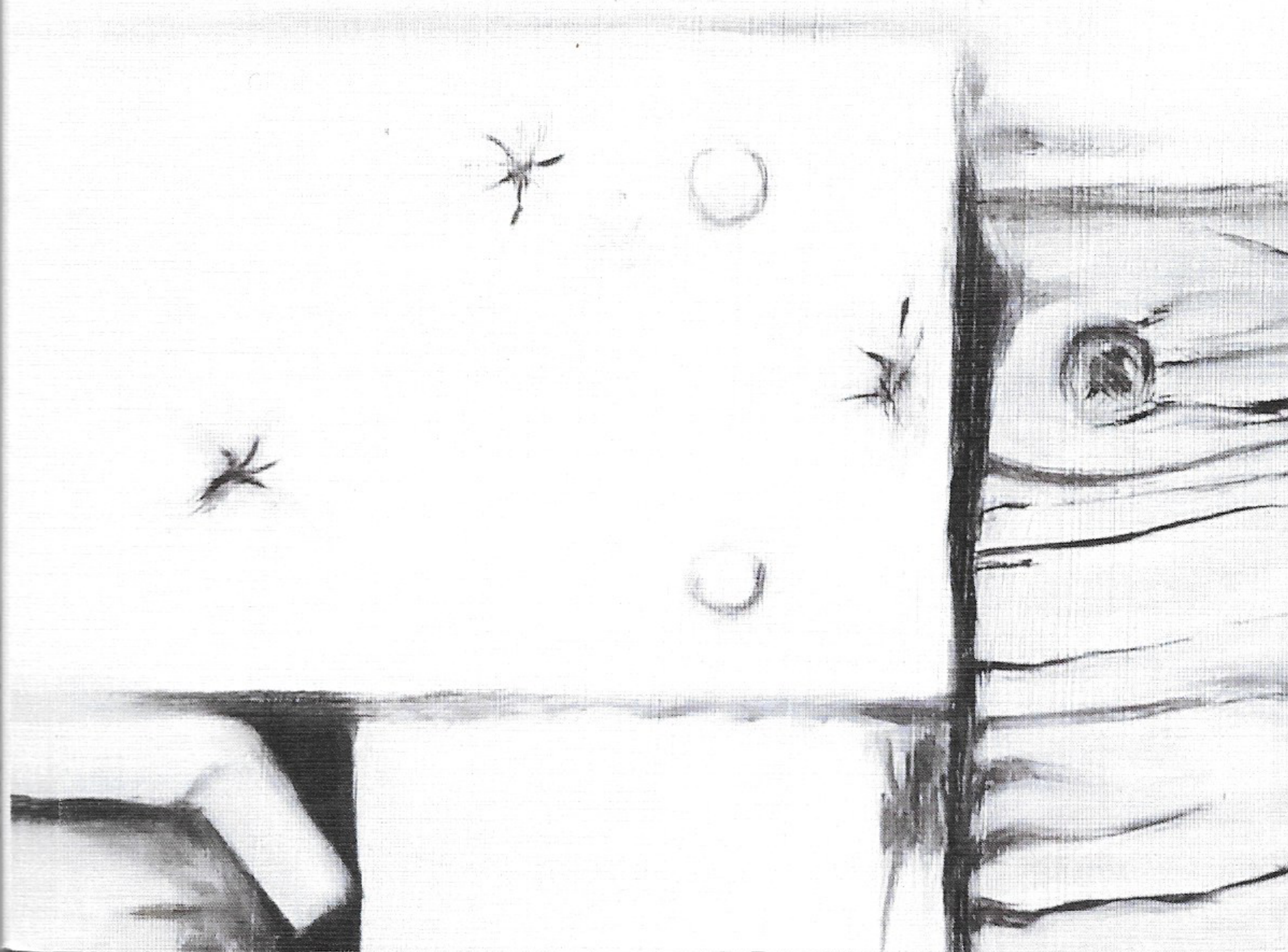


HOTHOUSE

Spring 2012



HOTHOUSE

the Official Undergraduate English Journal

••• Spring 2012 •••

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EDITOR'S NOTE

EMILY MATHIS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As we were finishing up this fourth edition of *Hothouse*, the slogan for the famed Strand Bookstore in New York kept popping up in my mind: "Where Books Are Loved."

To me it seems redundant to describe a place as a haven where books are loved—are books not loved everywhere and at all times? Who doesn't love to grab a book off the shelf and find a spot to sit and greedily delve into a story? My fellow English majors share this mentality. We English majors (and we lead the pack in numbers here at UT) know that stories and storytelling are as necessary as air. The philosophies we explore within a text in our English classes are often as enlightening, enriching, and relevant to the literary canon as they are to our personal lives.

The faculty and staff within the Department of English have worked hard to nurture our generation of storytellers. *Hothouse* is the cumulative effort of the extraordinary students in the Department of English and the faculty who inspire us. This year's publication would be nothing without the invaluable help of Brad Humphries, and my fellow editors: Jordan Smith, Lindsay Oncken, Gloria Sung, Caitlin Cowart, and Naomi Kuo.

I and the entire *Hothouse* staff are proud to present the fourth volume of *Hothouse* to those fellow lovers of the written word.

POETRY

THE KISS

KAYLEIGH HUGHES

If I see someone picking at their skin,
Fingers bouncing, arrhythmic,
With sickly yellow knuckles
Clenching and unclenching,

Or if I see someone stiffen as they suck in air,
And hold it in for five seconds too long,
And then release it,
Limbs settling into a heap of conflicting angles,

Or if I see someone, back bowed,
Grimacing into a toilet,
Mouth glistening with vomit,
Nose dripping,
Eyes begging for even the weakest mercy,

I find it is safe to assume
That they are writing a poem.

But, of course, appearances can be misleading
And the work of every spitting, gnashing, wincing poet I've ever seen
Sings.
And squeezes your hand just enough,
And kisses you so deep.
Its vital signs synch up with yours
And you realize you're living,

AUGUST

KAYLA MOSES

That summer was made of two colors.

It was considering the mid-hundreds
during the morning hours,
and I found myself yelling at you
over the air conditioning in your sputtering Chevy.
Do you think this is what Africa feels like?

So we'd stay in all day, hiding in sheets
damp with perspiration,
wondering if it was the heat,
always the heat —
or just the question of whether
we were lovers
or friends.

And between the reluctant exhales,
we'd watch the fan blades
rotate like swimming goldfish
across the ceiling.

But all of that was forgotten at night.

Sunset was like being born again,
And we wondered if this made us
owls
or fruit bats.
Foxes, you said, from the shower.
They're nocturnal, aren't they?

We skinny-dipped in the neighborhood kiddie-pool,
drinking Blue Moon and orange slices out of Mason jars
that were damp as the hairs at the back of your neck.

And we'd race cars on the highways to dry off,
windows rolled down in the Chevy – *wild*.

We were bandits in blackness:
stretching through town,
around town,
until it was gold again.

URBAN FOSSIL

JOANNA REESE

The grey and wrinkled man
walks down the equally as vintage street
a fedora on his head
a skip in his step
I am sure it has been there
since the pastel paint was bright
and before the Brothers' Grocers
sign became B ot ers' Gr c rs.
He looks around him
as if the stores were still alive,
but they are only lit by the burnt amber streetlights.
I don't think he knows
that this street is dead.
I hope he never knows.

MY COUNTRY

COLIN VANDERBURG

Enough of men—rare, dead, and unteachable.
Networked people, let's gawk and honk
At our backwards parade.
Let's Midnight Ramble, let's Strut With Some Barbeque.
Every jazz belonging to me as good belongs to you.

What do you mean, under arrest?
For strolling naked beside a red dachshund?
A public street?
But look how his ear sticks up—
Alert, stiff, listening to earth's low frequencies.
Badger frequencies. We're on our beat, too, officer.
We rule these alleyways.

I'm fleeting, I'm eternal, I'm going for a beer.
Or I would, if I drank like my friend here.
I'm declaring a new nation for dachshund people—
Gutter-sniffing Balla blurs, trotting fine-footed sausages,
Immune to authority—a swing dance of the dead.
This is our music,
Our limited pressing of the best joke ever told,
Oh random slinking people,
A gorgeous heart, our afterlife.

LONG RIVER STONE

JAMES WALKER

The desert has gone dry.
Its color retreated into the ground
Like starving roots.
Even the nopales are parched yellow
And bowed in unremitting thirst.

All the snakes are gone
And left warnings in their place.

The desert has gone cold.
Its long silence shadowing
Undelivered rains.

Death is broken into the rock,
The image of a lack cutting in.
A gorge filled with the absence.

The desert is without words
To cradle the lack.

You remember the Wasteland is filled with corpses.

As if nothing has shifted you
For so long, now you have found
The reason to end a pause.

At the elbow's bend,
Where winter barely meets the Rio Grande
You find rocks flat enough to
Skip onto the other side and keep going.

Hammered-down ligature.
The retreated banks a reminder
Of when it was so much larger
Than it is today.

When it was big enough to cut the mountains that shoulder it.

Flowing soft and steady
As the soil breaks around you,
A river through a desiccated mouth.
Drawing a line in the sand
That blows away a little everyday.

ARS POETICA

KAYLA MOSES

Poetry is a spool of thread –
as much the honeyed light of the late afternoon as the
curlicued breath of a waking child,
the flight of a symphony;
the truth and the honesty.

Consider the orange tree: bearing fruit
for fruit's sake, with no fanfare
for the blossom.

Authenticity, that I treasure.
The speckled elderly, the pigment of beets,
an arachnid ivy –
all vulnerable,
and earnest
and true.

Oh To have a celebration of the unnoticed;
a parade of the ordinary,
the tacitly vibrant.

I once saw a sparrow building her nest:
the dusty underside of my father's workshop,
here ribbon, there twine,
all simple and godly.

I would crown the plain were it not
for the crown itself –
for woven throughout, we knew poetry.

LEAVINGS

JAMES WALKER

One earring found.
No ear, no match,
The hooked eye
Gutted from the sheets.

In the hard animal stare
The unique soul you loved
Endures a second death.

Now forgotten
Now keenly remembered.
What was so diminished
Reaches from the ghost.

The shadow tattooed
Beneath your shoulder,
The mockingbird's original piece.

What is left covered
After the covers are stripped

What Past
Like hot steam
Hissing through the skeleton.

JAPAN

EMILY BUCHANAN

Such a thing as this. Devastation in that earthquake nation. Too
many possibilities to count, to fear. Tears of mine for ones
who cannot cry anymore. Butterflies in my
stomach like those when they saw that
wave of ocean. The island has
turned to water once more,
fish swimming alongside
roads and cars. Help is
coming. Another
place we must
Restart.

LITTLEFIELD HOUSE

COLIN VANDERBURG

1

You'll notice I have no head.
I have pearls and corals,
Yellow petals line my lip
Like a moustache.

Too much beauty!
Ungauze us, shred this lace.
Uncoil each doily.
Allow gloaming.

Wigs crept
Off, face powders lunched.
Soon my pale aunts were all
Only haunted bust
And neckline.

Freud promised his sweetheart
A springtime of cocaine.
She unspooled her maroon hair
And made me.

Lie down on the couch.
We have much to discuss.
Cigars, lanterns, primitive Man,
Pant-legs, glory.

The fading parade of dust
As that lady's carriage leaves us.

2

At night, unopened like a letter,
Some of its doors argue.
No, you shut up.

The Himalayan Cedar isn't talking,
But mourns the moths, sparrows,
Dead old racists. Sways its sedimented
Horizons.

Living girdle, these shutters,
These ghoulish porches loop
And dwell among us
Like curtains frozen in their fall.

BRIT

MADELEINE GUY

because that accent is sexy.
Let's get drunk on the wine
your wife saved away
in a dark closet
that you haven't had the time to clean out
in the year since her funeral.
I saw how you stared at me from inside of your car window where you
thought the dark tint made you invisible. (And I liked it.)

