

HOTHOUSE LITERARY JOURNAL



H O T H O U S E



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Dedicated to the writers
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Editor's Note

My journey with *Hothouse* began as a college freshman. Eighteen years old and a self-declared word-nerd, I jumped at any opportunity to break into the literary sphere at UT. When I went to my first general staff meeting with my favorite quote scribbled into my journal, ready for the moment to introduce myself, I knew I had found my place. Four years later, as Editor-in-Chief, I'm grateful to have carried the torch of everyone who came before me and to have continued making this journal a home for anyone searching for comfort in the written word.

To say that the past semester was not a challenge would be untrue. However, with the support of the English department and the help of my brilliant staff, we have produced a journal that makes us all proud. In this new edition of *Hothouse*, we opened our submissions to all undergraduates, not just our English and Creative Writing students. With this expansion, we have found a wealth of creativity and vibrant stories from all corners of campus. We can confidently say that the works in this journal showcase the best that UT has to offer.

Thank you to the staff for all your tireless work and endless enthusiasm, to the authors for your incredible stories, and to the readers of *Hothouse* for making sure those stories do not go unheard.

Sī valēs, valeō,



Lucia Delgado
Editor-in-Chief

FICTION

The Gentle Destruction of Evangeline Helsing

Natalie Brink

I knew my life in Sow's Creek was over the moment Evangeline Helsing strutted into town. She arrived in a flurry only two days after the biggest snowstorm of the season, a strike of color against the gloomy landscape. It was especially cold that day, so the crunch of her footsteps echoed through town, accompanied only by the occasional short birdcall.

I should have been finishing the hat I was knitting for my neighbor, but I left my needles and wool in my rocking chair and pressed my forehead against the window. The chill of the glass nipped at my skin, but I couldn't take my eyes off the movie star.

Evangeline Helsing had not been seen in public since her July wedding. She had simply vanished from movie theaters, television, and even the covers of magazines wives would buy and analyze for hours in an attempt to fashion their look after hers.

In pictures, she seemed too gorgeous to be real, with her sharp features softened by eyes as big and brown as the centers of sunflowers. But here she was, in the town I trusted to be far enough off the map to hide me from crowds of desperate believers begging me to help them.

My gut twisted; she was here to beg for my help.

Surely enough, Evangeline marched straight to my doorstep.

I recoiled from the window and scrambled for a coat to wrap over my cotton nightgown.

As I pulled the door open, I gave a too-big smile.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Are you the woman who performs miracles?” Her voice carried an accent I had never heard, something soft like a lullaby, but her words sent my thoughts unspooling. “Are you alright?” she asked.

I was not alright. Despite the cold, I could feel the heat of my neighbors’ gazes, trying to comprehend how their dowdy neighbor had caught Evangeline Helsing’s attention. And to my horror, a troop of men with cameras was marching into town, already snapping pictures of Evangeline on my porch. My cover was unraveling by the second. I was cornered, and there was nothing I could do except let her in.

“You should come inside,” I managed through clenched teeth.

Unfortunately, inside was not much. The fire in the stove roared, making the air wooly like my mother’s Afghan blanket spread over the back of the sofa. Orange garland webbed the room, sighing its citrusy aroma. I had even managed to buy a radio that year. Music leaked into the room, slightly distorted but undeniably bluesy. Despite my best efforts, you could tell the place was in disrepair. Paint chipped from the walls, leaving giant white silhouettes. The floors croaked, and the scent of mold lingered under it all.

Evangeline’s nose crinkled at first, but she was kind enough to plaster on a smile. “How do you know about me?” I asked once she set her denim blue suitcase down.

“I always have ears for anyone whose talents might be otherworldly, so when this woman in the hotel started talking about you to her friends, I interrupted.”

Shit. I had forgotten to cover my tracks somewhere. There were a hundred places it could have been. Thousands of people it might be. Was it the woman who wanted that job in Denver, the one who called me Madam Zara? The one

in Atlanta who wanted love and knew me only as the witch? Could it have been the teenager in Santa Fe who called me Molly and asked for parents who didn't use her as an ashtray? All gods, I could still remember the desperation in their eyes. I saw it in Evangeline's eyes, too.

"I see," I barely managed through suffocating fear. Outside the photographers were contorting themselves to snap a glimpse of Evangeline through the windows. I scrambled to shut the curtains.

Evangeline shied away from the windows. "The woman told me you help those in need. You are a miracle worker. According to her, you can turn pebbles into gold and see people's memories with only a touch of the hands. I came as soon as the storm allowed."

"Why?"

"I need your assistance. I am cursed."

I opened my mouth, my voice wobbly. "I'm sorry—cursed? Aren't you basically Hollywood royalty?"

"Yes, I suppose." She tugged at the silk scarf knotted around her neck. "But that is exactly the problem. You see... actually, might we sit down? There is much to discuss."

I motioned to the table shoved against the far wall. It was ancient and far too big to move out of the house, so I had made repairs as best I could. I hoped she didn't mind the uneven legs or the blotchy stain I had slapped on when I was still hopeful it could be restored. For her part, Evangeline made no comment as she tucked herself into the far chair.

Seeing her seated at my table, I came to my senses and realized I had a guest, however famous she might be. I tampered down my annoyance, put the kettle on the stove, and set the table for tea. She watched me in silence, running a painted nail across the roughly hewn tabletop. The birdcalls outside were drowned by the clamor of photographers and the sizzle of their camera flashes. I turned up the radio.

“Right,” I said, once the kettle started to hiss. “Now we can have our chat.”

She let her eyes fall shut as I poured tea, the hot water bubbling into mismatched cups. “I suppose there is no easy way to put this. I have been alive since 1679.”

“Really?” I said, using every ounce of my being to keep my tone neutral as I sat at the table.

“Yes, really.” She had opened her eyes, and I found the weight of her gaze too heavy to meet. “I have been trying for centuries to break the curse, and no one has been able to help me. I am asking you to try.”

I gripped my mug, impervious to the scalding tea. It was one thing to be visited by one of the most famous women in America. It was quite another thing to learn she was two and three-quarter centuries old.

“I’m sorry to ask, but why would you want to break the curse? Didn’t you just marry that director? Do you know everyone in America knows your name? Do you know every woman wants to be you?”

“I’m quite aware.” She piled spoonfuls of sugar into her tea and stirred but did not drink. “It’s part of my curse to be famous. I’ve been famous under almost half a dozen names in my life. I thought that was the goal: to be beautiful and coveted. Could you blame a young peasant? I watched labor gnaw away at my parents’ flesh and turn them to bone. I ran off to the forest more times than I could count to get away from the farm. Such a shame no one warned me of forest witches and curses dressed as blessings.”

“So you want me to break this curse that a...forest witch cast on you?”

She nodded. I couldn’t help but notice the stink of mold was stronger near the table. “Are you certain? Dealing with strong magic can result in death. Painful death,” I said.

She slumped over the table, her tea sloshing over the rim. “I don’t need moralizing lectures. I have lived too many lives to be lectured. Tell me, do you like to eat? Do you like to sip tea? Do you like to have the reassurance that air swells in your lungs and blood through your veins? Yes, I have been beautiful and famous ever since that day in the woods, but I have long since lost my tether to humanity. I have not tasted food nor drink for centuries. I could recite a thousand lines and never take a breath. I could cut my skin a thousand times and never draw blood. Tell me, is that a life?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I do not need your empty words. I need you to work a miracle.”

“I can try. I *will* try.” I had promised myself I was done with miracles, with facing crowds of beggars who were out of luck, out of money, out of time. I scampered out of cities in broad daylight because they usually came to me after the sun fell. It was more mystical that way. But in every new city, all it took was one lonely soul, and I was scrambling to come up with a new identity for myself and make miracles that soothed lost souls.

Evangeline was staring at me. I thought I saw her lip tremble, ever so slightly. I set my cup down and reached across the table for her hands. They felt almost like porcelain, smooth and without any warmth. My gift rushed through my veins and set them alight. My gut twisted painfully, and her memories flooded over me.

EVANGELINE’S SIX LIVES

evgeniya

morožova the serf

1699

Trees crowded around me like armor. The darkness in this part of the forest was absolute.

I was following the woman's voice, soft like candlelight. Her promises bundled around me, shielding me from the freezing temperatures.

As I got closer, the forest grew bright. I was almost there. I was almost free.

The moment I saw her, I knew I had made a mistake. She was not so much a woman as she was a lump of flesh.

But it was too late, I was blinded by her spell.

Before I could so much as scream, everything was dark again. It was in this darkness I drew a ragged breath.

It was in this darkness I found I could not take another.

EVGENIYA MOROZOVA

THE TSAR'S DANCER

1702

The package arrived late, right after a blizzard. I snatched it from the courier and disappeared inside the mansion I finally had enough money to own. I cradled the package close to my chest and sat beside the fire, the silks of my skirts pooling around me like liquid rubies.

The box was carved with the two bird-bodied women of Russian folklore who sang away misfortune. I let my fingers wander over the carvings, unaccustomed to such artistry.

When I finally lifted the lid, a necklace glimmered in the firelight. It was stunning—a wedge of emerald embraced by glistening diamonds.

I couldn't help but laugh. The man who history would remember as Peter the Great had seen me dance, and he sent me riches. *Me.* Evgeniya Morozova, the peasant girl.

Except, I was no longer a peasant girl.

I was a bird on the precipice of something great. And I was about to take flight.

*EVELINA MOROZOVA
THE TSARINA'S DANCER
1762*

Ballet was changing. The moves I had become famous for were too tame.

The instructor lashed at me with a venomous tongue, and I fell from my pirouette. The others watched with their hollow eyes. My skin crawled under their collective gaze, and I only wished to lie on the practice room floor for a few moments. The witch had not taken my ability to feel the ache of my muscles, and my body was twisting in agony.

“Again! Your mother would have no issue with this routine!”

I struggled to my feet, thankful I had no blood to allow a bruise. Piano music drifted through the room like snowfall, and I began my routine once more.

I could not help but marvel at myself as I glided through the air with otherworldly grace.

I knew how it felt to fly.

But then I was falling, crashing down to earth with broken wings. The instructor stood above me with his hands curled into fists.

I guess I should be thankful I had no blood to bruise.

*EVA VALENTI
THE PRIMA DONNA
1850*

It was after an impressive dinner served by the Duchess Este that her husband the Duke yanked me into the hallway. The veal, which looked wonderful but tasted like dirt, swam bloody in my stomach as his hand tightened around my bicep.

“You’ll no longer have a patron if you continue to shame yourself,” he hissed. “Everyone can hear that accent of yours,

so don't fool yourself into believing another patron will be eager to take you in."

My body was sore from the Verdi I had performed earlier in the evening and dinner was uncomfortable in my stomach, but I had learned how to rely on my muscles to keep me upright even while they screamed. However, my mind was not so reliable, and I could not fumble out a response to the Duke before he pushed me away.

"Did you not hear yourself arguing with Mr. Amati? Your job is to sit down and make nice with my guests. Tell them about your roles. Be agreeable, and do not take up space."

"I was only arguing on behalf of Verdi." The words were clumsy, and girlish on my lips. "He told me himself—"

The Duke raised a hand, and I swallowed my words. "You will never take up an argument at my table again." I nodded, but he still struck my face.

The veal escaped my lips before I could stop it. It splashed into a meaty puddle on the Estes' oriental runner and buried the stylized birds woven into the rug.

AVA LIVINGSTON
THE BELLE OF BROADWAY
1918

Romeo lay dead before me, his warmth still dancing on my lips. I howled with grief, and I knew without looking I had the audience ensnared.

But there was a slight tremor in my hands I could not shake. I knew the critics were watching, and I intended to give them a show—a show they would think about in the dead of night when they couldn't fall asleep. *Just how did she do that?*

"O happy dagger!"

I fumbled for the very real, very sharp knife I had snuck on stage. "This is thy sheath."

I stabbed myself. The metal thunked against my flesh, sinking between my ribs and igniting my side with pain but drawing no blood. I wailed in convincing agony. I had almost done it, I just needed to die with flourish to seal my name with Juliet's forever.

"There rest, and let me die."

Before I fell to the ground, I caught Romeo's eyes. They were open. They weren't supposed to be open. He was in full view of the wound that should be fatal but was not. I tried to draw a steadyng breath, but there was no relief of air, there hadn't been for centuries.

I could not explain myself out of this, could not rely on the inoffensive nature I had crafted since Italy. But I could buy his silence. I had to. I shuddered at what it would cost as the audience's gasps swirled around us: the two fallen lovers, tied together by an unnamable secret, trembling at the thought of one another.

*EVANGELINE HELSING
THE STARLET*

1954

After the heat of the studio lights, the coolness of the office was welcome on my skin.

But anxiety beat inside of me like a caged bird. There was something else inside of me too, something I did not know could happen to someone with no blood.

Arthur thundered into the office. "You're not keeping it, so don't get attached. We're putting you on a plane to Sweden tomorrow."

I bit my tongue, determined not to make a mess of my stage makeup.

"You've caused an enormous burden to the studio." He was yelling, spittle flying in all directions. "You've got to marry him now, do you realize?"

“I will.”

I can’t.

“That’s right. We’ve got a date set in December.”

“I love him.” I had to fall back on centuries of practice to deliver the line convincingly. Before I could stop myself, my mind conjured images of a married life with Forrest. Us standing on the church steps while white doves fly high into the sky. His hand digging into my back on the red carpet. His accusations of “whore” when he was the one who took me to bed. The blows he rained onto me. My body that refused to break, to scream the truth to the world through black eyes or broken bones.

“You better love him,” Arthur said. “You’re gonna be with him for the rest of your life.”

“I understand.”

A pigeon came to rest on a telephone wire outside. I forced myself to look away.

The fire roared in the stove. The smell of citrus and mold mingled in the air. Evangeline sat across from me with her hands still in mine. Her skin was tinged green, and I knew she had relived every memory as I had snatched it out of her. She had been alive for so long, under so many different names, but her memories were the clearest I had ever witnessed.

