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(2014) "The Oval, 2014," *The Oval*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

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**Volume VII**

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# **The Oval**

The University of Montana

**Volume VII**

**2014**

# Submissions

*The Oval* accepts electronic submissions of fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, and visual art from November through February. Only previously unpublished work by currently enrolled University of Montana undergraduates will be considered. Submissions must be in DOC, DOCX, or JPEG formats. Their genre must be defined in the submission.

Visit [umt.edu/theoval](http://umt.edu/theoval) for more information, and check out our blog ([umoval.wordpress.com](http://umoval.wordpress.com)) for Oval sponsored events, workshops, readings, and the Honorable Mentions for Volume VII.



*The Oval* is a literary magazine published annually by the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM), the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, and the Creative Writing Program of The University of Montana English Department. Each volume is printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper by The University of Montana Printing & Graphics.

The title font for this magazine is set in Kefa Bold, and the text font is Garamond.

The University of Montana Bookstore, Fact & Fiction, Shakespeare and Company, and The Book Exchange in Missoula, Montana sell copies of *The Oval*. Griz-card holders can buy a copy for \$5.00, and the standard price is \$8.00.

*The Oval* co-sponsors annual readings with the literary magazine *Aerie Big Sky* every spring, usually including a general reading and poetry slam.

The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses' (CLMP) Literary Press and Magazine Directory and NewPages.com's Index of Literary Magazines include *The Oval*.

The Oval Magazine

The University of Montana

The University Center, Student Organization Suite 201 J  
Missoula, MT 59812

oval.editor@mso.umt.edu

www.umt.edu/theoval

umoval.wordpress.com

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ISBN 978-0-9894031-6-0

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**Dear Reader,** Every year, *The Oval* gives voice to new artists and writers at the University of Montana. Our contributors are never just from the Creative Writing and Art departments but represent all disciplines on campus. This publication is a validation of these students' endless hours of hard work, hours spent hunched over a notebook, keyboard, easel, or camera tripod. Neck cricks and headaches, coffee breath, and baggy eyes. You can sense them as you traverse these pages of prose, poetry, and visual art. The heart of all UM students is rooted in this spirit of ingenuity and rugged perseverance. We are the masters of our voices. We challenge. We create. Working in the shadow of snowy mountain peaks, *The Oval* staff strives to capture this unique identity.

To honor our peers' creativity and dedication, *The Oval* staff of undergraduate students ventures to publish a respectable magazine. All choices, from layout and design to content selection, are a collaborative effort of our student staff. This publication manifests our dreams and ambitions alongside those of our contributors.

Thanks are due to Sue Samson in the Mansfield Library, to ASUM and their dedicated Business Manager, Mike Hopkins, to Maria Mangold and the entire English Department, to Kevin Head and the Writers' Opus, Shannon Janssen, Karin Schalm, and to Ken Price and his staff at UM Printing and Graphics. A heartfelt thank you goes to Robert Stubblefield, *The Oval's* faculty advisor, and his passionate graduate assistant, Caitlin Stainken. Your tireless efforts and constant vision make *The Oval* possible. Despite our hard work, we would have nothing if it were not for our contributors. Whether your work has been published in this issue or not, your contribution helps to keep *The Oval* alive. We continue to be amazed by your talent and dedication. No matter what you do with your life, remember to never stop writing and creating.

Happy Reading,  
Jenna Franklin and Grace Yon  
Editors



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# Weekend Haiku

Sarah Poole

Red chili peppers  
strung from your truck mirror sway  
with the one lane road.

Black dog in snow  
chasing nothing,  
but sticks and joy.

Smoking, she laughs  
and knocks snow off her trailer  
with a broom.

The moon rises slow  
lighting up day old snow  
on the wet trail.

November nights,  
snow rolls over his eyelids  
and into his clothes.

The old woman sits  
in front of the bakery  
waiting.



# No Smoking

Hannah Kochel



# Imago

Sam Wood

I like to think my parents married  
straight out of their pupae.  
'This is the way they tell it,

like there was nothing  
before they met, just soft flesh,  
spindly legs and too bright light.

Together, they parceled their past,  
bound by spit and rotten leaves,  
into the neatest possible bundles

and mounted these memories,  
still wriggling and indignant,  
from mold-warped ceiling beams.

When I was four, they began to drop,  
nearly mute in the early morning.  
They fell most slowly then.

At breakfast, my father would gather  
the fallen like late summer tomatoes,  
frown at the flattened sides,

before placing them in the garbage,  
their ruptured husks seeping history  
into the bottom of the white plastic bag.

I left at eighteen, forced out by pods  
so thick on the floor that each step left  
one cracked and bleeding, the pus

pooling heavy against the hardwood  
while my mother ignored the sickly smell,  
murmuring, "move along, move along."