AT THE PIANO SHOP

MELISSA RAGSDALE

Listen, I've lost it

but there were the days
 when I could take a piece of music
and spin it into a dream for you
 the days when no score was impossible
when the patterns and notes would form
on my mind like red wine soaking a towel
 when everything fell into place as simply
as black and white, when I always knew
my exactly where each of my fingertips were
hand when my mind was a howling fire
sha lit by the scent of a Sohmers upright
kes the days when I would come
as home in knots and unwind myself
 into 88 strings—and I've lost it.
it I lost it like love on a hot winter night
hov that twisted into shivers and this isn't working
ers lost it like a voice screaming for nothing
just or a word caught in the back of a throat
above the baby Grand is a 1918, made of mahogany
the keys are yellow, the middle C
 is chipped, just slightly on the right corner
each note lingers a little too long after
 it's been pressed and released, it yearns
not to be forgotten, it sings a silent song
into the dark, steadily decaying evening.

CHRISTINA GEORGINA

COLIN VANDERBURG

Winsome devoted goblin mother
Last seen in her little white robed death of 1894
Drip dropping devotion
After Eucharist with the bohemians
Quiet with cancer
Kneeling on the flat flowers.

Poor vacancy, pitiable empty scene:
Props in storage, in dark rickety rooms,
Paint-licked jar mouths—gaping glass.
They crash out of their pyramidal stacks
And smash the family below until it wakes.

BURN

ALLIE KOLECHTA

Making dinner over a stove,
flipping over chicken,
sauce, vegetables, maybe beef
sliding your palm down
the handle of the skillet
shifting it over the stove
over the heat
over the coil
then shock, drop the pan
your hand hits the metal,
like you slid too close
to friends who never listened
when you told them not to spill
small secrets contained
in the back parts of your heart.
The clatter of the dropped pan
resonates with the pulsing feeling
in the burn.

SCENES

MELISSA RAGSDALE

1-

After the movie
we went back to your place
where we used our hands
to defy the laws of physics

and molded brown sugar
into sandcastles and sculptures
of dancers poised on the very tips of their toes.

2-

One Saturday
I wrote my grocery list as a sonnet
placed it in the pocket of my raincoat.

It was raining, so the audience knew
something was going to happen.

3-

It took two hours for me to learn your name
but when you spoke, you did it in iambic pentameter
you did it with a meaning in your words.

I held my hands up in front of me
framed your head between my thumb and forefinger

the way it would look on a screen.

4--

I learned how to dance on the steps
of the Chicago Art Institute
my feet pattered with the rain.

It was a homeless man who taught me
his skin was the same color as brown sugar.

5--

I was pressing my hands into dough
when you told me it was over.

I threw the dough, fingerprints and all
slammed my wrist onto the counter
fell from the tips of my toes.

I stared at you, pulsing
wrist rolling, pan left

fade.

6--

None of that happened.

But.

On the bus back to Dean Keaton,
the bag of brown sugar burst in my hands.

NOSTOS

KAYLA MOSES

There is an indigo
that happens
somewhere in the careless vacuum
of watching the phone towers' cadence
on the horizon.

It is a hymnal to youth.

Postmarked in that memory,
find the chiseled tables
of that coffee shop,
the one with the red door,
with the scones
that tasted like home,
maybe with mugs fat
and stained as moss-covered rocks,
nestled together in
a trifecta: robin's eggs.

It's that endless.

Seventeen is a blue jean jacket
that fades just the right way.

I watched your cheekbones
over the years,
the way they caught
the brown of summer.
You were all bones then,
like piano keys on a fishing line.

And these days we live
by looking over our shoulders,
throwing salt at our demons,
and leaving light trails
someplace hence.

STRIPPING AND COSTUMING

ZACH LINGE

Pulling the stench of opaque stockings
like molten scales off my hairy
mammal legs. Do they make me
Man? Disorderly corset breast pads
slap the floor with a fury. As I
undress my dress and peel
the layers of a laced
button-down
bustier
I wonder
what it means
to fuck. Foreign,
matted plastic hair
scalps me as I tithe, lashing
my back bruises from any of the
cages I dance, hide, shine in. Black
leather pumps beat across my studio floor as
I wade through diadems, blush, false lashes, a killing
color of deep red lipstick, and animal skulls.
in so barren a room, with only a bed,
a sink, and the strewn entrails of
my dejection, one would think
that self would be obvious
as kiddy books. Each
plastic fingernail
utters

a shredding cry
as I remove it, the pain
exacerbates how torturous
it feels to feel the same when
nude as in disguise. I could invite
you in and apologize – depending on
what I think you mean to me – for the mess,
the metamorphosis, the ruse, the regret of being
unable to reciprocate each or any emotion you define
yourself with, and attempt to project back onto me. If you
mean something, I might tell you I'm not that kind of lady and
demand you cover your eyes. If you mean nothing, I might
kiss you until you're naked, hard, and eager, then tell
you to leave. If you're family, I'd have stripped
off each layer beforehand, and the layers
today would like quite different. If
you're a part of me, however,
I'll lay on my back – naked
on the rough carpet –
expecting you know
what this neglected
and protective fence keeps
safe behind the vulgarity of my
undressed, unwilling, layered bones.
I can tell you one thing, though: Daddy, you
don't know me, and we all know you don't want to.

SPECIAL FEATURES

BETTER OFF

MATTHEW HOWARD

I,

As an English major, have never been quite good with numbers, but will nonetheless sum up all I have to say on the matter with a simple phrase; I use \$5 words for nickel concepts and even though I won't make a dime by doing so, I damn sure hope to make a difference...

Maybe the latter statement involves a little more math than you (or I, for that matter) care for, but the point is clear; my major will not achieve me a great level of what many dub as "success." This I knew when I clicked the button registering me as an English major. All my life I've wanted more than everyone else, but not in a materialistic sense. Rather, I prefer to know more, to think more. Because of a few people, who were successful in a different way too, I now strive for what they owned...

Berryman taught me the blank verse which I practiced in the seventh grade. It was simple then, and still is, but these unrhymed passages gave me a sense of sense, that I did not need to conform to what I was taught; forget the iambic pentameter if it obscures what you are trying to say. As Whitman noted, "The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the free channel of himself." To write poetry in this way is a test of mental freedom.

Emily Dickinson gave me the theory behind dying and seeing beauty in everything I do and use. Because of her, I don't plan to stop for Death; rather, he'll have to come and get me. It will be just two gentlemen carrying on a conversation when he (inevitably) comes.

Theodore Dreiser taught me to instill strength within my writing, to make it meaningful, influential, to let those who are reading it know that there is an individual behind these words and concepts. Thus, I'll let the characters of my tales determine their own fate; but only through the force of my pen.

Twain threw light on a world that is as quaint as the day is long. He was a leader in showing us what we may not want to see or even experience. So since I'm not a Pudd'nhead, I'll heed current social issues and use them in my writing.

Ernest Hemingway gave me stream of consciousness, which to this day produces portals into my mind. Like RNA making a protein, I'll first transcribe a raw material onto the paper and leave you (the reader) to translate it. Or try...but then again, it's not surprising because my mother may be a fish...

Radcliffe gave me the gothic novel of the 19th century. This I've played with countless times, just to do it. I want to meet the black and cursed hero who haunts the world in order to amend it; perhaps I am, he...

O'Connor gave me faith in my Faith, enough to even write about it. I now tackle my religious fears in writing and am not afraid to throw in a pinch of morals into everything I write as well.

Foucault got me thinking about the death of the author in a more profound way; if I'm ever going to share my ideas, I must assume that having my name on a work means nothing if the work itself is incoherent or inconsistent with that of all my general ideas and beliefs. Thus, I'll ground myself in writing, not for the fame, but for the founding of a discourse to be built upon later.

Four years ago, had anyone told me that I would choose English as a major, I'd have looked at them like some half-wit and replied that it wouldn't do me any good overall. Whether it was due to listening in ELA courses or being bored of television, I now know English and Writing are not passive subjects. We use this language, no, this discourse from day to day but don't think of it as we should. Nietzsche, Derrida, and all those others who studied the arts know that literature and writing are an essential part of our society. In fact, we would be dysfunctional without them; why then, do my fellow students discourage me from studying this lost art? I'll never understand, but honestly, I hope to make a difference in spreading the word (pun intended) about how people I've never even met have helped shape my career into what it will be. And this, of all things, is what leaves me better off than most.

SHADES OF BROWN

ANNIE PAIGE

I learned to love at Shades of Brown. This hip cafe is filled with mismatched furniture, constantly changing pieces of art, the sweet aroma of brewing coffee, and memories. The local coffeehouse in the artsy Brookside area of Tulsa, Oklahoma was my hang-out all throughout high school. I went there at least once a week to drink chai tea, read in a comfy arm chair, study with classmates at the round wooden table in the front room, or to sit with friends in the decrepit rocking chairs outside enjoying the calmness of a cool spring evening. Whatever my need, Shades of Brown delivered.

The coffeehouse defined my coming-of-age experience. I first went to Shades in 10th grade. The place had already become the cool hangout at my high school, but as a shy 15-year-old, I was hesitant to go. The cafe's hip-ness and the maturity of its regular customers intimidated me. I imagined myself unable to find a friendly face, wandering aimlessly from room to room, checking all the nooks for my friends, while the ultra-cool twenty-somethings reading and sipping drinks openly mocked me. But my anxieties were unwarranted. While my first visit to Shades was nerve-racking, it was also exhilarating. Walking into the quiet atmosphere for the first time, I found people reading, drinking coffee, engaging in what I presumed was intellectual conversation, and generally being cooler than me. I feared that ordering an iced, blended drink, would expose me as the lame, young impos-

ter that I was. To save face, I ordered a latte, the most sophisticated coffee drink I knew. Taking my first sip, surrounded by friends and energy, I fell in love. In love with coffee, in love with Shades, and in love with my new independence.

Shades of Brown quickly became our spot. When we asked the unavoidable "So what should we do tonight?" the answer inevitably returned "I don't know. Shades?" Students from across mid-town converged at the cafe on Friday evenings or lazy afternoons after school. During the winter, due to the coldness of the weather and the friendly warmth inside, the windows always steamed up, obscuring the activities in the coffeehouse from the outside and providing the place with an intimate and magical feeling. During the summer, as adults slaved away in the office, we enjoyed our freedom from school and parents and frequented Shades constantly. No matter the time of the year or reason for the visit, Shades welcomed us.

We'd lounge for hours, drinking coffee and tea, eating the gluten-free cookies that looked so appealing from behind the counter but always disappointed, skimming through the odd collection of books that lined one wall, sitting outside and watching the cars pass by (and in our later years, passing around a cigar while the smoke swirled around us), and talking. Shades's greatest commodity wasn't its three dollar cup of bottomless coffee or the local bands that played on Saturday night. It was the way that it brought people together. As teenagers, experiencing a new level of freedom and friendship, Shades represented the phase in our lives when youth begins to mature into adulthood. We could sit for hours and be ourselves, without anyone telling us what to do or how to think. At Shades of Brown, we decided for ourselves our beliefs, our actions, and our thoughts.

However, as we got older and left high school, we outgrew Shades. As our youthful joy and innocence faded away, we became realists and saw the coffeehouse for what it really was—merely a coffeehouse. We tired of the shop with its snobby baristas, overpriced drinks, and pretentious, judgmental vibe and began spitefully referring to the coffeehouse by a series of snide nicknames ("Shades of Blue," "Shades of Hipsters," "Shades of Lame").

The place that once offered such freedom and independence became a relic of the past and a silly reminder of our immaturity. I now look back on the times I was afraid to go to Shades, and I laugh at myself for acting so young. Now a confident woman and an avid coffee addict, it's hard to remember how I felt then, when it felt like life was just beginning. But every now and then, I'll enjoy a beautiful book in the sun or relish a particularly delicious sip of coffee, and I'll be transported back to Shades of Brown. Then I can remember what that excitement felt like—as if I was just awakening—with the coffee, to fresh mornings and with the cafe, to a new stage in life. In those moments, I'll smile and think fondly of Shades of Brown, while the coffee and the memories warm my soul.

PROSE

TOUCH AND GO

ROBB BRIGGS

Mr. Stern plopped down behind his makeshift desk strewn with scraps of paper, an assortment of pens, and an unfinished hot dog. A portly man, Stern had allowed his waistband to expand congruently with increasing age; his hands were heavy, breaths were wheezy, and cheeks were pudgy. But his eyes. His eyes gleamed in austere blue: sharp, quick, and piercing. His eyes had earned him this spot behind a makeshift desk overlooking the football field below, the vigilant observer.

...