“I’m sorry.” I took my hands back and dusted them against my skirt. “I didn’t realize.”

“I remember everything,” she pressed her fingers to her temples, “but that was unlike anything I have ever experienced.”

“Again, I am so sorry—”

She held up a hand to silence me. “This is good. This means you are not a fraud. This means you can break the curse.”

“As I said, this will be hard.”

“After so long, do I have any other options?”

“I guess not.” My chest was tight. Part of me wanted to scream at her, scream for the quiet life of mine she had uprooted.

I could hear the photographers through the walls. The air was thick with their chant: “E-van-ge-line! E-van-ge-line!”

I hesitated. I could turn my back on the movie star, kick her out to be devoured by the media. It would be a lie to say I did not want her to suffer for drawing America’s attention to Sow’s Creek, to me. But where would she go? Back to Forrest? Back to a life she could not call her own?

Evangeline smiled at me, and all I saw was the scared girl in the forest. Evgeniya. The peasant girl who longed for more than life had to offer people like her. The girl who wanted to be adored but could not imagine the cost.

There are many small towns in this world, and I was not particularly attached to Sow’s Creek. I could pack up my life in less than an hour and be on my way.

I got up from the table and began rummaging. “I think I can break the curse, but I should let you know I don’t know what will happen. You might be fine. You might seize. You might turn to dust.”

“I understand.”

I didn’t doubt that she understood. Unlike my old clients, she knew what those of us who were gifted was capable of.

I filled a large pot with snowmelt and set it to boil on the stove. I tossed in rosemary and dried rose petals, dropped in a few perfectly round stones, and settled on the surface an eagle feather that had blown up to my front porch right before the snowstorm.

Outside, I could hear the sustained murmur only a large crowd could create, a chorus of dozens of voices. More photographers and journalists must be arriving in town—chasing the lead that after six months of hiding, Evangeline Helsing had shown up in Sow's Creek of all places.

The mixture on the stove was soon raging. I concentrated on Evangeline's earliest memory, of the words the witch had spewed. I imagined plucking the sentences out of the air and snapping them word by word, letter by letter until the curse had lost all meaning.

There was banging on the door.

I ladled some of the mixture into a cup and thrust it at Evangeline. "Drink this now." Without hesitation, she put the cup to her lips.

Before me, Evangeline Helsing melted away. Her features contorted, then smoothed into someone who resembled Evangeline but whose features were less sharp than gaunt and whose nose was slightly crooked and too small for her face.

The sound of banging overtook the radio's music. The door was shaking in its frame. "Evangeline?"

She sipped once more at the mixture, then her face soured. Her eyebrows shot up. "It worked! This tastes awful!"

She had her arms wrapped around me before I could understand what had happened. She was cured.

"Thank you a thousand times over." Her accent was growing thicker.

"How do you feel?"

"Never have I—" She frowned, her words coming slow and jumbled. "I— [REDACTED]"

"Evangeline, are you okay?"

She cocked her head. "[REDACTED]"

The door buckled against its hinges. "Evangeline?"

"[REDACTED]"

"Hello? Evangeline?"

She tapped her finger to her chest. “Evgeniya. [REDACTED] Evgeniya.”

“Can you understand me?” I was grabbing her hands, probably too tight.

“[REDACTED]?” Her eyes were not so big as they were when she came to me, but they were wild with fright.

I couldn’t believe it. I had destroyed Evangeline Helsing, and Evgeniya had arisen to take her place.

Just as I came to understand what I had done, the front door slammed open. The heat of the flash puckered my skin as the photographers took shot after shot.

“Evangeline!” They cried out like a horrific chorus. “Evangeline, look over here!”

By the time I had forced myself between Evgeniya and the mob, they had already realized that Evangeline Helsing was not in my kitchen. It was just a girl who resembled Evangeline, but who could under no circumstances be mistaken for the movie star.

The photographers fell silent. They did not even apologize as they left out of the broken door, their heads slumped not in shame but disappointment. And then we were alone.

I held Evgeniya close and hummed a lullaby, a wordless tune that I prayed could calm her. I held her until she stopped shaking like a bird stuck in the cold.

I set her at the table with the tea she had made herself earlier. She was shaken from the incident, but she managed to sip at it, her eyes fluttering at the sweetness.

As she sat in silence, I rummaged through my belongings and uncovered an ancient Russian-to-English dictionary that had been in the house when I moved in. Its cover was torn half off, and I wasn’t sure if Evgeniya would even understand the Russian it contained, but I had to try. Evangeline was gone, but Evgeniya still needed me.

I took the dictionary and sat next to Evgeniya. She didn't acknowledge me, merely continued to stare at her cup of tea.

I flipped through the pages until I found the word I was looking for. "Hello." She flinched before slowly raising her eyes to meet mine. "Hello?"

“I. Be. Help. You.”

Her mouth contorted into the breath of a smile. “██████████.” Her words were too fast for me to understand, but I nodded anyway.

Her careful smile reached her eyes.

“My. Name.” I tapped my chest as she had done. “Imogen.”
“Imogen.” She repeated. “Imogen.”

That evening, I took Evgeniya's hand in mine, and we walked down Main Street in silence. Her hand no longer felt like porcelain, but something rough and warm and very much alive. A few sparrows carried a birdsong as darkness shuffled in with sunset. A gentle spring mildness hung in the air about two months earlier than expected, so the snow was already melting. We helped one another through the mud.

When I left town with Evangeline Helsing, no one took notice. After all, she was no longer Evangeline Helsing. She was Evgeniya, and she was finally free.

Something Funny

Max Robison

My first move was to loop around to the side of the place. A little family-owned grocery store, a 24-hour one. The only one that was open this late. It was ideal prey. The clerks there wouldn't give a shit. Not for eight bucks an hour, no; they'd just be sitting there, slack-jawed, drooling, hand in nose. It wouldn't have cameras either. The big chains were always swimming in coiled neuroses about that kind of thing, a sort of turgid gnashing, agonized yowling at inventory discrepancies and phantasmagoric heists. Two loaves of bread unaccounted for, a can of beans gone, a bushel of bananas dissolved into the miasma that lay beyond the automatic doors.

I used to work at Target. They paid the guy who just watched the cameras all day three dollars more an hour than the rest of us. I remember him. I don't recall him having a discernible neck, and he had a faux-military buzz cut that must have receded a solid inch in the three months I worked there. Biceps like cantaloupes, legs that tempered into cones with young girls' feet, and a taut stomach that gave the impression of being in the third trimester of a 252-month pregnancy. He was bright red but I never saw him tired. He just sat in his swivel chair, eating chips, dragging his teeth across each other horizontally so he could grind his meal into a thick beige paste and slurp it down his throat. Totally still. A Buddha statue at the front desk of a restaurant. And when he saw someone stuff something in their pocket over the camera display he'd float out a drawl from the back of his tonsils, deep white noise, all staccato vowels, and he'd kick them out. I used to think he was a pitiful character, but now he terrifies me.

He wouldn't be there.

I got next to the dumpsters and undid my fly and pissed. Scouting the ground for an insect or landmark to focus my

attack on proved fruitless, the asphalt a barren expanse punctuated only by streetlamps, its only topographic variation being applied by a steady stream of urine. I heard a door open. Somebody'd gone out the back for a smoke break. Whoever it was would've heard me. I piss with vigor. I shook the excess off, zipped up my fly, and turned to steal an image of the man. Short but not squat, lithely fattish, trimmed black beard with rorschach blotches of gray, like a mid-career cricketer. If he heard me, he didn't say, or look over. I walked away, hurriedly nonchalant, and went in the front of the store. A woman at the cash register greeted me and I nodded. What all did I need? Bread, peanut butter, rice, maybe soy sauce. I was wearing an old army surplus fishtail parka, so it'd all fit.

There was my first problem—I didn't know this store. I found it on google maps half an hour ago. You can't ask anyone, though, it draws too much attention. But I was the only person in there. They'd have a bead on my ass no matter what I did. The lady at the counter was too chipper. I couldn't remember what she looked like, all my *cogito* could produce was a vague feminine silhouette. The buzz of the lights overhead was the only thing to hear, no typing or feet moving. She was trained. She was in some section somewhere sharpening a screwdriver to flay me alive with. The greeting was the signal, covering me with pheromones, marking me. *You dirty son of a bitch, fucking lout, goddamn thief, I'll strangle you with your own goddamn intestines!*

I had to move. I had a method for these things. Swiftly, long yawning strides stretching each limb's lank, to the back of the store, where the refrigeration section always was, then a left turn for cover behind the aisles, surveying them. Oatmeal at the end of this one. I advanced. In the middle of the aisle: wonderbread. I checked my flanks, stuffed it down my jacket, headed towards the back again and resumed my combing exercise, repeating it for the peanut butter and the rice (not the soy sauce, I was too freaked out), tucked away, shuffled to avoid any criminal protrusions on my form. All in steady shelter.

I went back to the front of the store—as I'd suspected, the cashier was gone. I wasn't even satisfied that it was easy. I was

too jilted, too paranoid, the tips of my fingers crawling up my elbows, teeth sheltering and chattering in thin receded gums. My pace quickened, steps retracting into sharp skitters, and I slipped past the front door. No alarm. The temperature had dropped, or maybe it hadn't and I was just used to the heat of the store, so then it was colder by relation, if not by objectivity, and I could've just been nervous. But I'd started shivering, so I kept up a fast walk and stammered into the parking lot, and turned the same way I did when I went to go take a leak, and I started to pick up, my torso falling forward until my feet caught up and I was in a dead sprint, the world running and curling underfoot like a treadmill—mechanistic whirring, lungs rising through neck, alveoli stretching and groaning in chewed bubblegum shapes, feet separate from themselves about one inch off the ground.

Then I heard something that sounded like nothing, a silent collision of bricks followed by a bout of screeching in my eardrums. I froze. I didn't keel over, I didn't put my hands over my ears, even though I probably should've. It was only about ten seconds after the fact that I realized how loud it was, whatever it was. I turned around. It was the guy from earlier, the stocky excrickerter, a shotgun in his hands. And even though it was darker and he was farther away, he came in much sharper focus: the crease of each segment of stubble folding into a subdivided neck, the liquid bulge of a hip in cheap khakis, the fringes of the mustache lightened as rust on tin.

I couldn't glean any strong emotion from his eyes; he stared at me but not into me, and racked the shotgun. A shell ejected and drizzled to the ground with a hollow tinkling noise, the pump cracking and reshaping its guts, shifting a shell into the chamber with a blend of discolored humors and vascular vigor, as if it were a small ill-tempered reptile resting in his arms. The man's lips shrank like raisined raspberries and his pupils followed in tandem, giving way for the whites of his eyes to nestle them in soft ivory blankets. I did not say anything, I just faced him and put my hands in my pockets. He fired the gun.

I felt nothing and stood there, blinking once, then twice,

then swallowing spit, wiping teeth with tongue, teething on my neck. He didn't cock it again. Just stared. I turned and ran, faster than I hitherto have. The ground didn't disappear as earlier, half of me was still welded to the ground, dragging, and I couldn't feel it, not really, just a vaseline-lensed outline of friction against my left foot while the right spiraled in propeller whirls, sending me off-kilter, sputtering, coughing but not tripping, not falling over, steady, steadyng, straight down, following twenty-sixth, not breaking until maybe a quarter or a third of a mile when my lungs felt like brillo pads and the air tasted like sand. I looked behind me. He hadn't followed. I wanted to sit down but it'd kill me. So I walked and my left leg still dragged. It was cold. I was cold.

The front of my pants was wet. I figured I'd pissed myself, even though I wasn't really all that spooked. And my leg was sticky and cold and wet and numb. I was wearing dark jeans, so I'd be fine, even though I really wouldn't be, because my drag was deepening into a limp, but nothing hurt. No sign of the gun-toting shopkeep. I found a bench and sat down. There was a subtle wet spot and hole in the front, three inches to the left of my dick. I tried to touch it and was met with a stinging wrenching like barbed wire pulled through a coffee stirrer. I moved my hand and the pain rippled in candy-colored sine waves and fluttering vibrato tremors. There was a shotgun pellet in my fucking leg. He fucking shot me. But the bullet wouldn't let me know until I acknowledged it, gave it some attention. I'd heard something similar from my grandpa. He caught a chunk of shrapnel in his knee and didn't feel it for half an hour. Maybe it needed nurturing. I could picture myself cooing at it, wheedling, cajoling, petting it, befriending it. Like a pet. I undid my belt and my fly and looked. There were clumps of purplish coagulation, collected on my inner thigh like deposits of clay. It wasn't altogether unpleasant. Similar to hot suds in the wintertime. It was in there pretty deep but I don't think it hit bone. I hadn't pissed myself, at least. I exhaled and said shit.

I couldn't afford a hospital visit. I wasn't shoplifting for the

hell of it. The nearest hospital was too far a walk anyways, and ambulance bills are a motherfucker. I wasn't partial to walking around with lead in my leg either, though. It seemed like a bad idea to leave it there. The bleeding had sealed itself, mostly, just a small trickle of burgundy fluid that glittered black and metallic under a streetlamp, the perforation in my flesh a gelatinous cavern. I should've been in more or less shock than I was, but it was soothing to have experienced it. It broke with the monotony. A little playful ruse by the city—the city, or this neighborhood, but never god, even one of the old testament caliber; it's too lofty. A god expressed through a shopkeeper's shotgun isn't even pitifully grotesque, it's grotesquely pitiful. The annoyingly pithy god of a vulgate—none of the honest grouchy earthiness of a good solid King James god. The creeping wetness of pavement, knock-kneed unkempt hedges, splotches of gray by the sign on the button on the corner on a crosswalk, the oratory of thudding feet, formless automotive slabs blaring and wailing and screaming and rolling holy in pockmarked intersection drawn up in whites and reds and yellows—these were grounds for mischief, reflecting itself into sly winking puddles and infinitive verbiage, through gray-tan constructs disemboweling themselves into red-brown leaves gently rocking into gutters. How could you be angry with it? It only wanted the best.

