Camas

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Article 1

Winter 2019

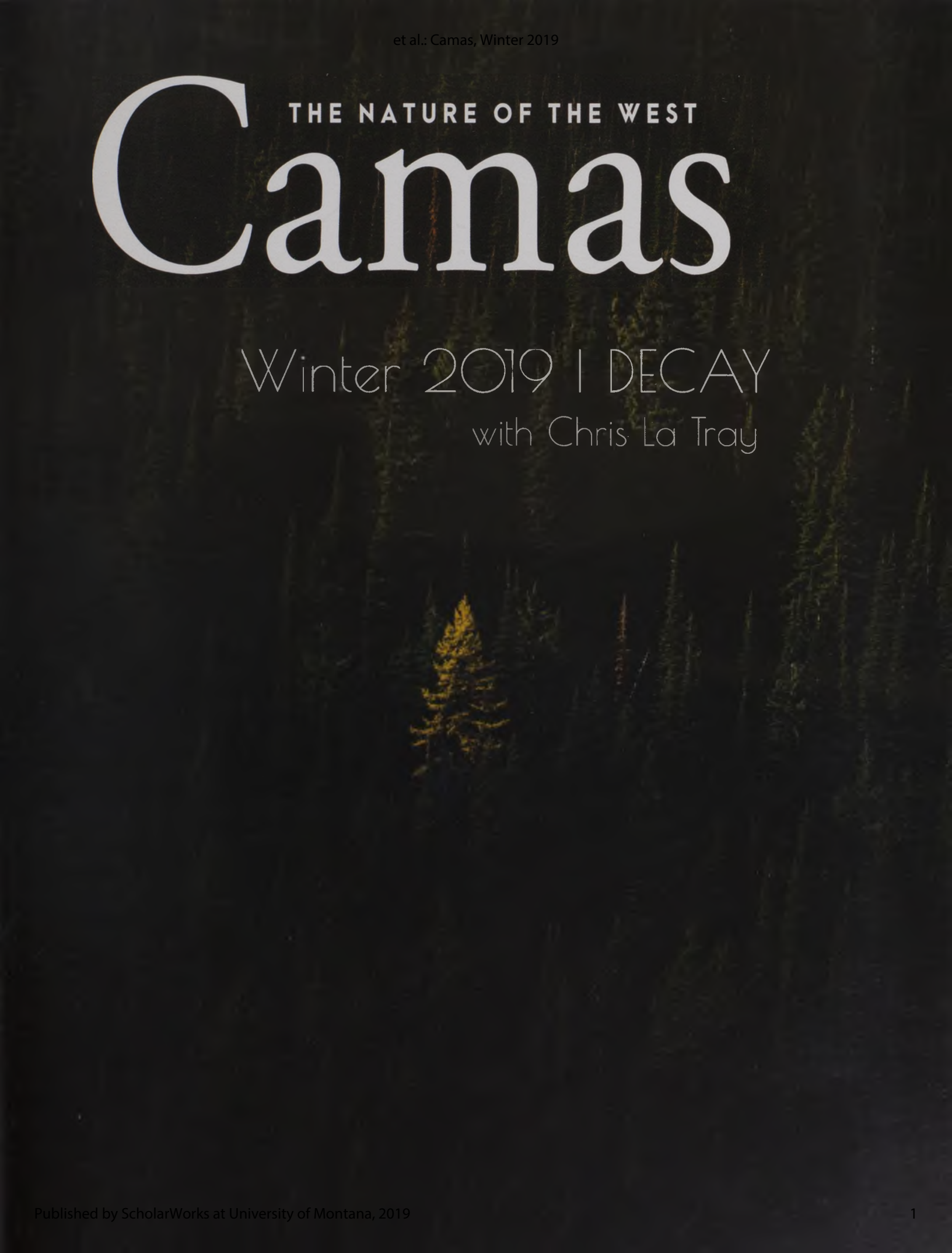
Camas, Winter 2019

THE NATURE OF THE WEST

Camas

Winter 2019 | DECAY

with Chris La Tray



THE NATURE OF THE WEST

Camas

VOLUME 28 NUMBER 1

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Camas Magazine cultivates a community of writers and artists dedicated to promoting ecological and cultural diversity and resilience in the American West.

OUR TITLE *Camas* takes its name from the plant *Camassia quamash*, which is native to the American West. Camas has historically served as a staple food and medicine for Indigenous communities. Its harvest continues longstanding reciprocity between land and people.

OUR HISTORY Founded by Environmental Studies graduate students at The University of Montana in 1992, *Camas* provides an opportunity for students, emerging writers and artists, and established voices to publish their work alongside each other.

OUR FRIENDS *Camas* received support for this issue from the Associated Students of The University of Montana, the Clark Fork Coalition, the Wild Rockies Field Institute, the Missoula Writing Collaborative, Montana Natural History Center, the University of Montana Environmental Studies Program, and donors.

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COVER ART:
Golden |

From the Editors

We left the warmly-lit Jeannette Rankin Hall—the locale of the Camas office—and walked into the cold, dark night. The moon hung bright over Mount Sentinel, clouds wisping through the light. It seemed a scene out of a horror movie; the clock tower lit up, its hourly gong reminding us of the late hour.

Sidewalk invisible, we trusted our feet to find hard cement beneath them. We nearly stepped on it—a tiny body. Soft. Cold.

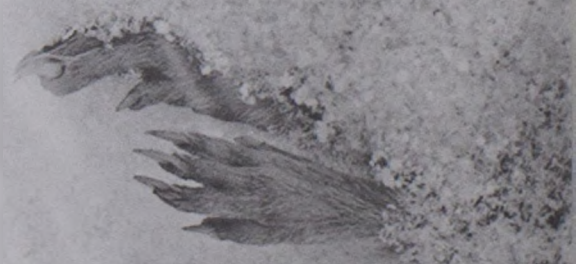
A northern flicker lay dead on the path, wings stiffened, spotted breast exposed to the November sky. Perhaps a coincidence. But with the theme of "decay" fresh in our minds, it might have been a sign.

Before the next afternoon, the body had disappeared from the Oval. Somewhere out of sight, decay began to set in. With this issue of Camas Magazine, our hope was to take a closer look at that which normally makes us avert our eyes.

Within these pages, we hear stories of places forgotten and exhausting treks. We find out what it might be like to exist in that liminal space between life and death, between sleeping and waking, between being remembered and being forgotten. The writers and artists in this edition dive deep into the concepts and emotions evoked by the idea of decay: grief, fear, and even relief.

We close with featured writer Chris La Tray's meditation on death and dying in "Back to the Mud." La Tray—who spends day and night surrounded by the wisdom of books as a bookseller at Missoula's independent bookstore Fact & Fiction—invites us into his living room on a dark night when the veil between the living and the dead thins. Ending here seems fitting for an issue that grapples with the myriad ways we conceptualize and compartmentalize our eventual end.

Thanks for reading,
Sydney Bollinger and Jackie Bussjaeger



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Rat Feet | Carll Goodpasture

Crossings

NONFICTION | KITTY GALLOWAY

She was small, just a loose pile of bones and fur, the maggots and ravens already at work. Feet paused, asphalt smell rising. The hot afternoon sun beat down.

It was Idaho, midday, middle of July. We were walking the edge of Highway 200. There were weeks of dust on our packs, in our shoes. Roads to highways. Highways to roads. Roads to dirt. Dirt to trails.

She was a bear cub, or rather whatever was left of one, conscious self or spirit gone a few weeks or more. Brown fur matted, took me a while to figure out. Long past impact, heart stop, dust settle, her heft only barely suggested what she used to be.

Beneath my boots the road wound away, back toward mountains, forward, toward more. It was the first roadkill bear I'd seen that summer of walking across three states. The first dead bear, but not the first dead animal. There'd been elk and deer, mice and voles, foxes and raccoons, once a bat. I'd seen several possum and coyotes, countless. One time there was a moose.

Now this, a bear cub, long past gone. I'd gotten good at figuring out what bodies used to be.

Erik was two steps behind me, ash blond hair long in his eyes, eyes down, on his steps. Calvin followed last, panting. Young paws and thick black fur had trained him quick to duck for shade that summer. On trails he ran ahead, found the cool cover of old Douglas firs or the cold of creeks to wait. Once we caught up, he'd be off again. But here, on highways, he plodded along, hot, leash bound.

The highway walking was not ideal, but was the only way for the trip to work. We were moving to Montana from Washington, and the space between the places lay open like a question mark. We had the summer free and decided to walk our way home.

There were many answers to the question of why we walked. We had the time, but time in those days could be filled with anything. Farm jobs, backpacking trips, day camp teaching, summer school. It amounted finally to curiosity. What does the world look like, between here and there? Washington had been my home and Montana his, so we split the difference. Or rather tracked that difference slowly, one step at a time. Fast as our feet could carry us.

Most long trails angle north to south, and for a reason. They follow the Pacific Crest, or the Continental Divide. We were walking east, across ridgelines, across watersheds. Our route then, had to be of our own making. Maximize mountain time, minimize roads. Witness every step of our own travel.

West to east meant roads could not be avoided. Go ahead and check: you'll see for yourself. Our country is crisscrossed with pavement meant for cars. Roads maximize speed, up to eighty miles in an hour. It's tough to avoid roads, whoever you are. Whether you're a pronghorn on the run, a curious field mouse, or a scavenging black bear. Walk any direction long enough and you'll hit pavement.

It's tough to avoid roads, whoever you are. Whether you're a pronghorn on the run, a curious field mouse, or a scavenging black bear. Walk any direction long enough, and you'll hit pavement.

We walked away from our own driveway in Bellingham, Washington, one spring morning, packs heavy. We carried lentils and rice, camping gear and dog food. Coffee and enough whiskey to ease those first few days. Roads to highway to roads to logging roads to trailhead to trail. To begin.

Two months later, and the summer had been different than we expected. The mountain sections were a refuge and respite, much needed after our route forced us to follow more roads than we'd wanted. Our prior winter spent poring over maps didn't convey the monotony of road walking, the mental space those miles would take. Still, we had our script down now, a record on repeat. Car slows, elbow out, eyes questioning, commence.

"From Bellingham… yes. Washington. Missoula. Yep, Montana. No, no, not crazy. Yes… actually walking. No, don't need a ride, thanks though. Yes! Thanks. We'd love those snacks."

I walked in front, stride steady, red pack heavy, hair now chopped short. I looked like a boy from behind, but it got me less attention, so was fine by me. Erik walked next, big army green pack worn thin in places. He whistled quietly through his front teeth as he walked. Calvin followed last and to one side, the dirt side; the trees and river, discarded trash, smells of field mouse snake slither search for second breakfast side. An Aussie Lab mix, Calvin acted like a Shepherd but looked like a Lab. Anxious, he didn't like us out of sight. Less than a year old, the walk seemed to be

Iguanot | Chris Daley

undoing him.

I'd learn my lesson later, about dogs on thru-hikes. But Calvin was the first dog, and this walk would be different than the others. He hated the roads more than we did, flinched as trucks roared past. He'd bound in joyous circles, eyes wide, tongue out, each time we hit trail again.

That day in July, the day we saw the bear cub, was our longest stretch of highway yet. It was a necessary crux born of steep rock walls and windy river. Yet the miles had been tough: pavement provides less distraction than ridgelines. Cars careened close and made us all think of near misses.

When we reached her, the bear cub, we all stopped. The three of us together, looking. She was only one of many bodies we'd seen that summer on roads, but still her dark coarse fur pulled our eyes. There was dirt and gravel mixed in with limbs, one paw with pads still visible, angled just so, outstretched. Screech of brakes, careening car, swerve, impact. Maybe she was with her mama, or a sibling, or several. Maybe it was dark. Maybe the driver didn't see her.

I read recently that one million animals are killed crossing roads in the United States daily. One million dead, each day. That's an animal killed every 11.5 seconds. That's now. And again when you're done with this paragraph. The National Highway Safety Administration reports there are

1.5 million car crashes related to deer collisions annually. That's just deer. I'm guessing most of those deer don't make it. Not to mention the elk, moose, pronghorn, wolf, coyote, jackrabbit, person cycling, person running, person walking and not looking, armadillo, hawk, possum, snake, prairie dog, field mouse related collisions. The bear related collisions. Not to mention those.

Drivers are always told not to swerve. Slow down if you must, but continue trajectory: forward and fast. Value of human life and all. I get it. We have places to be, places that feel important. The animals, casualties of our own collective speed, are a flash as we drive past. Matted fur, legs akimbo, ruptured guts. It's easier, looking out the window, not to look. To look through, or look past. To the beautiful river, scenic valley, awe-inspiring mountain highway, prairie, city, park, sunset over buildings, twinkly lights, look! It's easier to look at that.

After a while, our feet turned away, as they always did. We had miles to make and the day wasn't getting cooler. We headed east, Clark Fork River on our right.

Two years earlier, on another windy road, we were driving, Erik and I, through western Montana. It was dusk, the worst hour to drive roads like that. Deer out in droves. Diurnal creatures just headed toward sleep, nocturnal ones waking up. Everyone's active, and distracted. Headlights don't catch eyes in light like that.

That night, Erik hit a cat. It ran out fast, right in front of us, practically sprinted under the wheels. You know how cats are. There was no stopping —Erik didn't even have time to swerve. I remember screaming, then the soft, gut-wrenching thump. The whole car shook with the impact of her body, just a little, just for an instant.

Erik pulled over. The road was empty and air cold as he opened his door, slid out of the driver seat and jogged back down the road. By the time I got there he'd picked her up, was holding her tiny, shattered self.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's ok. I've got you. I'm so sorry."

She lay curled against his thick Carhart jacket, small body broken by the violence of our speed. We both kneeled there a long time, long past when the cat's breath had stopped, heart stopped, spirit left for somewhere else, maybe. The dusk turned to dark and stars came out, and we carried her off to the side of the road, placed her under some western larches. Erik mumbled about wanting to bury her but we were late already, a long way left to drive still down the dark windy highway, so in the end we just walked away, after he'd said some blessing to what or who neither of us knew, something that sounded in the end, again, more like an apology.

It wasn't long after we passed the dead bear cub, there on Highway 200, that the police officer showed up. She slowed as she first passed us, body leaned forward in the driver seat to get a better look. There was barely time to catch the frown, the angle of concern, as her car cruised by and past. Then the lights clicked on. The flashes arced, bright, muted, bright, in the high noon sun.

Erik and I stopped, heads turned back, bodies still angled away, forward. We watched her out of the corners of our eyes, the car slowing down to speed up, screech of rubber on road as she pulled a u-turn right there in the middle of the curvy highway and came back to us.