# Sagebrush Hill

Erik Nielsen

I shot the bear in the early hours of a rainy morning in June. It had snowed the night before. Sagebrush and pines were covered in frost and snow, and the snow melted and dripped off the branches into the mud with the rain. Inside the sheep wagon, the windows steamed from the heat of the wood stove, the rain pattered on the tin roof and hissed on the stovepipe outside. I sat on the cot with the rifle on my lap and waited for the sun to rise. The sky was gray and clouds hung low in the trees; mist and rain all rolling down the hillsides slowly.

The sheep left camp reluctantly, the last old ewes laying in the mud, chewing mindlessly in the cold. As the band made their way around the north side of the forested hillside, I left them to graze. I chained my dogs up at camp and walked through the forest along the south side of the hill. The rain tapped on my hood, my shoulders, and the barrel of the rifle, and soon the sounds of the sheep disappeared into the dark distance of the trees and rolling hillside.

I walked slowly and carefully through the brush, making my footsteps quiet as I crouched and held the rifle ready. I had never killed a bear, and I was nervous. He had left his mark all week, though—dead sheep and lambs found gutted carelessly in the grass—and it was time. The rifle was heavy and comfortable in my arms. The stock was worn and smooth to the touch. It almost felt warm under my fingers. When I slid a cartridge into place, it clicked easily and effortlessly, and the rain rung on the barrel.

When I shot him the first time he ran, the black mass darting through trees faster than I expected. Thirty miles an hour uphill, and he was out of sight. I wheezed up after him and could hear my dogs barking back at camp. I found him fifteen feet up in a tree when I got to the top of the hill. He looked down quietly at me, and I up at him. We sat like this for a few minutes, and I pretended that I wasn't trembling. It took five more shots before he fell out of the tree, his body limp and heavy as he teeter-tottered



on branches and collapsed on the ground, awkward and lifeless.

He was so beautiful and peaceful there. His black fur was streaked with rain, and it repelled the moisture off in beads and little braids down into the dirt. There was blood in the dirt. His stench was heavy in the air, and I cried for him in the rain. Somewhere through the sage, the ponderosa, the prickly pear and the last bits of last night's snow, the sheep spread out and grazed, comfortable and calling to each other in the cold moments of an early morning in the low, stretching Big Belt Mountains.



# The Frenchtown Mill

Sarah Korn

The paper mill shut down three years ago  
but it looks like it's been decades,  
a grayer film and a trim of rust growing  
like vines along its milky steel branches.  
You think of the last good poem you wrote.  
You think of how it swallowed you.  
There is an intersection in the center,  
four miles out of town. Traffic creeps through  
reluctantly muffled by gravel, ceilinged by  
the ivory exoskeleton of the belly of the mill.  
The chain link fence isn't to keep anybody out  
but to keep the dead silence in.  
Silence runs everyone out,  
everyone except you.  
The only movement in the hollow ghost  
is an orange bulldozer pushing a mass of rubble  
around an empty lot. A string of boxcars,  
grown over, painted with blooming roses,  
weighs abandoned on iron tracks.  
A white cross on the side of the road  
is garnished with a photograph and purple  
begonias.  
Your mouth fills with taproot.  
This has become your life.

# Autumn

Sarah Gullickson



# Lonely Bill

Sarah Poole

“Oh shit, am I on a date?”

I pondered this question carefully as I sat at Applebee’s overlooking Highway 93 across from the Super Walmart on the outskirts of Missoula. A man named Bill had brought me here. He was in his late sixties, early seventies, tall, lean, a bald head he covered with a baseball cap, long white beard, and wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a plain white t-shirt tucked into his Levi’s along with a black motorcycle jacket. He was a regular at the bakery I worked at and had asked me out for a cup of coffee to discuss literature. Naive as I was, I didn’t realize it wasn’t his intention to have a friendly conversation discussing the finer points of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, but rather a desperate attempt at a romantic evening.

“I know a place that has great coffee,” said Bill.

“Okay,” I said, hesitantly.

I originally thought I wouldn’t be leaving the bakery, and then I found myself here, the unfamiliar, at the neighborhood grill and bar. I felt as anyone would after eating one of its sizzling platters, nervous and uncomfortable.

“Well, while we’re here would you like to get some dinner?” Bill asked.

“Hmm, just coffee for me, thanks.” I had already eaten dinner not thinking I would be having some signature “juicy,” “mouthwatering,” “piled high” whatever.

“Please, have something else. It’s my treat,” Bill said with one calm, urgent hand gesture as he pointed to the menu.

I flipped through the storybook-sized menu. I decided, if this was a date, I’d better order dessert. Bill ordered dessert too, a brownie explosion of some sort.

As I sat drinking my third cup of coffee, swirling my fork through the boiling cream cheese that burnt my brownie to the pan, Bill told me about his mother. How sweet she was to him, her only child. He would visit her daily, preparing her dinner every evening, taking care of her until she died a few years ago.

“She went peacefully,” he said with a sincere smile.

“Are you guys having fun?” asked the seventeen-year old serving us, interrupting Bill. “Those desserts sure look scrumdiddilumptous!”