I had a friend who lived near campus. His name was Karl Egon and he was a medical student. As far as I could recall, he lived at a co-op on 23rd and Nueces. He was sort of a dumb hippie, but smarter than me regardless. I hoped he was. Otherwise I'd just be walking around

with a hunk of lead stuck in me. I dialed him. A hum for fifteen seconds, voicemail. He might've been on the shitter. I tried again. Seven seconds, voicemail. He was declining the call. Bastard. I called again. Eight seconds and he picked up with a high speed bass-baritone that made his words sound like runny mush, a muted rubber band whacked with a rake.

“Charlie?” He greeted me.

“Yeah, hey, Karl, how have you been?”

“Just taking it easy, man, easy enough,” and punctuated

his sentences with a thick mucus cough. “Easy enough, man. But what can you do? What can you do, man?” I heard water bubbles and a deep breath. “How about you, man? How’ve you been, man? Taking it easy?”

“Not quite,” I replied.

“Well what’s the issue, man? Level with me. Divulge your inner tribulations, compadre. For I am but a vessel for your —”

“I got shot.”

“You’ve been shot?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’ve been shot.”

“With what?” He asked.

“With what was I shot?”

“Yeah, man. With what were you shot?”

“Christ, Karl. A gun.”

“Someone shot you with a gun, Charlie?”

“The fuck else would they shoot me with?”

“A bow.” He paused. “And an arrow.”

“Why would—never mind. That shit’s frying your fucking brain.” I sighed.

“My gourd is my business, amigo.”

“Look, can you pull a shotgun pellet out of my leg?”

“Isn’t that a hospital’s deal?”

“Yeah, which is why they’ll give me a motherfucker of a bill over it.”

“And you ain’t good for it?” he asked.

“No, I’m not. Look, if you have a pair of tweezers and some rubbing alcohol, you can probably swing it.”

He exhaled and coughed again. “Half-assing the medical arts is a reliable route to one judicious infection, compadre.”

“I saw it in a movie, Karl. Why would the movies lie?”

“Do you need me to come to your pad or are you headed here?”

“I’ll meet you at your place. 23rd and Nueces?”

“Yeah, that’s it. See you in a few.”

I hung up and started on my way there. I could reckon with the limp at this point, assimilate it into my way of being, incorporate it into my visage and the subtleties of my silhou-

ette's gait. Maybe I could get used to dragging my leg around, provided something got fucked regarding Karl's operating skills. I didn't even know if he was trying to become a surgeon, come to think of it, but I'd committed. Maybe I'd committed to spending my twenties as an invalid. There was no use in getting pissed off about it, though—I could accept my fate with a crisscrosslegged poiseful resignation and smile. A lecherous bodhisattva sort of life could suit me. Crawling through sidewalks, sneaking into bars and 7-11s, ogling, drooling, laughing through missing teeth, carrying buzzing clouds of nicotine stink and crisp liquor that smell in the corners of your nostrils.

Or I could become a pure monk. A tonsure would frame my face well. Robes could be flattering, I could sit in some tower on a rocky island off the coast of Ireland, copy bibles by hand all day. But I said before, Catholicism freaks me out too much. I don't think I could be trusted with a rosary. I'd get up to something nefarious with it soon enough. A sect of Protestant monks out there who didn't feel the need to believe in anything too serious would be ideal for me.

In ten minutes I was at the co-op where Karl lived.

I banged on the door of the place and Karl answered. Suddenly, I was at eye level with a piece of turquoise drugstore jewelry shrouded in a firm bed of chest hair at the base of the opening of a brown fringed vest, bathed in the odor of patchouli oil and pot. He wore bell bottoms that went down to the base of his calves and a pair of crocs caked in some viscous mixture of mud, dust, and whatever coated the floor of his pad—generally, in the co-op, nobody volunteered for custodial work. I looked up to see his face, patchily bearded and eyes magnified about threefold by a Dahmeresque pair of glasses. “Karl,” I said, and smiled, pressing my hand against the spot of my leg where the shot lay.

“Charlie,” he said, and clapped me on the back, grinning with about forty percent gum. He led me through the place. It'd been there since the seventies. I wondered how much they'd spent on all the black-light posters and magenta-colored light bulbs drenching the place in a thick gothic nectar. I caught a

whiff of something that smelled like fried rotted orange peels and saw three skinny longhaired men in workwear congregating around a hookah with a clearly terrified young woman bringing a murky plastic tube to her mouth. Through the laundry room, a spread of mildew wafting into a man-sized hole in the drywall and day-glo finger painting smeared across a hallway like a schizophrenic's excrement. Karl spoke.

“So how'd you get yourself shot, amigo?”

“I didn't get *myself* shot. I just got shot. I had nothing to do with it besides being the target.”

“Then how'd you end up being a target, Charlie?”

“Bad luck, I guess.”

“Dude, I have not exactly been privy to the greatest of fortunes in my own travails, and I have never been shot.”

“Neither had I. Guess I'll try anything once.” I wasn't even embarrassed about the manner by which I'd come to have a projectile in me, but it was fun to mess around with him. I liked keeping it as a mystery for the mystery's sake, if nothing else. If I could build some hermetic riddle around it, the extraction of the thing might be imbued with the elements of occult ritual. I didn't know the medicinal consequences that might have, other than that I hoped they were benign.

We had to walk up a staircase on the way to his room. My leg stung and I wiggled my jaw.

“Well, I feel like I'm owed something here, man,” Karl said. “I mean, you can't call me in the dead of night, you know, and I'm mellowing out at this point of the evening, as I tend to do, and as you ought to know at this point, with my proclivities towards mellowing and whatnot, man, and—”

“You're trying to go to med school, right?”

“Yeah, I am, Charlie. But you harshed my mellow, brother.”

“I'm an ailing man. I'm sorry about your mellow. But where's your Hippocratic oath?”

“I got plenty of Hippocratic oath. Jeez, man, I'm not *not* helping you, after all. But my only recompense is that I'd like to know what happened. A hospital would charge you a hell of a lot more than that, Charlie.”

“You know I can’t afford a hospital,” I replied.

“Your parents, man. Why not ask them.”

“Fuck off. Don’t be a prick about this.”

We got to his room and he fiddled with the lock, ringing metallic jitters punctuating his movements.

“A prick wouldn’t pull lead out of your leg,” Karl said. “I’ll set out a towel. I have some rubbing alcohol and some long tweezers and I’ll patch you up with some cotton balls and gauze. We’re due to run this operation a la 1863, muchacho.”

“Anesthetic?”

“A bottle of cheap red I picked up at 7/11.” A pause. “It’s better than the alternative.”

“What’s the alternative?” I asked.

“Nothing, man,” he replied, “the alternative is nothing.”

He went to the bathroom and brought back a white towel with stains that looked like technicolor birthmarks. He flapped it open as if it were an expensive rug and laid it on the ground and motioned for me to lie on top of it. I took the bottle of wine, unzipped my parka, and took off my pants.

“Can you crack a window?” I took a Camel Filter out of my pocket and lit it. “Smoking’ll kill you,” he said.

“Life’ll kill you,” I shot back, but I wasn’t satisfied with the delivery.

“I’m told gunfire accelerates the process.” He stepped out and came back with a plastic bottle of clear fluid and a pair of tweezers. I took a few swigs from the bottle before settling into a nice rhythmic puffing on a cigarette. Karl told me to straighten out my leg, adjusted his glasses, got on his knees and leaned close to the wound. Wordlessly, he wet a rag with the bottle and pressed it against the hole. It stung like a white hot scalpel paring down a nerve ending. I sucked air through my teeth.

“Keep the bottle in your mouth,” he said. “Pain’s liable to get worse from here. Exponentially. If such things can be quantified.” He chuckled to himself without smiling. “Stretch your legs out more.” I did. “And take another drink.” I did.

Then a cold conduit enveloping the interior of flesh within itself, charging with thick sheets of wheedling needles of white-

hot sharp vagueness. Karl probed some more, sending down a few shockwaves of agony so pinpointed and exact that they ceased to be painful at all, a series of perfect geometric toothaches recorded on a scatter plot. A metallic twinge on the roof of my mouth extending to the rear of my uvula and trickling into the belly of my lungs. I felt like I was five horses tied together with umbilical cords tumbling off the side of a cliff. And I lay, reclined and exposed with him disinterestedly arched over me, examining my thigh with an attitude that was somewhere between a scientist and a child with a magnifying glass incinerating insects.

But I kept still. Towards Karl I felt a mix of hazy animosity and absolute trust. Every tip of a sting deepened me into him and him into me. I mapped each curl on the top of his head, the accidental partings and lack thereof creating edges on his skull where there were none otherwise. Occasionally, the cold metal of his glasses would press into my outer thigh and a stream of hot breath would dissipate into the seam of the wound. I felt clammy against him and he felt slick and warm against me. I was primordially concerned that some serous excretion of his might compromise the medicinal integrity of the whole affair, that once the semblance of sterility was forsaken we would just collapse into some conjoined lump of lazy flesh.

After about forty-five seconds he got the damn thing. I could feel him roll it around, pitching and yawning, almost toyng with it before he managed to get a decent grip and pull it out. He dropped it on the rag he'd set out. It was an almost-perfect sphere, now glistening red and pooling at the bottom. I took another drink.

Karl doused a cotton ball in rubbing alcohol and pressed it up against the wound. It was the same sensation as before but a little better and a little worse—darker in the corners, rounder at the edges. He kept it pressed down and wrapped a bandage around it twice, paused, and then another two times. It hurt and then I couldn't feel it much at all.

“You missed your femoral artery by one and a half centimeters. Eyeballing it, I mean,” he said.

“And what does that mean?”

“Couple more seconds of aiming on his end and you’d be dead, hombre.”

“Sure, but he didn’t.”

“Yeah, I guess, man. Was he shooting from the hip?”

“Sure was. And I was on the other side of the parking lot.” I grinned and poked the bandage.

“And you still almost died, man.” He sat and reclined on his bed and gestured at the food on the floor. “That what you got shot over?”

“I needed sustenance, Karl.” He pointed at the peanut butter and I passed it to him. He rotated the jar in his hand, examining its construction and contours, and spun it around to show a match head-sized hole in the side. “Where do you think that would’ve hit, Charlie?” he asked.

“Maybe somebody up there likes me.”

“That’s a fucking Paul Newman movie, man,” he replied.

I saw his expression shift, but only around the axle of the center of his brow—the glasses and beard prevented a totality of emotion from being displayed. His eyes didn’t change shape, they only oscillated, swelled and retracted, his mouth could only lengthen and shorten along a pair of lips like petrified frankfurters. His forehead arched around a point somewhere in the general center of his face and his forehead furrowed in folds. “Charlie,” he said, “I love you, man, but you’ve gotta pull your head out of your ass. I mean, Jesus, man. Pull out your wallet, tell me how much money’s in it.”

I crawled over to my jeans, reached into a pocket stiffened with crystal flakes of dried blood, and produced my wallet. It had a hole straight through it. I opened it and it had two holes equidistant on either side. Similarly marked were the last 2 dollars I had. “Um,” I said.

“Fuckin’ precisely. So why don’t you get a job?”

“Lay off.”

“I just pulled birdshot out of your leg, brother. On my time. And house calls aren’t generally my forte, even if it is my house.”

“It doesn’t work for me.”

“What about your parents?”

What about them?”

“Well, right now you’ve got a pretty meaty one of those in your leg.”

“What is it about my parents, Karl?”

“They’re fucking loaded, dude!” I took umbrage at this. Anybody would.

“The hell are you on about?” I replied.

“From everything you told me, your parents are Dallas brahmins. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but for fuck’s sake—would it kill you to ask them for cash?”

“How rich do you think they are?”

“You went to St. Mark’s before you went to college and dropped out, right? I looked it up. That’s thirty grand a year, man. I looked it up!”

“I don’t need the cash. And they’re pricks.”

“You just got shot outside a Kwik-E-Mart!” He paused. “What even makes them pricks, Charlie? Putting you through private school? Paying your tuition for three semesters?”

“They’re just pricks, man.”

“What does that even *mean*?”

“Means they’re pricks.”

“What did they do? Beat you? Molest you?” I did not respond. He sighed. “If I had folks with that kinda dosh to sling around, I’d —”

“Please drop it, Karl.”

“I just had to do minor fuckin’ surgery on your ass, Charlie!” And I was silent again. And he sighed again.

“Just—you can sleep on my floor tonight, man. Try not to move around too much. I’ll give you a pillow to prop the thing up on. Just gimme a minute. Gimme a minute. I need to cool off, man. I’m too heavy right now. I need to fuckin’ cool off.” He picked up the peanut butter again, took the lid off, dipped two fingers in, and stuck them in his mouth.

I only slept for about two hours before careening awake with a sour bubbling in the pit of my gut. I don’t remember

what it was I'd been dreaming about but Hong Kong Garden was stuck in my head. And I felt sick, really sick. I groaned right up and made my way to the bathroom, pulled my hair back, and hung my head over the toilet with five thousand pounds of pressure concentrated right on the peak of the vertebrae that constituted my currently horizontal neck.

Nothing at first, besides my mouth stubbornly tasting like rotten dry coke regardless of how many passes I made on it with a toilet-brush-tasting tongue. Then, a rumbling that happened somewhere north of my navel and behind my ears, some building of bile, a slack in the shoulders and a throbbing tenderness in the gums, a thin shrill crackle of misremembered stratocaster stabs at the base of the forehead in some rough-cornered eastern scale, some trifling pseudo-operatic shrieks, an emulsion of tan soupy fluid passing the lips and splashing the water back onto the face because it's leaned too close. Another string of bile, in bumps and jolts, thick gulps of the stuff, and a coat of viscous ectoplasm coating my mouth and my fingertips until it was just spasmodic spasms, and dry, like coughing backwards.