I always figured uniforms were for team sports and the Army. Dress blues. Pinstripes. Looks the same, but has my name on it. A distinction from the whole. Not here. Two hundred other me's. Black from head to toe. Part of the whole. Part of a family. Not the one in the stands—they're probably looking for me right now. The one on the field—whose sweat I share and dependence I rely on. One break and the form fails—we *die*. Oh sure, the crowd will sympathize. Won't understand what it means to be a part of something bigger. Selfless. Faithful.

...

The next marching band in competition filed out onto the football field, resounding taps on the lead snare keeping time. Stern grabbed another judging sheet from the disheveled pile on his left and set it in front of him. He sighed. What band is this? 20? 30? Stern thought as his meaty hand devoured the pen on his right.

Perhaps I'm getting too old for this; it's just too goddamn repetitive. Every year there's a show on water, or fire, or the sky, or, Heaven forbid, vampires. There's always a Shostakovich tribute, a Wagner refrain, or a Khachaturian dance. If it's jazz, it must be Rhapsody in Blue, or Pat Matheny. And good golly Miss Molly, must every closer be Mackey's "Asphalt Cocktail" or Zimmer's "160 BPM"?

He threw his glasses onto the desk and rubbed his eyes. There's no life to these shows. Most are played, some are performed, but none are lived.

Stern noticed the sudden lapse in white noise from the audience and returned his glasses to his face to determine his first impression of the band before him. They stood at an erect and rapt attention, eyes transfixed on their drum major ascending his podium. Leaning forward slightly, each member tilted their chin upward, arrogant and intimidating. Stern grunted. Well, they don't lack presence.

The drum major turned on his podium and saluted the judges.

"Willow Run High School Band, you may take the field in competition."

The drum major turned and faced his band again, arms extended to conduct the show.

Dut—

Dut—

Dut—Dut—Dut—Dut—

...

Horn snaps to my lips—did I move it? "Sounds like a dying cow" people said. Used to. I didn't care. Didn't want to be in band. Anything but. Things change—where else would I belong? Big hit. Not a dying cow no more.

New tempo. Watch the drum major. Best friend. We laughed to fits reading Patton's speeches. Back when "fuck" was funny. Dry ice bombs in his backyard. Forwards march. Held him when his mother died. Sobbed into my shoulder. Straight legs. I cried, too, terrified of being alone. Chin up. He was strong. I was weak. Parting ways this year. Even stride. Afghanistan. College. I won't cry.

...

The opener was strong. No surprises there. Stern's eyes roved over the shifting mass below, searching for discrepancies in form and technique. Lines morphed into diagonals which bended into curves which varied into archaic designs before returning to lines again. Brass deviated from the form at one instant, only to return as the woodwinds deviated in the next. The form changed with articulate fluency, guided by the rhythmic hands of the young man on the podium. One marcher, a euphonium, caught Stern's eye. The marcher's brow was furrowed, and underneath his fierce gaze did not waver from his drum major, gleaming with conviction. Stern grunted. He may be living, but he's just one.

...

Flash of color. A flag catches in the cool breeze as it arcs across the night sky. Its graceful master swipes it behind her back and across her feet, turning as the flag changes hands before it is tossed loftily into the air. It hovers in the air for only a moment, frozen in time, before succumbing to the allure of gravity and the girl's outstretched arm. Jesus, she's beautiful. We met freshman year, though I didn't know it at the time; I liked her friend. She got in the way. But junior year something changed—I can't explain what—and I began searching for that auburn wave of hair and green eyes that would flicker and dance in fluorescent light. We started dating—I was in this uniform. Man I was nervous. Why? I knew she liked me. Our first

kiss was when she told me baseball was stupid. It's not stupid. She kisses me again—World Series? She whispers "I love you" in my ear—are we on the ballad now? I hold her close while we look up at the stars, burning and teeming in innocent white, as we try to make sense of the world. This makes sense. Bugs are biting our ankles, but we don't move. Lies. I can't move when she breaks my—what? Her eyes. Black...not green...black dwarfs...I count the measures of rest...

...

...

...

The band returns in a euphonic forte pressed to the box, like a long lost hero returning home. The ballad is too pretty. Not pretty enough. It doesn't make sense.

...

A tear trickled down his cheek. One drop splashed across his judging sheet before he quickly swiped it away while pretending to adjust his glasses. He had not thought of her—had not visited her in ages. Carnations were always her favorite. She deserves more than that dull gray. Swallowing the hard lump that had formed in his throat, Stern scribbled one word onto the judging sheet, broken: Charlotte.

...

Rippled triplets on the bass and thirty-seconds on the snares. Drum break. Jazz run. Follow the leader. Running to catch up with Daddy. Follow in his footsteps. Scouts. Business. Make him proud. Was he ever proud? His eyes are on me even now. I can feel them: calculating and appraising. I must be perfect. Straight legs—separate the upper and lower body. Equal space over equal time. Is that what Father and I need?—No, the form. Crescendo.

Snare roll. Cymbal crash. He's yelling at me. I'm not him. Done following—Horns up. Let me go.

• • •

Stern's pen was frantic with life, but it wasn't writing. It drummed on the table along with the staccato rhythm of the percussion ringing in the stadium. His feet tapped a steady beat underneath his desk, reflected in small, furtive nods from the judge himself. Stern was engaged. He was living.

• • •

We move into the closer—double time. My leg cape flaps in the wind as we shape shift across the field by hip shifts and touch and go's. I'm no superhero. Batman for Halloween. There are two hundred other heroes on this field, though. Worked with them for four years—I'm lucky. Through all the toil and sweat of summer and fall, we are still here. Together. The culmination of love and loss, success and failure has led us all to this moment. The penultimate hit. Loud, but leaves audience anticipating—buzzing. My heart beat quickens—I know it's almost over and soon the show will be forfeit to the past, like dry ice bombs and bug bites. We march to the bottom of the home sideline and halt in an accentuated, crisp close. Final message—press to the box. This makes sense—will I miss it?

• • •

The band's final crescendo emblazoned Stern's ears in a symphonic euphoria. The chord reverberated throughout the stadium, electrifying the still night air. The audience jumped to their feet in raucous applause and exclamation. Stern just sat there stunned—mesmerized. Each member of the band bore the same countenance: brow furrowed with those same piercing eyes, confident and daring. They were living. Stern was no longer judging; he

was listening. And in that moment, one solitary, shining moment when the present is transparent and its music is infinite, Stern jumped to his feet and joined the entertained in their thunderous ovation.

• • •

The slow, rhythmic cadence of the bass drum announced the end of the season. We collapsed into four compact lines, and began to march off the field. Sweat glistened on my forehead, dripping down and stinging my eyes. I drew sharp, ragged, breaths between my lips, set in a light-hearted smirk. Around me there was more of the same heavy and elated breaths. A trombone staring intently at the back of the head of the mellophone in front of him. "Wooooo-hooo-hooo! AHHHHH!" A saxophone. A clarinet stifling a sob. "Fuck yeah, baby!" a trumpet. A flute wiping tears that streamed down her flushed cheeks. The euph next to me was praying. Color guard maintained those dazzling, ivory smiles—yes, even her. We carried ourselves out of the stadium with chins up and legs straight, still keeping time as one.

As we reached the water station, the realization of what transpired hit us pretty quickly.

"Oh my God! Did you hear the echo on the last note?"

"Claire! You nailed it!"

"Haha, remember Hell Week?"

I found my drum major and ardently shook his hand before he pulled me into a fierce hug. No words needed to be said as we clapped each other on the back, marveling at how far we'd come—from dying cows to Finals night. Eventually, I let go to find other members—no, brothers and sisters—to congratulate, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a rather stout old man walking in our direction, seemingly too fast for his elderly age. I strode into his path, and as he noticed me I stuck out my hand.

"Yes sir?" I asked.

The man didn't say anything at first, but took one glance at my hand before his austere blue gaze pierced my own. He gripped my hand with

surprising firmness and said in an authoritative but somewhat shaken voice, "Thank you son." Then, as quickly as he came, he left, with his hands in his pockets, a spark in his step, and his lips humming the music of our show.

THEY COME MARCHING

VINCENT RIDENOUR

JACK

I move out from behind the blue, paper curtain and the glare from the military-issue wall clock, roughly the size of a wagon wheel and fixed to the wall just below the ceiling, makes me have to adjust my glasses. The same paper curtains section off pieces of the enormous circular room in more than a dozen other places, making the chamber a hive of semi-private recovery spaces. Doctors are shuffling across the expanse without looking up, absorbed in clipboards and writing orders to waiting interns and various RNs and LVNs, all trailing behind like baby ducklings.

I walk directly across the big room, weaving between lab coats and scrubs, to reach my next assigned patient for the shift. As soon as I put my body through the opening in the curtain I know from the delicate, rotten fruit scent hanging above the bed that an infection has taken root under the man's skin graft. If he weren't so strongly affected by the painkillers, antibiotics, and various other fluids pouring through his IV, I know he would be feeling the suffering. The border space where the man's wound meets the graft shows that it is not taking. The slight little valley where skin wouldn't quite meet skin is sticky and angry looking, making a bumpy wet circle around his chest. I go about my duties, noting the progress of the graft on

the chart. Before I can replace his dressings, I have to clean out the exposed flesh. When I set down my bag of disinfectants and gauze and other supplies, I notice the ants again.

In a military hospital, everything is seen in terms of wars. If life can't be won or lost, it can at least be stabilized, triaged, evacuated, etc. For the last four months, the hospital has been fighting two wars over its usual one. The first was always understood to be the never ending war against infection. The attending doctor had told me in my first week that most patients that die here don't die of what they come in for: they die of subsequent infection. "The war never ends," he said. The new war was with the ants. A civilian hospital would be too afraid of lawsuits to stay open, but I had my orders and every two weeks I replace the ant poison in the coffee tins all the bedposts sat in. So far this had kept the ants from crawling up the posts and onto the patients, but I didn't feel good about it.

I force myself to look away from the crawling trail under the bed, saying in my head that it's just a delicate line of hair and to tell the floor janitor to sweep. The fruit smell comes a little stronger as I clean out the border around the graft on the man's chest. Most would expect a smell of meat if they saw an image like this. Such a meat smell would tell me decomposition, more a sign of something like gangrene. Infection is lighter, sweeter, and generally more like an old fruit drawer. The shuffling of the doctors outside the thin curtain mixing with the scent of infection and preservative antiseptic gives me a vague feeling of nostalgia for country stores I bought candy from as a boy. I let my mind drift with the memory for the moment before moving on.

TIMOTHY

Line is unbroken, brothers behind me and brothers ahead. Feet say the tile is sticky, sugared. Hormonal chemicals excite inside me and I get ready to exude a cloud announcing victory. My head leans close, forehead flexes two long noses, brain buzzes that it is only a bit of dry tea, not the smell we came

for. Move forward, move on. I come to the wall and my front four legs reach up to grip as my brothers ahead of me have and my brothers behind me will.

The paint is rough, grips strong, and my view is wide from the wall as I crawl up, up. I see the dead brothers from the first attempt at securing the source of the smell, clustered around the bedposts and peppering the coffee cans full of poison. The lesson was hard won, but well valued. The line does not break now, not a single brother moves towards the poison baits, instead keeping to their places. The trail pushes on slowly but with purpose along the wall, forward, onward. A man, existing in the room as a vague shape, fuzzy and without detail, as all mountains seem from a distance, comes slowly to a full stance and then walks through the hanging paper. With him go the strong scents of soaps and salves that had been clouding the signals from my long noses. The smell of the goal comes stronger now, clearer, a sweet sugary scent like putrefied fruit.

Lead brother reaches the next step of the plan. I watch him stretch his front legs out from the wall and touch down on the clear bag of water on the long metal hook. With his lead, I am determined anew. The brothers move together, excited, throwing off small puffs of victorious hormones. I reach the end of the path along the wall and extend the front section of my abdomen across the small gap of space between the rough grip of the wall paint and the slick plastic of the bag. Feet tell me to grip hard, the new floor is slick and too clean. I move down the bag, carefully, down and down.

In turn, I reach the long hose attached to the bottom of the bag. Brother pushes behind me as I hesitate; I can see it is very far to the end of the hose. With a small movement air, I'm hit direct with a pure cloud of the scent. My long feelers fire and spark and tingle and I almost fall I am so dizzy. When my head is straight, I am hungrier than I have ever been and I find I have already begun to move down the hose. It is not so scary as I thought, it is only moving forward, moving on, moving, moving.