Erik exhaled loud behind me. Air pushed from cheeks through teeth, jawline tense. I looked back at him, eyes asking him to chill. We stopped our march to watch the car as it neared. Calvin whined. Erik bounced on his toes.

Gravel rolled under tires, kicking up as the officer pulled over to the shoulder behind us. Bodies forced to face her now, her frown in the windshield, those pulsing lights. She waited a minute, sitting in the car, eyes on us, mouth on radio. Then she cracked the door, got out.

Our usual script didn't fit, though we were trained so we tried. Bellingham. Missoula. No, Yes. We were stopped short. She wasn't offering snacks, or a ride.

She waited a minute, sitting in the car, eyes on us, mouth on radio. Then she cracked the door, got out.

"Hitch-hiking's illegal in Idaho," It was an accusation, not question.

Erik and I were a peal of protests before either could consult the other.

Me: "We're not hitching, we're walking."

Him: "What's your problem?"

She'd already gotten going though, and still she didn't offer snacks. We listened as she explained that no one in their right mind would walk this highway, so she had to assume we were hitching. The pavement, in direct sun, oozed heat as Calvin lifted one paw, then the next. He leaned on the leash toward shade.

A few more questions and still no one was budging. We couldn't change our story and she couldn't believe us. She returned to her car, radio crackle, air conditioning. Lights kept flashing and we stayed standing, packs on. Cars thundered by and ponderosa trees, curious, leaned in.

The officer came back, change in tactics.

"Ok," she said. "Can I talk to you?"

She was looking at me. The pause as I processed stretched. My feet were beginning to hurt with all this pavement, sweat in my eyes, but I didn't take my pack off. I didn't want her to think we were staying. I stretched the vowels of my answer, which had to be yes, thinking.

"... yea...?"

I remember in that moment how my eyes found hers, trying to read what was living there. I was looking for an are you ok, trying to give her an I'm fine. Really. But all I got from looking was her face, her eyes, hardening. All I could see was her sizing me up.

I glanced at Erik, those eyes more readable. He was saying something between, This is bullshit, and Go ahead, I guess.

So I went, followed her around the curve of her car, pack still on, hackles up. Closer now, just her and me, her toughness felt cultivated. Her hair was cropped short, like mine but neater, mouth set as if she expected already I'd try and cross her. She reminded me of a mountain guide friend I used to work with, Dawn, back when I called myself a climber.

"Dawn's so hardcore… I mean, she's just like a dude," I remember my dude guide friend telling me once, of Dawn.

Dawn's shoulders were broad and arm muscles ripped. She'd worked years in the industry. She knew how to take care of clients. She knew how to navigate mountains. She could out-climb anyone. She was not, in fact, a dude. She was twice as strong as her male counterparts, and only occasionally taken seriously.

The officer squared up, angled to intimidate, but what came out of her mouth instead was something attempting to be kind. I wondered about that kindness, how often it was taken as vulnerability. If she had to train herself to look away, most of the time.

"So. What are you two actually doing? You hitching?"

A repeat question, and we both knew it.

Already shaking my head, "No! We're walking. We…"

"Fine." She cut me off. "But I'm just telling you. Hitchhiking is illegal in Idaho and girls like you… it can end up bad …"

So she already knew the story, or thought she did. I remember looking for the space between her words for the conversation we could never have. She'd already seen too much to believe me, or seen too much to believe at least that I could know a thing about the world and still be walking this side of the road, cars flying by, hot afternoon sun beating down. Vulnerable.

I used to think they all worried for nothing. The worried mothers worried teachers worried strangers. The worried wording our culture encourages. My own mother worried the loudest. Solo backpacking trips or travel alone inevitably prompted torrents of concern. I dismissed it all as sexist. Ignorant. I thought strength and optimism were enough.

But by my mid-twenties, that summer of the dead bear cub, I'd learned that mothers and grandmothers have reason to worry. My own mother had reason to worry. Police officers, too. I had to give her that, as she stood there staring me down. I hadn't forgotten four years earlier: the stale beer vodka breath hot on my face as I fought to keep him off me, fought him who I'd just met, him who seemed so nice at first before he started drinking, him who had followed me upstairs, up into the group dormitory of the hostel that had, as it turned out, no locks nor anyone who would come to the sounds of yells, or of quiet, insistent violence. I had not forgotten what that felt like, the way his face changed. How could I?

That summer of the dead bear cub and the disbelieving cop, after years of learning all the ways forgetting doesn't work, I was, once again, trying new tactics. Pivot and pirouette. Toward, rather than away. More strength, more optimism. But open those eyes more widely, girl. Know the risks, but don't let them kick you off your feet.

Her words hung between us. She was still waiting. Girls like you, it can end up bad.

I understood about fear. I just couldn't stomach the taste of it in my mouth anymore. I wanted a new story, and standing there on the side of the road, I wanted the police officer to want one too. Even if she'd heard this same one too many times.

Her words hung between us. She was still waiting. Girls like you, it can end up bad. I looked away from her, up to the trees, out at the river, still high for August, racing past. Erik paced, far side of car. I thought of the bear cub again, then. Why had I assumed it to be female? I hadn't even questioned the thought. I wondered about telling the officer what I'd seen. Black fur matted, ground into dirt. About all those bodies this summer, pushed to the edges of the asphalt. Paws so often still whole beneath the oncoming decay.

I didn't know how to say any of it. I didn't know what to ask. Maybe she didn't either. Silence stretched as we stood there, heat rising from pavement, worlds unable to cross or connect. We both looked away. The officer's mouth, brows, body creased toward another frown and in the cicada buzzing quiet, her patience flickered out.

"Fine." She said, again.

We walked back around the car. I rolled my shoulders, bounced my pack. Went to Calvin and rubbed his hot black head. Erik, leash still taut in his fist, started in.

"Look, we're not doing anything wrong, so are we free to go? If there's nothing else?"

A few more questions that felt like stalling but in the end, she couldn't stop us. She got in her car and pulled away, gravel again crunching under tires, loose stones scattering as she picked up speed. Dust rose and Erik coughed. We watched her around the bend and away.

Calvin led us to shade, for water and a rest. Then back to the highway, back in line, sun higher, heat beating down. The river on our right smelled like fish and mud, like decomposing brush. Our steps were quiet along the road. Warm pine, mixed with exhaust, mixed with dust. A motorcycle thudded by.

A breeze, the first all day, was beginning to rise off the river. It pulled at the fine wisps of hair at my neck, a feeling still unfamiliar. My hair was short because I cut it all off. Less than two weeks earlier on this walk, there was a day when I couldn't stop crying. It started slow, early morning, but built as the miles dragged on. I tried everything to stop those tears, but it seemed like a dam had burst somewhere. The sorrow was hot and unending. I tried snacks, tried

singing. I tried listening to the trees, but they didn't have an answer. Sometimes we have to get through things, just choose to ride the mourning and come out the other side. Eventually there was nothing else to try.

We got to a town later that day, by which time I was a mess. Dirt smudged face, puffy eyes, heart exhausted. Erik left to find ice cream, chocolate, beer, something. I sat at a picnic table in the public park, and after he'd left, I took out my knife and started cutting. Years worth of growth and then grief fell in long strands to the dirt. Cut after cut, hair fell, heart shifted. In some cultures, cutting off one's own hair represents an act of mourning. In others, there is the cutting off of fingers, toes, whole hands even.

Perhaps there is a lightness found in separating from one's own essence.

How else would you talk to a grief you didn't have a name for?

We walked and the sun pulled higher. The road stayed quiet as the minutes ticked, then, half an hour later, an engine approached. Driving slowly up the road, it was the police officer again. She didn't stop, just looked, head craned, then sped up as she passed by. She pulled another u-turn, there in the middle of the road, then drove off the same way she'd came.

The drive-bys continued for the rest of the day. The officer never again stopped, just slowed, making sure we knew. I assume she was looking for outstretched thumbs.

The pavement was trickled with dots of oil, the occasional coke can, crushed. We didn't see any more dead animals that day; just a few beer cans, cigarette butts, a wilted plastic shopping bag. We kept our heads down mostly, not talking. The occasional chatty crow swooped overhead. The infrequent fly buzzed by. My ragged hair, the inch or so left, stood up and out in odd curly wisps. Eventually we walked all the way out of the officer's jurisdiction. Different county, someone else's problem.

We'd set out that summer walking to witness our own steps. Yet in the end, what we found was something more. We walked, and in our steps, we held witness to the refuse of what was being left behind.

The Deca

Plague Garden

POETRY | CHAD FORET

Let us gather at the lake fat with baptisms,
feel pity for the grandfather with a play-
ground for a throat, how Inada Granite
hides, waiting in the age, rain knocking
on the midwives. Between root & river
graves, infants eat Diphylleia. Answer
with a heart built for hell, skin to spare.
Someone dressed me in a painting of me
drowning, opened a blanket by the river,
& spread onion marmalade on crackers.
Now, every sound is saved for isopods,
these xenomas rusted hearing aids, eye-
less intersections crammed with cornmeal.
Let us begin a boneyard underneath
the neighbors, visit when we can, find
ants in slow & strange arrangements,
fruit waste stacked, eaten to the seeds.

ake Lake | MICHAEL CARTER

Volumes

FICTION | NATALIE STOREY

I woke to the sound of the Bookman humming show tunes in the bathroom.

I don't even know what show tunes sound like, but I imagine they are the sort of songs a vile old man would hum when he's happy. There are no show tunes on the radio in Montana far as I know.

So I woke up and I heard him humming and the next thing I noticed was the smell of cigarette smoke. The stale kind. Like when someone smokes inside and doesn't open the windows or wash the sheets. Before I even opened my eyes I wanted to barf just from that smell and his humming.

When I finally did open my eyes, I saw the light on in the bathroom. The Bookman was in there getting ready for work at his bookstore. It was humid in the bedroom from his shower and the antiseptic, piney smell of his aftershave seeped into my nostrils. I imagined the cloud of his smell hovering around me like mustard gas like in the WWI documentaries we'd been watching in history class. I clutched myself in the Bookman's bed. I wondered how long it would take him to finish in the bathroom and leave his house and leave me alone. I didn't want him to know I was awake so I shut my eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

It's not easy to sleep, though, when you have to barf. And pee. And shit too. I wanted to get it all out, but I decided to hold it all in until he was gone.

I was wondering: Why should he hum? Did he hum happy old man music every morning or just this morning because he thought I was asleep in his bed?

I also couldn't stop thinking about the dinner he bought me the night before. It was torture because I felt like puking. We'd gone to the nicest restaurant in town. I'd never set foot inside the place before, but sometimes I'd heard adults talking about it. The restaurant, called The Depot, has two wooden lions by the front door to guard the place and, inside, they keep the lights dim. The bar is a long slab of mahogany with carvings along the edge, right where you rest your elbows, that are curled like a cartoon woman's hair. At the ends of the bar, more wooden lions stand watch and there's a huge mirror behind it. The Bookman told me the bar was historical, brought on a barge up the Missouri River to Fort Benton in 1904.

When the Bookman brought me in that fancy place for our date, I felt awkward and wouldn't look the hostess in the eye. At least I had the sense to put on my one good dress. At least, before she died, my mother taught me the sense of having one good black dress. The hostess didn't notice or didn't care about my age. She led us to a seat at the grandfather bar to wait for our table. It made me feel sophisticated to sit there. I couldn't stop looking into the mirror behind the bar. At first, I was all worried about how I looked -- Did I seem old enough? Was my eyeliner straight? Could you see the zit on my chin? But then I started to wonder how in the heck they kept that mirror so clean. I was searching it for a smudge—one single little mark—when the bartender asked me what I'd have. I hadn't even looked at the menu. I didn't think ordering a drink was an option.

The Bookman, who I'd pretty much forgotten about, rescued me.

"She'll have the Pinot Noir," he said. I memorized this. I didn't know what Pinot Noir was, but I decided that's what I'd order from then on.

I waited for the bartender to ask for my ID, but he never did. Maybe it was because I was with the Bookman and he is old, 30 years older than me exactly, actually, because we have the same birthday. He considered this a "sign." Probably he used this sign as an excuse to try to fuck me—us having the same birthday made it alright because he understood me, because we were fundamentally similar, he said. Personally, the birthday thing creeped me out.

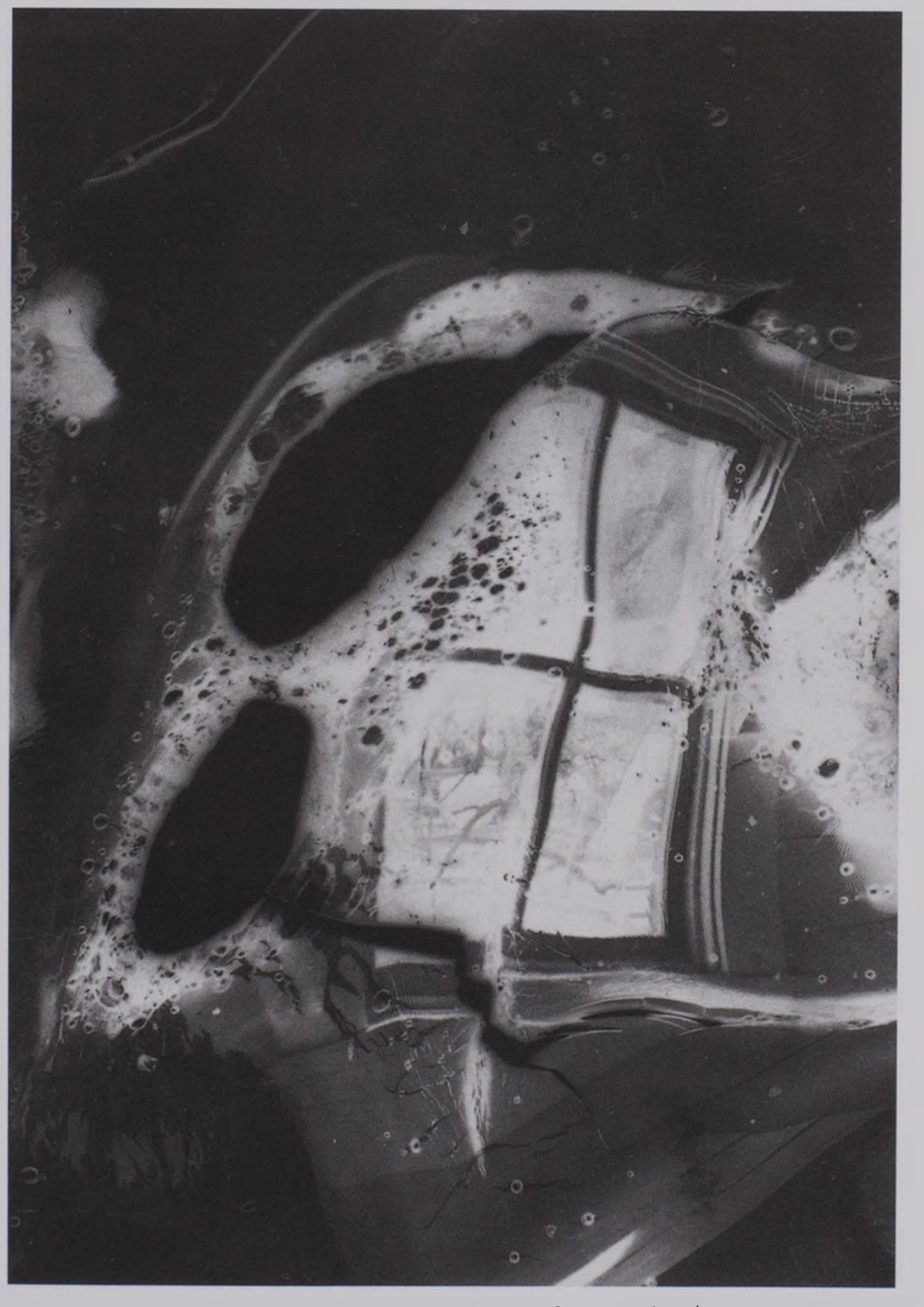
I watched the bartender select my wine glass from the shining glasses that hung suspended above the bar. He used a cloth to shine it one more time before he poured the red wine into it and then set it near my hands on the bar. The Bookman got whiskey on the rocks. I waited for him to take a sip of his drink before I tried mine. I picked up the glass as daintily as I could, holding the stem in my middle finger and thumb like I imagined sophisticated ladies did. I brought the glass to my lips carefully and hoped I wouldn't slop the wine over the edges onto my face or dress. But I didn't. If I hadn't needed to concentrate so hard on not spilling, I would have liked to watch myself drinking that glass of wine in the mirror.