“Mmmm, indeed!” I said. This kid was headed towards upper management for sure.

Bill continued telling me his life story as I dumped more sugar and cream into my coffee. He told me how he stopped leaving his apartment other than for his daily small talk at the bakery. He worked maintenance at the apartment building he lived in across the street from the bakery, and therefore, never had much desire to leave the two blocks his world consisted of. Besides fixing water leaks or repainting the inside of apartments, Bill had adopted some pigeons that he provided birdseed and water for on the rooftop. He was genuine in telling me about his pet pigeons. How gentle and beautiful they really are. I chewed on my brownie.

I listened, glancing around the dim room, trying to hide my bewilderment, nodding and smiling back. There must have been a dozen teenagers serving a dozen people here: the stoned college students, a family of four that didn’t speak but stared up at the television screen, the sad married couple with the husband affectionately chewing his steak while the wife held back tears, the older couple, the woman who had left before the check was paid for, the two divorcees drinking away their sorrows, and then there was the lonely widow, waiting.

I finally told Bill that it was time for me to be heading back. He acted surprised, as if the date was only just getting started. I climbed into his car, hoping he wouldn’t start driving towards Lolo, and he didn’t. Ten minutes later, he dropped me back off at the bakery where we had met earlier that evening.

“Have a good night Bill, thanks for the coffee and dessert,” I said with relief.

“See you tomorrow!” Bill said, with enthusiasm that left as soon as his car pulled away and headed down the block.



# Pin-Up Girl

Eva Stone





# Despairing Landscapes

Jeron Jennings

“Imagine spending six hours every weekend in a car.”  
you said, as if  
that was the worst part of your parents’ divorce.  
And I thought of you  
every Friday night  
as you headed north on that dreaded commute,  
your gray eyes gazing out at  
the desolation of barren,  
ugly hills;  
maybe wondering where the farmland ended  
and the reservations began  
and who would have fought to claim these places anyway?

I’d time my runs along 135  
(you should know by now  
what I was doing out there)  
as if that asphalt network  
connected me to you somehow,  
and I’d light up your lonely screen  
in hopes that I could it would make you  
feel less alone.

You were only thirteen, then,  
just a kid staring out at the vast emptiness of the northwest  
on that hundred-mile drive.  
Or something like that.  
But it would take me three years  
to really know.

I had been eighteen  
for just a few hours  
An adult, by standards  
That can only be defeated by timezones.



I was an adult but I was no more prepared than you  
for the stern, mocking faces of the hills  
spread out before solid murals of sky.

This must have been what you felt.  
Driving up to Kalispell  
to reunite the family when you know  
all you'll find is evidence of its falling apart.  
We both lost a piece of ourselves to those  
despairing landscapes.  
I wanted to ask you  
how you hadn't lost it all.  
But you left me in the cold last night  
after I'd begged you to stay.

You were never concerned  
with the preservation of me.

And maybe I wasn't either,  
but I needed you to say it first  
before I would ever admit it to myself.  
I spent all this time wondering  
what kind of man am I?  
And what was wrong.  
We had scars and clashing sleeves to cover up—  
but to compare  
maybe we'd find they weren't so different.

So why in the hell couldn't you just say so?  
Why didn't you stay?  
Why in the hell did you have to wait until right now  
to wonder aloud  
if it was the lightning or the side effects?



# Lightning Forest South of Darby

Bridget Gibbons

My dead pines,  
stand tall in your sickness,  
an army of grey at watch against  
foreign eyes in these barren hills.

Cover secret treasures of  
wooden wounds from peeling sheds,  
Indian paintbrush kissing violet weeds,  
and fresh prints from smaller hands.

Open to me in sunlight and birdsong,  
in clear currents and moss whispers.

Let down your hair,  
shake the burrs of winter's arrows,  
and raise your arms to a newly blue heaven.

I breathe your ghosts and stolen stories,  
across another season harsh  
into another season giving.



# Foundations



Eva Stone





# Intermediate Disturbance Hypothesis

Gaaby Patterson

You know all those dark and damaging things, the things you secret away, pulling them from the pockets of your heart to polish on your sleeve, to look at, to press on like a bruise so they hurt good and remind you of why you've turned out this way.

You know that mother, the overbearing magic one. The one you had to break from in every way, pushing out into the world again and again and again, away from her body, away from that tricky charisma. The one you ripped yourself from, her body, her clutches, her influence, at birth, on that plane when you were eleven years old, again at seventeen, running off with those boys, those drugs, doing whatever you could to become yourself, to burst from the chrysalis, broken wings and all.

You know that dad—or do you? The one who left before you walked in order to start the new family with the new wife, and the new wife, and the new wife, leaving each family in turn, as children got minds of their own, became individuals, made the decision to hate him. The one you predicted—when you were drunk that night at fourteen, with him, that absent father, the only thing on your drunk and perseverating mind—was going to die a lonely old man.