NATHANIEL

My head feels damp and swollen with medicine, and I can't open my eyes. The light still pushes through them, blinding and fluorescent, always bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz all around me. As a reflex I first try to orient myself inwardly, figure out how long I've been here, but everything swims, including my thoughts, and I feel myself fade.

Swish scratch, swish scratch, shuffling shoes wake me again. The din of voices speaking medicalese has become something of white noise, almost inaudible, but the shuffling walk always stands out, like sandpaper against cheap plastic. It's accented with mindlessly violent writing on clipboards—scratch, scribble, scratch, rip, scratch, scribble, scratch, rip. I listen for my own breathing under the sounds of the room, but I don't hear it. The only sense that rises above the various prickling noises is the overwhelming tactile sensation.

The liquid in the IV masks much of what I can tell I would otherwise be feeling, but I feel the liquid itself pushing into my arm, ice cold and giving my veins too much thickness. From my chest I still feel the same crushing ache, the same pulsating, radiating soreness. The only difference in this moment of wakefulness as compared to those he'd drifted in and out of before now is the vague smell of food in the air, something sweet, like jam or fruit pie.

A tickle on my arm draws my attention suddenly and fully. I feel as though a series of hairs are standing on end in a trail up my side. Like so many times before now, I attempt to lift my arm or shift my body and find the movements futile. As the hairs move to my armpit, I exhaust myself trying to move in any way I can. I feel sweat form on my temples, matting my hair and running behind my ears, as I fight to summon energy. All I have goes into the one action I am able to accomplish, but the strain of the effort has my mind sharper and more present than it has been in what seems like days or weeks. In what must appear from the outside to be a pathetically weak gesture, I limply bob my head forward, tilting my face towards

my chest and allowing me to look down at the sensation. I focus all my will to pull my eyes open for the first time since my arrival here. If not for the sudden presence of mind this odd sensation has brought me, I doubt I'd be able to do it, but the lids stretch slowly, and after several long moments of painfully blinding light, shapes around me sharpen.

I look down and toward my left arm, to where I first felt the sensation, and it looks like tiny bits of dirt are crawling up the crook of my elbow and side of my chest. My heart is beating faster now, panic clearing my head and sharpening my thoughts further. My eyes move deliberately slowly to the bandages around my chest. A swarm of prickling brown trails is leading under the white bandage at every angle. I never think to try calling out with true words, but I can hear an animal whine come from somewhere deep inside my throat. I follow the border of where skin meets bandage, trying to break down the event into something understandable. A twitch draws my attention to a lump on a spot of skin just above the bandage. I refuse to believe, refuse to think, as the twitching lump moves, under the skin, like a tiny burrowing mole. Before my vision darkens again I watch more twitching lumps emerge from under the bandage, following the first in a studded line.

OTHER HALF

KRISTEN JONES

The first thing I experienced in my new life was light. Before that, I lived in constant motion, surrounded by suffocating darkness. Nothing was visible in that murky abyss, and the emergence into this new world with colors and shapes and sunshine terrified me. Now I know I was right to feel this way.

...

When I was washed ashore, the air stung my body. The salty wind licked and dried my skin until I could no longer move. Immense figures clouded my vision as they walked along the sand. I hoped they would pass me by, and they did again and again. Thankfully, I realized my body was partially covered by a bundle of dried seaweed.

I dreaded the sound of birds. Their shadows circled over me. Once, a seagull's disgusting feet inched towards me. He laughed and strutted across the sand. I struggled to move. It was useless. I lay there staring down the dirty creature. He shrieked to his friends, and suddenly a swarm of them drew near to feast their eyes upon me. I shuddered, waiting for certain death. I would be torn apart by the greedy monsters. They would gobble me up and fly away to cackle and bother the rest of the world.

But, alas, a couple that chose the wrong time for a seaside picnic saved me. The flock of birds caught the smell of bread and chips. Not able to resist the intoxicating aroma, they left me alone in order to attack someone else's feast.

The most agonizing part of this new place, however, was that I could hear the waves, my home calling out to me. I longed to return, but my body was useless—dried and baking in this newfound heat. One afternoon, I realized I had died. My flesh had turned white, and I was smoother than ever before. I did not pass into that state in which most believe. One moment I was alive and the next I was not.

...

Weeks passed. The wind blew, but it no longer troubled me. I did not have to fight to stay alive. One morning, as the sun peeked over the waves and the seagulls began their wretched song, I noticed a shadow approaching. It was a man.

He was alone, carrying only a fishing rod. His steps were timid, as if he was unsure of each movement. He was large, though to me everything is large. His body was wrinkled and tired. I remember he did not carry any bait with him. In fact, his fishing rod went unused that day. Later, I wondered why he carried it at all. His shadow became darker and darker until he stood over me, peering down at my lifeless form with piercing gray eyes. A tiny smile flickered across his face. He slowly bent down. I heard the bones in his knees crack. His breath came quick and heavy. I was torn between excitement and sheer terror. What would he do with me? I was almost certain humans wouldn't eat me.

Ever so slowly, his dry, weathered hand extended towards my place in the sand. His fingers came so close, but suddenly, his entire body lay on top of me. I was caught beneath the soft part of his belly, cocooned in the fabric of his shirt. His body pressed me a little deeper into the earth as he struggled to stand. He rolled onto his back, freeing me. He spread his arms

above his head. As he failed to sit up again and again, his face became red and damp with sweat. There, as I lay next to him, shining and whole, he began to cry. Thick tears swept down his cheeks, and as he turned onto his side, I could feel that familiar moisture that I had longed for all these weeks. The giant drops slammed against me, but I relished the feeling. Though my flesh was gone and could no longer enjoy the sensation, I was overtaken with what had once been my life.

The man's body shook with an unspoken grief. People often believe that things that cannot speak do not feel. To them I say this: that day, watching the old man sob near the sea made me realize I could feel despair and loneliness, nostalgia and pain. But as his body ceased trembling, and the tears subsided, he saw me once again. I was the reason he had fallen in the first place. He smiled for the second time, and when his giant hands moved to lift me from the sand, I was not afraid. In fact, for the first time, I knew what hope was.

That morning, he carried me in his hand. His thick fingers curled around me gently, and I was brought to a new place. I heard a gate squeak open, and the sound of the sea was a distant whisper. Through the slits in his fingers I could see many steps leading up to a cottage. The blue walls were faded and worn, and the porch creaked as he walked to the front door. It swung open, and we entered the place that I would learn to call home.

He sat on a whicker chair in the living room and rocked gently back and forth, still cradling me in his palm. His massive legs stretched out, and he slowly opened his hand to gaze at me. Rough fingers stroked my sun-bleached surface. I was glad to be somewhere cool and shaded, and this man was not frightening, as I had imagined all humans to be. Shelves lined the walls, and I noticed dozens of glass jars filled with seashells. They were little deposits of my former companions. I dreaded being placed among them, forgotten and anonymous among the greens and grays and pinks of the ocean. He set me on a table and examined me under the light of a lamp. It was bright, but it felt nice to be admired. For the first time in my existence, I felt beautiful.

Suddenly, he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Clara, come here. I want to show you something." I heard a noise in another room. Minutes passed in silence. The clock on the wall ticked loudly, and the man tapped his feet along with it. Finally, a woman appeared wearing an apron and a large hat. She was out of breath and her face was red and puffy.

"Yes, darling. What is it?"

The man stared at his companion with an odd look of sadness and frustration. He gingerly swept me into his hand, stood up on his third try, and brought me to Clara. I was apprehensive of this woman, but the moment she caught sight of me, her eyes danced with excitement.

"Oh, Arthur" she murmured. "It's beautiful. How did you ever find a whole one?" The man shrugged shyly, beaming at me. I stared at Clara. Her face was dry and craggy, lined like Arthur's but in a different way. Her features sagged unnaturally, as if she could no longer ward off time.

"Can I wear it?" she asked him. He smiled and brought me to a different room. He placed me on another table, and rummaged through some drawers. Slowly he brought a long, thin piece of wood into view, placed it on me, and slowly tapped it with a hammer to form a small hole. I could not feel any pain but quivered with each blow from the wooden point. Finally, he stepped back, blew away the dust I had shed, and brought me to Clara.

She stood in the kitchen, staring at colorful bubbles in the huge sink. Arthur crept up behind her, kissed her softly on the neck, and murmured something I could not hear. She laughed, a full, hearty laugh that filled the room but was gone as quickly as it came. She disappeared down a hallway and returned moments later with a thin pink ribbon. Arthur looped it through my new puncture and Clara turned her back to him. At first I thought she was unhappy with me. She had just been admiring my beauty. What had changed? I thought.

Then, with reverence, Arthur lifted me high over her head and lowered me to her wrinkly chest. I felt the ribbon tugged tighter as he secured the material around her neck. I lay against the softness of her loose skin. Her

heart beat faintly against me. I wondered what it would be like to have so many organs and blood and life flowing through you. I would never know.

She turned and clutched at me with her soft fingertips. Arthur's smile stretched across his entire face.

"I've always wanted a whole sand dollar," Clara whispered.

"Well, my love, now you've got one."

...

I spent weeks against this woman's body. She slept with me, ate with me, bathed with me, and could not fathom removing me. I came to know all of her habits. She took hour-long baths, submerging me in freshwater and soap. Her white skin shone against the porcelain tub. Folds of skin lay against her bones. She lathered every inch of herself meticulously, washing each wrinkle and dark spot clean.

She and Arthur took walks together, though she was always the one to take his hand and ask to go home. He would sigh, plead with her to keep going, but ultimately we would all turn around and return to the cottage. Once, she fell in their bedroom, landing with a thud against the wood floors. I was afraid she would collapse against me, cracking me into a state of worthlessness, but she remained upright. I could hear Arthur in the next room, but she didn't call out to him. After an hour or so, she used the bed to stand. Each morning, Arthur pulled the pink sheets away from her body and rested his head against her stomach. He would lie there until she awoke. She would stretch and stroke his balding head, but he could never disguise the despair.

One evening after dinner, she and Arthur sat on the tattered couch. I watched Clara's hand scribble answers to the crossword. Then, suddenly, she stopped and grabbed Arthur's arm. She turned to him, and I could see the worry on his face. She took a deep breath. I rose and fell with her inflating lungs, but she said nothing. She went back to her crossword. I saw Arthur's eyes.

"Please don't leave me here," he begged. I saw her hand reach to touch his face. She said nothing, stood up, and we both left him there waiting for reassurance. I hated Clara for that.

Days later, as we lay in bed, her heartbeat grew fainter and fainter. I listened to the last lub dub, and then it was quiet as she went still beneath me.

...

I was taken from Clara's body and placed in a small box with some spare change. It was dark there, and I longed for the skin I had grown accustomed to and the sights and sounds of the little cottage. I could only hear Arthur's soft sobs from his bed. Sometimes he would doze off but violently awake screaming for Clara. I wished I could make it better, but I think the sight of me would have hurt him more. She was gone, and no one could bring her back. I wondered why I wasn't like her—why I could not simply stop being.

Time passed, but I was unaware of it. My sense of it was gone. One day, I heard other voices. They were new to me, and I was nervous because Arthur was all alone. I longed to see these new visitors, but I remained in my prison—locked away so he could forget.

As I stared into darkness, the table on which I had been placed began to move. It shook beneath me as somebody fiddled with the drawers and rifled through the objects inside. Suddenly, the top of my box was lifted and light enveloped me. I saw a young woman staring at me with wide brown eyes. Her lips pressed together and her eyebrows drew into a scowl.

"Grandpa, what's this?" she yelled. Arthur shuffled into the room, looking haggard and frustrated. He saw me. I longed to be in his comforting hands again.

"Oh, just something I found once. It...was your grandmother's." His voice shook. He opened his mouth to continue but was interrupted.

"Ooo...vintage. Is it okay if I wear it? It's so pretty."

She didn't wait for an answer. She tied me around her neck with confidence and ease. "I'm gonna go show Mom. She'll love it. Thanks,

Grandpa." And with that, she brushed her lips against his hollow cheek and bounced out of the room.

I now dangled precariously above her ample bosom. She strode to the living room where I had been so many times with Clara and Arthur. Instead, another woman sat on the plaid couch. Her legs were tightly crossed at the knees, and her hair was tucked severely into a bun.