It tasted bitter, but I didn't complain. I liked the performance of drinking from the tall, shiny wine glass. I never got to go to ballet class or take piano lessons or anything like that. So maybe this was my form of dancing. Or playing music. Maybe there was a whole symphony playing behind me the first time I drank a glass of Pinot Noir in the bar at The Depot at age 17 in my one good black

dress in a railroad town in Montana.

When we moved to our table, the waiter put the menu down in front of me and I thought it was funny and nice how it was bound like a book. I picked prime rib, the most expensive thing on the menu, because I felt I deserved it. When the steak arrived at the table, I tried to hold myself back from eating it too greedily. I cut it into tiny little pieces.

While I did this, the Bookman doted on me. "You are very clever," he said. He ordered me another glass of wine. All this happened just the night before, but now I'm not sure I even know who that other girl is. If I would recognize her if she passed me on the street.



Marche Funebre | Beihua Guo

Here's the picture of my small-town life in my mind: The wind always blows, slicing through the heaviest jackets, and I am always walking into it. The blue and purple mountains of the Absaroka range stand in the distance, snow-capped and numb. I'm walking everywhere in the shadow of those mountains—to school, and then down to 10th Street where I work at the Dairy Queen, and then home to my house on the wrong side of the tracks, right next to the railroad shops where my dad works. Then I'm walking in the wind to The Mint Bar to find my dad on Friday night, to ask for some grocery money. I find him with his railroad mechanic buddies smelling so much like grease that I sometimes wonder if I could get high off of sniffing their stained shirts like some kids do behind the gas station with paint thinner. My dad's buddies each hug me real hard, always, and my dad gives me $20 and tells me not to waste it on hair products or makeup or any "girl stuff." Then I go back out into the wind and walk from Main Street to the grocery store on 12th Street and try to figure out what food I should buy for $20. I use my Dairy Queen money to buy shampoo.

People who come to my town to fly fish or backpack think it's the most beautiful place in the world. Real picturesque, they say. They take pictures of the old buildings on Main Street with the mountains standing at the end. I guess it is pretty here, but only if you can forget to imagine what our lives are actually like. I've never seen my dad's grease-stained hands holding a fly rod; when he wants to relax, his hands hold beer cans and pool sticks.

It's pretty here, but only if you don't look below the surface. Only if you don't know that under the turn-of-the century brick train depot there's a swirling pool of gasoline and coolant and other toxic chemicals because back in the day the mechanics who did the same job my dad does now didn't take care about the way they emptied the train engines of all their fluids before they did their work. They just opened all the caps on all the tanks on all those engines and ran them up and down the tracks real fast until all the gas poured out. Eventually it permeated the ground and created a giant pool underneath the railroad tracks that everyone who lives in this town year-round calls The

Bernice | PATRICE SULLIVAN

Plume. Local people say there's more cancer here, the real bad kinds too like the ones that affect your balls or your boobs or your blood.

Used to be, when I didn't have to work, I'd walk from school to the Bookman's store downtown. It was formerly the studio of a famous western painter and upstairs there are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with every sort of used book a person could ever want. I love the musty, papery smell of old books, and I love hunting through them to find evidence of other people's reading, their underlines or bookmarks and photographs they forgot inside. I like it that the Bookman never removes these things, that he lets his customers find them like the treasures they are.

How I came to like books was when I was little our TV broke. I didn't know what happened to it at the time, but now I know that someone, probably my mom, must have gotten drunk and kicked it or knocked it off its stand so it fell and broke, the screen shattered in one corner. I was maybe like five years old when this happened and when I cried and told my dad I wanted to watch cartoons he looked real sad, but told me to shut up and go to the library.

"Read a goddamn book, why don't you?" he said.

My mom was gone—sometimes she'd be gone for a long time, like weeks or months—and so my aunt came over the next day after school to watch me. I asked her, "Where's the library? Is it fun there?" So she showed me. It's on 2nd Street and has two stories. The bottom level is full of kids' books and stuffed animals. After that, I didn't care very much about the TV. My dad never got a new one. I know some people like my teachers at school think my dad isn't a good dad, but he's the one who made me strong and who taught me to rely on myself. Personally, I'm proud I don't need all the stuff the other girls talk about all the time —bikini waxes and manicures and Seven jeans. If I have a book, I'm okay.

Maybe the Bookman would say this is all my fault, that I seduced him, because I was always hanging out in his bookstore. What does it even mean to seduce someone, I wonder. Because I was just there? In his field of vision? Because I'm smart and poor and poor smart girls can't just be innocent and pretty. We have to be seductive.

He said my interest in Jean Rhys delighted him—no single person in our town had ever asked him for one of her books until I did—and that I should visit his house to see his real collection. So I did one day. After school I walked to his house on B Street and inside he let me look through all the books on the wooden, dusty shelves that lined every room except the kitchen. He had really old books, rare books, books with broken spines and bindings. He had books he kept in plastic and that he called "my baby" and "my sweet," the same names he sometimes called me. In his house, among the volumes, it was easier to pretend at having a better future.

After I finished my prime rib and the Bookman paid the bill, he took me back to his house to see a special book. When we got to his house, he gave me another glass of wine. Then he found the special book—a big, white book—and sat down in his armchair in his living room. I held my wine glass by the stem and ran the fingers of my other hand over the spines of the books on the shelves. It was dark in the room except for a reading light on the table by his chair. The Bookman lit a cigarette. He said, "Come here." He patted the arm of his chair. He had the white book open in his lap.

I went over to him and perched on the chair. The Bookman had opened the front cover of the book so I could see, on the title page, that the author had signed it for him. I ran my finger over the black ink.

"It's the photographer," the Bookman said. "I met him once a long time ago when I was young. I was studying art in New York back then. I wanted to be an artist."

The photographer's name was Alfred Stieglitz. The Bookman began to slowly turn the pages of the book, which was filled with black and white images of a woman.

"She is Georgia O'Keeffe, the painter," he said. "Do you know who she is?"

"Yes," I said. "She painted the flowers. Poppies."

"Yes," he said. "You are very clever."

At first, the photographs showed Georgia's leathery, beautiful hands, but as the Bookman turned the pages he revealed more and more of her. I saw Georgia's wrinkled face, her flopping breasts, her forest of pubic hair. I began to hold my breath, anticipating what the next photograph would reveal. I felt like I couldn't stop looking at the photos, but at the same time I felt ashamed, like I was spying on Georgia's private moments. It was just like a creepy old man

to take photos like these and others, like the Bookman, to collect them. But I had to admit the photos made me super curious. I wanted to keep looking at them.

When the Bookman had finished flipping through the pages, he said, "What do you think? Do you like them?"

"Why did she let him take these pictures?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" the Bookman said. "They are art."

"Maybe," I said. "But they are also ugly."

"They aren't ugly," he said.

I seized the book from his hands and flipped to a page on which Georgia appeared naked from the waist up, her tired, defiant eyes hardly interested in the photographer. It was like her eyes were telling the photographer to screw off.

"Look," I said. "She hates him and she's ugly."

"What do you think is ugly about her?" he asked.

"Look at her sagging breasts," I said. "Look at her armpit hair. She has bags under her eyes and a funny nose."

The Bookman chuckled at me.

"My little darling," he said. "Are these the things you worry about? Not all men like the women in Seventeen Magazine. I want you to understand that beauty is more complex than what you currently believe."

My face turned red with shame. What sort of lesson was this? I wanted to say, "Fuck you old man. I don't read Seventeen Magazine." I didn't want the Bookman to tell me Georgia was beautiful anyway. I didn't want him to tell me that I was perfect just the way I was. I wanted respect and I wanted what she had: the right to ugliness. But I didn't say anything.

The Bookman put his hand behind my head and gripped my hair in his fingers. He brought his face in close and, although I shrunk back, his lips smothered mine.

It was hot in the Bookman's bed. He was taking forever in the bathroom. The vomit rose in my throat, but I coughed it back down. I tried to rationalize: If the Bookman sees that I'm awake, he'll try to kiss me with his ashtray mouth. He'll try to talk to me and call me sweetheart. But I can't talk to him and I can't stand the thought of him finding me vomiting in his bathroom, of him trying to make it better or chuckling at me and my body.

So I decided to pretend I was asleep. I was good at feigning sleep. I did it when my mother came into my room at night to kiss me when I was little, her breath smelling of sweet and sour boxed wine. I let her plant her drunk's kiss on my cheek without moving. I knew not to clench my eyes shut and to relax all of the muscles in my face, to appear natural, sleep-calm. The Bookman would leave for work soon, I told myself. Then I could purge everything.

The show tunes stopped abruptly when I heard him open the door to the bathroom. He must have realized I was still "asleep." I smelled his cologne all around. I knew he would come near the bed soon. I needed to sneeze and cry and puke, but I held it in.

I felt the Bookman standing over me. I heard his asthmatic breathing. I imagined his eyes tracing the outline of my body under the sheet. I was lying on my side and I knew he saw the slope of my back and the rise of my hips. I didn't imagine him feeling any remorse for what he had done.

The Bookman sat on the bed near me and I felt it cave in with his weight. I let my body go limp and sag along with the bed. The Bookman began to trace the outline of my body with his fingers, from shoulder to flank. I almost gagged. Then he pulled the sheet back and I felt cool air on my legs, my belly, my shoulders. I was naked, although I couldn't recall taking off my clothes.

He didn't move from the bed. He was just sitting there, looking at me. He must have known by then that I was awake, but I was so angry that I refused to react to him. I imagined myself as a doll, still and numb. His cigarette-stained fingers, his hard and dry fingers, began the tracing again, this time on my skin. I begged my body to hold its vomit in.

Finally, the Bookman covered me back up with the sheet. He smoothed my hair and kissed my forehead. He stood up to go but sat back down and kissed me one more time, this time on the mouth. I cringed, but I don't think he noticed.

I waited until I heard the front door close behind him before I finally opened my eyes. The tears came. I waited a few more minutes in his bed, terrified he would come back. When it was finally too much, I ran to the bathroom. His smell still hung in the air and it make me throw up everything, all of the prime rib and wine. When it was over, I felt too dizzy to stand so I just lay there on his stained bathroom floor and hoped to God he wouldn't come home.

I thought of writing the Bookman a nasty note, saying something like, "I never want to see you again." Or, like Georgia, I could have written, "You cannot give me back that faith you took away." But I didn't want him to have something he could keep and re-read over and over like one of his books. Instead, I decided to steal something.

On one of my first visits, he'd showed me a first-run Fitzgerald, a copy of Tender is the Night. I'd never read the book. It's the sort of thing an old wanna-be artist would treasure, not a book for a teenage girl. But I didn't care. It took me awhile, but I found that first-run Fitzgerald among the other books on the shelves.

I tucked it under my thin jacket and let myself out, facing the wind.

The Scavenger

NONFICTION | DOV WEINMAN

This landscape is new to me. I haven't seen much of it. It doesn't yet feel like home. Not enough of it has found its way into me, but I settle into the task of making a small space for myself alone in an off-grid cabin a handful of miles from the closest town. Set on a considerable slope, the cabin is backdropped by old cedar and massive sugar pine. Far from human noises, my mornings are started with corvid calls and rustling feet on the rooftop. A spring near the cabin provides enough water for a few quaking aspen. At night the forest is shrouded in darkness and quiet. The nighttime birds and beasts are beyond sight and I leave the woods to their fatal games of predator and prey. Behind the cabin is a tangle of dusty and rutted logging roads. Roads leading to other dirt roads in other wooded areas. I follow many of them, memorizing their sideroads and divergences. Sometimes they lead to long-abandoned mining claims, but most signs of human-interference are grown over and muted by time and wild growth. Each day I return from work and slip into pre-laced shoes. I run the maze of roads in the hours before dusk. These routes will never fit anyone's definition of wilderness—there is too much left over from human toiling—but still there remains a quality of forgotten wildness.