You know that boy, the one who broke you into a thousand pieces a million times, who used your love to satiate his ego. The one you followed into that dingy apartment—you, a willing participant in your own decimation, giving yourself in whole, happy to take scraps.

You know that life, steeped in alcoholism, in disease, in loss—the darkness claiming love after love after love after love after love as you stand helpless, a finite speck against the tide, unable to predict, unable to protect, unable to save anyone but yourself.

You know that baby that slipped from your grasp, falling from your family before she even had a chance to know what she was

leaving.

You know—*of course you know*—inherent inside, in strange design, that these are the very things! These things you resist, you resent, you think mean pain—turn them on their side!

Quit knowing them as you do.

These are gifts with which you have been entrusted—intermediate disturbances that hold your worth and fill your spiritual feet with cement, tethering you to the ground, to yourself, to the earth in earnest. They are the things that make you real and rich and complex. Know these things differently, as offerings placed in your care, the substance and grist of you.



# Snow Princess

Jen Fredette



# A Sky of Sugar Crystals

Benjamin Mason

Look for him at the counter  
Of that old diner on Higgins;  
He's the boy with the sugar glass eyes  
And an old paper tucked under his arm

It's nearly eleven, and he has waited  
For four hours for the girl with a heart  
Full of whipped cream vodka and  
Cherries picked by a cold lake

He is crying. Can you taste the  
Nectar—sweet agave—on his cheeks?  
The radio buzzes, between stations, but  
The fly's antennae are better-tuned.

A man in a red beret and suspenders  
Sits down and orders an Americano.  
"I came to sing happy birthday  
To your crime, and offer some advice.

It was cold that night, so  
You drank Fireball (to break the ice)  
Until you fell through, but  
You're no goddamned drunk

And you can't act like one.  
Cream? Yes, I would love some."  
The strawberry phosphate neon dimmed  
And the boy's feet hit the glossy pavement,

Slapping toward the Orange Street  
Bridge. His scar itched so  
That he grit his teeth, but it was



Too cold to take it off.

His hands stretched and wrapped  
Around the safety rail and he thought  
Of jumping—only a short tumble through  
The air—as he always did

But he heard the squeak of  
Her wheelchair before he  
Could get up the nerve to do it.  
“Your neck is so red.

Have you been scratching?”  
“Why this year when I’ve been  
Waiting for so long?”  
And she stood up and

Lurched toward him, one hand  
On the railing and one hand  
Held tight against her chest.  
“I’ve been waiting, too.”

Legs still weakened, she collapsed  
Into his arms and he held her  
Like the nest holds a bird before flight  
And guided her back to her seat.

As he pushed her along the river  
He thought forgiveness a thing  
So sweet when not uttered aloud  
But rather left to meaningful glances.

So the boy and the girl walked  
Together that night, and took their chances.



# Volatile Oblivion

Aaron Polich



# Leaving Inverness

Katie DeGrandpre

Today we drove into the wet sky  
looking for a glen tucked  
somewhere between Rosemarkie  
and the beach. The mist is not thick  
today, the road—finally, is swallowed  
up in ferns.

We'll leave by train tomorrow,  
just the way we came,  
our shoulders knocking  
against each other, bones looking for hold  
in the dim incessant light.

Walking up the road, we giggle  
a little in the silence, but laughs  
just turn to breaths, swaddled  
in the green cast of light.

I walk with my fingers in the weeds.  
They drip. You walk ahead of me. I want to dip  
my fingers in the mud, and paint  
out the boundaries on our skin.  
My hands. Your legs. My nose. Your hips  
—or at least the distance from the milk water  
and the sagging trees.

You look at me at the end of the road.  
Sighing, we press a penny  
into the log, shiny ridges repeat,  
the spines of other people's wishes.  
And we turn back, using awkward verbs  
walking each our own edge of road.

Now you are sleeping  
in our bright room.  
We'll have dinner in a while  
and tomorrow  
in the salty air  
go back to London.



# Velociraptors at Midnight

Joel G. Kempff

*For Jonathan, Matthen, Timothy, and David.  
The fiercest raptors I know.*

It was an especially hot day the summer before my friend Alex went away to college that his Mama came to us and told us we'd be taking a road trip. The two of us were sitting in a blue kiddie pool and drinking warm beer in his backyard.

"We gotta do something to remember," I was just telling him. "I'll be damned if we're just gonna sit here in dusty old Wenatchee all summer and then you go off to Pullman to get smart and I'm stuck here with Niedermeyer all winter."

Niedermeyer was our other friend. Well, sort of our friend. He was the only white kid in our graduating class. My papa and his dad were both orchard managers so he came around a lot with his family. Some friends you choose. Some are forced upon you. He was okay but he talked a lot about white kid stuff, like computer games and cable TV shows. Mostly he just talked *a lot*. Just as I was gonna suggest we take a bus to Ellensburg or something, Alex's mom showed up. She didn't care that we drank. Nobody really did.