"Mom, look what I found. It was Grandma's. Doesn't it look perfect on me?" The girl flipped her hair for good measure. I decided I looked hideous against her skin, but only out of bitterness. This girl might have been Clara's granddaughter, but I didn't belong to her. She had stolen me away and didn't even know where I came from.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. It's pretty. Be careful, though. It looks fragile."

Sadie walked to the rusty mirror on the wall, and I was taken aback by her reflection. Brown hair fell over her slim shoulders, and her face was covered in makeup. Black smears coated her eyes, and her lips were unnaturally rosy. She wore different clothes than Clara had. Her fingers touched me again, but this time I was held between two red nails. She flipped me roughly side to side. I would have rather stayed with the coins.

"Vrooooooom. Errrrrk. Neeeeeeooooorrrrr splat!" A toy plane crash-landed in the living room and a small blond boy giggled with excitement. He clapped his hands, and collapsed next to a pile of tiny soldiers. He began organizing them into battalions. His little tongue protruded from his mouth in concentration. Slowly, he raised his head and saw Sadie in front of the mirror.

"That's a dead *Echinarachnius parma*," he announced. "In New Zealand, they call them sea cookies. You should put him back where he belongs. He could be a fossil fuel one day."

Sadie's chest rose and fell beneath me. Sea cookie, I thought. Huh. Maybe that's why those seagulls were out to get me.

"I don't care, Jeffrey. Go play somewhere else. You're annoying me."

"You're not the boss of me. Mom? Tell her she's not the boss of me," he squealed. Their mother was reading a magazine, completely unaware of her children's argument. She hummed loudly to herself, lost in the pages.

"She doesn't care. Go away," Sadie snarled.

"I wanna see the sea cookie!" His scream caused the clock on the wall to hum.

"It's not called a sea cookie, freak. It's a sand dollar, and you can see it. You just can't have it. Grandpa gave it to me. It was Grandma's," she taunted. His cheeks filled with blood and his fists clenched at his sides. Sadie laughed at him.

"I hate you! You're the worst sister in the whole world." When he gained no reaction but another snicker from Sadie, he added, "I bet you're the reason Dad left us!"

Angry tears brimmed in the boy's eyes and spilled onto his round cheeks. He ran at his sister, arms flailing. When he reached her, he began kicking at her legs. His head reared back, and it slammed into her stomach. She fell, clutching at her gut, and I hung just inches from the brown carpet. Sadie gasped for air. Jeffrey fell to his knees, hiccupping from another wave of sobs. Slowly, Sadie raised her head, and I caught sight of the boy. He was wiping his face, and a long stream of snot hung from his nose. He rubbed his chubby fingers over it, transferring it to his grimy little hands. Sadie raised her arm, poised to punish Jeffrey for what he'd done.

"That's enough." A shadow appeared over the three of us. Arthur stood, staring at his grandchildren. His breath came quickly. I yearned for him to lift me from these disgusting humans and marvel at my beauty like he had so long ago. Instead, he turned away and shuffled down the hallway. I heard his bedroom door slam, and I was left stuck to Sadie's sweaty skin.

In a moment, she had untied the knot of the ribbon and I swayed towards her brother. Dangling between them, I saw Jeffrey's lips twitch into a grin. I spun on the ribbon, and the image of their faces blurred into a single figure. Sadie. Jeffrey. Sadie. Jeffrey. When I could no longer distinguish the difference between their bodies, I felt a hand capture me. It glistened

with unknown moisture, no doubt teeming with traces of the tears and snot Jeffrey's face had just produced. His nails scraped at my surface, and I saw chunks of brown caked under them. His little fingers traced my five grooves, beginning in the middle and extending to my edges. Eventually, he dared to glance at Sadie.

"Don't ever talk about Dad again," she whispered. She snatched me from his hands. I swung back and forth in her grip until I landed on the kitchen table.

...

That night, as the four of them sat around me, the silence was only broken by the clatter of utensils and Jeffrey's food being destroyed between his teeth. His jaws gnashed the chicken his mother had made, his mouth flapping open like a seagull's. After what seemed an eternity of this hell, Arthur wiped his creased lips.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. He rose slowly, gripping the table for support. He shoved the chair back under it and disappeared from the room. The scraping of forks ceased, and even Jeffrey's mouth stilled for a moment.

"Mom, how long do we have to stay here?" Sadie whined. Her mother shook her head, taking a gulp from her glass of wine. The young woman sighed and stabbed at her peas.

"Grandpa's so sad. It scares me. I'm never getting married. Girls are icky," Jeffrey said defiantly.

"Trust me, boys are icky too," his mother mumbled as she slammed her glass onto the table. I shook with the impact.

"Yeah, but boys can pee standing up. We're so cool." Sadie's head fell to the table and she groaned at her brother's comment.

"Please stop talking, Jeffrey."

...

I was left on the table that night. When all the dishes were cleared away, and Jeffrey began terrorizing his sister, no one noticed me. As I lay in the moonlight, I missed Clara. If she were here, I would be resting peacefully against her skin. Her heartbeat would comfort me, and I would rise and fall steadily as she slept beside her husband.

When I could see the stars through the window, I heard a door creak. Footsteps echoed in the hallway, and Arthur stumbled into the kitchen. He pulled out his chair and winced as he lowered himself to sit. The skin around his thin mouth trembled as he stared at nothing. His eyes were unfocused, lost in another time.

Then, his big hand reached across the table. It shook slightly until it found me. I was finally cradled in his palm, just as I had been on that fateful day. His thumb brushed against me. He brought me to his cracked lips and pressed me against them. The air from his nostrils blew against me. His body swayed back and forth in the chair. Then, just as quickly as I had been taken from the table, I was flung down. I saw the anger he had buried deep inside. He left the kitchen, abandoning me once again.

...

When the sun peeked through the window and the damn seagulls began screeching, Sadie made coffee. The machine gurgled, and she wrestled around with some pots and pans. The blue flame of the stove flickered alive, and eggs began to sizzle. She slid plates onto the table and poured juice into glasses.

Jeffrey raced into the kitchen, surely lured by the smell of food. His mother soon followed. When the eggs were done, the three took their places around the table and stared at the empty chair. Jeffrey could no longer contain himself.

"I'm hungry. Why aren't we eating?"

"We're waiting on Grandpa," his mother declared.

"That's stupid. It's gonna get cold." He reached out to grab the plate of eggs. Sadie grabbed the other side and pulled hard.

"You can't have any until Grandpa gets here," she said. The boy kept his fingers locked on the plate and it hovered over me in the center of the table. Both of their fingers began to slip, and I was helpless to prevent it. The plate dropped. I split into two pieces. I heard them gasp, and then silence fell upon the kitchen. After several moments, the plate was lifted from me. When it cleared my vision, I saw that they weren't looking at me. Following their gaze, I saw Arthur standing next to the table. He clutched the back of his chair. He was so still. His lips were pressed into a hard line, and his eyes were in that distant place again.

I cannot accurately describe being two things. One moment I was whole, and the next I was split. There were two of me, but I was one being. I was not either piece. I would always be both.

The three of them stared at Arthur, attempting to judge his reaction. He breathed steadily, but his silence was suffocating. Sadie spoke first.

"Grandpa, it's okay. We can put it back together." Her voice quivered. "And even if we can't, it's no big deal. I only had it for a day. I wasn't too attached yet." She giggled awkwardly, but it dwindled away into silence again.

Arthur reached out to touch me. He picked up both of my pieces. This time, his hands were firm. I was squeezed tightly into his palm. His voice was ragged and cold.

"Do you honestly think I care about that? You're so goddamn selfish." With that, he began walking. The kitchen door slammed shut behind us, and I could hear the waves beating against the shore. Arthur stumbled over some jagged rocks but stayed upright. When he finally reached the edge of the water, he stood motionless. I was torn. I loved the sea. It was my first home. Somehow, though, I didn't belong there anymore.

Arthur bent over. Against all odds, he knelt down. The waves lapped at his knobby knees, soaking his pants. He plunged his fist into the water, and I was immersed in that salty liquid. One by one, his fingers released me into the sea. I floated for a moment until I was saturated, and then I began

sinking. I caught a last glimpse of him. His graying hair blew wildly in the breeze. His chest heaved up and down, and those sad gray eyes blinked against the sun.

LAUNDRY

MATTHEW GARNER

He lit his first cigarette in the car, letting the smoke seep into the leather. Light poles twinkled throughout the vacant parking lot and somewhere a train rumbled, like a sleeping giant. The man on the radio talked to him, words wiggling into his ears as he laid his head back against the seat, twirling the cigarette between two fingers. Empty bottles of beer littered the floorboard and smoke started to gather on the roof. He imagined the train as it snaked through the countryside, lumbering over hills and past old gravel roads that start to crumble like wet sand. Cars seemed to drift by, floating along the highway, their headlights cutting swaths of light for them to travel. He liked to watch them, and imagine where they were going, if they were headed back to their homes and families, or to work, or to an empty apartment. He was never really sure. The laundromat behind him was blinding, an artificial sun sterilized with bleach. Clothes wrestled in washing machines. Through the rear-view mirror he watched the steel drums that lined the walls. His Pall Mall was burning to a stub. His clothes were probably almost done; he dropped the ash to the gravel, letting it smolder. A lone silhouette sat in the window, watching clothes spin. He got out of the car and made his way to the laundromat, wrapping his jacket around him. The door chimed when he opened it, and the glare of fluorescent light struck him. He sat down next to only other person in the hellhole. He flipped through the

stacks of ruined magazines on the table, tattered pages and faded covers flowing through his fingers as he looked for anything to read. The man next to him spoke up,

"Which washer is yours?"

"Huh?"

"Which washer has your clothes in it?"

He put the magazine down, and pointed at one across the room.

"That one's mine."

The other man pointed to the one next to it,

"Mine's right there. Look, they're right next to each other."

"I guess they are."

The man in the seat next to him was an anachronism, a statue from another time. His skin was translucent, and skinny blue veins crisscrossed through his arms. Spots of age dotted his face, his hair was white and like the wind. The Velcro straps on his shoes were stained with dirt. He struck out a hand, "I'm John, its nice to meet you."

His eyebrows arched, "I'm David."

John's skin was dry and chalky, soft like old paper. "You smell like smoke, David."

"Well, I just smoked."

"Oh. Well that makes sense."

"Do you want a cigarette?"

"No, I quit."

David's hands fumbled in his pockets. He lit a cigarette. The reflection from the flame on John's skin aged him.

"Why are you here, David?"

"Huh? I'm getting my laundry done."

"No, I mean, why don't you have a machine at home?"

David huffed, "Why don't you?"

"I used to do the laundry for my wife and I, but when she left, I couldn't stand doing it anymore in my house."

"Oh."

"So, why are you here then? You look like you're well off enough to afford a washing machine."

David's oiled leather shoes tapped on the linoleum.

"I'm living alone right now."

"Right now?"

"I was kicked out of the house a couple of weeks ago by my wife. Even though I technically own the house."

John's laugh could have been mistaken for the throes of a cough.

"What'd you do?"

"Cheated. Got caught."

"Huh."

There was silence, like a still pond. The drumbeat of machines played in the background.

"I cheated on my wife too."

"Well, look at you."

David laughed, "Two guys, doing their laundry on a Friday night."

John rasped, "Well, we fucked up."

"That we did. What did you do after she caught you?"

"I moved out, moved on. We didn't have kids at the time. We were both young, early 20's. I moved to the apartment complex across I-35, down by that old gas station. I'm sure you've seen it."

"This was here?"

"Yeah. I've been in that apartment for close to 50 years now. Manager doesn't even collect rent from me anymore." John flexed his fingers, letting his joints breathe.

"Christ, that's a long time."

"Yeah, it is."

"Well, what happened to your wife?"

"Also moved on, got married again, had two kids. I drive by her house sometimes, every month or so. Just to see her, if she's doing well."

"Do you talk to her?"

"I did once. I walked up on her porch and knocked on the edge of the screen door that they had. She yelled me off the lawn. Since then, I've been just driving by, though not as much lately. My car broke down, so I take the bus every where now, and no bus makes a pit stop in the suburbs. Haven't been by in years."

David stared straight ahead at the rows of machines, his John looked at him,

"What's your story?"