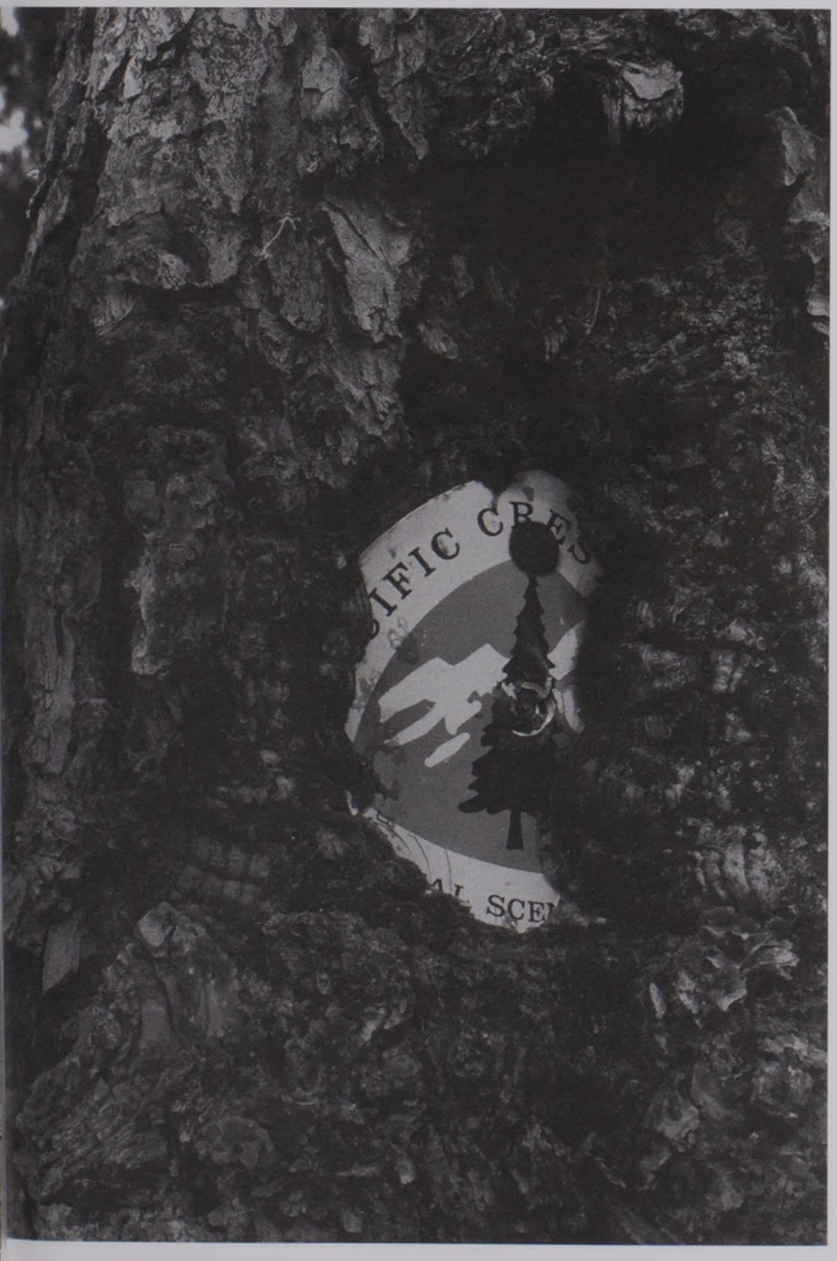
With each new road, I extend the conceptual walls of my new home. I spot new traces of those who called it home before me and small items from those who simply passed through. A No Trespassing sign along a path to a caved-in mine. An old beer can. A car tire. Initially, I am disappointed in finding littered sites in the beautiful northern Sierra Nevada forest, but this disappointment is soon replaced by my own fascination with rediscovering what others have left behind. I slow down to look closer at earth-covered artifacts. I am curiosity on the move, spending less time looking ahead at the horizon and more time scanning the underbrush for trinkets and keepsakes. And I begin collecting—gathering whatever tokens I find. I take them home like a bird building his nest. A bat skull. A bleached-out vertebra. A shotgun shell. One day I come across a shiny bike rim and run home with it tucked under my arm like a shield—a shirtless spartan delivering tidings from the battlefield. A messenger. I scoop up rusted cans left by miners, a frying pan riddled with bullet holes, and the exploded head of a piñata. I don't discriminate against the ephemeral, spending the time to gently fold transparent butterfly wings in a bandana.

I take on a new identity, hunting for the odd, human elements in the wild spaces—the strange-fantastic objects hiding in the landscape. I am a scavenger. Not of the dead and decomposing, but of the forgotten and left-behind. Scavenger from the alteration of scavager, from the Middle English scawageour, the person hired to remove refuse from the streets. And even further back the word composted from the Old English sċeawian and the German schauen, meaning to look at. To inspect. I look and I inspect. And then I collect, mimicking the soaring, black scavengers above. Their bald heads and greedy beaks float over organic prizes. Vultures given the Latin name Cathertes aura, from the Greek katharsis, meaning purification. The seekers of purification, cleaning the land of unwanted detritus. I too have become opportunistic, spending my free afternoons cleaning the backroads of the misshapen and broken. Re-homing the old and unwanted.

Shadows float over the dirt road beneath me, following their owners, the obsidian-black ravens overhead. We echo each other, the winged observers above and the bipedal watcher below. Croaking their prruk-prruk-prruk from the upper branches of towering sugar pines, these northern ravens alert each other of new competition. Collecting shiny objects and metals to impress each other, they add their tokens to their nests. I set my own forgotten artifacts along a small wall outside the cabin. We add items each week. And each week we feel more at home, understanding the space a bit more as our own. Now I witness my own shadow projected opposite the falling sun. The shadow's arms swing back and forth. Its knees drive forward. A tanned hand clutches a new prize. The corvids watch. Hunger is its own master. For now, scavenger is making its way back home. We collect again tomorrow.

Awaiting Burial

POETRY | KERSTEN CHRISTIANSON



Adapt | KITTY GALLOWAY

Dead raven found
one street over. We
swaddle it in fleece,
cradle it in a plastic
grocery sack.

In the winter
winds off the Pacific.
it swings from the arm-
rest of a wooden chair
on the porch, a chair,

hued in four shades
of spray (carrot, crimson,
indigo, plum), a make-
shift branch of a trunkless
tree. One week out,

ground too frozen to bury,
light penetrates the shroud.
Iridized feathers somber
as stained glass; corvid
quiet in its winter sleep.

On Speaking Terms

FICTION | B.A. VAN SISE

I

Esther Silver meant well, but only occasionally.

Each day, she'd spend her breakfast hour combing through the obituary pages, looking for the names of people she'd no longer have to avoid running into; at her age, she knew everybody, and hated most of them. She could reliably count on the Post, the city's trashy, fish-wrap tabloid, for former people she wasn't on speaking terms with, and the middle class Daily News, the city's picture newspaper, would even offer photographs of their smiling, soon to be sloughing faces, but she always felt it was an honor to her name to find an enemy in the New York Times.

She had quite the collection of people of whom she could, when hearing gossip, reply well, you know, we're not on speaking terms, and always kept a weather eye out for them to be under the weather. She loved the obituary pages especially in late February, all through March, when the winter was cold, when the winter had been long; it was a special treat to know they'd shuffled off the mortal coil just in time to miss the glory of New York in the springtime, that they'd withered just before the flowers came into bloom.

When Lyuba at her mahjong club sneezed, Esther never said god bless you; Esther herself wouldn't, so why should God?

When the bakery downstairs would burn its leftover scraps at 11 each morning, her husband, Horace, would ask if Esther smelt toast. No morning did he fail to ask, and no morning did she fail to make a small prayer that the bakers had fallen out of schedule, and that after 35 years of marriage Horace might turn up the next morning in the back pages of—she thought about the rates to place a notice in the city's various publications—the New York Post.

All in all, she was happy.

Her son, Joseph, had moved to Los Angeles, where he said he had a dry goods business—who does that anymore?—but she was sure he was actually in the movies, or maybe setting up a string of orange groves up and down the coast, or at the very least a gangster. When the landlord, a middle-aged Italian man from Brooklyn with accent to match, would ask how Joe was doing, she made sure to tell him that he was very well, and busy working on a new picture. She liked the landlord—mostly because he hated Horace, who paid the rent every month, but always exactly five days late.

Retirement had been good to them; Horace's job at the printer's union had given them a steady pension, enough to make rent on their apartment, which was in a nice enough building at 46th and 9th, new brick, all the apartments with balconies, its only fault being a faulty hinge on the front door that the landlord promised to fix. They ran on opposite schedules, which Esther felt that, along with hatred, was the key to a happy marriage.

Horace slept during most of the day and kept nighttime hours, smoking small cigars he'd buy from the boy behind the counter at Manganaro's, getting Esther her papers at 6 AM and retiring to bed just about noon. Esther, for her part, kept busy; she slept in but filled the rest of her day with the mah jong club, ambles down to the coffee shop, and the ladies of the Jewish War Veterans Auxiliary, who since the Great War had met regularly to complain about their husbands, even though Esther knew they had nothing to complain about since hers was clearly the worst, with his odd hours and guinea stinker cigars. Hannah Rosenberg had nothing to whine about; her husband had one leg, sure, but a half a million dollars, and Rebecca Gleicher's was a real prize, all things considered; his three women on the side left him little energy to climb on Rebecca, and honestly, Esther thought, those three homewreckers were all decent enough—well, except for Hannah Rosenberg.

It was an unusually hot July morning, and Esther sat at the empty table, the newspapers spread out before her, after Horace had lit out: knowing him, most likely to the haberdasher's, hoping to get a new suit and hat. Please, please, she said to herself, let it not be as bad as last year, when he waltzed in the door with a broad-shouldered, almost yellow suit with oversized buttons, declaring how handsome he'd look, joking that everyone on the street would admire him. Look at that man, he assured her they'd all say, with his beautiful double-breasted suit, and his beautiful, double-breasted wife.

She looked down at the open pages, and was disappointed to see that the Post had nobody worth not missing, and neither did the Daily News. On to the Times: some concert pianist was dead- whatever- but she looked to the other side, running her finger down the list of names until she ran into one she swore she knew:

SILVER, Esther, aged 57. Beloved wife of Horace, dear mother of Joseph. Cherished daughter of the late Joseph and Hannah Berkowitz. Funeral at 3PM today, Beth Shalom, Forest Hills. Visitations at home at 665 9th Avenue, Apt 4E.

For the first time in her life, Esther Silver wasn't.

She waited at the table, as patiently as she could, trying to make sense of it. She stood up and went to the mirror,

but couldn't see herself because of the tablecloth thrown over it, and the one in the bathroom, under its towel, was no help either. She didn't think to move them, and as she watched the clock in the kitchen- its glass cover opened, its hands stopped, she didn't wonder why time was moving so slowly, why Horace was taking so long to come home and explain what this was all about.

When he finally walked in, he came in with Lenny Rosenberg, looking like the pair of misfits they were, Lenny hobbling in behind him, looking a bit cheerier than usual. They were already in the middle of their conversation, and didn't stop to greet her.

"I hope you don't mind, Silver, I just wanted to come by when I saw it in the paper." "It's fine, Leonard. I'm glad to see you. Nobody else has come by."

"Do you need anything? Hannah and the girls are coming by with a spread of food this afternoon, after. Do you need money? Esther told Hannah that you were thin."

"Thin? No, not at all. Plus, I get my pension payment on the fourth."

"Horace, can I ask you something?," Lenny asked, gently grabbing him by the arm. Horace was surprised by the tenderness of it, how soft, and kind, and warm, it felt.

"Sure."

"What happened?"

"I woke up around 7, like usual, and found her lying on the sofa. Looks like it was peaceful, the doctors think it was a stroke."

"A stroke? Aren't there symptoms?"

"Yeah," Horace said, "supposedly, you smell toast."

II

She reeled at the sound of it, but trying to find the words, she discovered that the air didn't move inside her, that she just could not fill it with sound. She tried for their attention, knocking over a chair, but it didn't budge. She tried to ruffle the newspaper—she had just been turning the pages, no?—but they would not turn, would not ruffle. She could not stand the idea of being not only a ghost, but a cut-rate one, unable to haunt or make noise, throw things around, scare Horace in his sleep. He deserved it, after all, it had been his obligation to die first. She hung on not the word—what are words, she tried to remember—but the notion: die.

She thought again and again about the obituary: a funeral. Lyuba Abramovich came by at 1:30, came to the door and for the first time into the house. She offered to take Horace to Forest Hills while Sy went to Idlewild to pick up Joseph, so Horace wouldn't have to worry about it. Esther had watched her husband spend an hour dressing himself in front of their covered mirror, in the shoddy

Gorgeous Creature | Rochelle Asquith

blue suit he'd borrowed just that morning. Now, Lyuba stood in front of Horace, walking up to him. "You look handsome," she said, and Esther realised that yes, maybe he did. She glimmed him slowly and, in spite of the 5 o'clock shadow, could almost see the young man she'd met in 1919, his olive drab uniform with its little cloth wings sewn to the breast. It was the afternoon after the big April victory parade in Manhattan; all the soldiers, thousands of them, had fallen into bars, taverns, and the lucky ones their mother's kitchens, but she found Horace sitting in the Jane Street Park, looking at the new spring flowers, this silly little smile on his face. Springtime. In New York, he marveled. She withered, as he watched them come into bloom.

Lyuba grabbed his tie, and sweetly pushed it out of alignment. "There," she said, "can't have people thinking you're looking for a girlfriend." Esther stared, amazed. Maybe Lyuba hadn't been so awful, after all.

III

Esther Silver did not attend her own funeral, which is a shame. The crowd was enormous: Esther, after all, knew everyone, and everyone turned out. Horace did alright, too: all the executives at the printers' union, and the employees, they all came down; the fellows from the Jewish War Veterans and the ladies from the Ladies' Auxiliary were there to a man, were there to a woman; Joseph, jet-lagged from a three-stop last minute flight from Los Angeles, was there, as were his friends, as well as a beautiful Californian woman with a small nose and blonde hair, that Esther had never seen. Esther's cousins, nieces, the kid from Manganaro's, with a box of free cigars for Horace, even the landlord showed up. Anybody who was anybody, who wasn't dead, was there.