There was a nice old not-damp shag rug in the middle of the bathroom. I curled up into it, I leaned my head into it, I snuggled into it, I embraced it, I swaddled myself into the faded yellowish tile and let it wrap around me and a dim orb of streetlamp light trickled through shades of a dingy window. And I slept there until someone came in the next morning to take a leak.

I dreamt of an eggshell-creme room with red stripes that could've been curved or straight, or on the floor or on the walls or the ceiling, I don't remember. Just a series of thick constructs breaking it up, nominally like shelves flowing into aisles but more viscerally a series of curbs stretched out into engorged caricatures of something I didn't know. The floor might've looked like something but I don't remember. Maybe there wasn't one, but I was stepping on something. And I could see a fat red man eating chips behind my eyes. I ran with nobody behind me, though I thought I knew I had to. When I woke up I tried to catch the bus but I couldn't pay the fare. So I walked.

One Evening

Max Robison

Delta Dawn was on the radio and a whore was riding shotgun. In the contours of her face he could make out a dozen or so soft implications, a brow unfurrowed but tracing its own outline as if it were, lipstick on the corners of a mouth bleeding into reluctant grins, heavy eyeshadow and a craned-back neck letting the light trickle down the semicircle curve of a hairline to paint her visage as sugar skull, her lips flattened to implicate her teeth, clenched to implicate her jaw, turned upright to implicate her neck and shoulders, dripping down the forensic indentations of her breasts and pooling in a theoretical navel to implicate him. Then, reversing their trajectory, pooling in discarded packs of Kools and green-gray cans, notions and smells and ideas of earthiness floating up from matted floorboards, wrapping around ankles and exploring calves made topographic with occasional razorburn, pausing before her knees.

Jerry Varnadoe turned the volume down and leaned back. He made sure to put his hand at 12 o'clock on the wheel but not to grip it so tightly that it would show in his knuckles and forearms and that the skin wouldn't tense around his bones and veins and he went to finger another pack of cigarettes in the cupholder, feeling for cotton filters and not the sole upturned one he had imbued with good fortune if smoked last. He placed one in his mouth, where it lay downturned thirty degrees at a bend situated one and a half centimeters from the filter, switching hands, rolling down the window, and then placing them both at ten and two, shuffling them when his initial placement proved slightly off, then relaxing his fingers, his palms, his forearms.

“I have a zippo in the glove box,” he said.

“Mm,” she said.

“Could you get it out for me?” he asked.

“I guess, yeah. I could.” She rolled down her window and clicked open the glove box and took out a small metal box with an American flag embossed on the side and clicked the glove box closed.

“Yeah, that’s it. Thanks, honey.” He leaned over for her to light it and she threw it in his lap.

He picked it up, putting one hand on twelve again, and she put her head out the window. He lit it and got rotting mint and lighter fluid smell in his lungs and breathed in and breathed out and sighed and rubbed his chin and thought about how he needed to shave and fiddled with his ballcap and went back to ten and two. The oaks overhead curved down over them and shook and sweated thick and heavy in drawling early-june heat. Jerry pumped the gas and turned them into gelatinous lanky bushes until they saw a sign that said they were entering Amite County.

“We’re getting a little far out,” she said.

“I paid for the whole night,” he said.

“Mm,” she said. “Have you got a place to stay?”

“I’m figuring it out,” and he said it with a grin and affected frustration so as to not seem malicious to her but to not get caught up in treacly pencilneckedness either.

And then they were on another stretch of two-lane, half-paved and fraying at its edges, acne-scared and aged, seeping and creased, craggy and serene in its senility.

“Do you live down here or what?” she asked.

His grin remained but his inflection was flat. “I don’t see how it matters one way or the other,” he said

“Cause there’s plenty of pimps in McComb,” she said, “and that ain’t very far from here at the very least —”

“You were on the way is all,” he said.

“Mm,” she said. “So you ain’t from here, then.”

The cigarette was only halfway burnt down but he tossed it out the window anyways. “No, I ain’t.” He sucked on his teeth and tried to press his tongue up through the roof of his mouth so as to reach his eyeballs. She pressed her lips back

down against her teeth and strung the corners of her mouth into something that would only betray emotion vaguely. The lipstick smudges made it seem as though she'd had an allergic reaction and was trying to preserve her manners in the face of biologically-induced asphyxiation.

"Well, what are you here for, then?" she asked. "Amite county ought to have reasons for being there. Aside from being born."

"I'd prefer not to be sharing my, uh, the details of my travel to every woman I wind up meeting on the way." He thought to himself that his attempt at being enigmatic had come across more as a halfhearted coquettishness, less charming than perverted. He did not realize it but he saw in her something to be seduced. Or maybe he did by way of synonyms. He did most things by way of synonyms. Archetypes, though he'd balk at the word, having long since donned the habit of enlightened anti-intellectualism, which primarily found its expression in the form of anti-polysyllabism—a loose enough habit, one able to smuggle chosen quirks cribbed from television screens, articles, internet feeds, the odd movie, the reluctantly-parsed book—that did well to obscure the shame of five semesters of college in affected philistinism. He supposed now that he was a minor role in the oeuvre of Harry Dean Stanton, a milky-lens photo of a trucker in an election year, a half-remembered Waylon Jennings song.

"So where are we going to stay?" she asked.

"A motel in Gloster I've been to," he replied. "It ought to still be here."

"So it isn't your first time through here," she said. "How's it your concern?" he asked.

"Well, you wouldn't be just passing through, because Amite doesn't really run through anything, unless you saw Monroe and figured you wanted to keep going for a while." She snickered through her nose and did not open her mouth. He didn't say anything.

"And there are better ways to get to Jackson," she continued, "if you're headed in from Texas."

"I never said anything about Texas," he said. "I saw your

plates," she said.

"You get this wrapped up in everyone that gives you money?" he asked. "Only if it's mutual, and I figure at this point it rightly is," she said.

"I never said anything about it being so," he said.

She grinned with her mouth shut and reached into his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out and put it in her mouth. She got a Bic lighter from her purse and leaned out the window and smoked some more, tapping her finger to ash only sometimes and let the flame burrow and create steep cones like elongated gumdrops. It looked to him like she was playing a game with herself, to see how long she could stretch the tips of them before they collapsed, and he eased up on the gas so as to humor her. He only saw how many freckles she had when he looked in the side mirror and her face looked like paper-mache eggshells stretched thin across a wire frame.

Then she tossed the butt out the window even though it had a couple drags left on it. He figured she'd gotten bored.

"I been to Texas once or twice," she started. "Galveston and Corpus, I think. I don't know. I was real little."

"Mm," he said.

"I guess dad was moving around a lot back then. I don't know. Don't figure it matters much one way or the other."

"Yeah," he said.

They were pulling into Gloster proper now and the dirt roads had crept into asphalt flanked by reluctant sidewalks mirroring squat rectangular brown-brick buildings. There was an old ad for Pall-Malls on the side of a drugstore and a newer one for Goody's powder on the side of a thrift store. Then to the town center, which was a four-way stop with the sheriff's office and a law office diagonal from a gas station and a diner. A flatbed lumber truck passed by and they turned right, down a road tapering and thinning into ratty strings of tar until it shed its paving too, past the Presbyterian church, which was bigger on the inside and had pews at hard right angles in affection for god and indifference to his works, sticky-white walls refracting sunlight in ersatz Greco-Romanism, that he had heard was a field

hospital at one point in the Civil War, where the kids at sunday school would point to discolorations in the new linoleum and say that there were bloodstains.

Then a left turn, a right, then contending with the overripe, bloated sun inspecting itself as it began its descent, past chain-link fences and barking dogs, into something resembling a parking lot which led to a shack connected to a two-story u-shape with twenty-four doors and twenty-four numbers on the front of them in black paint, with a look like it'd been yellowing and peeling since it'd been under construction, slumping its shoulders into contortionistic quadrupedal writhing, spanish roofs perched like cheap toupees, catching beads of sweat and letting them settle in brows and lashes, stretching into crisp wrinkles and crouching, rotating its wrists, craning its neck, testing the backs of its teeth with tongue.

They parked the car and got out. Jerry had a suitcase with him, the girl didn't even have a change of clothes. The door was down a sketched-in little gravel pathway and made an electronic ding when they opened it. The guy at the counter was a thin man with aviator-frame glasses and slicked-back hair. He looked as though all the weight in his body was gradually converging on his forehead and his neck was powerless to support his skull for much longer.

“Hello,” the man said, with a timbre and a shakiness that seemed not to derive from anxiety so much as it did from physical frailty of the larynx.

“Three nights,” Jerry said, reaching for his wallet. “How much’ll that wind up setting me back?”

“But you’ve only got me for the one,” she interjected, hands balled at her sides, still smiling with her mouth closed. Jerry did not look back at her and pushed his lips upwards so as to touch the base of his nose.

“I’ll get you back tomorrow morning,” Jerry said. “What time?” she asked.

“We’ll figure it out,” Jerry said.

The clerk smirked like a vole and Jerry thought that someone ought to kill him, though he wasn’t sure who. “Sixty dol-

lars, sir," he said, and when Jerry gave him three twenties he handed him a key with a blue tag that read '207'.

And they went back out the front door and it made another electronic ding through a speaker they couldn't see and went up a set of stairs that squished under their feet because of carpeting that felt soggy and really wasn't and wood that they felt ought to have been wet and rotted out, even though it wasn't any of those things either. Then they went in the door and turned the overhead light on and the room was burnt yellow like puke or Ronsonol. There were two beds and a couch, all green-beige and covered in plastic sheets. A small, cheap TV was on a wooden stand next to a bible and there was a lamp and an electrical outlet and a radio alarm clock on a night-stand, which looked like it was made out of plastic or some kind of cheap laminate.

She went over to the television and put on the news and he went to the bathroom. He didn't have to piss, he just looked at himself in the mirror. He set his ballcap down and pawed at some matted-down brown hair blackened with sweat and pulled it down to cover some of the lines that had been creeping into what he thought was a too-broad forehead, to in its mattedness and blackenedness draw away from the three lines threatening to puncture the corners of his eyes, to how his stubble made a round head with a squared-off jaw seem somewhere between ponderous and matronly. He inhaled under his shirt and smelled dry cold sweat and cigarettes and energy drinks. Then he splashed water on his face and went back into the room and the TV was saying something about a drive-by in Pike County. She'd taken her shoes off and was sat criss-crossed on the bed with bare feet and red toenail polish. Her hair looked bigger and more ginger, like she'd draped her head in the pelt of a small mammal.

Her face was all gradients and discolorations. In the antiseptic yellow light he could notice the bumps and grooves and ridges of pimples and craters smothered in concealer applied thickly but unevenly, the suggestions of purple blooming from under black eyeshadow, the ridges of chromatically-cut

fake eyelashes not long enough to reach the denouement of a proper curl.

Flaws of habit, not of form, in any case. And in these flaws he could make out the staging ground for an offensive: he saw his in as being the method by which he would cripple her. He had begun to construct an image of her in his mind of the silhouette of a femme fatale, of someone whose latent femininity he would be forced to coax out of perpetually pursed lips, whom he would be forced to brutalize and ignore, to thrash about and neglect, to whittle down to a base girlishness which he could then coddle and sweeten by the force of his will alone. The matter of her prostitution was of no concern to him; if anything it provided a means where he could elaborate upon his theories of seduction in a controlled environment, where he could oscillate freely and observe, record responses to each whim he indulged, and modify his own habit accordingly.

“What’ve you got that shit turned on for?” he asked. She didn’t say anything, just leaning back and crossing her arms and letting out a reverse-gulped sigh through her nose. Jerry picked the remote up off the bed and clicked his thumb down the list of stations until he found an old James Dean movie and left it on and sat next to her.

“You ever watch this before?” he asked. She leaned forward and cupped her hands around her chin so he could only see the back of her head.

“Nah,” she said. “Ain’t seen a ton of older movies.”

“You ought to rectify that,” he said, enunciating every consonant in ‘rectify’ so as to lengthen the drawl through his nose by way of his teeth. “That’s Jim Dean there. He’s good in this.”

“Sorta good-looking too,” she said.

“Naw,” he said. “He’s too pretty to be good looking.”

“I don’t mind that he’s pretty,” she said.

“I just don’t think he could look after nobody,” he said.

“I guess he’d make a cute girl,” she said.

“Don’t get queer on me,” he said. “He’s dead, anyways.”

“I ain’t queer,” she said. “I just think he’d be cute is all.”

“Quit being fucking dumb,” he said.

“I ain’t dumb,” she said.

“How much school did you end up doing?” he said.

“I don’t think it matters a whole lot,” she said.

“Are you still in school?” he asked. “Is this how you’re paying for it?”

“I said I don’t think it matters,” she said.

“You were asking me shit earlier,” he said.

“That’s different,” she said. “I think you know it’s different.”

“I’m just trying to get cozy with you is all,” he said. He tried to run his hand through her hair and she swatted it away.

“Fuck off,” she said.

“Don’t get coy on me,” he said. He grinned and touched her hair again and she didn’t swat his hand away.

“I ain’t being coy,” she said. “I mean it.”

He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her onto her back so he could see her face and got to where he could move in to straddle her, sitting on his shins with his knees touching her shoulder and her hair was flat on the bed behind her like a ratty peacock and he leaned down to kiss her so he could smear her makeup all over her face and paint her in red gradient splotches and tear apart the sketch he had of her head and segment it into independent hamlets of nose, eyes, mouth, ears, forehead and chin and steal away her prettiness so she wouldn’t have anything else that he didn’t have, but she kept her mouth pinched tight like red wax on cheese and her teeth were razor wire behind her lips so he started licking her face all over like a dog until she scratched her green drugstore nails down his arm and he yelled and smacked her across the face and she yelled back at him and called him a fucking piece of shit and a fucking son of a bitch and a bastard and he screamed at her what the fuck was that what the fuck was that.

“I don’t want to do none of that,” she said, face turned towards the bathroom.

“Fuck, you mean,” he said.