"I, uh, I met this woman at a bar one night, after work. I told my wife I was staying late, and we did, technically. Big project due the next week to some firm, plans for a building, I can't even remember the name now. She comes on to me, and I'm tipsy, and stupid. All I remember is waking up the next morning, my phone had twelve missed calls, and then I looked over. She found out next week, after I got a call from the woman I slept with. She yelled and cried, and mascara ran down her face, to the side of her nose. It got stuck there, in that little fold of skin."

They sat together in silence as lights started to flicker like candles.

John pulled out his flask and swallowed, handing it over to David. David took it wordlessly, letting his throat burn. Smoke started to gather above them from John's cigarette.

The liquor started to take hold, stringing nooses around their necks. Flush faces, tinged with blood in the cheeks; they laughed like kings on their plastic thrones, drunk with apathy.

"Still have a cigarette?" asked John.

David handed over the pack of Pall Malls and John lit up. From a distance it looked as if they had smoke ring halos. They burned through the pack silently, waiting for the laundry to finish.

John spoke first, "What are you going to do now?"

David sighed, "I don't know. That's the problem."

"When did you talk to her last?"

"Two weeks."

"Where are you staying now?"

"Super 8 by the freeway."

Smoke continued to gather.

"You could go get her back."

"That sounds a little cliché."

"Well, you wanna sit in an apartment for fifty years?"

"No."

"John, why didn't you go get your wife back?"

"I don't think I wanted her back."

"Really?"

"Maybe. If I truly did, I would have tried harder. I tried once, before she got remarried. It was a disaster. I was crying, like an idiot. She had dry eyes though. It was at the apartment we stayed at, before we could buy a house. I was kicked out, and when she moved out to a new house with a new husband, I moved back in. I still live in that apartment."

"That's the apartment you bought?"

"Yeah."

"You wanted her back."

"I don't know, David. I don't know."

John pulled another drink from the flask, "Who do you love David?"

"What?"

"Did you love her?"

"Rachel?"

"So that's her name."

David glanced at John through the smoke, "Yeah, it's Rachel."

"So did you?"

"Yeah. I still do, I think."

"You think? She doesn't think that."

"Fuck you, how would you know?"

"You cheated David. I'm not suggesting something odd."

David dropped his cigarette on the tile, letting it die. "I lived in an apartment with Rachel before we were married, back in Missouri, where we went to school. We would study together, in the kitchen, on our shitty table we

got from some ministry. We would work until two or three A.M, in silence, drinking coffee we would take turns refilling. Then we would go to bed, leaving everything out scattered. We would do that almost every night. I had never been so content. I remember one time the light bulb burnt out, with this pop. Rachel screamed and I just laughed. We didn't have any other bulbs in the apartment actually, so we had to burn one of those scented candles she was so fond of and keep it in the center. We were huddled together to catch glimpse of the light on our papers." David's cheeks pulled up like curtains.

"Shit. That sounds like love, David."

"Fucking hell, John, I know that's love. But that's not here anymore. Not anymore."

David's eyes were half filled wells.

The fire alarm went off, yelping like a dog. Through the blanket of smoke, John and David could see the little blue light flash on and off. They sat there as the siren sang.

John coughed.

"Oh, hell."

David cleared his throat.

"Now what?"

"I guess the fire department would come, eventually. Find us drunk in a laundromat."

They both laughed at the absurdity of it, of how strange it seemed. Two men, drunk off of cheap liquor in a laundromat at 2 A.M, with clouds of smoke rolling from machine to machine, trapped by the glass. They laughed like fools walking to the gallows.

...

When the firetruck rolled around, its bulky mass casting a strange shadow in the parking lot, David was watching the machines. He thought about

how careless the clothes seemed. Firemen jumped out of the car, lengths of rubber hose wrapped on their shoulders, but when they saw only the smoke, and no flames, the look of disappointment was almost palpable. One walked in, his shiny boots squeaking on the floor as he waved some of the smoke away. He made his way over to David, who was staring at his laundry, and how empty the machine looked to him.

The firemen followed his line of sight, "What the hell are you doing?"

David mumbled.

"What?"

David grabbed John by the shoulder, laughing at the fireman. He shook John. An empty bottle sat by David's chair.

"Look, buddy. We gotta go, before you inhale too much smoke. This isn't exactly a big laundromat."

David looked up at him,

"Fine, fine. Let's go, John."

The fireman glanced around, "Who's John?"

David pointed. "John's right here."

"There's no one right there."

"What?"

"You're alone?" He saw the empty bottles and flask, "How much did you drink?"

David was motionless in the chair, his body limp like wet cloth. The fireman grabbed David by both of the armpits, lifting him up and dragging him along out of the laundromat. Smoke followed them. The fireman sat David down on the grass and pulled out his radio.

"Hello? Yeah, we have a drunk guy over at the laundromat by I-35, he set off the fire alarm inside with four packs of cigarettes. We need someone to come pick him up. Possible medical services too, he was hallucinating."

David started to cry, and his laundry was done.

THIS OLD LOVE

KAYLA MOSES

Walt Whitman once said of this old love:

"We were together. I forget all the rest."

BEGINNINGS

A bandstand, humming with the crackle of fireworks and electric lights. It is the 4th of July in 1940. The people of Louisville, Kentucky are lounging around the park and enjoying a brassy jazz set. The whole scene feels as if in a dream, lights painting everything in watercolor hues of red and indigo. Beneath a meandering trumpet voice, crickets and cicadas chorus from the marshy creek that weaves through the landscape. Young mothers sit in nervous circles for the first time without their husbands, anxiously bouncing their infants on their rosy knees. Boys chase each other in a carousel blur. Girls laugh, white teeth gleaming against their drugstore red mouths. This is what Clive will remember most about his first glimpse of Eliza. Those red lips, perfect and pomegranate, so elegantly drawn that he mouthed silent regards skyward. That upturned smile, dimpling into the most innocent, most mischievous emblem of beauty he could have ever imagined.

Tugging on the straps of his suspenders, he shifts his weight from the knotty branch of the live oak to a sturdier perch. He rifles through his pock-

ets, searching for a lonely scrap of something – anything! to capture those red lips. Finding only the tweedy roughness of his trousers' lining, he turns to a lady's discarded fan, limp with dew, lying upon the grass. He licks the point of his pencil and writes in a crease:

Eliza Donahue,

You, and only you, are my night sky.

CLEMENTINE

Eliza was a now a knobby bird at eighty-five. She was a woman of character, as her mother had taught her to be early in life. Her hands and knees were riddled with rheumatoid arthritis – also a gift of her mother – her frame diminutive and unassuming. Her once auburn hair was now teased away from her crown in a polite cumulous cloud.

She reapplied her red lipstick in the car before going into the grocery store. It was all muscle memory now, and she didn't bother smiling into a compact. Today she'd come to purchase only things for her Keats – butter, sugar, cinnamon, the like. He'd asked for an apple pie over that morning's coffee.

Shuffling mutely through the produce section, Eliza paused to bag eight or so Granny Smiths. One of the market boys was unloading crates to her left, the tendons in his arms pulsing like the pistons of a locomotive. Each fruit felt heavy in her withered palm as she silently appreciated his frame. Her husband had once been that young, that strong. She hungered for the ease of those years. He had once held her in arms with muscles like a machine, especially in those months before the service took so much out of him. She recalled the way he climbed like a spider up the trellis below her bedroom window to hand deliver his letters. Back then, all his letters were poetry. This first one had broken her heart, that damp fan with his looped script – *You, and only you...*

She'd tried so hard not to love him. Boys weren't coming home those days. But there was no way to refuse the feelings that washed over her when

she read those letters. It was overpowering, especially at sixteen. Everything that year had seemed veiled in a blushed haze. The war was a looming foreign headline that could be swept away in a stolen glance or between lines of Clive's prose. He was only eighteen then, a baby. It was then that she began to call him Keats.

Eliza's eyes crinkled at this memory. Keats. If only she'd known. Keats died young. Clive, too, had died in a way when he came back from France. It wasn't a surprise then; all the boys got off the train with this flashbulb look in their eyes like they couldn't adjust to the darkness because they'd been living there so long. She married him less than a year after he returned, expecting their life together to be just like his poems. She'd saved up her typist's checks for all the weeks he'd been gone and bought him a leather-bound notebook and weighty silver pen as a wedding present. He'd accepted it with hollow resignation. She found over half the pages in the wastebasket a week later, most with a single word crossed out at the top.

He told her he couldn't write anymore. Not poetry, not anything. Sometimes she'd catch him squinting into the sunlight as though he wanted to go blind. One night, weeping into his side of the bed after a nightmare, he'd asked her to hold him closer.

"I'm afraid of the monsters that take me when I can't feel you, Clem. Never leave me."

And all she could think of as she held his shaking frame was the years that stretched ahead of her and those empty, empty pages.

KEATS

Clive listened from the rocker on the back porch as Eliza pulled out from the drive. He had asked her to bake him an apple pie over breakfast that morning. Eliza loved to bake.

He'd needed some time to himself. His bones hurt and he was feeling nostalgic. The creek behind the house smelled like Kentucky. Clive breathed deeply, his rickety chest puffing with effort.

The humid smell of summer brought him back to the first time he'd written to Clem, back when she was simply pretty Eliza Donahue from two streets over and not his Clementine. He'd always fancied himself a writer before Eliza, but her love brought forth a wealth of words he never knew existed.

When he was in France, he kept notebooks for her of all the things he'd seen, good and bad. As he rode the train from Avignon on leave two years later, he tore out the pages with descriptions of anything gruesome. Eliza was porcelain and knew no wrong in the world. Her immunity meant everything.

Clive chuckled at the recollection of the concessions he'd made for his young wife. He puffed a few draws on his pipe, squinting.

On their wedding night, she'd looked at him with animal eyes waist-deep with horror stories from mothers and close friends. He'd kissed her cheekbones with understanding; they spent the rest of their first night together as husband and wife slow dancing to Glenn Miller in their honeymoon suite until Eliza was too tired to stand. He remembered carrying her to bed, stroking her hair until she'd fallen asleep.

He cherished these memories in his old age. All the beautiful he had left was muddled around in his head, the company of ghosts and phantom B-17 propellers.

The sweet nothings of his letters had fallen underfoot somewhere back in the French countryside. This was hard. He knew she expected the poet that climbed the trellis, the freckled Kentucky boy from the 4th of July picnic that was too poor to carry a notebook. Clive stroked his whiskers and adjusted his pipe. Eliza never raised her voice because she was a lady, but he knew that for years she'd been silently collapsing, unable to vocalize anything at all.

She'd only really fallen apart once, several years into their marriage. She'd just finished the Lindbergh book *Gift from the Sea*, which she'd tearfully toted around for weeks. He knew there was something wrong because she'd stopped baking. All those smells of spices and flour that came to mind when

he pictured her soft embrace had disappeared. She'd abandoned her apron for his stale aviator jacket and cowered beneath it after collapsing against the cold glass of their window seat. Every couple of pages, she'd stop and ask questions about airplanes with this misty, faraway look in her eyes. He found her one evening on the kitchen floor, crying into a freshly baked apple pie. It was still warm from the oven, which hung open over the scene breathing hot and soundless. She'd taken off her heels after dinner, and her hosed feet look ghostly and forlorn tucked beneath her trembling body. She clutched the pie like a life preserver. What to do, what to do: a smudge of flour on her forehead, those ruby lips quivering; those heaving great breaths shaking those fragile shoulders.

"She flew," she sobbed. "But I don't know how."

ENDINGS

As Eliza weighed apples about two miles away from home, Clive began his Sunday ritual. He balled up that day's newspaper and tossed it in the fireplace, taking care to light a generous blaze. He retrieved the week's worth of work, in notebooks and spare scraps of paper, those few scattered matchbooks, all full of the only writing he could do these days. Private Johnny Anderson, the boy with no face; Mac, and the sound of not taking off; Benny and Smithson, the shmucks who'd fought over the same bird in that club in Paris; and then there were the long-faced farmers, dried up rivers, sirens, tailspins, that familiar kack-kack-kack of choking artillery in the distance. One by one, pages fed the fire. If he couldn't write for his Clementine, he didn't want to write at all – he'd still be her Keats. Let the ghost do the work. It was an old love, after all. We do what we can.