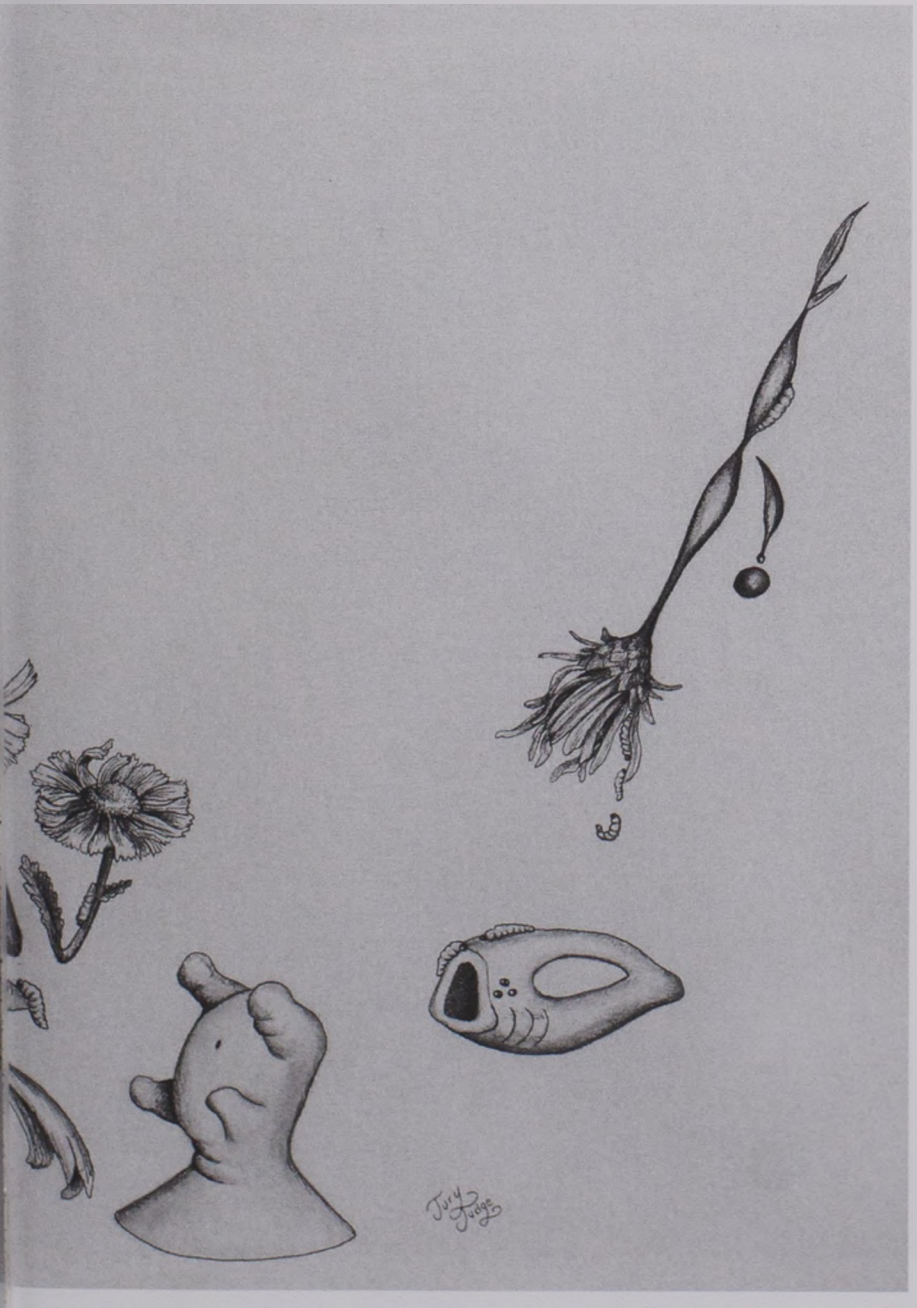
It was getting hard for Esther to remember where, or who, she was. She felt like she was living not a series of moments, as she always had, but one moment, stretching longer, and longer, getting thinner, and thinner. She could feel people coming to the house, which she had no desire to leave, first many and then fewer and fewer; she longed to read the newspaper, and as she watched Horace light up one of those small oily cigars, she yearned to smell it, to recoil at it, to hate it. She dreamed of a blonde woman- who did she ever know that was blonde?- beautiful and distant, the sort you'd see in the next big Hollywood motion picture.

She could feel others, more than see them; she tried to stay close when Hannah and Rebecca each brought trays of food, and was relieved that Horace wouldn't starve, even more relieved that his eye didn't wander. He was polite, she could tell, but she felt like she was watching his reflection in a mirror, around a corner, through a window made of frosted glass.

She felt bathed, constantly, not in time but in memory; what little she did come up with was always the past; the baby, what was his name, gurgling as he toddled around the apartment; watching her father pick his daily hat from the shelf; her mother's perfume that smelled like orange groves, Horace in his uniform, framed in flowers. She would try to run her finger across his cheek; he'd get up and close the window. In her last moment she pressed herself against his ear, trying to move the air, to curl it just enough to whisper I love you, I love you, I love you, before knowing, once and for all, that they were no longer on speaking terms.

Marauders All

POETRY | JAN HARRIS



Where The Worms Crawl | JURY S. JUDGE

in the day-glow light
our old skins cells flake
off and drape across
the zoysia grass an
offering to long-dead
microbes who spun
themselves into
complex beings
while they shivered
in a toxic sea with
no atmosphere just
that same star
enticing the reckless
protozoa who swam
towards its beacon
sailors in a maelstrom
lured by the smuggler's
lantern only to run
aground on a more
perilous shore where
we begin

Elevate | Julia Forrest

Mise en Abyme

FICTION | ELIZA MARLEY

I

It was probably past time to get a professional opinion but I never liked to be told bad news. The look in Lucy's eyes was one of practiced composure from her forty-five years as a nurse. I pretended to not be bothered by her lack of enthusiasm and waited for her to give me her diagnosis. This was the closest I would get to a regular doctor without getting thrown in the looney bin and what are three-door-down neighbors for anyways?

Lucy's home was stark white. The type of white that all matches and makes you feel like you need to squint when you look straight at the sofa. Lucy squinted a lot, especially at me, but she was careful to only ever look me in the eye. She finally sighed and set her white mug down on the glass coffee table.

"Well, I'm not going to lie to you and say this is common."

"I didn't expect you would."

"What happened?"

There is always a chance, so statistically small it is considered impossible, that when you go to kick a wall your foot may go completely through instead of bouncing off. I remember that line from a late night infomercial, maybe it was for earrings. There is always the possibility that something may not be where it should be. I used to use this argument when I misplaced my keys.

I had swung my legs out of bed like always, with my hip I have to do things slowly. When I didn't feel my foot I'd figured it was just poor circulation. It's not uncommon for me to have to lie in bed for a little and let my fingers and toes stop tingling. But when I got up I almost fell back over and had to brace myself on the nightstand. When I looked down I thought I'd have a heart attack.

My left foot was completely gone.

It didn't fall off or anything either, I checked. All that was left was the very end of my ankle, rounded off like someone had come along with an eraser.

No drugs either, not for me. I've got a severe allergy to whatever it is they put in those plastic capsules these days. And I sure didn't sell it to anyone either. I knew a girl, Martha, and she swore up and down that a man she had met online stole one of her kidneys. Of course she was a bat and didn't even know where her kidney was from her breast implants. But then she had a stroke so I'm not allowed to say anything about it.

That first morning, I looked down at my new ankle stump and felt exhilaration. I'm a little ashamed to say it, what with all those charities and stuff out there, but I felt great. I'd lived my whole life as ordinary Linda, married Linda, and widow Linda. Now I was one-footed Linda and that just seemed so much more interesting. I hadn't felt so good since I fit into a size eight jeans.

I didn't know where to go first. I wasn't seeing any of my friends until Wednesday, when the home April and Charlie lived in hosted Canasta. I thought about calling my granddaughter, but she was always busy and my son worked day and night. I had nowhere else to show it off, so I went to get some groceries. I put on one of my nice, strappy sandals even though it was too cold for them. I kept myself steady with Rick's cane; they gave it to him when he first got sick. It was a little too tall for me but the wobbling added to the look.

It's not every day something life changing happens and I deserved to bask a little. But nobody even noticed. I'll tell you, if Marnie was here she would have gotten everybody's attention. She's stuffed up with silicone the way a jumbo shrimp is stuffed with cheese. If she walked in here everybody would hold out a hand and offer to push her cart.

I've never been much of a head turner but with Rick at least I always had somebody with me. It's been about three years but it's still hard sometimes. He always kept tissues in his sleeves and would tell me when I needed to touch up my lipstick. He smelled like licorice, even in his younger days. I loved that about him.

I was walking through the aisles, not really looking when I saw another woman trying to grab a pack of frozen corn. Her black, billowy sleeves were too long and kept catching on the shelves. I hobbled over to her and tapped on the glass door she was holding open with her hip.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"Excuse me?" She snapped at me and then let the door slam shut. "Do you think that's a funny thing to say to me?"

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to help you."

"Well, I don't need any help!" She shooed me off with both arms and when her sleeves flew back I could see the rounded end of a wrist with no left hand attached to it. She saw me staring and pulled her sleeve back over the stump, embarrassed.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked, excited.

"What?"

"I don't want to be rude but… did your… did it just go missing one day?"

She stared back at me. Her eyes traveled across my face and down my body. I waited as she finished her scan and took a step back. I thought she would yell again but she started to laugh, "Did you…"

"Just this morning…" I replied. Her laughter was contagious.

"I've never seen anyone else… well I've never asked before."

Her name was Mary, she was 58, and she had a face that looked like it hadn't seen a smile in years. She had puffy cheeks that stretched down to a tight-lipped mouth and no creases. We finished our shopping together. The two of us together, her with no hand and me with no foot, turned more heads than I ever imagined. People stared, gawked even, and I tried to stay sensitive enough to muster a blush about it. It came easier to Mary, she kept her sleeve draped over the stump and would not meet anybody's questioning gaze.

We went out for coffee after the store, letting the bags of frozen produce melt in her trunk as we talked. And then we met up every day the rest of that week. We learned a lot about each other. I told her about my children and how I was the last of my friends to live on their own.

Mary mostly talked about her daughter. She had been missing for ten years since disappearing on the way to a friend's house. She had given Mary a ring for Mother's Day when she was little and Mary never took it off. It was a plastic ring with big, fake gems on it that sparkled gaudily no matter how dark the room was. She said it happened a few years ago, the anniversary of her disappearance. Mary had just woken up and the hand was gone. The ring was sitting in the sheets of her bed, so she started wearing it on the other hand.

Mary lived in an apartment by herself just like me, but hers was on the other side of town. It was small and poorly decorated but it was the only place she would relax in. I was always talking about how she needed to get out more but she could get so stubborn. So we would sit in her living room on her lumpy couch and drink tea. I showed her a picture of my granddaughter and Mary talked about how she used to braid Hayley's hair for school.

After a month of trying, I finally brought her out for cards. All the girls were there and they just loved Mary. They called us the dynamic duo and Marnie even asked to feel Mary's stump. Alice made a joke about reading her palm and I could tell Mary just loved being around the group. People have to be around other people or they just wither away.

But Mary didn't see it that way. After the card game she stopped returning my calls. I gave it a few weeks, calling and asking around about her at the store and the coffee shop, but no one had seen her. I was getting worried so I

Cemetery Forest | Cassandra Sevigny

dropped by her apartment. The door was unlocked the way she always left it. I looked around but there was no sign of Mary anywhere. She had left a cup of tea in the microwave and her electricity was shut off. I was about to leave, give up for good, when I saw a colorful reflection off the framed, school picture she had of Hayley hanging on the wall. It was coming from her bed. I ruffled through the sheets until finally, Mary's ring came tumbling out, daintily placed on the single finger still attached to it.

I think that's all that's left of her. I think everything just got a bit too much for Mary. I don't know if she can hear me or feel me there but I just can't bear to let her go. I keep her with me now, in a nice little tin in my purse. I make sure she stays clean and I even paint her nail every now and then when I get lonely. It's nice to have someone with me again.

II

It was the first time the traveling magician had planned ahead for a show. He would go from town to town alone, doing tricks in the parks and empty, rural lots for children passing by. The swatches of green and brown country roads were his home and he never stayed in the same place for more than a few nights. The families would always try to hire him to do birthdays but he never accepted any jobs or money, not even a tip off the street. But this town loved him more than all the others and he wanted to show them something truly amazing. He had some of the children put up posters all over town about a magic show in the park that night. It was the most exciting thing to happen since a circus with real elephants had come through last summer.

He wore a black suit with a single red flower on the lapel. He was very quiet and polite, raising his hat to the ladies walking with their daughters to the corner store. Anyone who might have been suspicious about the tall stranger in a small town would be immediately won over by his quiet, constructed, closed lip smile.

As the sun was setting, nearly the entire town came to a small park by the community center. Only a few families stayed behind with children sick from the flu going around town. The sick children all wallowed in their disappointment but there was one little girl, a bright and curious child who was not to be deterred by a fever.

She had seen the man once during the last time he came. The man had walked down the road and stopped to talk to her. She remembered him complimenting the ribbon in her hair and then making a quarter appear from thin air, which he gave to her for candy at the store. She liked the man and wanted to see him again. So with the her runny nose and red cheeks she slipped out the back door after her mother had tucked her in.

The show was lit by torches stuck in the dirt of a field used for soccer practices. The air was cool and the sound of crickets permeated the silence of a crowd waiting to be amazed. People were sitting on blankets and lawn chairs the same way they did for the Fourth of July, some even brought sparklers. The magician stood before them all. In the darkness, only the red flower of his jacket stood out, gleaming in the fire's light.

He began by making one of the torches fly. It soared through the crowd, minding the women's hair and the children's grabbing hands, and landed at the man's feet. He did card tricks, illusions, and cut the librarian, Renee, in half like she was butter. When she got out of the box she took a bow and the magician pulled another flower from his sleeve for her. It was as red as her blush when she took it.

The girl arrived at the show about halfway through. She was entranced by the sparkling lights and the rabbit pulled out of the man's hat. He barely said a word, only bellowed with joy when the town applauded him.