She was young for a mother. She was beautiful. I think Alex hated that fact even more than Niedermeyer and I loved it. We always told him how *hermosa* she was, just to get a rise out of him. Boy, did he hate it.

The chain-link fence squealed shut behind her as she walked toward us and stopped at the foot of the pool, all hips and dark hair and hot summer day.

"Alex, *mijo*, your Papa got picked up in Coos Bay, Oregon." Her accent was thicker than most of the Latinas around Wenatchee. I loved it. "I need you to go get him." She reached into her purse and dug out a pack of cigarettes.

Alex chugged his beer down and threw it at the garbage can by the shed.

“Christ Mamel! Can’t they just put him on a bus or something?”

“You know they won’t release him unless someone is there to bring him home.”

“Well, can’t you go get him?” Alex asked, reaching out to her for a cigarette. I don’t think Alex ever bought his own smokes. He just took his mama’s.

“*Dios Mio*, you know I can’t take any more time off from the Bag-n-Save, *mijo*.” She pulled off her shoes and stuck her feet in the pool next to my thighs. Her skin was darker than mine; it shimmered, like sweet *dulce de leche*, under the water. She looked at me and smiled over her cigarette.

“I called your papa, *mi amor*. He says you can go too. You can take the car. And I have two hundred dollars for you. That should get you down and back.”

Well that pretty much sealed it. Wenatchee to Coos Bay was ten or twelve hours. We could take a trip down the coast. Bringing back Alex’s pa would be awkward, but that’d be a small price. A road trip in a rusted out Mazda 626 was just what I was hoping would come our way before Alex left for school.

We took Alex’s ma back to the Bag-n-Save, and went to my house to grab some sleeping bags and a cooler. I threw some chips and salsa in a backpack for later. We’d have to camp out since we couldn’t afford a motel. We were just slamming the trunk on our stuff, when Niedermeyer came pedaling down the street with a huge hiking pack on his back.

“Oh Christ,” Alex said, making for the driver seat.

“Hey guys!” Niedermeyer waved as he approached the car. “Gabe! Your dad called mine. He said you guys are going to Oregon. Can I come too?”

“We’re travelling fast and light Niedermeyer,” Alex said, motioning for me to get in the car.

“It’s cool guys. I’m ready to go.” He stopped his bike right in front of the car and looked at us. Alex and I looked at each other. It’s not that we hated Niedermeyer. He just talked so damn much and it was a long drive.

“You got any cash?” I asked, still looking at Alex.

“Yeah, of course.” Niedermeyer reached into his back pocket.



“My mom gave me a check for eighty dollars. We just need to go cash it.”

I sighed, “I suppose we could use the extra money.”

“Alright, get in,” Alex yelled. Niedermeyer threw his bike in my backyard and jumped in the back seat with his big green backpack. It was one of those old ones with the big metal frame on the outside. He was struggling with it. I’m sure he had it full of weird white kid supplies, like water purifiers and a compass or whatever.

“Hey Alex,” Niedermeyer said as we pulled away, “it’s too bad your mom can’t come with us. I’d love to sleep under the stars next to her.”

I laughed. Alex just ignored us and started the car.

Alex’s *tío*, Juan Carlos, worked at the Kwik-Trip on the edge of town. He’d sell us beer and cigarettes, so we always went there. He cashed Niedermeyer’s check too, so we had enough to buy a carton of Marlboros, two racks of Miller Lite, and a large bag of Hi-Country Jerky. Normally we had to get the generic stuff, so things were already shaping up nicely.

I thought for sure Juan Carlos would say something about Alex’s papa being gone since the Fourth of July, but he didn’t bring it up. He knew, though, that we were going somewhere.

“*Mijo*,” he told Alex at the counter, “you remember to check the oil every time you stop and don’t go faster than fifty, neither. I don’t want to hear about you breakin’ down your mama’s car.”

“Yes, *Tío*,” Alex said. We went back to the car and threw the beer in the cooler. We forgot to buy ice, so I ran and took a bag from the cooler in front of the station. I’d be damned if we were gonna drink warm Miller Lite the whole way.

We were leaving with enough time to make it to the coast before we had to stop for the night, once we got through central Washington we could follow the Columbia to the ocean, then drive south.

The drive was hot. The air conditioner was busted, so we just ran the vent. The air that blasted from it was warm and smelled like engine but it was better than nothing. Niedermeyer kept asking to

roll the windows down but it was hard to smoke with all that wind. We did most of the drive with the windows up.

And we didn't talk much. It just felt good to be on the road. Central Washington is high desert. There's a lot of scrub and exposed rock. Alex knobbed through the radio frequencies uselessly. There are only two kinds of music out there. Christian radio or mariachi radio. I hated mariachi music but it was better than the lame stuff on the Christian station. We blared the mariachi music through most of Washington. Mostly because it kept Niedermeyer from going on about all the Boy Scout shit he had in his backpack.