“I mean I don’t want to do none of that,” she said. “I ain’t saying it to say it. I don’t like that shit.”

“Quit being a tease,” he said. He dragged his feet in lop-sided semicircles back toward the bed.

“I’m being fucking serious,” she said. “I ain’t a fucking tease.”

“Are you usually this ornery with your clientele?” he asked. And he enunciated his consonants the same way.

“You paid me to fuck you,” she said. “I don’t got to like you.”

“You ought to look at me more,” he said. She did not reply.

At this point he decided to dispense with his methodology. He did not admit that his methods had failed in their application, but rather that there was something faulty in their object. A churlish juvenalia, something premature, defective, coarse, any other number of adjectives he could generate from memorized turns of phrase, something that in no way reflected the failure of his methods but rather their adaptability. He would cut his losses here. He would adapt his method in such a way that he would not use it at all, gliding on his sheer cogito into sexual encounter, and would of course be proof of his own personal magnetism. She had hitherto spent her time facing away from him, curling into herself and sinking her mind into her stomach, which he interpreted to be the result of some solipsism, narcissism or neuroticism on her part. He decided that he would address all three of her theoretical ailments by acting as though he had never theorized them at all. By extension, he would stop seeing his goal as seduction and instead view her as nothing in particular. It would be flattering to her sense of professionalism.

He grabbed the remote off the bed and turned towards the TV and she spoke.

“Can you keep it turned on,” she said, in a creaky low volume that stretched the pitch of her vowels like gelatin. “I like to keep it on.”

And he tossed the remote onto the other bed and sat down next to her and started rubbing her left shoulder, making little shallow circles with his thumb and pressing in the manner of a caveman mashing berries into a thin paste against a rock. He

put his other hand around her waist and did the same, insinuating in the direction of her navel. Then he moved to the top of where her thigh met her hip and leaned his chin in to touch her neck and scratched it with his bristles to see if she would do anything, if she would affirm him with reciprocity and provide entrances to herself beyond the obviousness of orifices despite the abandonment of his techniques. She sent him signals in the form of shivers and a lean forward in the same way she had done before, and was met with a pullback down to the bed in the same way he had done before, and rubbed her shoulder from the front, pressing into the bit of tissue that connected it to her chest. She bit down on her gum and teethed on its pink softness. He scraped his chin down until the side of his face lay on her stomach and breathed her sweat in through her blouse and thought about how he wanted to live inside her lungs.

She stared at a lamp on the table and laid still and Jerry could see clearly her face sloughing down into the plastic over the bed and thinning against it until it was a two-dimensional illustration, its shading and depth removed and her attractiveness abstracted into pales like before and her hair was pressed like the petals of a sunflower. He wanted to breathe into her and make her share his lungs and she seemed as though she didn't want to breathe anything at all, so she made quick little in-and-out breaths so it didn't feel like there was any air inside of her and that she was nearly dead without having to commit to the whole thing. He grabbed her hand and she grabbed it away and put it on his head and Jerry thought that she wished he would die and a bass-clef crackling fuzz came up from between his tongue and his uvula and he felt like he was going to puke the same color as the paint on the walls, so he got up and sat on the ground and she sat upright on the bed and watched TV.

He watched with her, but he'd already seen the movie a couple of times, so he could follow along from listening to the words. She just wanted to look at James Dean anyways. He looked at her and she was still while she watched it, until she smiled at it with her mouth open and he saw that she had

braces with little pink rubber bands.

He froze and blinked and breathed and blinked again. Then he got up and leaned over and pointed at her with his other hand kept at his side.

“How old are you?” he asked. “Old enough,” she said.

“You ain’t fucking old enough,” he said.

She stood up and pointed at him back. “You don’t know that. You don’t know shit about that.” Her eyes looked fat and swollen and her cheeks looked like they were turning yellow.

“You’re wearing fucking braces,” he said.

“Lots of people wear braces,” she said, but the words dribbled down her chin in thin strings.

He sighed and pinched the spot where the bridge of his nose met his brow and he wished that he could reach in and pull out his frontal lobe in ribbons like a mummy. “What grade are you supposed to be in,” he asked. “You don’t even gotta tell me how old you are. Just tell me what grade you’re supposed to be in. Please.”

“I ain’t supposed to be in any grade,” she said.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said. “Can you gimme a straight fucking answer here?”

“I ain’t in school anymore,” she said. “I told you that already.”

“I already paid you,” he said. “I ain’t—I ain’t gonna fuck you.”

“I’m old enough,” she said. “I told you.” He sighed again and pinched his face in the same spot again.

“Who bought the braces?” he asked.

“What?” she said.

He turned to her and stepped closer to her so she would feel his height against her and the impressions of his eyes against the tops of her eye sockets. “I mean,” he said, “who paid the orthodontist to put the fucking braces in your fucking head.” She did not say anything and instead opted to inspect his left earlobe, though as far as he knew there was nothing wrong with it. “Was it your fucking mom?” he asked. “Did your fucking mom get the fucking braces put in your head?” And he

pinched his face again and let out an anorexic whimper like a dog that didn't know why it was in pain. "Do you live with her? Does she fucking know about this?"

"I don't live with her," she said. "I took myself to the dentist."

"Then how much did they cost?" he asked.

"What—what does that have to do with anything?" she asked back.

He paced back and forth with his head down, every five steps stopping to drag his foot across the ground like a rearing bull and hoping that his neck would extend at such an angle that his head would burrow into his ribcage. "If you bought them," he said, "you'd know how much they cost, cause there's no way you got insurance." He looked up at her and her face looked like how he'd imagined it against the plastic sheet, except for her nose, which protruded and disturbed the flushness of her face like that of a trainee geisha.

"Oh," she said. "Oh."

"I need to go have a cigarette," he said. He got his keys and his wallet off the table and she sat down on the bed and watched TV some more and he went out the door and back down the stairs and past the gravel and into the parking lot and pulled on the handle and it didn't open so he pulled on it again and the car alarm went off and he turned it off with his key and he unlocked the door and he got in and started the car and drove out of the parking lot and past the Presbyterian church and past the town center and then he turned east toward McComb and past an old ad for Chesterfields and another one for an old Civil War battleground put up by the tourism board.

The road got less paved as he went on just like before but in reverse now, receding coarsely from asphalt into uneven clumps of dirt seasoned with pebbles and crushed twigs. There were no streetlights so the trees were just an audience and the air smelled red and wet like tongues. He thought that he felt guilty but he wasn't sure and he really didn't anyways, because he'd excised the guilt away from his own being and could see it as something else. He was a surgeon squeezing a bloody tumor

in the palm of a rubber glove. He could pare away more at himself, conceptualize himself, turn himself more into his own object than him, really him. His badness was negated insofar and he recognized it was bad, his guiltiness the same, scrape away all the clumps congealed in the inner linings of his brainpan or whatever else there was to him and lay it in front of him and peer at them through microscope lenses and clad himself in sterile white cloth that could obscure his finer points, that could swaddle him in its formlessness and that he could shape himself to fill, not with fat or muscle and skin and bone but lines, thick-bolded and dot-dash lines of nothing. Delta Dawn was on the radio but this time it was sung by Waylon Jennings. He figured he was fifteen miles out now and he found another little town he didn't recognize and pulled into the parking lot of a gas station.

He reached into the glove box and pawed at a .38 special with dark-stained crosshatched wood grips he got cheap at a pawn shop a couple years back. He set it in his palm and set his other hand over it and squeezed it like he was trying to smother a mouse and leaned back and breathed in and breathed out and he grabbed his lighter from the cupholder and dropped it in the floorboards. He put the gun in his mouth, slipping the barrel between his lips and teasing the gap in his front teeth with the front sight. He wrapped his tongue around the muzzle and folded its tip, attempting with halfhearted battering-ram motions to slip it down its opening. He bit down on it until his gums hurt and for a few minutes he suckled on it, as if he were trying to propel a cartridge into his brain without the assistance of gunpowder, as if it were a teat. Then he took the gun out of his mouth and put it in the cupholder and tried to fall asleep for about fifteen minutes.

It Takes a Lot to Laugh

Max Robison

I went back home for Christmas for about a month. You know, freshman year and all that, they wanted us out by the fifteenth or something so I packed up my shitty little Silvertone and a couple of books of poetry and got on the first Amtrak to Fort Worth Central. And I couldn't focus. I got too hopped up on cheap dining car coffee and I couldn't stop staring at miles and miles of dead yellow grass. So I just had this little book of Rimbaud or some shit on my little tray, drinking a coffee, wearing some stained sherpa jacket and these beat-to-shit Justins. I looked like a dick. Everybody probably thought I was trying to be Townes Van Zandt or something. And it was a bunch of students on there, you know, but they were headed for Dallas, cause all those fucking people live in those fucking Dallas suburbs. Gawking, like they do. You can't even be white trash anymore. You have to be some guy trying to be white trash, and then everyone thinks you're a dick. Snickering, teeth clacking, they don't have to be anything, and then they make it a pain in your ass.

I made my dad real pleased, at least. I'd made good grades my first semester. I mean, I'm not pitying myself, but I didn't really get along with a lot of the folks down there, and I had a rough go of it sometimes, but I told my dad it was going alright. It was only sometimes. I liked campus in wintertime. Wearing cardigans and penny loafers and all that, leaves on the ground, makes you feel smart as hell. And girls dig it, you know, if you look smart or whatever but you don't have a stick up your ass. I met this one girl. I think she was reading Nabokov or something in the lounge in the philosophy building and I got her number and we went and got coffee a couple times. Nothing crazy, I don't think any of it was really a date, we just

sat around and talked. Her name was Erin. She was from one of those Dallas suburbs and her folks were these really uptight Irish Catholics and I think she got a kick out of me because I knew about books and all that but I didn't know anything about the pope or all that Old Testament stuff or incense and I didn't really care about it all that much.

But the train was nice. It wasn't too jumpy and it was nice out and we went during the daytime which was nice because I can't stand riding the train at night. People were quiet and the coffee wasn't burnt. When I got off the train the air felt like gnats chewing on my cheeks and my nose felt like someone had poured drain cleaner down it. I walked down the platform a little ways and had a cigarette, not because I really wanted one or anything but because it seemed like the right thing to do on a cold day after you step out of a train and you're waiting for someone. I had to stamp the thing out before it got to the filter anyway because I saw my dad pull up in his green F150 and I didn't want to stand outside for any longer. I threw my suitcase and my guitar case in the back and got in the cab with him and he told me he was glad to see me and he missed having me around and I told him I missed having him around too and all that.

When we got home I unpacked all my stuff and dad grilled some hamburgers for dinner. We watched an old John Wayne movie on TV—I wanna say it was *Liberty Valance*—and my dad had his left leg propped up on a little ottoman thing I guess he got from a junk shop and put a pillow under his leg and wrapped it in a blanket. I knew it'd been giving him trouble but I hadn't seen him do that before. He didn't seem like he was in pain. He's a big guy, you know, real big-shouldered, and he's the same height as me except I'm a hell of a lot reedier. And his nose kind of crinkles the same way mine does when he grins, and he grinned a whole lot when I was there. He didn't usually. It made me really happy to see him so happy but it wiggled me out a little bit.

That's why I didn't ask him about the leg. I didn't want to ask him about something that'd bum him out. I didn't ask

him about work either. Just how it was going and all that and he said it was fine. I asked him about hunting and fishing and movies and all the stuff he liked to do. And that really made him happy. It made me happy too, you know, not just because it made him happy or whatever, even though that made me happy, but because I like hearing him talk about that stuff. And he has his buddies from work and his old army buddies but I worry about him getting lonely up there. He can handle himself, I know he can. It just really freaked me out seeing him so happy to have me around.

I got pretty sick of hanging around a couple days in. I mean my old man was at work all day and there's no good view around the house, cause we're in the middle of nowhere as far as the greater Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex is concerned, and everything's just flat and it's yellow-brown dirt and dead grass and when I didn't have the front door open and just the screen door there at the front it felt like a hermetically-sealed space station that was running out of air but it was too cold outside to go out and it seemed like too much of a pain in the ass to do anything about it. And then whenever dad got home he was too tired to do much of anything. So I could entertain myself playing some stuff on guitar, along to records or whatever, or write some stuff, but you can only kill so much time in the day. I fed the cat at noon every day but he's real old and doesn't really socialize much.

So I called Erin up and we made plans to meet up on Thursday, because neither of us had anything to do during the day and I wanted to be at home on the weekends to spend time with dad and the cat. I asked her if there was anything good in Dallas and she said there was a cool art museum downtown that didn't charge students for entry, which seemed like a good deal because I was pretty hard up and it seemed more scenic than going to the spot where Kennedy caught lead, which was the only other thing I really knew you could do in Dallas. And I took the train. I took a bus to the station, which was fine, you know, cause I was really out in the middle of nowhere and nobody even takes that bus so you didn't have any basketcases

or egg-smelling troglodytes.

Then I got on the Trinity Metro line, which is nice, it's kinda like Amtrak. The seats are cushioned and they fold down and they have cupholders and all that. I don't know why, because the line only runs straight from downtown to the airport. And then once you get to the airport you have to switch to DART, which is the Dallas train, and it goes more places but Jesus Christ is it a load of shit. All the seats are that shitty little plastic they made chairs out of in elementary school, all the trains are this weird shiny .32 pistol color with smudges and stains all over them. They look like they haven't changed at all since the seventies. When I first got on there was a guy chain-smoking newports and just leaving the butts on the ground in a pile at his feet, just dropping them there. I never even saw him use a lighter. He just used the burning tip of the last one to light the next and then stamped them out on the floor. Then there was a fat guy in a wifebeater watching porn with the volume turned way up, a woman on a walker whose skin was leather and who didn't have any teeth, et cetera for about forty-five minutes until I got off at the station. Then I waited fifteen for Erin.

