has a small baby nestled against his chest.

The train lurches forward like Reese’s stomach, and she belches loudly. The man stiffens and glances at Reese. He cradles the baby closer to his body.

“Do you have a problem, sir?” Reese asks. Claire winces as if she was shouting.

The man frowns. “Will you keep it down? I have a baby.”

“Reese,” Claire says, patting the seat beside her.

“Okay Mum.” Reese rolls her eyes before sinking down and ignoring the man.

At least, that’s what would have happened had she not seen the Lucky Strike box peeking out of the man’s windbreaker. And yeah, it was definitely his better-than-you vibe that set her off, but also other things, like the booze and how Venus always smelled like sweet smoke.

“Who the hell do you think you are anyway?” Reese asks, her voice growing louder.

“Reese, shut your mouth,” Claire says, jerking her hand.

The man’s eyes widen. “What is wrong with you?”

Reese’s blood simmers as she stands. “What’s wrong with me? What about you?”

“Reese.” Claire stands as well.

“Don’t smoke in front of a fucking kid,” Reese says, pointing at the crying baby girl.

The man’s jaw tenses, and his eyebrows slant inward. “Stay away from me,” he says.

“Don’t tell me, tell her.”

“Reese!” Claire tries to grab her wrist, but it’s too late. Reese surges forward. She barely has time to react before the man slaps her arm and swings, his fist colliding into her jaw. Reese staggers back, spitting pink saliva onto the floor.

“You bloody bastard,” she says. Reese lunges for him again, but Claire grabs her shoulders and shoves her back. The man pulls a pocketknife from his jeans.

“Oh my god, please, I’m so sorry,” Claire says. She drags Reese to the other side of the car until they’re seated as far away as possible. Reese rubs at her jaw, which will bruise even more when Claire smacks her in the same place later.

Brian swears he’s never been more thankful watching a train pull away. Fucking psychotic woman. He shushes Mei, rubbing her back in soft circles before bundling her closer to his body.

Home is a fifteen-minute walk from the Chief Mobile stop, but Brian’s eardrums and left knuckles still throb when he shuts the trailer door.

He lets out a long exhale when he hears Tanner’s snoring. At least Tanner wasn’t with them. He probably would have broken that stupid girl’s fingers. Thank god she didn’t hurt her. Brian glances down at Mei, who is suckling the hem of her blanket. His chest warms. They’d only had Mei for a couple weeks when Tanner realized suckling indicated sleep.

When they first adopted her, she cried all the time. Brian would always attempt to retrieve

her, but his feet never hit the ground.

“No baby, you need to sleep,” Tanner would say, kissing Brian’s shoulder blade. Brian smiles. Two solid reasons why Tanner’s a keeper—his low, gravelly voice and the warm saliva puddles he leaves on Brian’s skin. Brian will probably never get tired of them, even when they have dentures, and Tanner’s lips feel like shriveled apricots.

Mei smacks her gums, spit collecting on her tiny mouth. Her eyelids twitch, and Brian wonders what she dreams about.

He trudges over to Mei’s crib. It occupies the spot where their foldout card table used to be. They always did 1000 piece puzzles together back when they were newlyweds.

Yeah sure, the crib’s white paint chips, and Tanner had to stack some old Beatles records under the back leg to keep it from wobbling, but it’s a fine crib. Brian lays Mei down and strokes her warm, velvety cheek. What kinds of crazies toss a perfect working order crib? He doesn’t know the family who left it on the side of the road, but he wonders if they have a daughter too, if she draws with pastel chalk outside a two-car garage, and most importantly, if this daughter has a mother.

Sometimes Brian wakes Tanner just before daybreak, not with intimate touches like when they first started dating, but with overwhelming doubts.

“We’re not the only ones,” Tanner would say.

“Just because we aren’t the only ones doesn’t mean Mei will accept it.”

“She will, baby. And if it takes a while, that’s okay, too.”

“What if she hates us?” Brian would nibble on his lip skin, and Tanner would pull Brian’s lip down with his thumb. “She won’t want to talk to us about boys or—”

“Of course she’ll talk to you about boys, baby. You pulled me, remember?”

Brian rolled his eyes at that.

“You know what I’m worried about,” Tanner said. “Bras and periods.”

Brian chuckled. “Worse comes to worse: Wiki-How.”

Other times, Tanner gives him a stale kiss and asks about work. Usually it’s the same old shit, but once in a while something big happens, like the time the dairy trucks pulled in ahead of schedule, so Brian’s manager opened more bay doors, and the warehouse dropped fifteen degrees. It wouldn’t have mattered if Mei hadn’t been stashed in a storage crate near Brian’s station that day. Normally they have a babysitter, but she was out of town, and it was impossible for Tanner to take her to the Army Reserve.

Tonight, though, Brian pulls the Lucky Strike box from his windbreaker. He holds the cigarette pack in his hands and flicks it open. Nestled between his cigarettes are four Crayola crayons. It had been Tanner’s idea—a way to carry something for Mei to do when they were at a restaurant or on the train. Brian sighs and sets the pack on the nightstand before rubbing his aching fist. What a fucking ride.

When he wakes Tanner and mentions the drunk woman, Tanner mutters, “Unbelievable,” until he’s so worked up he throws off the covers and begins pacing back and forth, yelling about how the stupid bitch is lucky he wasn’t there. His stomps shake the metal awning, and Mei starts crying, and Brian sits on the end of their saggy mattress, rubbing his temples with the heels of his palms wondering why the hell he said anything in the first place.

If he hadn’t mentioned it, Brian would have shed his jeans and joined Tanner in bed. He would have kissed down Tanner’s chest, and Tanner would’ve nodded weakly before sucking air through his teeth when Brian took him in his mouth.