The flat country flew by as I sucked on Marlboros. I imagined that Mexico probably looked similar to this part of the United States. I'd never been to Mexico, of course, but my parents had lived there as kids. They said it was mostly the same, except safer. In Mexico, you moved cocaine. In Washington, you moved apples. As we drove along through the heat, I imagined we were down there with the scrub grass screaming by at a furious fifty miles an hour and mariachi music blaring in our ears. Alex's mama would always say that mariachi music is like white people's polka, except with better brass and more tequila.

It went that way until we got into Oregon and near Portland. Alex stopped at a Chevron for gas. I was gonna take over driving for a stretch so Alex could have some beers and relax. When I went to fill up the gas tank, this old guy in blue coveralls came running out, yelling for me to stop.

"What?" I asked, "what's the matter?"

"You can't pump your own gas in Oregon, kid," the old man said. He came up to me and grabbed the nozzle out of my hands. "I'll do it for ya."

"Are you serious about this?" I asked.

"Serious as a kick to the gut, kid," he said, "five hundred dollar fine for pumping your own gas in Oregon. So what'll it be? Regular?"

"Yeah, regular's good," I said. I didn't know what else to do so I just sat down behind the wheel and let him pump our gas for us.

Niedermeyer poked his head up between the seats. "Don't forget to have him check the oil, too."



“Oh, yeah.” I rolled down the window. “*Señor*, can you please check the oil too?”

“You betcha, just pop the hood,” he said.

After he checked the oil, he washed the windows too. Alex and I just stared at him the whole time. We’d never seen anything like it. It was like we were rich white people or something.

Finally, Alex turned back to Niedermeyer and asked, “Do we have to tip him?”

“Nope,” Niedermeyer said, “it’s just his job.”

The oil was fine. I paid the old man for the gas and we pulled away. After a mile or so Alex started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“That guy had me so surprised I forgot I have to piss like a racehorse.”

We both laughed. Alex cracked a Miller Lite and took a sip. Then Niedermeyer spoke up from the back, “You know where that comes from?”

“Where what comes from?” I asked

“The phrase ‘piss like a racehorse?’” He didn’t wait for us to tell him that we didn’t care. “It’s cause they give racehorses this stuff that makes them piss and shit a lot right before the race. So they’re nice and light.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Alex asked.

“I’ve seen them do it. My dad takes me to the racetrack sometimes. He says you should always bet on the horse that pisses and shits the most right before, because you know they’ll be running lightest.”

We didn’t say anything back to him. Alex took a drink of his beer, then turned to me, “I can wait ‘til after Portland for a piss. Don’t worry about stopping now.” He turned the music back up and looked out at the Columbia River as I drove.

Oregon has all these turnouts and signs along the road that tell you about Lewis and Clark and prehistoric sites and whatnot. We passed one that said “Mammoth Beds Fossil Cache.” The Columbia River area has tons of stuff like that.

When we were in grade school, we took a field trip out to Lake



Roosevelt and they showed us fossils of mammoths and ferns and stuff. There weren't any dinosaurs in the area but after that, we got really excited about fossils and all that. I mean, what boy doesn't love dinosaurs at some point? Jurassic Park was in the Cineplex around the same time. The three of us—Niedermeyer was always around, even then—begged our parents to see it. Finally, it was Alex's papa that took us to the late showing. After that we were convinced we'd be the youngest paleontologists in history. Mostly though, we just ran around the house for weeks like velociraptors.

I turned the blaring mariachi trumpets on the radio down.

"Remember when we were little, how we'd tear around the house like dinosaurs?" I said.

Alex laughed, "Yeah, remember how we'd stalk your mama's old *perro*? We almost gave that poor dog a heart attack."

"Yeah," Niedermeyer chimed in from the back, "or the time we tipped over that curio cabinet and broke all my mom's angel figurines."

We laughed. Only white people have things called curios and figurines.

"That was the end of velociraptors in the house," I said, "it wasn't quite the same outside, with no hallways to hunt down."

That got us all talking about old times. It's weird how you grow up with people all your life. Especially in a small town. You know everything about a guy. About his family. And even though you pretty much know about all the crazy stuff in their life you don't ever really talk about any of it. You just talk about the times you ran around like dinosaurs and got into trouble. Kind of like Alex's *tío*, Juan Carlos. You don't talk about the crazy stuff. You just fill up the gas tank, check the oil, and make the drive. What else can you say about the other stuff?

We drove through Portland without stopping. Alex pissed on the side of the road. After that we were in the forest and it was much more hilly. Night was falling and we were getting pretty excited to find a place to stop for the night. We did pretty good about saving most of the beer, but once we got a glimpse of the Pacific, that stopped. Alex finally changed the radio to some Portland station



and *Wild Horses* by the Rolling Stones came on. Niedermeyer passed out beers to everyone just as we turned to drive down the coast. Alex grabbed his beer and toasted the dashboard.