I was starting to lose my nerve a little when she finally got off. She had this real bohemian-chic thing going on with her outfit that I hadn't seen her do before, she had thesehigh-heel tobacco-brown boots and flares with all this strange kinda cowboy embroidery on them and this tight knit blouse with these red flowery patterns running over the shoulders. Then a shaggy fake-fur coat—she was vegan, I remembered that much—and this really heavy blue eyeshadow and a new bob cut that squeezed her face thin and made all the weight in her head pool at her chin like a squash. Her skin was the same milky, fleshy color as the sky and her hair was the same color as her freckles. I mean, I thought she looked really great, I sort of felt like a chump, I was probably wearing a sweater and chinos or something, but all of this is more memory than fact. I don't know how fat the guy on the subway was, really, and maybe the leathery lady had some teeth in her head, but everything gets

staccato and thin, bulbous and engorged, rhythmic and interminable, nothing's ever anything less than a caricature.

I asked her how she was and how her day was going and I told her she looked nice and she giggled and said things were going pretty alright on her end. She had this real breathy voice and I always wondered if she tried to lower it on purpose, because there was always this slight grain to it that didn't strike me as something someone from where she was from would sound like. I forgot what suburb she was from so I asked her, and I probably made a joke about it so I wouldn't sound like an asshole for forgetting. We got to walking.

“Plano,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, shit, Plano. I’ve been there a couple times, I think,” I said.

“What for?” she asked, and giggled again, real higher than her speaking voice.

“I don’t really remember,” I said. “I must’ve been pretty little. I don’t know. Don’t they have something about trains there?”

She giggled and blinked once and then twice. “Yeah,” she said. “There’s a little museum for it. It’s really corny. I drive by it all the time. It’s been there *forever*.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it,” I said, “I was pretty little, then. I think my dad took me down there. I was on this real train kick when I was six or seven or something. He wanted to humor me, I guess.”

She laughed and I laughed back but her laugh was a little thinner than mine and mine seemed a little too heavy. “You were one of those kids who was into trains? Dear God.” And she laughed again.

“I mean, it was something we did together, you know?” I said.

“Are you still one of those guys who’s into trains?” she asked.

“Into trains?” I asked.

“You know. Those guys who go and watch trains, collect the schedules, gawk at the engines.” The way she said gawk sounded like someone stepped on a pigeon.

“Oh,” I said. “No, no.”

“Are you sure?” She asked, and she smiled and bumped into me on the sidewalk.

“Yeah, yeah. No, I don’t really keep up with—trains?” I said.

“Trains,” she said. “You seem like you’d be one of those guys.”

“How come?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It seems like something you’d like.”

“What else do I seem like I’d like?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Are you one of those obsessed record collector types?”

“No, no,” I said. “I don’t know if I’m real neurotic enough to do that. I mean, I knew some of those guys in high school, and they look at the serial numbers and all the different pressings and the factory and—”

“English football?” she asked.

“I’m American,” I said.

“Plenty of Americans like it,” she said.

“In Dallas?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “Dallas is boring. It’s Republicans and rednecks.”

“I heard the Cowboys are alright this season,” I said.

“Do you really watch football?” she asked.

“I mean, not really, unless it’s with my folks,” I said, “but I heard from my dad they were playing pretty hot and got into the playoffs.”

“Don’t you think it’s stupid?” she asked, and she didn’t look at me but she smiled.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Don’t you go to the UT games?”

Her face tightened up. “I mean, with friends. My roommate’s boyfriend is in a frat, so we go in a group. It makes for good conversation.”

“Good conversation with who?” I asked.

“Well, people care about football,” she said. “They take it seriously there. You know that.”

“But if you don’t, why hang around people who do on account of something you got no interest in?” I asked.

“I mean, you’re going to an art museum, aren’t you?” she asked.

“I like art plenty,” I said.

“Like who?” she asked.

“I dunno,” I said. “I like Schiele.”

“Schiele?” she asked. “Where the hell’d you learn about him?”

“I mean,” I said, “probably from some book somewhere. But I like him?”

“What,” she said, “because he painted naked women?”

“Didn’t a lot of painters do that?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said, “but Schiele was a perv. Are you a perv?”

“I don’t think I am,” I said.

She giggled and grinned. “We’re just about there and you haven’t tried to hold my hand or anything.”

“This is the first time we’re going out, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said, “but a lot of guys are really forward about this stuff.”

“What do other guys have to do with anything?” I said, and I probably said it a little coarse.

“Grow up!” she said, and laughed again. “How many dates do you get?”

“Enough, I guess,” I said.

“I went out with this guy the other week,” she said, “an analyst guy who’d just got out of McCombs. The guy bought me dinner. And a glass of wine!”

“Are you still seeing him?” I asked.

“God, no,” she said. “There was nothing to talk about with him. All he cared about were stock markets, football, and suits. I don’t think he would’ve known anything about Schiele.”

“Well,” I said, “don’t blow smoke up my ass here.” “I’m not,” she said, “I’m just saying.”

We got to the place and it was this real squat kind of building with a line of windows wrapping around it like a strip. It was kind of funny looking, because everything around it was a

heady skyscraper type thing flanked by cold gray-whitish skies like liquid dandruff and big plazas with red-brown leaves carpeting the bricks. We went in and, like she said, they didn't charge us or anything. The first room was that really abstract stuff, which I don't really dig, but I didn't want to come across like some kind of wiseass or anything so I just looked at each one for a while and didn't say anything so she'd get the impression I was really thinking about each one. After that was the renaissance stuff and some greek and roman sculptures and that kind of thing, which I think she really got a kick out of. She would straighten out her back and put her hands in her coat pockets—I don't think she ever took her coat off, I don't know why—and would make a face like she was pressing her bottom teeth to the roof of her mouth. Maybe it was the Catholic thing, I don't know.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek whenever she was looking at one of those paintings with some poor woman stripped nude, her tits hanging out and all that, getting tortured by demons with swords or spears or whatever. She looked at those all serious and I couldn't shake the notion that it was probably just porno for whatever nobleman commissioned it from whatever painter. But she seemed like she knew more about this stuff than I did so I didn't want to say anything. I don't think we really said much of anything the whole time we were in there, we just went from place to place and sometimes we sat down because my feet started to hurt because I was wearing these real cheap derbies that looked pretty slick but I'd gotten from Goodwill on the off-chance that I'd ever need them, which of course proved to be the case. I kind of resent it when I'm right like that and I think I resented her for it there. She had the luxury of being smart in this real graceful, collegiate kind of way, I was just kind of smart in the way my cat was smart, I guess, but only insofar as it involved cheap shoes.

Then we got to the more modern—not really modern, you know, like a hundred years ago—stuff, which I could gel with a bit more. I knew a little about dada and surrealism and that whole mess cause in my senior year of high school I found

this book Octavio Paz wrote about Duchamp and I hit the ground running. It messed with my head more, I really dug it. It didn't make me feel smart or anything, mind you, I wasn't a real asshole about it, I just liked it. And that was when I first talked a bit more in the museum. Still not a whole lot, but more than I was prior. They had some Picassos in there—real bush-league Picassos, mind you, we were in Dallas—but then we got around to some stuff Ernst and Dix had painted and I leaned over and tapped her on the shoulder and I said man, isn't this stuff neat? I mean this is cool as hell, right? And she nodded and narrowed her eyes and smiled a little ways and went back to that same little pose she did whenever she was looking at the paintings.

But the thing that really fucked me over was this Magritte they had in there. And it wasn't like it was a shitty painting or whatever, I really liked it, and Magritte's great, I was just being a fucking dumbass. I really loved it. It was probably my favorite painting there. It was really well done, it had these real light brushstrokes and it was almost like something your grandma could hang up in the den, but it was this pair of pants standing on a table. That's it.

There wasn't any background, it was just a table and these pants. The pants didn't even have legs in them. They had pleats, they didn't have any legs. And I started laughing at it! Not like I was making fun of it, though. Laughing like you do when a guitar player plays something really good, or something good happens in a movie. You know, this whole time I was thinking, man, Magritte is the fucking man, this is fucking great, he's really onto something here. I really dug it. I still really dig it, honest. Not like some kind of fall-on-my-knees ecstasy like you read about in books, like when all those music critics first heard *The Rite of Spring*, but just really profound respect for this guy. And I laughed, because a pair of pants standing on a table is funny as hell and I think Magritte would have thought it was funny as hell too.

But when I quit laughing and turned to see Erin she was giving me a look like I just took a shit on a shag carpet. She

came over to me and she whispered something like, are you alright, but what she really meant was what the fuck are you doing you're embarrassing me you dumb fucking asshole. And when she whispered her voice was higher up than it was when she was just talking at a regular volume, and I laughed even more because I wanted to say I knew it, I knew it, I fucking knew it man. And then she got even more pissed. I quit laughing and we went through the rest of the place, and she still did that little pose, but you could tell by her chin and the way she notched her shoulders that she was gritting her teeth and balling up her fists in her pockets. I thought it was harmless but I didn't want to say anything about it and run the risk of pissing her off even more. And we went back to not really saying anything.

When we left it was getting pretty dark. I was hungry and I asked if she was, and she said that she could eat. I asked her if there was anywhere good around here and she said there was a nice Italian place a couple blocks down, in the same direction as Dealey Plaza. I asked her how expensive it was—like I said earlier I was pretty hard up—and she said it wasn't crazy, you know, but it was a nice place. And I was thinking I'd pay for her, so I asked how much a meal was. She said twenty or thirty dollars and without thinking about it I said holy hell.

“What’s the matter with that?” she asked.

“I mean, that’s kind of pricey, don’t you think?” I asked.

“Well, sure,” she said, “but it’s a date, isn’t it?”

“I mean, yeah,” I said, “but I mean, I don’t know.”

“We didn’t pay for museum tickets,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said.

“Then what’s the issue?” she asked. “You’re a gentleman, aren’t you?”

“I like to think I am,” I said.

“So I’m good enough for you to make a fucking idiot out of yourself in an art museum but not enough for you to buy me dinner?” she asked.

“It’s just really pricey,” I said.

“You’re in Dallas,” she said.

“I really don’t have all that much money,” I said, “and I gotta get my dad a present for Christmas, and—”

“It’d be more believable if you said you were getting one for your mom,” she said.

“Well, I ain’t,” I said.

“So you do this to every fucking woman in your life?” she asked.

“What?” I said.

“You’re a fucking creep,” she said.

“She’s not around,” I said.

“I don’t fucking care,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I can’t really buy you that, but there’s probably a McDonalds or something around here—”

“Drop dead, you fucking asshole,” she said, and walked toward her train stop. And she said it higher-pitched, like when she was whispering.

Her stop to get back where she lived was the same one I needed to go to to get where I lived so I killed some time. I found a McDonalds and had a hamburger and a cup of coffee.

When I got home my dad asked how the date went and I told him it didn’t go so hot. He told me there’d be plenty of women out there. And I told him he was right, but this one stung, and he seemed like he understood that.

A couple weeks later it was Christmas. I got my dad a new tackle box and book about Clint Eastwood movies I thought he’d like, with all these nice, glossy pictures and he was really happy about it. I only got one thing, which is fine, I’m pretty used to that, and it was this big trapezoidal box thing. When I opened the box there was a guitar case inside and inside the guitar case was this beautiful, expensive Martin D15. I said holy shit dad, how did you get this, and I said it because we don’t make a whole lot of money, and he said don’t worry about it. I teared up and I hugged him and I told him I loved him and he told me I loved him too. I got the thing tuned up and played him some old blues songs, Elizabeth Cotten Skip James kind

of stuff, and he said it sounded great and I sounded great and he was proud as hell of me. And then we got drunk on cheap red wine and Pabst and watched *Die Hard* until we passed out.

Goodbye, Unsiliconed

John Thompson Guillén

“How many times, say, in the last month have you felt like exploding?” asked Dr. Anjeline Charles.

“Many times,” I said.

She asked, “There’s not a specific number?”

“There’s not.”

“You mean there’s not a specific number, or you weren’t counting?”

“I wasn’t counting.”

Dr. Anjeline Charles shifted in her swivel chair and said, “Thank you for your honesty. Now, would you say the explosions are a recurring or reoccurring feeling?”

“Reoccurring, I think.”

“It happens regularly, but not in a pattern or intervals?”

“That sounds right, yeah.”

“They’re random?”

“Yeah, they’re random, Doc. But I can’t stop them from happening. Write that down, write that down. I can’t stop it from happening.”

Dr. Anjeline Charles scribbled on a notepad and asked, “When was the last time it happened?”

“What do you mean, Doc? You mean the last time I felt like exploding, or the last time I actually exploded?”

“Both, or either one.”

“Well, the last time I felt like exploding was when I was seated in that chilly waiting room right before I came in here, and the last time I actually exploded was, well, last night. No, scratch that, scratch that. Don’t write night. Write evening.”

“Last evening?”

“Yes, it sounds prettier. The sun was just about down, sky fading purple.”

“And where were you?”

“I was on Fourth Street. Late for the bus again after getting held back at work again.”

“And is that a recurring development?”

“That’s one of those questions that necessitates its own answer, Doc.”

“Okay, so these developments, then, you might say, is what often leads to the explosion?” I looked down at my toes and couldn’t see them beneath my shoes, so I looked at my shoes. I said, “Sometimes, but not all the time. And definitely not this time.”

“Could you elaborate more on why ‘definitely not’ this time?”

“I mean, the reason I exploded yesterday was because of this person I had to walk behind. And before you ask, Doc, I’ll tell you.” Dr. Anjeline Charles set her pen down and met my eyes. “The person I walked behind yesterday was, easily, the slowest person who had ever learned to walk. Doc, you could roll a corpse faster than this guy. No phone, no food—nothing. Just these slow, wide steps one after another on a busy city sidewalk. I’ve thought about this, Doc. The only reason for anyone to walk as slow as him is if he was carrying something in his pants. And by that, I mean if the guy had just robbed a place and stuffed the haul into his pants. That’s the only reason for someone who looked that healthy to walk that slowly. If that had happened, then, well, what’re you going to do? The guy’s got a salmon filet in there, and that’s why he’s moving so slowly. Fine. But at the time, I suspected nothing of the sort. He was just slow. If I were braver, I’d have said something about it to him, like, buddy, look around, look how fast everybody else is moving and compare yourself. That’s if I was confrontational, not braver, I mean. If I were braver, I’d have said, ‘Excuse me, ’or sorry, but I’m in a hurry here.’ If I was twelve years old, I’d have just clipped the back of his shoe until his heel popped out and caused him a real pain in the ass.”