THE POND MONSTER

JOANNA REESE

It is only one hour into the reception, and I'm sitting in the grass, drunk.

Actually, I think I'm drunk off the cocktail that is the night. Maybe it's the scent of the vanilla candles topping the tables or the twinkle string lights pitifully trying to compete with the stars. Or maybe it's the sound of my family's feet two stepping on the wooden platform that they'd dragged out here as if we were supposed to pretend this wasn't my uncle's backyard, or the sound of my brother's mandolin. He can't actually play, but no one has ever told him that. The band was trying to drown him out, but he's all I can hear.

The point is, all of this is distracting me from the things buried in my mushy insides. So for our purposes, I am drunk. They can't see me behind this oak tree. That's the plan. A firefly meanders past, so I throw a rock at it. Two seconds later, a frilly white blur dashes in front of me. I jump and scratch my back on the bark.

"Jules?" says, Anna, my cousin's little girl. I don't like children. She was still young enough to have that angelic curly blonde thing going on but mature enough to walk down the aisle with perfectly timed steps.

"Where did it go?" she says. I assume she's looking for the firefly I tried to murder.

"It died."

She takes a step back, as though fearing she would be next.

"My mommy says you're lonely."

I let it sting for a moment. I've started embracing these sorts of things in the hopes that I'll develop an immunity.

"Yeah? Well, your mommy's a b—"

I stop myself because I'm not ready for this to be rock bottom. Telling off the flower girl could wait.

"—beautiful Matron of Honor."

All her mother, Cam, had ever done was give birth to Anna and three other kids. I don't think she's ever even had a job. Whenever I see her stupid smiling face, I imagine having to stay home with them all day and think about how miserable she must be. Her house is covered in paisley wallpaper and she collects ceramic dolls.

I am the only other cousin of Cam and Chelsea, the bride, but I was relieved to not be in the wedding. After all, I had sent back the RSVP checked maybe, an option that I scribbled in myself.

It might have been harsh, but it just feels like my family always acts extra happy around me, as if they're trying to convince me how great it is here. As if they can smile me out of this "funk" I'm in, as they put it. They go to work from nine to five every week and church every Sunday at ten in the morning, and yet I'm the one in a funk.

Anna runs off. I brush the grass from my butt and walk further away from all the noise toward the small pond where Cam, Chelsea, and I used to play when we were girls. Well, they would play while I sat on the small dock with my knees scrunched to my chin, thinking about how my legs itched from the grass and how all the rocks they skipped were probably upsetting the snakes and monsters that lived in the murky depths. I never even dipped in a toe.

Looking at the lights reflected in the pond makes me long for the city. No one there thinks it's weird to be twenty-four and single. In the city, you're allowed to not know what you want to be or even what the hell you're doing now.

"The country air smells great," a voice says behind me.

I turn and scrunch my nose at him. I remember seeing him standing up there with the other groomsmen, beaming and holding back tears.

"Don't say that. Not unless you're a writer for Lifetime."

"Close. My name is—"

"Don't."

"Excuse me?" he says with a smile.

"If you tell me your name, I'm going to feel bad when I see you later and can't remember it."

"Okay." He says this with his voice going high at the end, like I'm a kid who refuses to get out of the pool. I imagine my mom saying, "Fine, I'll go home without you."

He sips his beer without saying anything. I sit down on the dock but let my feet hover just above the water's surface. I'm grateful that the pond gives us something to look at.

"The cousin," he says in a faraway fashion.

I get ready for it. The assessment. Grandma and aunts and brothers will ask you all these questions about your life already knowing that they won't be impressed with the answers. Where are you working? Oh, you have a philosophy degree? Are you going to work at the philosophy store?

I always want to tell them: it doesn't matter if you're living their kind of life or my life, something is missing. I'm just closing to finding it than they are.

When he says nothing, I look up at him and see he's smiling at me. It's then that I notice his widow's peak and dark eyebrows. I think that maybe if I'd seen him somewhere else, maybe in a low lit bar or on the subway, I might have grabbed his arm and whispered something that would make him want to leave with me. But the next morning I always sneak out and go back to my studio apartment where I'll shower him away and never think of him again, so I look back at the pond. I'll cut out the middle part this time and just go straight to forgetting him.

He sighs. "If you're not going to do the small talk I'll do it for you." Out of the corner of my eye I see him take a step closer and turn his back to me.

"What do you do?"

He goes back to his original position. "I'm a writer."

He switches back again.

"Oh, that's so interesting. What kind of writer?"

Again.

"Thank you for asking. I'm a greeting card writer for Hallmark."

"What?" I laugh. "That's so . . ."

"Mundane?"

"Nauseating."

"I like it, actually. It's a job."

"Yeah, but, is that what you wanted? Were you a little boy who dreamed of coming up with things like 'Dearest sister, I hope you cherish this special day, and don't choke on rainbows or shit out puppies.?'"

He shrugs. "I think there's something to be said for simplicity. It's good working conditions and I'd like to think I'm making people happy."

I can understand the allure. I mean, I don't hate everything. I'm just not interested in pretending to be interested.

I grin and say, "You're churning out facades of happiness."

"Okay, I tried." He takes a few steps away but then turns back. "You know, you're one of those people that gets off on being complicated, but I had you figured out instantly. It wasn't hard at all."

I keep my eyes on the water. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah. You wore that slinky black dress and your hair stick straight because you know your mother hates it that way. You think you're so much better than all these people here, just because you went to a liberal arts school and won't be satisfied with the classic white picket fence story."

Just when I think he's done, he takes a deep breath and then puffs out his cheeks a little.

"You keep waiting for something better to just plop in your lap. You spend all your time waiting for 'it', but 'it' doesn't exist, it's this thing you've

built up in your mind, something you've become so fixated on that you can't stop and enjoy breathing the country air. Not everyone can be a revolutionary, but its going to take a bit more time for you to realize that and start enjoying the ride."

I pretend that his words haven't chilled my bones and calmly speak without looking at him. "What makes you think you know anything?"

"I used to be scared of happiness, too. Then I realized what a pretentious dick I was being."

"You should put that on a card."

He walks away. I realize that I'm sitting with my knees tucked in, just like when I was little and afraid. I peer over the dock's edge. I'm still afraid.

My legs won't stand, so I start rocking myself back and forth until I gain enough momentum to roll over and slowly fall over the edge and into the water.

There is a small splash. More of a plump. I stay balled up and after sinking for a few seconds, I open my eyes, but all I see is dull moonbeams filtering through the green water.

Wherever the monsters are, they don't care that I've invaded their pond.

When I can no longer hold my breath I let myself float to the surface and reach for the dock. I pull myself up and plop on my back, feeling the water pool around me, loving how it romantically drips around my legs and down my neck. I take in deep gulps of air, and I can't believe I've never really thought about how air tastes, so clean and soft. The water mixes with the air and rather than the cold making me uncomfortable, it brings life to my limbs. I feel a vigor growing inside my chest and I sit up, smiling. I am a fish who has just now realized she needs water.

I do want to know his name. Maybe I will give him my number. We can go to dinner. That's what people who want healthy relationships do. My shoes are too squeaky so I carry them as my feet dance across the soft grass. I peek behind the tree at the reception and spot him talking to one of Cam's friends.

She's pretty, but it doesn't bother me. It doesn't bother me because now I'm looking at him, and his tie seems too plain and his shirt too ironed. His hair is perfectly gelled and he's sitting straight up and giving her polite eye contact. He speaks, and then she speaks, and then he speaks again. They are playing ping-pong with words.

All of a sudden I want him to marry her, because she would fit perfectly into his simple life; a life that anyone could live if they wanted to. But I will keep looking for it. I will keep looking for it and even if it is never found or if I never even find out what it is, at least I will be away from here.

He spots me, this swamp creature covered in sludge, peering at him under twinkling lights and the air smells like vanilla and there is an off-key mandolin playing around us. I mouth Thank you, and he keeps staring with his eyebrows scrunched together.

As I drip, I walk around the edge of the reception ignoring all the wrinkly and soon-to-be wrinkly people glaring at me. If I hurry, I can catch the 10 o'clock train into the city.

SOPHIA

KAYLA MOSES

The package came on a Wednesday afternoon, wrapped in nonchalant brown paper, addressed to the only other Sophia at St. Bernadette's Prep. This other Sophia – Lorenzini, that is – was so thin she was practically invisible, this popular, vaguely European, slinky tight thing – at least, tight enough to snag the attention of all the guys that never noticed me. She was a cheerleader.

I stared at the package after carrying the damned thing up to my room, eyeing my name belonging to someone else, printed neatly in Courier New on the label below the St. Bern's crest. Sophia Lorenzini. I tried on her last name like an expensive dress, laying out the syllables in thin air and pretending they fit. Her name rippled, a yawning seductress' shoulder blades. Mine bounced: So-phia Bac-cio. You could hear New York in my name, mouthy Italians.

I hurriedly fumbled to crack open the tape with a pair of my kid brother's nail scissors. My hand slipped, a miserable crescent appearing on my pinky finger and weeping fat drops of stupid blood. Fuckity Judas, motherfucker. I winced. Judas, Christ. It hurt like a bitch. I sucked my pinky and looked inside to find Sophia's varsity cheerleading uniform, folded with gusto and smelling like a goddamn Benz.

The thing was so damn crisp it nearly snapped when I shook it. There

were bizarre little pleats and Underoos built into the bottom half. I imagined it was the same sort of personalized shit reserved for athletes, Olympians, even.

I shrugged off my old man's Nuevo Boogaloo Stones shirt, kicking a crumpled Keith Richards into the corner. I didn't need his eyes on me. My belt buckle jangled as I dropped my skinnies. I circled my hips a few times in the skirt half, squinting to see a bleached belly dancer in the mirror. My body looked like meat spilling out of a sausage casing. My ass didn't look the part, either. Cheerleaders were golden and shining, and my floppy moonbeam cheeks puckered out the sides in all the wrong places. I even heard a few stitches rip.

The top was all straightjacket, and I wondered how cheerleaders managed to yell so much when they couldn't breathe for shit. The zipper kept getting caught in my bra; eventually I yanked the whole thing off out of disgust, half because I hated my reflection, but more because the itchy-ass rayon felt like hell and a half. There were red marks, an imprint from the zipper along my spine.

I read somewhere once that Venus de Milo was like a size ten or something. But there's no fucking way. I stared back at myself – a beluga calf, expansive, the product of pasta and adoring Italian mothers.

Sophia's uniform looked defeated on my closet floor. I stood over it, wondering if I should even bother giving it back since I gave the whole built-in Underoos thing a go. Plus, I had ripped those stitches. And the whole thing looked a little stretched out. It was a sort of private revenge, ruining Sophia's uniform – like a bizarre desecration of everything perfect in my universe. I'd gone and ruined something stupid that meant the world to her. Probably one of the only things that mattered to her, honestly.

I'd lie about it later, when the dopey desk lady Ms. Bissell in the front office buzzed me out of Katz's fifth period algebra to ask if I'd received it by accident, because she'd had a little accident, and could I please let her know when it arrived. I'd say no, and continue to say no until Christmas, when it was too cold to play sports anyway and nobody cared.

But it was there, the fat box with the wrong last name. It sat hotly in the back corner my closet, re-wrapped under outgrown sweaters and constantly reminding me of my lot in life: not among the chosen few, not golden, but something dull, limited and small.

Periodically I dug the thing out from underneath the junk in my closet and tried it on. It was something my mother would have called godly disgraceful. Bit by bit, month by month, it fit tighter and itched more intensely. The red rayon and wool letters of St. Bernadette's on the front were a joke. Who believed in fucking Catholic school cheerleaders? The only sacred heart they knew was that one of Jesus looking all forlorn-like, eyeing them from the mantle as they gave their boyfriends handjobs on their parents' couches.

Me and Christ are on good terms. Being Italian, us neighborhood kids grew up with a lot of shit from our parents about being on good terms with the Dio trio. But at school nobody really gives a shit. Anybody can accept communion and say Hail Mary's or whatever. I'm sure those girls all have a regular rotation.

I began to wonder about getting straight with Christ about the whole uniform thing. Was it really worth an afternoon in confession? Father Doherty would just tell me to return it to the school, and by now most sports are finished. I think the Pom Squad does the cheering or whatever for swimming.