“Niedermeyer, that’s the most Latino thing you’ve done all day,” he said, “good timing, *amigo*.”

“Well actually,” Niedermeyer piped up, “the Rolling Stones are British and we did just tune away from Mexican music, so really it’s you who...”

“Niedermeyer, shut the fuck up,” Alex said laughing. “Just *cállate*, would you, and watch the *Pacífico*.”

We drove for another hour or so, drinking beers and listening to rock ‘n’ roll, until it was dark. We found this campsite that didn’t have a fee, so we pulled in. We were the only ones there. Not many campers in the middle of the week I suppose.

The site we chose was really something. We were still in the forest. I mean, there were pine trees all around us but the huge dunes came right up to the edge of the site. Some of the tree trunks were actually buried a bit by sand. It was like nothing I’d ever seen. Like a different planet or something.

We didn’t have any firewood but we had some flashlights. Niedermeyer had a headlamp that actually seemed pretty handy. We ate beef jerky and tortilla chips with salsa. Mostly though we drank beers and talked about all the pretty girls from school we wanted to get with.

“Hey, you know what we should do,” I said finally, after we’d been sitting for a couple hours, “we should take this beer out onto the dunes and hike to the ocean. It can’t be far.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alex said.

We emptied out my backpack and filled it with Miller Lite and Marlboros. Once we left the trees and started up the first dune, we realized how bright it really was out there. It was a full moon and clear sky. You could see easily. The first dune was huge and it probably didn’t help that we’d been smoking all day. Climbing up a sand dune the size of a mountain is much harder than climbing up a normal mountain.

We got to the top of the first dune, huffing and wheezing like

a bunch of *cabrones*. We hadn't known how far we really were from the ocean. I mean, there must've been ten miles of massive, rolling dunes. It looked like the Sahara or something.

"Well shit," Alex said, "I'm not gonna go all that way."

"Me neither," I panted.

Niedermeyer walked up to the edge of the dune. It looked pretty steep.

"I don't know about you guys," he said, "but I'm gonna run down this son of a bitch as fast as I can."

"Are you crazy?" Alex said, sitting there out of breath, "Climbing through this sand once was hard enough. I don't want to do it again."

"Your loss," Niedermeyer said.

He didn't even look back at us; he just disappeared over the dune. We jumped up and ran to the edge. He was flying down the thing. Definitely faster than fifty miles an hour. Huge, bounding strides carried him down. He looked like he was going to tumble end-over-end at any moment. Then he let out the loudest, craziest, velociraptor screech and jumped into the air. He tucked into a cannonball and went barrel rolling the rest of the way down. It was spectacular.

"Fuck it," Alex said and plunged down the hill. I didn't wait to follow. The whole way down we squealed and squawked like velociraptors. Alex tried to do a slalom type move but fell and tumbled most of the way. Latinos don't know shit about the slalom. I managed to stay mostly upright, until the end. When I fell the backpack of beer opened up and beer and cigarettes went spilling everywhere.

It took us a while to pick up our supplies down there in the narrow valley between the dunes. We laughed and roughhoused our way through most of the job. Alex had somehow gotten a bloody lip and I had skinned my elbow on something when I fell, but we were okay. Once we gathered up all the beer and smokes, we climbed back up to the top of the dune we'd come down.

We sat there, alternating between choruses of *Wild Horses* and perfect silence until finally, after a particularly long silence, Niedermeyer spoke up.



"I'm sorry about your dad, Alex."

I looked at Alex. He didn't like to talk about his papa. Usually he got kind of angry if we brought him up. Especially since Fourth of July, a week ago, when he'd left again. It was the second time this year.

"It's okay," Alex said finally, "You didn't do it."

"Yeah, but I'm still sorry," Niedermeyer said, "It must be hard, you know. Lookin' after your dad like this all the time."

"Well, I won't have to soon. Once summer's over I'll be at Washington State and he'll be left to Mama." He chugged down the rest of his beer and threw the empty can down the dune. "I shouldn't be leavin' her. I should be stayin' to help her."

"You know that's not what she wants, Alex," Niedermeyer said. I was getting nervous. Alex was starting to look upset. Niedermeyer's *white boy* was really showing now. He just didn't know when to shut up about this sort of stuff.

"Yeah, I realize that, Niedermeyer," Alex said, standing, "she's the one who filled out all those stupid scholarships for me. She knew I wasn't gonna do them. I told her someone needs to be home with her, but she refuses. She tells me if I don't go to college she'll kick me out anyway."

"I think she's right though," Niedermeyer kept going. "If there's one good thing that can come of all this it's those scholarships. You can..."

"No!" Alex screamed, "*Es no bueno*. Someone should stay with her. If not me, then who? *Tío* Juan Carlos? He won't do it. His stupid *gringa* wife doesn't like him around my hot mama. I'm all she's got!" He looked like he wanted to say something more and I was pretty sure he was going to take a swing at Niedermeyer any second. He didn't. Instead, he just went stumbling down the dune towards the car. I thought about going after him but I knew better. He just needed to be alone.