“The pace of this man, then, you might say, prompted an explosion?”

“That was part of it, but then this other thing happened. After walking behind him for so long, it got me, well, frankly, curious. I spent so much time behind the guy that I started asking myself these questions about him, like where did he come from? What is he headed so slowly towards? Have we ever crossed paths before? Will I ever see him again? I went so long looking at the folds in the back of his neck, the length of his socks, his movements, and mannerisms, I convinced myself I could recognize him again if it ever came to it. But then, coming the opposite way, walking towards us, emerged out of the crowd this comically tall woman wearing a trapper hat. like nothing I’d ever seen. She was wearing a trapper hat with the flaps over her ears, and in that same instant, she stopped, and her face lit up. The slow guy stopped in his tracks, right after she had stopped, and I almost barreled over him. But I realized what was going on. These two fucking know each other. Right there, in the middle of the sidewalk, they began to chat and hug, asking how are you? How are you? I couldn’t stay and listen, of course. Neither one of these people were a part of my life. I kept walking, and then some ways down, I exploded.”

“There, that’s when you exploded?”

“Yes. Right there on the street I blew up. I sent the cars parked curbside crashing into boutique shop windows and dress mannequins, eviscerating outdoor patio restaurants and landing all my debris onto the fine evening dinner plates of hungry people, bourgeois hungry people, and caught nearly everything on fire.”

“And after the explosion, what did you do then?”

“Well, I kept my head down and took the bus home. It’s stuck with me, though. And you know how they are, I got a few gnarly looks from the shoppers, but soon they lifted up all the fallen wall plaster, swept the glass, and kept browsing the racks like nothing happened. The folks having dinner, they wiped some ceiling rubble off their tables, but didn’t let it ruin their meal.” I kept my head down and took the bus all the way home.”

Dr. Anjeline Charles unclasped her hands and picked up

her pen. She said, “You mentioned earlier, briefly, that you thought the evening sky looked pretty?”

“Oh, yes. Yeah, it was one of the more gorgeous evenings I’d ever seen.”

Dr. Anjeline Charles wrote that down in her notepad. For quite a while, she did not say anything.

Finally, then, I asked, “Well, Doc? What do you think? Can you fix me?”

Dr. Anjeline Charles looked up from her notepad and seemed to be contently startled. She said, “Yes. Oh, of course, yes. But we’re going to need a magnet. A massive, gigantic magnet. Maybe the largest magnet you’ve ever seen...”

POETRY

In Response to Internal Thalassophobia

Ty Jones

Down
down
down in the sea, in her cold,
sharp arms,
quiet,
finally unable to hear the
ringing in my
ears,

Dark,
no more blinding light in my face,
no more need for the epileptic settings
on my devices,

Even pressure against the
parts of me escaping,
pushing my soul back to
where it's supposed to be,
like fixing a slipped
disk.

Falling away to my sweet silence no more playing the game of when
to speak and when to be silent and what to say and what not to say
and why would you say that that was so
rude and hurry up and say something,
be polite.

Just peace.

The fish next to me don't drown
(I am not sure yet if I have gills but that's a risk I'm willing to take)
I can see the parts of me I hate,
and the parts of me I hurt,
and the parts of me I hate that hurt,

and I am at
peace.

No one to twist the knife.

Me and myself and they and us and we and you are all gone.
I am at peace.

I am cold inside and out – for once not half burning-half stone –
altogether, all at once.

i don't know how to love without my hands

Lucia Llano

bc isn't life just nerves like kitchen lights?
or like the same poem again and again?

hasn't everything love-bent already been said?

i have so much to say its backlogged my throat is all clogged up now
how bout you stick your fingers down it? i'm

just kidding.

i'm just stoned
in place,
a granite statue,
sending you a text

thinking of you,

the other day,

remember how
i put my fist in my mouth
just to see how it would fit and
it just kept coming back lavender
when i spit,
or like a fistful of grass.

anyways. i think i swallowed wrong
and you forgot to ask but

yes, i'm still stuck.

yes, i've been trying to find my hands ever since.

until then,

just know,

(i love you)

i am not trying to walk away from you

i am just always trying—

i am just always breaking

in a new pair of shoes.

i am

also sorry.

or more like

just waiting on you.

bc i know it's so cool to be calm and collected

but like, i'm sitting here, freezing to a still.

c'mon, turn on my kitchen light.

give me a little heat.

oh, that reminds me

once i rolled out the hot-womb with a godlike fear of language

so my first word was laughter and

i never found a word

that laughter didn't already say

and you make me laugh

(it's)

so hard.

i'm just a kid

learning to speak all over again.
i just roll around the hillside of each mouthfeel
white socks painted green
by the small hands of each small word

i just stand there, pointing at the world
saying, *look! look!! look!!!*
nothing else.

sometimes,
just sputtering,

love
!

if this is any solace to you,

Lucia Llano

the places in the wet, forest dirt where our little fingers once dug knuckle-deep in search for the purple, swollen rubber of odd creatures, are still standing, the same throbbing earthworms are there even now, crawling and slurring through the wet dirt and now unbothered by our tiny fingers, spend their time instead planting soft little kisses all the way down the sleeping carcass of our old childhood dog.

ANTFARM

Ryan Nowicki

She gazes beyond the cave toward the frigid gales that ruffle the oak trees, a little creature within a great earthen tower. Her many compatriots and acquaintances flood in among the strangers, wind-swept waves of them cresting the doorway in search of shelter. Some make their way through the colony to labor, moving foodstuffs and construction materials, backpacks and information. Others don their treated grasses and furs and brave the breeze, hobbling off to other mounds where more strangers lie. They will be welcomed there, just as she lets the strangers wander about this mountain. They will not dare approach her room, nor any other chamber they are not guided toward. She knows this. The air waves tell her this. Patterned plosives and approximants in the atmosphere pressure them, little wind-lifted marionettes, singing their plots and following director's cuts. She makes her own and responds to those of others in turn. She uses these waves because she cannot smell well, and neither can they, not on these lengthscales. This makes them quite different from other colonial animals, and as a result of their lack of typical pheromonal communication, they lack proper queens, their naked bodies all equivalently small, only distinguished by their chosen adornments on their backs and their bellies and their buttocks and their breasts.

Tumors

Ryan Nowicki

There was a blossoming in my chest

One night, when I was alone
At home, mulling the day over
Again in my head,

Where my heart awakened, ceased to rest,

From which vines grew greener than envy—

She was there, an aspiration,
Both newly conceived
And forever longed for.

They were callously thorned, so prickly

That when they fruited, the red flower—

Bloody,
Bloody,
Bloody as all get out—

Died and became an ulcer, a shower

Of fertilizer onto a stomach lump.

Nextdoor in the hospital,
A woman, too, waited
For her tumor to be examined.

Next to my bed, she was gleeful, plump-

Bellied and pushing her tumor out—

It hurt, I could tell—
Her teeth grimaced,
Her muscles focused—

From her womb, her stomach; her long bout

Was intense and, once over, was calm—

She sighed relief,
The weed plucked from her bed,
A garden's harvest clutched close in her arms—

With an ambience of love, no psalm.

I stared at her in silent, solemn loss—

 Why the pleasure? My abdomen aches

 And yet the tumor is still,

 Never to move,

 Never to grow,

 Never to ache and break and become anew,

 Forever wilted in my arms—

My heart curdled; I knew mine could try,

But no matter our predicament,

I would lie, I would die.

luna angelo

Julianna Riccioli

give me plum-colored fingerprints
i can wear around my waist
like an unholy halo of adoration
or, i am Saturn, with my own rings
because there is no love
so divine
as ours.

in the hazy hours after midnight
as we bask in our shared sticky-satiation
i pray this heaven

(our heaven)
lasts forever.

your love is moonlight
that never wanes.

i will glimmer
(only for you)
and wish
on silver streaks of shooting stars
for more nights like these.

“dear celestial body,
(one apart from you or me)
i worship [you] at the altar of our affection,
my supernova,
and ask that this heaven is not some one-off
and we continue to have more than the fuzzy nighttime be-
fore the dawn
and you always revere me.
humbly,
[me].”
so

while we’re here
(or anywhere)
in the light of the streetlamps sneaking in through the crack
of the curtains
i leave you love-bites
like asteroids
colliding on your neck

Disk Flowers

Molly Tompkins

Between there and here, I
Saw a two-headed sunflower
That reminded me of him.

A double imprint in the green
Thumb, pushing the seed deep in soil
Must have betrayed a cleft heart.
Still, planted—

The history of his insides
Were written in Vietnamese,
The signature resembling Fansipan peaks.

We only understood *his* language.
Before English, he spoke signs,
Ten rayed sunbursts
Meant *Mama, hold me.*

Baby boy, smiling with nubby teeth
Fuzzed with cavities. He loved
To rub our father's bald head, like a globe.

His black bangs hung like night sky
High above the sahara, no
Sign of the metal river sloshing

Runoff thoughts from his brain
Like a Venetian afterthought, dead
Ending in a side street.

He wouldn't have known the French—
Grand Mal, seizing him, back to a metal
Barred crib and nurses' honey breasts.

The whites of his eyes blew back,
Like a wave break against the gale,
His body clapped like air between
Two hands, clasping and letting go
For the sound of good.

I thought his forehead swam the Pacific's
Length because he kept eyes for two suns,
Never seeing the silver shunt seeded
Until weeded beneath the operating light.

They asked for your mother,
One of the two, watching, your eyelashes
Unwind two disks of brown,
Spiraled with gold.

Where are we all?
We could answer only
Covering him in kisses.

Good News

Molly Tompkins

You proposed forever,
Twisting your knuckles above,
The honeyed veins of the treetop
Table, in the corner of the coffee shop
Where we met, the first time of many.

I put my hands over
Yours, easing the nerves that struck
Like hammers through your skin,
Merely at the thought of pressing a key
Into a wood lock that could stir into a living room.

Your eyes shone.
I never would have foreseen you,
Gone.

How many proposals do you think this tree saw?
Thousands, you traced the raw
Patches beneath the lacquer.
Fairies, princes, hikers who scaled the mountain,
That sounds like the beginning of a tale.

I thought you broke the promise,
But now, watching what the tabletop witnessed—
Scarred with stirred stars and run rivers,
Stained with birthmarks and unlashed
Eyes, I realize such proposals can't crack.

Branches, light enough for children and the sun,
Dated into calendars and captive chairs,
That prop scenes for romantic affairs,
Corner tables set with one-days,
Until, one day, there never need
Come another.

i can feel when i'm open and
yearning

Trin Viet Ho

every nerve receptive and tender
my body gentle and yawning
corners of my lips curling
tip of my tongue orbiting
tingling tracing titillating

how sensitive can we be with our soft subtle grazings
between fingers

lips
nipples
nerve endings?

All That Glitters

Wynn Wilkinson

Let me clarify what I mean.

When You bite the grapefruit and juice runs down Your chin,
And You offer me the sweetest slice and I decline.

When You walk lockarmed through bitter freeze
And test the Northmost corner, of which You'd been warned
And You promise *lahat chereb* still cracks and burns.

The tonic tastes better on Your side of the bed,
Or so I imagine, ill on the damp tile floor
From which I beg *unto dust shalt thou return*,
Or the restaurant foyer slick with glass and ice
Wherein You wink *the last shall be first*,
And I beam, *and the first last*.

This is all to say

It's the eyes which house the seven thousand mysteries
Which glint like gold in the glutton's gaze,
And the heart which discloses the twenty thousand truths
Which shimmer like water in the Spring of Thirsty Friends.
And I, God forbid, have stumbled in mines dark and dim
And have tasted liquid fire, and made out—*consume!*
The consumptive and prince share a trivial glance
And regret not bathing in each other's arteries.

I have sucked pulp from that fruit of countless glowing truths,
Plucked so uncontroversially from Your Garden,
And offered up to You with a *holy is the Lord of hosts*
Then rescinded when the morions of conquest emerged.

Now I see fountains hidden from sight;
Now the oases reveal what is plain.
And I loathe—much too late—those high archetypes,
For the stomach is full of long-hardened gold
Which water may never erode.
Those oases and fountains alike are divulged
To the truth-seeking ships without trespassing souls.

And maybe I've got a little more to say to You now,
And maybe I reminisce on that stage of nudation
After the earthquake but before the disease—
Those parched cracks in Your skin spreading to mine,
Animals devoured in Your wounds, braying in fear
Before crossing over to graze on my meadow's marrow.
What haunted visions did You witness, cotton-mouthing,
Sheltering under chandeliers or open sky,
Eyes sputtering with seismic synesthesia,
Mind racked by muttered *thou shalt surely die*
Which pierced Your chamber door

And reached us way down at the Tree of Life.
Tomorrow, I'll chant holies, and glimpse Your cracked lips
Grapefruit-ridden rouge, pacifist, honest, away.

Today, I bring clarification, and offer up
A glint of gold, mined from my stomach, then moored in
my eyes—
You'll agree it looks better in Yours.

Grief Poem 2212

Wynn Wilkinson

The Moon shone across the babbling stream and spoke: "Be still!
I'm full tonight, but your ripples shatter my image;
Be still, mirrorlike, and reflect the untarnished light of my grace!"
The stream cried, "I'm trying, I am! But think of my state—
The earth consumes me, I fall through the sky, and my bends
Fall downwards with the slope of this hill. But I'm calm, if not still;
I'll end in a pond, crystal clear and servile. Meet me there
To gaze on your gleaming cheeks and precious eyes
Through your loyal and hardworking vessel, O Moon."
But the stream saw no more of the Moon that night,
And the pond sketched shadow in the shimmering starlight.