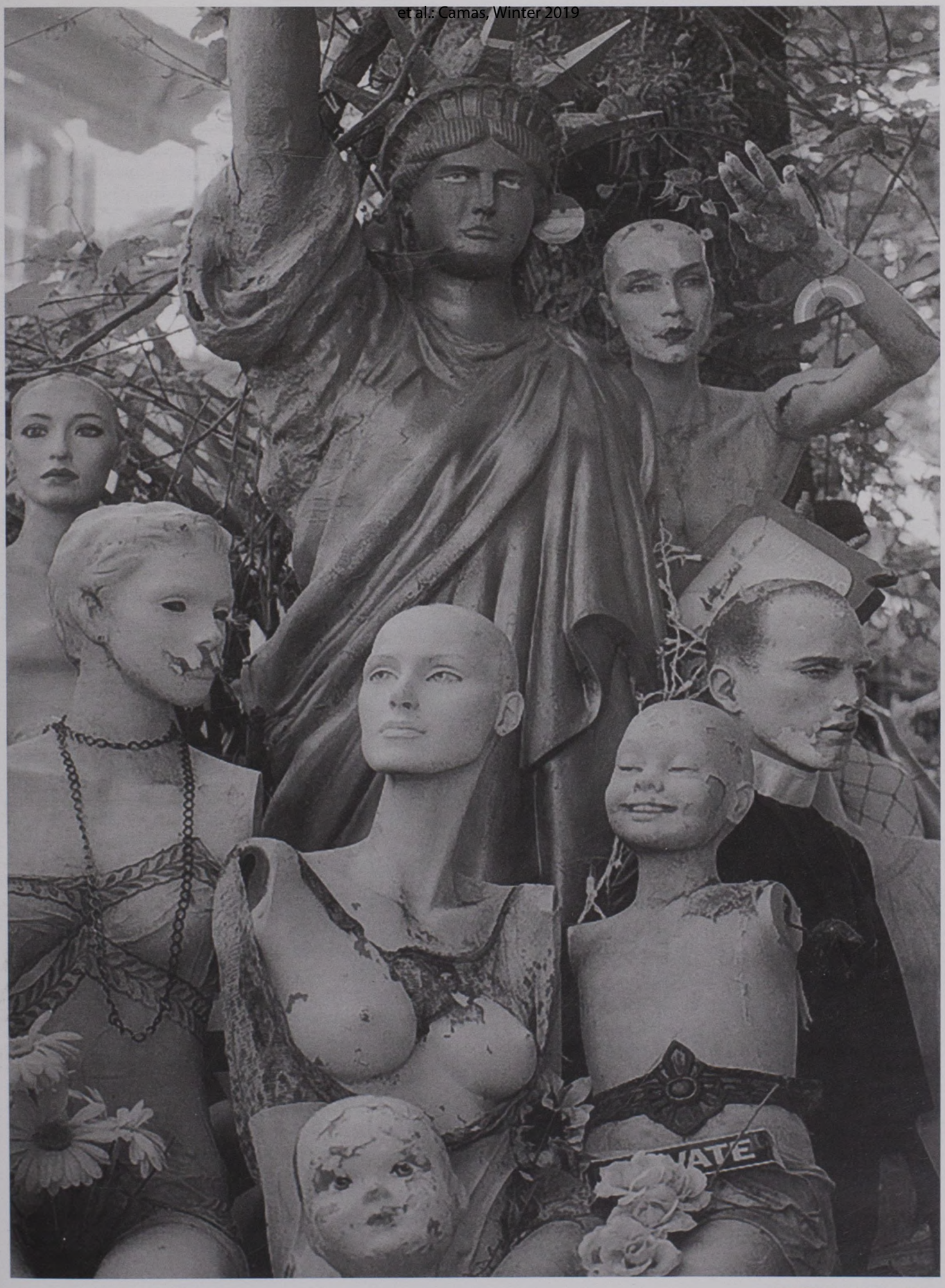
Finally, it was time for the last trick. He asked for a volunteer and the girl shot her hand up, waving it wildly, but she was too far back for him to see. A chubby little boy made his way to the front instead to take the magician's outstretched glove.

The magician produced a mirror from his back pocket. It started out as a small square in the palm of his hand with a delicate silver frame. And then he shook it. It became clearer, bigger, and by the time he was done it was a full length mirror that the man held up and turned to face the boy. He asked in a low voice for the boy to stick his hand into the mirror. The boy did. The magician turned the mirror so the crowd could see that the boy's hand was not coming out the other side. It was somewhere else. The magician asked the boy the stick his other hand into the mirror. The boy did. Then the magician asked the boy to stick his entire head into the mirror. The boy did and as he stood there, half way inside the mirror, most of that audience regained their belief in real magic.

After the show, the families packed up and left. Children swung on their parents arms, excitedly recapping all of the tricks they had just seen. But the girl stayed behind, walking against the flow until the field was empty and she stood before the magician. He looked down to her with a soft gleam in his eye and pulled another red flower out from his sleeve.

The girl took the flower but continued to stand there, looking over the tall man in the dark suit. The magician put up a single gloved finger to his lips and the girl repeated the gesture, giggling as she copied him. The magician smiled his constant soft smile. He pulled from his pocket the same mirror as before, shaking it out to full size and facing the girl with it. In the mirror, she saw herself and the darkness of the barren field around her. She looked up at the man and he nodded. The girl tapped the surface of the mirror and it rippled like water. She rubbed it and it felt like glass.

The girl slowly put one arm into the mirror and it felt warm and airy like the front porch of her house where she would sit in a rocking chair with her mother. The girl put



Future State | Seth Simon

her other arm into the mirror and felt the soft leaves of a blackberry bush so much like the one that grew in her front yard. The girl took a breath and put her head into the mirror.

According to the town, she just got lost. The official story is she wanted to see a friend, but with her fever she must have forgotten the way. She probably wandered away into the woods and fell into the river or fell asleep under some bushes. The gossipy old ladies would say she was eaten by a mountain lion. No one thought anything more than that. Surely there was no one here she would have gone off with, no one that would not have returned her had they found her. No one could ask the magician because he never came back. He left town that same night, walking the familiar tree-lined roads to some other, sleepy town. Even if someone had asked it wouldn't have led to anything. The man would've leaned down with his soft smile and gloved hands to give them a glimmer of something wonderful, something good and genuine. He would've melted off the questions like butter had they even been asked. And then he would have brushed the dust off his suit jacket and carried on his way, somewhere.

III

Wendy was looking at me from across the table, eyes wide and glasses falling off her nose. It was only our third date. We usually went to the taco truck, but tonight I pushed for Italian. It was the new place in town, nicer, and it guaranteed me more time with her if we had to sit down in the squeaky leather, too-big booth.

"Do you ever wonder if someone's hiding out there, just waiting to kill you?" She raised an eyebrow as she said this, trying to be dramatic.

"Like a horror movie or something? The psycho killer always knows right where you are?" I had met Wendy at comic book club. There are only a few sure-fire ways to meet cute, queer girls on a college campus this far out in Iowa. She loved fantasy stories and had an overactive imagination that almost made up for my own complete lack of creativity.

"I was walking home the other night by Mason street, you know, with all the corn fields. I was walking alone and thinking, what if someone just popped out from the corn right now and grabbed me?"

"Well, if they're popped all you need is the butter."

"Be serious Colleen, I mean like a man or something."

I took a sip from my soda. Wendy said the word 'man' in a whisper, like one might be lurking somewhere, listening. I looked around the sparsely populated restaurant to make sure the coast was clear before turning back and motioning her to continue.

She giggled to herself and continued, "I was thinking, maybe if someone did try to attack me I could karate chop them or something. I'd be ready. I'd open up my purse and pull out a machete. Then, I would swing it around and he'd try to run at me but I'd slice off his head. Or I'd chop off his arm and he'd run away screaming, leaving a trail of blood behind for the police to track."

"You really don't get thoughts like that? Like any moment you could be out grocery shopping or walking to your car and someone just tries to grab you?"

"That sounds like a reasonable plan to me."

"But I don't have a machete. Even if I did it wouldn't fit in my purse and I wouldn't know how to use it."

I pushed the basket of breadsticks towards her. "Practice with these."

She laughed, her hair getting close to falling into her food. "If you're worried about something like that start carrying around pepper spray. Or I'll just escort your everywhere like a big, buff body guard."

Wendy nibbled on the end of a breadstick, the end of one curl dipping slightly into marinara sauce.

"Please, like you'd do any better than me in a fight." I sat up a little taller in my seat.

"I could fight a bear if I needed to." I wanted to add 'for you' but brushed the hair out of her food instead.

There was a moment of comfortable silence while we ate. It was so natural to sit here with her but I couldn't help my eyes drifting up to the mirrored ceiling of the restaurant. There was another couple, a few booths away, well into their meal. I watched the woman with long, dark hair twirl her spaghetti upside down. When I looked back down Wendy was smiling at me, her food abandoned.

"You really don't get thoughts like that? Like any moment you could be out grocery shopping or walking to your car and someone just tries to grab you?"

"I don't know what they'd want with me. I have heard about that car stuff though. I hear they hide under your car and wait for you to walk up to it. Then, they cut you at the ankle so you can't run away. I guess there's some ligament there or something."

Wendy was staring at me and clutching her napkin in her hands. Backtrack.

"But hey, you don't even have a car here, so you don't have to worry about that."

Wendy just sighed. "I know it's stupid. It just makes my skin crawl. I remember last week I was grocery shopping in the middle of the day and this guy at the counter was so nice to me. He was asking me how I was, if I got everything, and gave me the deal on my coupon even though it expired last week. But then as I was leaving he asked for my number

and I did the whole, 'Sorry, I'm gay' thing but then I swore I saw him again later at Walgreens and again when I was going to my friend Amy's for game night. And I started thinking, what if he's following me?"

"Maybe he just needed cough drops?"

"I know I'm being paranoid. It's a small campus anyways. It just made me stop for a second. What would I do if I was being stalked? Proper stalked. Where they send you pig hearts in the mail and letters written in their own blood and cut up magazines."

"I guess it could happen. Maybe every time you look out the window they're out there. But only for a second. Just long enough to make you feel crazy. And then they seduce a plastic surgeon to make a clone of you."

"I would freak if someone ever made a clone of me."

"I better not take you back to my dorm room then." I wiggled my eyebrows at her and felt a pang of success when she laughed.

"Tell me another one." Wendy was twirling pasta around on her fork, playing with it.

"Another creepy story?"

"Yeah, you're good at it."

"Alright." I pulled on my sleeve.

It started with footsteps. Boots on an empty sidewalk, late enough that the crowds of drunken kids outside the bars had gone home. Boots that were too big because men's sizes were wider but women's had too many sparkly buckles. It was cold too. Boots on a sidewalk, echoing in the familiar pattern of hurrying home and out of the wind. An arm stretched across a flannel, clutching it to a chest to keep warm.

And then more steps, different steps.

A different type of cold and the familiar urge to turn around and glare. Of course it was a man, dark jacket, face obscured in the shadows. You could never see his eyes. The arm holding the flannel clutches tighter and the footsteps speed up.

The man laughs or maybe he doesn't. He speeds up or maybe he doesn't. Everything that happens next is filtered through the rough breaths, exhaled in soft puffs into the empty air. Eyes searching for others, seeing nothing but dark store fronts and neon signs.

There are conflicting rhythms, the two sets of steps, unevenly matched, and the sudden racing of a heart. Why didn't I wear a bra? There were not enough layers suddenly. My hips flattened in loose jeans, but there. My hair stuffed into a baseball hat but coming loose and hanging down my neck. Suddenly a woman, walking home alone late at night and a man walking behind her, silently in the dark.

"Colleen, I was just kidding. You don't actually have to think up another murder story."

The soft background music and the sound of people talking around us rushed back in. I realized I had been staring into space. I looked back up to the ceiling and saw in the dim reflection that the other couple had left.

"Sorry, I was just thinking. I was trying to be creative." Wendy smirked at me and I started planning our fourth date.

"Okay, let's hear what you've got then."

"Alright. What if the waiter here was actually a spy. He drugged our food so he could control our minds and force us to marry him. But he doesn't know that we're also spies who've built up an immunity to mind control drugs." Wendy smiled and pointed her finger gun at me from across the table. "I love it. And then we pull out our cool spy weapons to fight him off. I've got a lipstick that shoots fireballs."

I imagined the spies surrounding the restaurant, waiting for us. There was the table over with a tall man in a baseball hat. He was a spy. The man at the counter waiting for his pick up order, holding a wet briefcase, spy.

"And I've got a dart gun that paralyzes people. But wait, there are more spies. I think they could be anywhere. They're probably surrounding the restaurant right now so we can't escape." Wendy laughed and turned around to look for any potential spies at the tables around us. She looked back at me and her glasses were out of place again, just slightly.

Wendy licked over her chapped lips and pushed her glasses back up on her nose. I imagined the spies surrounding the restaurant, waiting for us. There was the table over with a tall man in a baseball hat. He was a spy. The man at the counter waiting for his pick up order, holding a wet briefcase, spy. Outside the rain was falling softly and I hoped it would still be when we left so I could offer Wendy my umbrella. All around us there was the lit up college town, surrounded by the fields and farms. The street lights only went so far before it would be the woods and the dark, country paths that were better left undisturbed. I reached over and squeezed Wendy's hand. She squeezed back.

"I think we're surrounded. We better sit here for a while and wait it out."

Currant Bushes Speaking From November

POETRY | TARA K. SHEPERSKY

Haunting Fingers | JAYNE MAREK

Rich brown bursting
stars of seedpod
call from their pendant perch
call from their proud protective
conscious curving, Come
to the hedges!

As day is tilting upward, Look
how my ragged
lime-green lobes
embrace their sunset!

What
in the long labor that is your life
will you hold so loosely?
On what will you bend such pride
such luminous
love?

Winter

FICTION | BRYCE PETERSON

I get to the trailhead around dusk, but it feels like it would have been this dark at any time I had arrived, that the deeper I push into the wet, never-quite-freezing-cold forest, the darker the world would be. There seems to be no life. No birds, no insects, no wind but the occasional breath of chill swamp air. My flashlight is dying, illuminating only a small circle of black trees on either side of the trail. My footsteps each make a single wet slap then the sound dies in the muffling drizzle.

The beach is a gentle nightmare: rocky islands offshore, twisted driftwood like an elephant graveyard along the sand. The beach is hemmed in by a forest of dead trees, gnarled branches reaching out to the ocean which is distinguished from the mute grey glow of the sky only by the waves which crash slowly with a heavy and reluctant roar, then sigh as they disappear.

There is a brief flash of blue light from what must be a headlamp but when I walk through the campsites there is no sign of life. This is the most popular wilderness campsite in the state of Washington, but in the middle of February I am left alone.

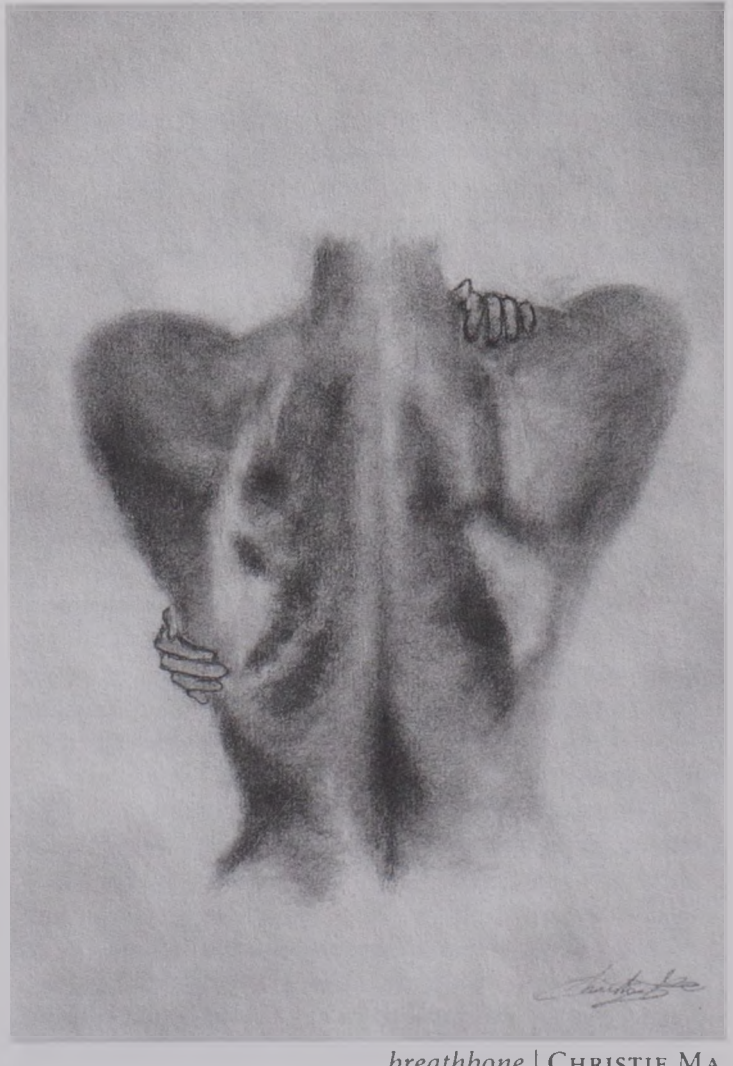
If it wasn't winter, Maia wouldn't have died. The simplicity of the thought feels awful, that if we lived in Arizona she would still be alive. The last time I saw her was on the bus. She seemed distracted and told me she was too sick to talk, then got off at her stop and receded, illuminated by the glow of streetlamps fighting impotently against the shadows which seem to not be cast by anything but emanate like gas from the earth. We part ways into two entirely different winters.