Brian knows exactly how to tease him—where to touch, when to pause, how many strokes

before adding another finger—so that by the time Brian thrusts into him, Tanner would be panting and minutes away from spilling between their sweaty bodies.

“Thank you,” Tanner would say because he deploys tomorrow morning, and Brian would have taken the stress away for a few blissful minutes.

But now it’s 3 a.m., and Mei is still crying, and Tanner is in rationalize mode.

“It wouldn’t have happened if you had stopped years ago.”

“I know, but I’m working on it now.” Brian swallows.

Tanner crosses his arms over his chest and sighs.

“I’m sorry,” Brian says. Then he heads to Mei and cradles her in his arms to quiet her wails.

This is not how he imagined it. No one wants to spend their last night at home pissed over what they can’t change, but that’s exactly what happens, and when their heads finally hit the pillow, they lay with their backs to each other. They’re out of time.

Brian stares at the pack on the nightstand as Tanner’s breathing slows and wishes that tomorrow would never turn into today.

Morning comes too soon. Reese has been sleeping on the floor with her shirt half off. She throws back pills, mouthwash, and a banana. Then she dabs at her purpling jaw with cheap department store concealer, staring at her reflection, piecing together the night, trying to figure out where the hell that came from because fuck’s sake, that wasn’t her at all.

Two hours later, the aspirin has worn off, and Reese is in studio twenty seconds away from losing her mind. She clenches her fists and scratches the bridge of her nose.

“Where’s your emotion?” Venus asks.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry like that’ll fix the problem.” She snaps her fingers. “Again.”

Reese inhales mildew and exhales exhaustion before forcing her hands to move, stumbling through another four measures before Venus slams her palm on the piano cover. The pang resonates inside Reese’s head.

“Unbelievable. How do you suppose you’ll impress anyone playing like an empty corpse? How were you even accepted here? It’s like you’ve regressed about a decade.”

“Are you quite finished?” Reese snaps.

Venus scoffs. “No, I’m not *quite* finished. And neither are you.”

One last time.

The last time they had gone to an airport together was to bring Mei home. Brian remembers holding the grainy, greyscale, 2x2 picture to his chest as they flew through clouds toward Shanghai. He’s surprised he hadn’t vomited at the orphanage, the way his stomach was churning and dropping. Maybe he would have if Tanner hadn’t been shaking too.

Brian watches the digital red numbers above the checking desk. The waiting is always the hardest part.

“God, I don’t want to do this again,” Tanner says. Brian squeezes his hand, his thumb stroking over and over on the back as if trying to memorize every bone and tendon.

The first time Tanner left was only for a couple months, but that was before they were married, and before Brian had told his parents he was gay. He remembers Tanner’s glassy eyes, and how much he regretted not kissing him among all the other couples.

Brian exhales a long, warm breath when the intercom calls for final passengers boarding Flight 483. Tanner stands. He holds Mei up to his nose, and Brian wishes he had his Canon.

“I’m going to miss you, little one,” Tanner says, kissing her chubby cheeks.

“You’ll call every Friday?” Brian asks.

Tanner nods. “Every Friday. I promise.”

He kisses Brian’s mouth once more before he’s rolling down the runway.

Venus takes off through the parking lot, and Reese grips the door handle as if that will stop the car. Then she’s at her professor’s house in the study with the model trains and mock Monet’s and once-full glasses that now lay on their sides. And she’s lying there too, like the glasses, except she’s being filled instead of emptied. She only had one drink, so she can’t blame that.

One drink would muffle the harsh twisting in Brian’s chest. His body sways with the bumps of the track rolling beneath, and Mei drops the purple crayon again. Maybe she wants a different one. He opens the cigarette box. Mei’s small hands grab for green. Tanner’s favorite color. Brian imagines Tanner’s low rumbling laugh and crinkle-eyed grin as Mei toddles toward him on the tarmac, her arms raised high above her head, her tiny fingers opening and closing in the air. She’ll probably be walking by then.

After they’re home, after he’s rocked Mei to sleep, Brian’s lungs shudder.

It’s too quiet. He hates snoring, but god, he wouldn’t complain now. This is it—the part no one else sees. Usually he can hold it in, but this is different. This is eight months, not two. Afghanistan, not Hawaii. Brian opens their closet. He pulls out Tanner’s favorite flannel and brings it to his face. The collar smells of Tanner’s aftershave. Not good enough.

That’s what Venus says about the others.

“Am I?” Reese isn’t sure if she’s asking Venus or herself.

Venus doesn’t answer. Instead, she wraps them both in bathrobes and leads Reese to the glossy black Baldwin in her living room.

“Play.”

“Why?” Reese rubs her eyes.

“Trust me.”

“Fine.” Reese clears her throat and settles on the bench. Her fingers press against the keys, and she begins to play Debussy’s *Arabesque*. It’s her strongest muscle memory.

Her eyelids shut as the tune swells and fluctuates, and she’s almost back in Cheshire with her plaid jumper and pigtails—back to when her mum looked on, and she couldn’t quite reach the pedals. Almost. But no, it’s definitely there, the creaking pedal under her foot, and she can’t hear the dull thud of her Steinway’s old keys, no matter how hard she cranes her neck. Reese sighs.

She waits for Venus’s sharp tongue. Nothing. Then, smoke. Smooth, sweet and mild.

Reese stops mid-verse. A memory pulls at her mind, almost breaching the surface of her subconscious.

“Go on,” Venus says.

Reese swallows, nods, and her fingers move once more.

Come morning, neither boards. The train continues.