I have lured you to the desert with promises of an oasis
And the mountaintop with promises of a monastery;
They exist in time I do not have.
The pastures of our eternity have never been greener;
Frolic, and see your own eyes through mine as I forecast the oncoming snow.
Lay me face down in the direction of the enemy, my Love,
And wish on the smallest wheat-grain you can find that there is no Heaven.
Let's trade: I'll be the pond, tranquil and still, missing your wandering beams;
Lest I be the Moon, in glory and grace, crying out for that babbling stream.

Pillbug

Wynn Wilkinson

We're lucky to hear over cast iron sizzles
A pillbug scampering earnestly in the grout
Glinting, concealed halo, I stoop but can't quite see.
Silent Thatagāta, long beyond the wondering,
Patient wanderer crossing icy marble seas,
Middle way over crumbs, hair, skin, and dust,
Whose antennae peruse the driftwood of life.
Please, please kneel with me. We are hosts.
A guest has resolved to spend precious time here.
Relocation can wait—let this humble secret keeper
Feel the warmth reserved for the most tender prayer.
And don't you dare roll up that jaundiced old digest!
First, butcher and scatter my libational corpse
In segments and space as this Godhead has limbs.

NONFICTION

In the Wasteland of my Childhood Bed

Lucia Llano

I grew up in the kind of town that made you think of your past lives often. It was a little orange city, melting, pouring over the Mexican border. It never knew of anything but itself. A West Texas town breathing within an egocentric vacuum. A living city amongst the walking dead. It made you lust after what else you could have, or rather what else you might've had in other lives you couldn't quite recall. But this town. It had the kind of charm that you would never understand unless you grew up there too. The kind of charm that would sink its teeth into you. There, it's a well-known fact that no one ever leaves. You will find generations of families living in the same yellow houses by the churches, never having ever touched the skies. This town. With the warmth of the dust storms and city lights and orange skies and punch-hole stars. It holds me like a domestic dog, on a short leash. Even when it gives me some slack, even when it lets me loose, I always find my way back in.

I grew up here, terrified, because all the kids would say that this town was rabid. That it dug its claws into you. It was that adolescent, desert lore. We were all far too familiar with that young itch to leave and that old, beckoning ache to stay. The older I get, and the more I try to make a run for it, the more I come to believe it. Because I have tried, and tried, to cut myself free, but the truth is, no matter how far I manage to stray, I don't think I can ever properly leave.

This town had always demanded performance. With its red sand stage and spotlight sun. It begged you to squeeze some nectar from the wastelands. You would never understand unless it bit you, that kiss of death. Here, you woke up in the mornings and grabbed a scarf, a leather journal, some sunglasses, a cigarette, and a tall, cold bottle of Mexican coke. Just to go drive around the pavement desert. Just to wander around

local corner stores with a cassette and some earbuds and ripped tights. There was not much else to do but play the parts handed to you.

Today, I stumbled my way back home again, back to the city on fire, back on stage, back into my old roles. I would know it blind. Here, the heat of the Texas sun exhales off the adobe walls as you walk home, half somnambulant in the evenings. I wandered home feeling entranced, enamored by the once again familiar pebble lawns and morse code city lights. But I knew all too well that this was not the kind of town you fell for, but rather, the kind of town that grabbed you in its hands and pulled you under, the town that gave you no other option but to starve in love for it. It came with a loyalty so strong it was nearly akin to religion. And you knew no other choice but to defend it with that feminine anger, that motherly venom. And I always did. You could say it was all folklore. Told by desperate teenagers. Told by the stench of a stifled adolescence, something like the hint of vodka on your breath as you stumble past your mother into your childhood bedroom.

Tonight, back at home, I found myself a child again. Slipping into my baby blue hand-me-down sheets. Once again, a little girl in a little yellow house pouring out by a church. And here, it's easy to close your eyes. Between the warmth of the dust and the dirt. It's easy to forget all else. This town, plays along, ignores the fact that I have grown far too big for it, and instead wraps me in its long, hot arms, and like a mother, tells me I am safe with her.

I still find myself performing for this city. For the blue, endless sky. For the way the clouds scatter like lovers in the mornings. For the fire in the sky every evening. For the winding suburban roads and dead-end streets stopping cold at the feet of the Franklin Mountains. I am always performing. Even here, writing alone, I feel a subtle audience, somewhere inside my mind. There is always a voyeur peering over my shoulder. I write this now, to you, because I know quite well that no one else would understand. Only you could see this charm too. The appeal to the cult of the mountain valley. With these tree-lined

streets. With their rock walls and mountain backdrop. They are heavy. I feel like a visitor with too much baggage stumbling down Camille Street. I sit in the red of my old teenage car, drive down the streets bordering my old high school, and find myself no longer knowing its walls. I've got to pull over to cry. I don't know when this city turned ghost town. I always felt it breathe, even then. Now, I drag the old, empty shell of who I used to be after me, through the landmarks and the metaphors, the infinite sky. Like a snake that shed its skin only to crawl back in again, I park in the same spots I used to, just to sit in the hurt for a little while longer. And under this desert sun, the memories ripple. The iridescent shapes of the past still linger, sitting on the same benches, standing on the same intersections and street corners. I reckon traces of my skin are still lying there. Clear as day. I want to hear it say goodnight to me once more, that's all I want, for it to yell at me, once more, *"don't let the desert get to you, girl, it's only a mirage."* Only you would understand.

Pride: Return Rituals and Devotional Friendship

Wynn Wilkinson

This is a gay bar, Jesus. It looks like any other bar on the outside, only it isn't. Men stand three and four deep at this bar—some just feeling a sense of belonging here, others making contacts for new partners. This isn't very much like a church, Christ, but many members of the church are also here in this bar. Quite a few of the men here belong to the church as well as to this bar. If they knew how, a number of them would ask you to be with them in both places. Some of them wouldn't, but won't you be with them too, Jesus?

-Rev. Malcolm Boyd, 1965

Under the sticky, mid-day August heat, a party is raging in Austin. The sights and sounds are built to dazzle; every color of the rainbow streams past without cessation, overwhelming the iris with glitz and glam. Club music pumps from a distant stage where drag performers strut, undeterred by the sun's unceasing fervor. The downtown procession glides by, showcasing the diversity of the enthusiastic, accepting community—including the wolves that have identified said community as a sound financial opportunity. A UT student with dyed hair and assless chaps strikes up friendly conversation with a graying white woman sporting a “Free Mom Hugs” shirt. A float for a company that routinely donates to the political campaigns of homophobes wafts by a socialist in a sexy cop outfit reminiscent of the Village People. Real cops, sporting rainbow armbands, march past an aging lesbian who, many moons ago, hurled stones during the Stonewall protests. A girl my age wearing an asexual pin exclaims that she likes my outfit. That I’m slaying. Thanks mama, you too!

The ritual I’ve identified is, of course, the Austin Pride pa-

rade, although for decades now, similar celebrations have and do occur annually across the country. When I attended my first Pride event, I was 17 years old, bisexual, and felt far from welcomed in the small Texas town where I'd been raised. The unrelenting summer heat enhanced by the unforgiving burning asphalt of downtown Austin set the scene for the beautiful ritual of radical acceptance that is a Pride celebration. On that special day, strangers embrace, hug, kiss, love, and hold in community other unknowns, connected by the shared experience of queer oppression, by the miracle that is queer love. Maybe your parents were closed-minded. Maybe your pastor told you you'd burn in hell. Maybe you're new in town and are just desperate for community. Nobody asks; knowing smiles take the place of questions, skipping straight to the important bit: *You—we—are here now, together.* Four years later, I've yet to take part in a ritual where I feel more encouraged to express myself, to liberate my oft-caged queer soul, than at Pride. I've never felt more welcome.

My usage of the term *ritual* is not accidental. Pride, to the uninitiated “baby gay” on the first steps of the journey of self-discovery, is downright baptismal. The 20th century Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade developed the concept of the eternal return, the argument that religious ritual symbolically transports the devotee(s) to the time of mythical inception. The Catholic envisions himself in sacred time walking alongside Jesus, the Buddhist imagines that she meditates at the feet of the Buddha. I console the skeptic that this flight need not be literal, and is more accurately a spiritual proximity to the source, a return to the elements of this life that are sacred and everlasting. I make no claims that homosexuality is a religion, but most queer people would agree that love, welcoming, tolerant, queer love, is sacred, special, fundamental. Love—romantic, platonic, agape, familial—is so often denied to us, yet here is a space where we may not only drink our fill, but our cups runneth over. Even the listless rainbow capitalism on display during the festival parades facilitates love, an object of collective scorn and ridicule, a binding agent that promotes unity in the face of deception and deceit.

It's significant, too, that this love is not merely an internal feeling, but an outward, expressive manifestation of care which selects a subject, be it a community, individual, or concept. The welcoming love espoused in symbols such as the various pride flags, makeup-and-fashion-based expression, song and dance—what one might ascribe to the category of “queer culture”—are devotional practices in a morality that prioritizes love as the most sacred of gifts. The famously eccentric, pluralistic Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna conceptualized five valid archetypal forms of devotion or God-realization, one of which is friendship, another the love of a mother for her child, another the woman for her lover. A friend says to another, “Come sit with me.” Another friend remarks: “I like your outfit today”. The mother sees God in the eyes of a boy whose birth parents see naught but the Devil. She hugs him and they weep; their acceptance, care, and mutual appreciation reach to the heavens. Two men, mystical outcasts for proclaiming their truths in the tradition of al-Hallaj, discover one another in the night; each believer caresses the other’s Christ-body, recreating the reception of the Eucharist, returning by sacred time to the Last Supper of the Messiah. Beauty, truth, freedom, love—the ritual of Pride can be nothing but an eternal return, a celebratory worship of the fundamentals of human experience from which the community has so often, throughout the history of this country, been gatekept.

After Pride 2019, while waiting for my Uber after the climactic parade and cruel sun had come and gone, I wept and wondered if I should wipe off my makeup before getting in the car. The ritual is never permanent; we must always return to the profane world. I pictured returning to my hometown, where I would concede to Caesar what is his and simply pretend that my worship had never occurred. The city skyscrapers faded into the distance as I stared out the backseat window, the lights and sounds of 4th Street an evanescent sensory experience. A light drizzle began to coat the glass, blurring my vision of the ritual site. How can you up and leave the clutches of the divine? I mentally marked my calendar for the next event, blissfully un-

aware of the approaching cancellations that would be inflicted by Covid. I had been welcomed to peer into the heart of God and had seen the overflowing oceans of love-blood. How could I bear to, for even an instant, look away?

Contributor Biographies

Natalie Brink is a fourth-year English major, and she is completing a certificate in Creative Writing. She loves reading and writing speculative fiction and becoming obsessed with obscure historical time periods. She can usually be found baking, drinking iced coffee, or listening to ABBA—sometimes all three at once.

Ty Jones is an Asian Studies major who has never submitted anything anywhere before and was as baffled to hear that people liked one of their poems as their friends were to hear that they wrote a poem. They are survived by their cat (and landlord) Tippy and their lanyard collection.

Lucia Llano is a Cuban-American poet raised in El Paso and currently studying Creative Writing and English. In her writing, she has a taste for the surreal and a sweet tooth for ampersands, hyphens, and white space. And also love. Lots of it. Lucia is, ironically, not the best with words. So she's grateful to have her poems to be able to say— see, this is what I meant all along! In her free time, she indulges in yoga, eating fruit, swimming in rivers, painting poorly, finding hearts in tree leaves, traveling, twirling her hair around her finger, & peanut butter.

Ryan Nowicki is eager to disappear into the cosmos once their fae contract with the university ends. A graduating senior in Astronomy and Physics with an Honors Certificate in Creative Writing, they write their poems when not busy studying black holes and the greater universe. In their work, they ruminante heavily on gender, nature, and the eternal peculiarity of society and our places in it. Once released into the starry night, you might yet be able to summon them again with Star Wars watch-parties, earnest questions about dinosaurs, or new recipes for baked goods.

Julianne Riccioli is a sophomore English major and French Studies minor. When she isn't writing (or languishing on what to write) she spends her time trying new coffee drinks, caring for her plants, going to concerts, and thrifting with friends. In her writing, she hopes to verbalize the whimsy, the longing, and the love that life can bring.

Max Robison is from Krum, Texas. He is studying history at the University of Texas.

Molly Tompkins is a Plan II and English major, also pursuing certificates in Creative Writing and Core Texts and Ideas. In her work, she attempts to capture the profundity of the mundane. Stuck in her home during the COVID-19 quarantine in 2020, she picked up a pen for the first time and began to find poems in the furniture, siblings, and dishes she'd taken for granted. She writes to reveal goodness and hope in the world, both to herself and others.

John Thompson Guillén is a third-year English major with a minor in Cultural Anthropology and a certificate in Creative Writing. He has lived in Florida, Ohio, and Texas, as well as his mother's home country of Costa Rica, where he loves to frequent and visit his family. Some other things he enjoys are: books, octopuses, sweet tea, baseball, and outer space.

Trin Viet Ho (they/she) is a poet, playwright, theatre director, dramaturg, and activist with interests in pleasure activism, art as resistance/community building, and transformative justice work. Trin is a transfer junior majoring in Race, Indigeneity, and Migration with a minor in Asian American Studies. While pursuing community outreach and facilitation work, they want to also continue their creative work as a liberatory practice.

Wynn Wilkinson is a 3rd-year student studying Government and Religious Studies. He loves reading and writing poetry, learning new languages, and daydreaming about petting the campus squirrels. He thinks making art can equally be a process of obfuscation or revelation (he prefers the former, and would like to apologize to his readers in

advance)! His favorite authors are Jorge Luis Borges and Kahlil Gibran, and following their lead, he enjoys writing about nature, spirituality, and the human psyche. He hopes to work in academic publishing and written translation after his nascent career as a creative inevitably crumbles.

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