After I found out I spent the night with two friends who'd been close with her. The room was thick with sadness. There was no way to condense it into words because it was already meaning in its purest form. Everything we did was loaded with the permanence of knowing each gesture would be etched into our lives forever after.

Maia showed me her room like it was important. She always lived in houses with lots of people, her room the only calm place, a warm center. This was why people treated her like a saint. No matter who they were or what they'd been through she could talk to them and make them smile, because she'd been through it herself. She gave us her smiles, and put everything else into her paintings, staring for hours a day at the canvas, using her tiny brush to make small changes. Recently she'd left to live in her own apartment, receding within herself and making that warm room less public. She showed me a few paintings she'd just finished, and then, finally, the one she'd been working on for years. There is a woman in a hat, dancing, alone in a whirlpool of color, her eyes shaded by the brim of her hat, knowing something I never will.

We talked about how recently we each saw her as if it might make her closer or less posthumous. We narrated our image of her death: she paints her painting, drinks a glass of wine and lays down, and then is gently plucked up into the light.

I gather cardboard from my pack to build a fire, but it doesn't come easy. The air itself seems wet enough to extinguish whatever meager flame I manage with the wet



breathbone | CHRISTIE MA

twigs I have to work with. Once I have a steady flame I have to pay constant attention or it will die. I open my bottle of alcohol, which in the past weeks I've used to keep my sadness alive. A blanket of clouds has insulated me from the sky and I haven't had a chance to see whether there are any new stars up there I might name after her.

I spun Maia around like a pinata and where she stopped spinning we walked in a straight line, jumping fences and squeezing through bushes until we came across an empty road between a used car lot and a bank. Well-lit and useless, the wet asphalt was littered with dead leaves shifting in the breeze. "Watch this," she said, and as we passed one of the streetlamp it turned off. "My aunt is the same way," she said, "we think it's magnetic. Watch that one on the left." It went dark. She pointed at a dead one, which flickered back to life.

At ten years old I would try to stop time on the walk home from school. Now, I thought, now, 1, 2, 3, I counted, slower and slower, but 4 would inevitably come, leaving me not a single moment of rest.

In the lab where I work, counting things and weighing them and refilling and cutting and pouring my mind turns to logic: the longer she's dead, the longer it's been since she was alive, the smaller the chance I'll happen to run into her on the street, the less likely this will all turn out to have been an accident. The whole of her life was the whole of her life. Through deductive reasoning I'm left with empty tautology: she existed.

The longer she's dead, the longer it's been since she was alive, the smaller the chance I'll happen to run into her on the street, the less likely all this will all turn out to have been an accident.

There is nothing to be done. Nobody to punch, no fundraiser to pay for a hospital bill. My only comfort was in self-absorbed mourning. Eating food felt like cannibalism so I sat at the bar with someone who knew her and drank to keep my nerves raw where they'd been cut. Being with each other was like being with her. "You gotta move on, guys," said someone at the bar beside me. He had lost his sister to suicide. "The good die young, it's a part of life."

I close the bottle when I realize it's almost empty. There's no way to know what time it is. It could still be late afternoon for all I know. I run along the beach to a steep promontory, where I have to scramble up steep mud and loose rocks. At the edge I see the infinity of water reflecting the impenetrable grey of the sky.

When she died I was sleeping in a garage where at night my tea froze. My heart ached and my lungs were bad and there was blood in my come. I thought this winter would last the rest of my life.

In the waiting room I got a phone call. "I had a dream you died," she said. "Everyone was telling me to go to a therapist and I did, but I realized I should be out with my friends, not cooped up in some office with a stranger. I woke up crying." Outside, I stared at the big light in the center of the parking lot. It turned off and I thought my heart would stop. I ran through the rain until a dead streetlamp I passed turned on. I calmed down, thinking maybe Maia was just fucking with me.

On the bus I could have told her to go to the hospital but instead she walked on the wet asphalt under the glow of the streetlamps fighting the shadows home to her room where she choked on the fluid in her lungs. She didn't just forget to wake up; she was on her face with no pants in a pile of puke in the cold dark kitchen, maybe trying to get help. Not gently plucked, but violently stolen.

Maybe after more life she would have become bitter; mathematically speaking, only the young die good.

I came close to death in the same way when I was 18. I said, "if I can get home it will be fine, if only I can get to my own bed," as if my body didn't want me to know what was going to happen. The ambulance instead brought me to the hospital, where, even though they didn't think they'd be able to save my life I wasn't sad, just calm, like there was no longer any reason to waste any effort on the rat's race of inhaling and exhaling. Like closing your eyes before the most restful sleep of your life. I've heard the same thing from people who have overdosed on heroin. No magic, no near-death experience, just a longing for home, for warmth.

I wake up on the promontory, gasping at how long I've let the cold soak into me. I stagger back the way I came in a drunken panic, falling the final ten feet onto the sand in a pile. When I put myself back together I can see my fire, a point of light higher up the shore, miraculously still burning. I follow it home.

The cold wakes me just before the late dawn. I have no sleeping pad, and a rock I heated for warmth has burned a hole in the floor of my tent. I drain a bottle of filtered creekwater, brown with tannins, into my dessicated veins. As I rebuild the fire I try to recall the evening. Vague images of relentless waves and climbing and falling; fire rising and water flowing. Darkness, moments in which I was barely cognizant from the alcohol, blacked out and apparently incapable of sensation on the cliff. Was I dead in those moments, in my dreamless sleep?

My grandpa died from Alzheimer's. I had a nice conversation with him one year and the next he was in another world entirely. There was no beginning, middle, and end to his life, but a gradual movement from one thing to another. In the meantime each moment is forever and

never at the same time. He looked at me with a mischevious smile when I asked how he was doing. "Dripping," he said, as if I would know what he meant. And I guess I did. When he died I wondered if he wasn't dead already, hadn't been for months. Maybe there is no such thing as a moment.

I start hiking. By the light of day it's a whole new landscape. The sky is now a light gray, the waves seem to crash at a normal, comforting speed. The forest is just a forest, the branches dead and gnarled but with no malicious intent. Two bald eagles watch me from a shared perch above as the gravel crunches beneath my feet. Before long I come across a big dead fish, guts oozing from its belly. Another mile and I find a seal on its back, mouth sagging into a bloody grimace.

The spaces between the trees dim and then finally there is only darkness around the limits of the fire's warm light, which becomes my whole sphere of reality.

When Maia was a kid she used to say you could sing something back into existence, like if you eat broccoli you could sing it back out and everything would stay in tune. She said that sometimes the world falls out of tune and some of us were sent to earth in order to bring it back into balance. Embarrassed, I try it out, into the wind, and soon I'm screaming, the wind ripping the sounds out of my mouth so I can't hear any of it even at my loudest. The sadness is beautiful again.

Before the river I come across a beached sperm whale, a rotting semi-truck of blubber. It has been there long enough that its skin is no longer rubbery, but new enough that I can recognize all of its features. Only the surface was ever alive, I think, the inside was always meat, just waiting to fall out.

Maia's dreams and nightmares will never be revealed in autopsy.

She showed me her baby pictures, a leatherbound photo album she kept in a drawer. Her dad, her mom, her siblings. She told me about her grandparents and described her childhood as if she wanted me to help her remember.

At the memorial I didn't know what to do with my memories. There were dozens of us in the living room, mostly crying, some not, many surprised at how close we each were to her without having met each other. A couple people seemed naïve and unprepared for death and so it passed right over them. Some steeled themselves off from it. "Just keep living," someone told me, "it's all you can do." Faces screwed up in cinematic distress, ready to laugh through their tears at a funny story. We told the stories that used to help us understand her, but which now are her. This is not a ritual of remembering, but of forgetting.

A deaf girl spoke up; she got confused at parties, she said, but when she saw Maia they would dance together. It always feels like this one is different but she really was. For some people she was the only person in their life that they would let hold onto certain dark parts of themselves, so when she died they had to forget or the loneliness would become debilitating.

Her family was present: dad, mom, siblings. The baby pictures suddenly made sense, I wanted to ditch the memorial to tell her about it, but when I found her name on the contact list of my phone I knew that she was no longer dead, but gone.

I started to forget why I was so sad. People were living their lives while my heart was constantly on the verge of breaking. Trying to eat I saw someone who knew her and between us the absence opened up, that look of involuntary sadness that crosses an old person's eyes when recalling a long-dead spouse.

But those moments were fewer and further between and I went to the woods to keep some of the sadness for myself, to watch the stars.

The river ices my wide-open nerves. It's up to my chest and it takes everything to keep my balance, the rocks moving with the current under my bare feet. I stumble once with the pack over my head but make it to the other side, where the sharp rocks sting my numb feet.

At my most depressed a streetlamp turned on above me, a feeling of sudden comfort nearly knocking me off my feet.

At the end of the string of campsites is a sign that reads "now entering Ozette Indian Reservation." Something about this liminality scares me in the lonely dusk, and I remember that the Ozette tribe no longer exists, the reservation is unpopulated. I sit for a moment among the festering seaweed, look out at the dead earth and ocean and feel my gravity.

I collect sticks and fight to get a fire going before dark because my flashlight is no longer functioning. The damp wood refuses to burn. I use up all the pages of my notebook trying to maintain a flame to dry the wet sticks which extinguish themselves as fast as they burn. The frustrating desperation to keep myself warm is a small relief.

The spaces between the trees dim and then finally there is only darkness around the limits of the fire's warm light, which becomes my whole sphere of reality. I pee outside of it in order to not taint it, and stumble around to find sticks where I feel them scaly on my fingers, but aside from that the rest of the world is a complete unknown. There is no way to investigate any of the sounds of broken branches or dripping water or breath-like sounds. Little bones are littered around the campsite, so I pass the time by

assembling a little statue to protect my tent.

There's not much alcohol left, not nearly enough to fight the paranoia. I can't sleep without the warmth of the booze. Outside I hear the footsteps of imaginary animals which turn into nightmares of torture and murder on cold winter concrete.

In the back room of the lab I find a human skeleton. I run my fingers along the vertebrae, imagining the notches shallow and covered with skin. I stand behind it and measure its right arm to mine, holding it up by the hand. Our arms bend together and I twist it gently, examining the mechanics of each joint. I interlace our fingers and realize that we're dancing. I feel the texture of the skull, the empty face in which I can't help but see some innate expression. The sadness is not beautiful, but it's not sadness anymore either.

Crossing | Dov Weinman

LOWER FORMS OF LIFE

POETRY | GARY BEAUMIER

In my book of the dead
I will take my riches with me

Do not say I will be some insignificant particulate cast on the waters.

I will transition easily to some higher place of entitlement.

Do not suppose I will announce my name as a bullfrog with a gulping twang
In some green scum pond

or

be a flower amongst yellow flowers
A pine needle let go to soften a forest path
Some blinding pulsation across the night sky— lingering in one child's eyes—then gone
To be nothing

Do not say this

I will ascend to high plains
Where the strata is thin and rarefied

and yet I have shed epidermis here
A fingernail clipping along the way
Clumps of grey left near barbers chairs

Still I will not be something
Chuffing in the undergrowth
Grunting odd noises
Or lifting a leg
To leave a message
In the leaves
In the leaves in the grass

Skulls and Moths | Kathy Bruce

THE PILEATED WOODPECKER

POETRY | JOHN NOLAND

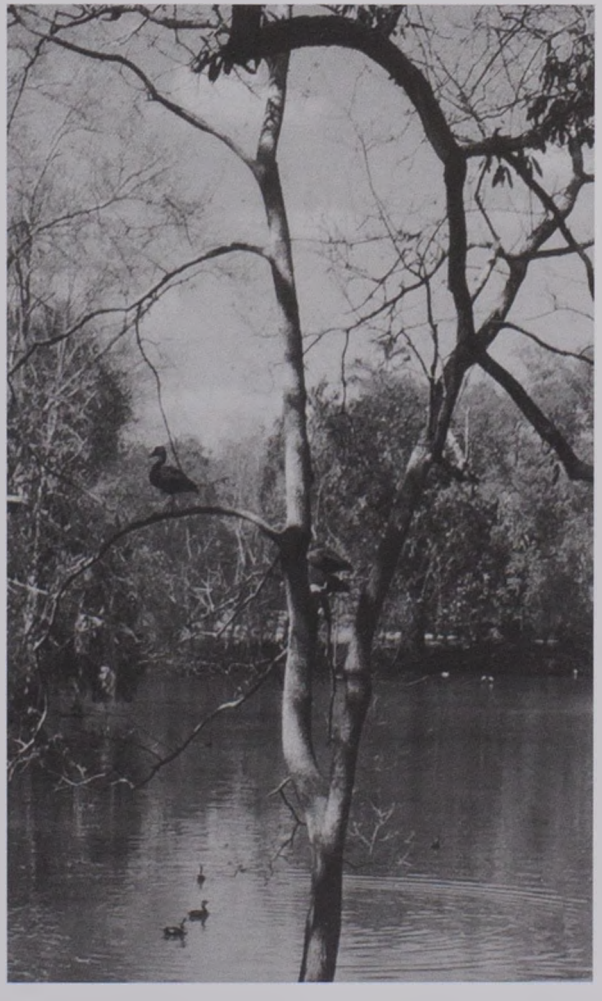
In America
where the house of earth
drifts and cries
with ghosts
of passenger pigeons, coyotes, bison,
old growth timber,
I have seen
pileated woodpeckers
rise up
like gods

given a second chance
and tattoo the air
with drumming, etching
into snag after snag
the story we never remember

the one that ends
with our own deaths
in a silence
so empty
we cannot even cry.