The main office and Ms. Bissell never did get wise to me. I mean, shit, they asked me day in and day out if it'd arrived yet, and I always said – "Nope! Check with the postman, y'know? It's a big city. Lotta Baccio's. Lotta Lorenzini's. Helluva lot of Sophia's. Maybe it went somewhere else."

Ain't that the truth. Ms. Bissell kept giving me the stink eye like she was gonna go all ninth circle on me, but she never said a word. All the Sisters probably gave up the first week it went missing. Not that they cared much, really. Sister Francesca that runs the cheerleading is kinda a dark horse. A bit of a pariah, y'know? I personally think the other Sisters are just jealous that she's younger than them and a helluva lot less squishy. She mighta even

had sex before she became a nun, who knows! But the other Sisters have in for Francesca, I just know it. They're always tittering behind her back when she's off to practice without her habit, looking all regular-like.

You can tell she likes it, too – the attention, I mean. She always schedules cheerleading practice right before the boys' basketball team walks to the weight room. They all stare at her ass, then mumble something about being sorry, red-faced and already scheduling when they'll visit Father Doherty for confession.

I can just imagine Father sitting there, having heard this a thousand times before: "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I was looking at those plumpish peaches that are Sister Francesca's sweet ass cheeks."

And maybe – Jesus, wouldn't this be something – maybe then Father Doherty would just sigh and say through the screen, "Son, don't you worry. It wouldn't be the first time for either of us."

THE MOON BABOON

FORREST LYBRAND

"The twigs are on the ground."

"Yes, and the twits are all inside."

It wasn't poetic as they intended, sitting behind the ledge of Grayson's balcony. It overlooked the edge of the pine forest, each pine short and malnourished, the road beyond it, completely black in the night, no cars gleaming across it. Darius and Jelly, Angelica for real, standing there. She was in her dark, thin dress, her knees shivering and her arms pimpled. It was winter in south Texas, not snowy, but sampling the cold all the same. And Darius, silver-tie and knobby vest, hands wrapped together, given up on appearing detached from the weather.

"I can't stand them," said Darius.

"The club?" said Jelly. "The bawling, loud members in there?"

"Bawling? You are pretentious, aren't you?" said Darius. "No one is crying."

"What do you mean?"

"That's what bawling is, Jelly girl," said Darius. "Crying, loudly."

"The noise they make might as well be," said Jelly. "Talking about cars, talking about summer plans half a year away. I came out to enjoy the party."

"Away from the party," said Darius. "I did the same."

He had an empty clear plastic cup on the edge of the balcony in front of him. Empty of liquid, once red punch, now a solitary blueberry sitting

tilted against the side of the cup. Jelly's fingers threatened to crack her cup, still half full of punch.

"So, Grayson invites us and we sulk away," said Darius.

"Yes, we, the loners," said Jelly laughing.

They were madly in love. Madly, not in a passionate way, not in a desperate sense, but mad in a completely misunderstood, made-up idea.

"They're probably talking about us," said Darius. "Why did 'those two' go outside? They're too good for us?"

"Yes," said Jelly. "And they think we're talking about them. Which we are."

Both chuckled, both delighted at a common cleverness they shared. Commonplace.

"I don't care," said Darius.

A snippet of wind, not yet a breeze, dove down past them, ruffling Darius' shoulder-length hair and smoothing Jelly's, which was cropped to the sliver on the back of her neck. She had the pixie-cut, and her skin was as white as the sandy stones the balcony was composed of. They stood close. Only a stack of unread books could have filled the space between them, though they both shivered now and again.

"I don't care about Grayson's tree either," said Darius. "It's why he bought a house with a twenty-foot tall ceiling, isn't it? To stand a gaudy tree in. That's why he insisted the club's party be held here."

"It's bare," said Jelly. "Just some green lights, not real ornaments."

"Lights are all you need, I expect he'd say," said Darius. "Christmas is for the sinners, he'd say, and we need lights to show us our way home. Nothing about fancy ornaments to prolong our vanity."

"He's all about humility this year," said Jelly, giggling.

"New house, twenty-foot tall ceiling," said Darius. "Marrying a CEO's daughter in a few weeks. Very humble."

Jelly laughed, squeezing her cup more. They had met through the club, she and Darius, a year before. Darius was a painter, living in a tiny loft in the city, the walls splattered with yellow and purple, though the landlord

didn't know. Jelly was a secretary, though she hated her boss and every co-worker. She made the coffee each morning for the office, weak and watery on purpose, hiding the sweetener packets in a new cabinet every few days.

"Did I tell you what Dandruff did yesterday?" said Jelly, her teeth tapping together as she pretended she was warm. "He yelled at me."

"Ass," said Darius, flicking his empty cup over the balcony. It tumbled into the darkness below, down through the air, the blueberry sinking deep into the pine straw, the cup crowning the surface of Grayson's backyard beneath.

"Said I made too many personal calls during work," said Jelly.

"Who were you calling?"

"I can't help it if my mother is starting Alzheimer's," said Jelly. "I call her up every day to tell her a memory from my childhood, to keep her mind lively."

"Your boss has no class," said Darius. "That's why we'll all take over soon, our generation. His was all about the self, but we're looking back at better days and trying to uphold good values. Not blindly like they did in the fifties, but for the sake of decency. We're not out just to make money like your boss's people, we want the world to be good again."

"You and I do," said Jelly, pouring out the rest of her drink over the ledge. "The bawlers inside are just as bad as Dandruff."

"It's all about money."

They were quiet.

"I read Winnie-the-Pooh again last night," said Jelly.

"Good for you," said Darius, looking at the low pine-tops. He was serious; he was not making fun of her. "Your boss's people only read numbers and interviews with politicians. You stick to your roots, that's how we'll make this city good again. We need children."

"It was about Pooh Bear finding Piglet a new coat," said Jelly. "He had lost his. A real dear."

"Was it where Pooh got stuck in that hole in the ground?" said Darius.

"No," said Jelly. "He found Piglet a new coat. It was a Disney book. It was one of the cartoons when we were kids."

"There's real decency," said Darius.

"No, I guess it wasn't one of the old books," said Jelly. "Whoever wrote them a hundred years ago. I doubt those are sold anymore."

"It's from your roots anyway," said Darius. "Real innocence and goodness, when we were kids."

"I'm sure the club's all hung up on politics," said Jelly. "Ugh, nasty suit-wearing idiots."

"Money, Jelly," said Darius. "They don't read the classics, they're inside gabbing about the two rebels out on Grayson's balcony."

"That's us," giggled Jelly.

"I almost didn't come tonight," said Darius.

"Why did you?" said Jelly, smiling at him, as he only looked out at the trees and occasionally at the sky. It was without any stars. The moon was buried in a black cloud.

"Just because they thought I wouldn't," said Darius, not looking at her.

She continued looking at him, at his hair, longer than any other man in the club, at his shoulders, slouched and ruffled in the shabby vest. She looked at his shivering hands, the fuzz of his knuckles pointing up at his nose, also turned up.

"Me too," she said, looking at his lips. He looked at the treetops. At least his eyes did. His hands moved into his pockets, though he imagined they were grasping the edge of the balcony, and pretending that he was gazing at a silver moon, and that the twenty other members of the club were all staring at him from inside, through the glass doors.

They had all dated one another, the other club members, Jelly thought. Trading off every few weeks or months, trying out a different man or gal and seeing which shirt fit the snugest, or which mittens were warmest. They were animals, a colony of baboons interbreeding and producing no offspring. Not she and Darius, madly in love, she had told the girls. They were the newest members, even though they'd been around long enough,

and they were better off, they were close friends. They were evolved from the baboons, those junior-highers inside, dressed up in adult bodies.

"Painted anything new?" said Jelly.

"Hmm."

"A landscape or something?" said Jelly.

"I've been thinking about painting the poor," said Darius. "Like Van Gogh did. Show the others their self-absorption. Maybe go downtown and paint a homeless man. I'd probably buy him lunch, even."

"You should paint Piglet," said Jelly. "Him or, oh, I don't know. Remind society of our childhood."

"They wouldn't get it," said Darius. "They'd think I was exploiting him. I'd paint his shopping cart blurred and his face very clear, and his beard the wrong color, to make them think."

Jelly laughed, her fingers finally snapping the plastic cup. It broke and its new edges pressed against each other, derailed and sharp. She looked at Darius' hair again.

"I think you should kiss me," she said, her voice much quieter than she had hoped, from the cold and her own embarrassment. A little louder. "You should kiss me."

Darius was transfixed by the shrouded moon that he thought he saw. He said nothing. Jelly smiled and almost laughed again, unable to, but smiled wider and looked down at her broken cup.

"Mr. Dandruff is always making passes at me," said Jelly. "Always asking me to come into his office and giving me extra work. But he's like that, doesn't know how to flirt without mixing in business. Ugh he's an idiot."

"I think I'd paint his beard pink, if I did it," said Darius in a grossly fake mutter, for it was loud and enunciated fine, but bordered with a gruffness that no one would have been fooled by. Jelly ogled at it. She thought it was so insightful, she turned her toes toward one another. She dropped her ruined cup over the edge of the balcony, hoping he'd see that she did it.

"I think you should k..." Jelly started again. One of the glass doors opened behind them with perfect silence. Out stepped Ezra, cutting off

Jelly's words with the beat of his stiff shoes. He was a year younger than both of them, his hair combed to the side and his body well-wrapped in a brown peacoat. He lit his cigar as he walked up beside Jelly, kissing her on her frigid cheek before kissing his cigar, his shoulders rising.

It was mean, and he knew it, his one act of meanness for the night. Jelly gasped, "Hey!"

"Hey to the both of you," said Ezra, blowing ghostly rings out over the pines. "Gosh it's black tonight."

"I'm not surprised you said that," Darius smirked.

"We're trading gifts soon inside," said Ezra between puffs. "Don't open the long box with the green paper. It's just an old golf club I found in my parent's shed at Thanksgiving."

"I don't think I'll join," said Darius.

"Me neither," said Jelly.

"Didn't bring anything?" said Ezra. "Otherwise that sort of ruins the game."

"You don't read much children books, do you Ez?" said Jelly, thinking she demeaned him by the question, and by shortening his name. "The classics, of course."

Ezra puffed and puffed, then blew a far-reaching parade of the wild smoke, holding his cigar down at his side. "I guess I don't."

"How's the noise in there?" said Jelly, laughing, glancing at Darius, whose bare arms quaked above his buried hands and beneath his rolled up sleeves.

"Oh it's great," said Ezra, smiling at her, though she was still turned away toward her mad lover. "Leslie and Don are thrilled about Grayson's wedding. Doing more planning than he and his girl are. Grayson made me best man, did you hear?"

"Of course he did," said Jelly, rolling her eyes, or trying to. She only managed to look up at the veiled moon, seeing if she could view it as Darius did.

"Ezra," said Darius. "What would you think of a homeless man with a pink beard?"

Ezra tasted his cigar again. "I'd think he was a goof."

Darius laughed, the sound coming from his throat like a chugging, ancient train engine, unused to travel and open air. Jelly joined him, several seconds late, adding a high whistle to the odd noise.

"And how's work, old fellow?" said Darius, laughing more. Jelly tried to follow his sound, but her mouth stopped short and she looked down at the balcony, blushing.

"I'm sure you all are talking about us in there," she said, wiping her mouth for no reason.

"Mm, no," said Ezra, sucking in more smoke and releasing it solemnly.

The pines leaned to the left in unison as a real wind arrived, stretching them, perhaps to grow taller someday. The moon began to show itself as the cloud was hurried along, brightening the shadowed road and shining on the two pieces of trash in Grayson's backyard. The wind knocked into the three people on the balcony. Darius's back stiffened and strained and his arms flattened against his sides, Jelly rattled and wished she still had her cup to squeeze. Ezra smiled as his neck felt cooler, his coat keeping him comfortable and loose. He puffed four times more on the cigar, and then spat on the edge of the balcony, dipping the lit end into the water and extinguishing it with a sugared hiss.

"By the way," he said, turning to go inside. "No one gives a damn what either of you think."

He went back in, his hard steps disappearing behind the silent glass door. Jelly continued to shiver, unable to stop, while Darius looked at the circle of peppered spit on the now-moonlit balcony. Ezra obviously didn't read the classics. He was just like the old generation. They both would bring decency back into the world.

The pines tipped left as the wind blew with more strength.

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