Still,
the pileated goes on,
drawing the map
of all created things
across the earth's skin
while we stand
and wonder
why,
in his black and white
robes
and fiery red crest,
he reminds us so much
of promises we have broken,
dreams
that have died.

Somewhere,
we hope,
there might be atonement
unless it went away
with the trees.



Audubon | ANN SCHLOTZHAUER

Back to the Mud

or, melodramatic thoughts on death and decay

NONFICTION | CHRIS LA TRAY

The wee hours. Sitting in my chair in the living room. My dog Bucky, a 2yo Jack Russell terrier, is in the yard doing whatever it is she does out there when she gets me out of bed. Moonlight is spilling across the dry grass, the porch, and through the sliding glass door. I love nights like this, the phenomena of them, the way they call me to walk out into the darkness—I rarely do—even though I will pay the price for my wakefulness tomorrow.

I've been reading a book about Sasquatch in the Great Bear Rainforest of British Columbia. I spook myself imagining some gigantic form moving in the night outside, hunkered down out by the propane tank against the back fence, its huge shadow obscuring the starlit sky as it stands to full height. That is something else I love, the notion that maybe, just maybe, these creatures could exist. People believe in wackier things, right? I choose Bigfoot.

I want to visit that part of the world, where tales of the Sasquatch abound, which extends from the Campbell River in British Columbia north all the way to Alaska. It is a wild, rainy, and primeval place, with a rugged, storm-pounded coastline. Maybe when I burn my last bridge and my heart for community gives out I'll disappear there instead, living out my days as a hermit. It's a fantasy I often indulge in. The reality is I'd probably end up dead at the hands of some meathead Canadian trophy hunter mistaking me for a bear. There are worse ways to go. It might even be a worse experience for the hunter. My cares would finally be over. He would have to live with himself. Then again, that person may not care after all. I shouldn't underestimate the moral turpitude of the run-of-the-mill trophy hunter.

The Great Bear Rainforest is a magnificent place. At 12,000 square miles—15.8 million acres—it is the largest temperate rain forest in the world. The area supports

more organic matter per square meter than any other place, anywhere on the planet. More biomass than the jungles in Africa, or the Amazon. A cacophonous scrum that includes hundreds of different animal species all clawing out their existence among thousands of different plants, crowded higgledy piggledy together under a canopy of fir, spruce, and cedar trees. So much life! And so much death.

Death is as critical a part of the equation as anything. All that breeding and eating and more breeding and then the shitting and more eating and then breeding leads to an equal measure of death and decomposition. The rot, all its stink and filth and slimy grossness is critical to making life possible, from the tiniest species to the greatest. Decay is essential. Decay is the promise of life.

The grossest thing I've ever seen in the woods was on a hike in Washington with my dog, crossing an area where logging equipment was parked for the weekend, the ground churned-up into deep ruts from all the comings and goings, and my dog emerging from the woods smacking his lips with a length of stained toilet paper still clinging to his muzzle, which goes a long way toward explaining why people who let their dogs lick their faces gross me out—because lovable as they are, dogs are pretty damn gross.)

Do we put too high a value on life, in the clinging to it? I have come to think so. I think about death, about dying, all the time. A French reference to orgasm, la petite mort, translates as "the little death." Depending on who you ask, it refers to the loss of life force once thought to accompany the experience. Those folks could be on to something. Maybe when we get too old to fuck worth a damn, if at all, we're left to stop dreaming about sex and instead focus on the other ultimate intimate feature of life: the ending of it.

Winter | Maciej Toporowicz

"Back to the mud." That's how the Northmen characters in the magnificent fantasy writings of English author Joe Abercrombie refer to death. When someone dies, they have gone "back to the mud." For them that usually means a battlefield of some kind, as they lead violent, and generally short, lives. Even though it's fantasy, I like the idea. Back to the mud. Returned to the earth. Quite possibly the fallen remain right where they fell, decomposing, decaying back into the world. Or gathered by their comrades for disposal in a pyre of some kind, if not tumbled into a shallow grave which ultimately serves the same purpose as if they'd remained where they fell in the first place. Their corpses become part of the cycle of renewal that pretty much every other member of the biological community is part of but humans.

People can still be buried at sea, but going out on a blazing pyre, at least in the United States, is almost impossible to do (legally). There is one place in Colorado (in the town of Crestone) where you can be

consumed by flames reaching skyward, but they won't torch just anyone. You have to live in the neighboring community, a decision they wisely made to keep people from overrunning their town in a bid to have a "novel" funeral. It's quick and inexpensive, unlike just about anything else but a drive-thru meal these days, which is its own kind of end-of-life pursuit.

Death, typically, is a big, toxic moneymaker in the USA. Funerals are expensive. Coffins are expensive. All the chemicals used to preserve the body are expensive and nothing you'd want near you while you are alive. This has only been the case for maybe the last hundred years or so. Back in the day, if Grandma passed in her bed, her body would be dealt with by the family and likely laid to rest in the family plot out back.

That can still happen here in Montana, but there are all kinds of laws and regulations one must follow. Most of us die with so many lingering obligations tied to us that The Man needs to know what is going on, and who those tendrils will be attached to among the living relatives of the deceased. We have our debts, and our estates, and all the shit we've accumulated over a lifetime that someone, probably grieving and not wanting to have to deal with it, has to resolve. I don't want any part of that. I don't want anyone to have to clean up my living messes after I die. I can't think of a worse thing to do to someone as my final act.

There is a growing movement toward natural burials, or "green" burials, in America but it's slow going. Which isn't surprising. No industry that essentially prints its own money, as the funeral industry does, wants to see anything simplified. But the idea behind this kind of burial, besides lowering the staggering costs of a "traditional" burial (the 2016 national median cost of a funeral runs $7,500—$8,500, depending on the "options" you choose, according to the National Funeral Directors Association), is to get the decomposition of human bodies back into the earth where it belongs. Where it was meant to end up.

Would I rather look at a cheap piece of ceramics on the mantle, or sit in the shade of something grown in the remains of a loved-one? It's a no-brainer.

I saw a CNN report In May 2019 with a lede of "Washington has become the first state in the nation to pass a law allowing composting as an alternative to burial or cremation of human remains." The bill goes into effect in May of 2020. Think of how you take your coffee grounds and vegetable scraps, cover them with straw, and wait for them to turn to soil. That's essentially how human composting works. A facility manages the remains (probably not a minimum-wager in muck boots wielding a pitchfork to turn the pile, but who knows) and after a period of weeks you receive a box of soil to take home and, if you choose, grow food or flowers in. That's an improvement over ashes in an urn, isn't it? Who wouldn't want to plant a Grandpa tree, for example? It seems a little weird, but it also seems a hell of a lot better to me. Would I rather look at a cheap piece of ceramics on the mantle, or sit in the shade of something grown in the remains of a loved-one? It's a no-brainer.

Why all this brain energy on death and dying? As I finish this essay months after starting it, it is the evening of the fifth anniversary of my father's death. I write from the cusp of Halloween, Samhain, when the spirits of the dead are said to be closer to the living, the veil between worlds at its thinnest. I like the season, even with all its dark energy. I think of my father, who died in his sleep after a long illness (his body in decay from the inside out). Dying in one's sleep is maybe the best way to go—though I still think the poet Jim Harrison's death, at his desk, writing a poem, might be the ultimate—and I like to think my father's letting go was gentle, maybe even happy. I lament what came after, my last sight of him being nothing more than a shape in a black bag being wheeled out of the family home on a gurney. Dad didn't want a funeral, he wanted to be cremated, and he was. So there is no gravesite to visit. I don't know where his ashes are, presumably in an urn somewhere in my mom's house. The family home is owned by someone else now. All the pets buried there, beloved companions, in earth belonging to strangers. Even the mill where Dad gave more than forty years of his life is slowly being dismantled, with what remains of it slowly rotting into the ground, a toxic blight destined to become a Superfund site. Too often that is the kind of decay we humans leave in our wake.

With each passing year, short of memories and some few photographs, it's like Dad wasn't ever here. There's nowhere to mark his presence. There's nowhere he loved enough to say he wanted his remains to reside. That, to me, is tragic, and I have yet to come to terms with it.

Maybe I'm obsessed with death because I've lived so far beyond the natural expiration date for our species, but keep kicking around because of how science has extended my, and everyone else's, lifespan. Sometimes the thought of two or three more decades is more than I want to bear. Even one more decade, for that matter. Sometimes it eats at me; nights like this, months like this. I don't really look forward to anything, which is its own kind of decay: the loss of verve for living. I don't see much adventure ahead of me. My heart feels eternally broken, both existentially in how

people have ruined the world, and personally in my myriad failures to be anywhere near the kind of person I'd like to be. My petty yearnings and desires and lusts and heartaches and resentments and jealousies and regrets and everything and all in between. Surely others feel this way. Maybe we all do but have been duped into thinking it is taboo to discuss it. That's what spirituality is for, to fool oneself into thinking it's all okay. But really it isn't. Life is more brutal than not, a vast existence of suffering occasionally pricked with just enough joy to make it all seem worthwhile. Life may occasionally flirt with being a gift, maybe sometimes for years at a time, if one is fortunate, but more often, these days, I think life is overrated.

So I think about death. What is next, if anything. How do I want to go out? Preferably like Harrison, pen in hand, with no electronic device anywhere near me. I hope not to have a bunch of bullshit to leave in my wake for the remaining people who care for me to deal with.

When I visualize my death, how it might play out, I imagine coming to a well-reasoned decision that enough has been enough. I walk into the woods, stretch out beneath a big tree under a frigid and starry night and just let death take me. My body will linger there, slowly melting into the soil, with plants growing up through me, bugs tearing away my flesh. That sounds like a good death to me, if not a poet's death. But with my luck a Labrador retriever or some other obnoxious canine breed out for a saunter with her owner will find me, roll in me, then tear off an arm or leg and take it back as a treasure to her owner, who will be horrified. Then all hell will break loose about a body found in the woods under mysterious circumstances. Why can't anything be easy?

One of the challenges those philistines who don't believe in Bigfoot make against the existence of such a creature is that not only has no living specimen every been found, but we've never found one of their corpses either. No Lab has ever dragged an unidentifiable gigantic hairy forearm back to the family hunting cabin, for example. But maybe Bigfoot is just culturally better at death than we are, than we have become. Maybe they know the best places in their ecosystem to retreat to when it's time to die. It's possible their rituals for death are more tied to the environment and the giving back to the cycle of life into death into life than ours are. Maybe they simply never made the mistake of retreating to a saccharine, manufactured world disconnected from everything that the universe meant for us to be a part of. That isn't so hard to believe, is it?

Life may occasionally flirt with being a gift, maybe sometimes for years at a time, if one is fortunate, but more often, these days, I think life is overrated.

Reflecting on death is as natural a process as reflecting on conservation. I feel compelled to stress that I'm not really suicidal. "You just have to be realistic about these things," as Logen Ninefingers, anti-hero of the aforementioned Abercrombie epics, is wont to say. Thinking about it doesn't have to mean actually doing it, does it? I just want to be prepared. Plan ahead. Expect the worst and never be disappointed. That's Stoicism 101 right there.

Back to my late night reverie. Bucky just burst back into the house as if summoned by the moonlight pouring over the floor. She acts like her arrival is the best possible thing that could have happened. Like being up at 3am with a maniac dog is exactly where I'd prefer to be. Maybe it is. Maybe her verve for life is enough to keep me excited about mine. Her joy makes me smile, and that is a magical gift. She pauses at the kibble bowl, crunch-crunch-crunch, then makes a dash down the hall for a drink of water. I lure her back to her kennel—her cabin—with a biscuit. Cheeto, the house Chihuahua, stirs just enough to get a piece as well.

It's said the lifespan of a Jack Russell terrier is basically as long as they can last before they kill themselves with their antics. Throwing themselves into life until death answers back. Is that such a bad way to live? I don't think so. It beats sitting in a chair, sullen, waiting for an approaching shadow to forever shutter the moonlight.

ROCHELLE ASQUITH is an artist, writer, illustrator, and all-round creative person based in West Yorkshire, UK. Her work is inspired by Gothic fairy tales, romanticism, and sacred geometry.

GARY BEAUMIER was a finalist for the Luminaire Award and a finalist for the Joy Bale Bonne award. He was nominated for Best of the Net Award for his poem "Rio Grande." His poem "Night Train to Paris" took first place in *Streetlight Magazine*.

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CHRIS LA TRAY is an enrolled member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians. His book *One-Sentence Journal: Short Poems and Essays From the World At Large* (Riverfeet Press) won the 2018 Montana Book Awatd and a 2019 High Plains Book Award. His next book will be published by Milkweed Editions in Spring 2021.

CHRISTIE MA is an emerging multidisciplinary artist from Hong Kong and Canada, focused on realizing the embodied and untranslatable through the visual arts. Christie is also an athlete and activist, passionate about international human rights and social equity.

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ELIZA MARLEY lives in Chicago, Illinois. She is a graduate of Loyola Chicago's creative writing program. When she is not writing she works on film sets making props and doing script supervising. A lover of all things magical and surreal, she is an emerging writer still exploring her style.

JOHN NOLAND has published five chapbooks, mostly dealing with nature poetry. John has also won awards for his fiction writing and has had two plays produced. Raised in the Midwest, he currently lives by the ocean in Coos Bay, Oregon, where he explores beaches, mountains and sand dunes with his springer spaniel, Shanga, and other friends.

ANTHONY PAVKOVICH focuses on crafting multimedia narratives based on the landscape and people of the West. He is inspired and shaped by the wild and public lands surrounding his home in the Northern Rockies. His work can be found at anthonypavkovich.com

BRYCE PETERSON is an itinerant laborer and line cook who can be found riding the rails and highways that divide ecosystems between coasts if the United States, or on either side of the line that divides ecosystems and human communities along the US-Mexico border.

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SETH SIMON is a New Jersey-based photographer with a Master's Degree in Environmental Issues. In his photographic practice, he uses vintage film cameras to achieve unique images that preserve a sense of history. His photographs have been selected for numerous journals and exhibitions worldwide. You can view more of his work at coroflot.com/sethsimon.

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Born in Portland, Oregon, PATRICE SULLIVAN has resided and is a Professor Emeritus of Painting at CSU where she taught for 25 years before retiring in 2018. Her work is inspired by her childhood home and memories. The figures tell personal stories about her childhood through their introspection, innocence, or wisdom and their complexity within the family structures. She received her undergraduate degree at the Massachusetts College of Art and graduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

MACIEJ TOPOROWICZ is a multimedia artist based in Brooklyn and Grahamsville, NY. He came to the USA as a political refugee in 1985. His work was presented in individual shows at Lombard Freid Fine Arts, Galeria Camargo Vilaca, and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

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