"You really need to learn when to shut the fuck up, Niedermeyer," I said.

Niedermeyer didn't say anything back to me. I could tell he felt bad. It's not like he did anything wrong, exactly. He just couldn't understand that we don't talk about stuff the way he does.

“Don’t worry too much about it,” I said finally, “He’ll sleep it off.”

We stayed up there for a while, getting more drunk under the full moon, staring way out across the dunes at the Pacific ocean. I swear if you listened long enough you could hear the waves. We went down to the car finally; Alex was asleep in the back, on Niedermeyer’s massive green backpack. We got the sleeping bags from the trunk and slept by the cold fire pit.

In the morning, there wasn’t much talking. We were all tired and about as hung-over as any eighteen-year-olds can really be. Mostly we were just uncomfortable because there was sand everywhere. In our ears. In our asses. There was no way to get rid of it all. We’d be shaking sand out of our hair for the rest of our lives.

It took another few hours to get to Coos Bay. During that time the weather began to turn. It was cloudy and grey, the way Oregon usually presents itself in all my memories. The air coming through the vent was thick now with the promise of a rainstorm.

We pulled up to the police station. It was all grey cement, the same color as the sky. I was going to stay in the car but Niedermeyer got out to go with Alex, so I figured I should go too.

Inside, Alex told the cop at the front desk we were here for his papa. They gave him a little paper bag of his pa’s personal stuff that he handed to me, then they took Alex through a door to the back while Niedermeyer and me waited up front. There was a window that looked across to the piers along the rocky shore. A bunch of fishing boats were docked, probably not going out fishing since a storm was coming. We stood, looking out at the water while we waited for Alex to come back with his papa. I knew I shouldn’t, but I looked in the paper bag at the stuff Alex’s papa had brought down here with him. Not much. Just a few things. But looking at those things, I had to finally say something.

“You know what’s weird about Alex’s papa?” I said. It felt strange to talk about it, but I figured if I was going to, then Niedermeyer was the one who’d listen. “What’s weird about his pa is that he’s not a drinker or anything. I mean, usually when somebody’s papa is runnin’ off all the time or gettin’ picked up by



the police it's because he's a drinker, you know? Or worse than a drinker sometimes. But he's not. He's a good pa. This is the man who took us to see movies when we were little. And, I mean, what are you supposed to say about it now? Sorry? Sorry doesn't do anything. It's just sad and there isn't anything else to say."

I reached into the brown paper bag and pulled out a pair of military dog tags, a wallet, and a folded up picture of Alex's mama. She was in her bra and panties, holding a baby Alex. She was so beautiful. That's when I really felt angry.

"Like this." I showed Niedermeyer the photo. "A guy goes out and gets himself a wife as hot as Alex's mama, and then he goes off and gets himself blown up and his brain all scrambled, or whatever happened over there, and now he can't even enjoy her, or take care of her, or take care of his kid, and they gotta go search around for him when fireworks scare him off. I mean, you almost wish he was a drinker. So you could hate him. But this?" I shoved the photo at Niedermeyer's face. "This is just somethin' else that I don't even know how to talk about."

For the first time in all the years I knew Niedermeyer, he didn't have anything to say. He took the photo and the wallet and the dog tags from me and put them back in the brown paper bag. It was good timing too, because just then Alex and his papa came out from the back with an officer. His pa was in pretty bad shape. His eyes were all red and puffy like he'd been crying and he looked like he probably hadn't eaten or showered in a while. They signed a few papers and we walked out to the car.

I opened the passenger door for Alex's pa. He looked at me and grabbed me behind the neck, "Thank you for coming, *mijo*," he said and hugged me before climbing in the Mazda. We stuffed Niedermeyer's huge green backpack in the trunk along with the cooler and the sleeping bags. Niedermeyer and I both climbed in the back seat. Alex got in the driver seat and started up the car. I had to piss but I knew we'd be stopping for gas and to check the oil before leaving town, so I waited.

As we pulled away from the police station, the radio began to play and the vent started to blast cool air. It was just starting to drizzle outside; the cool air would be nice for the drive back. I

leaned across the back seat to Niedermeyer.

“I don’t wanna make cracks to Alex about his mama anymore,” I whispered in his ear. He nodded silently as Alex drove us all home through the gathering storm.





# Lake McDonald Nude

Nathan Snow



# Grand Staircase, Utah

Erik Nielsen

My mother held my hand as we walked.  
The three of us alone on a dark road,  
And though it was summer in the south  
we were cold with sweat and shivered.  
Lost on this red dirt road,  
the fading purple sky of dusk  
seemed frightening.  
The frozen stars  
shimmered with such intensity.

When my dad jumped into that pickup,  
after waving it down,  
he pretended to be calm,  
and I remember thinking  
I would never see him again.

I offered my mother Corn Nuts from my pocket  
And I could tell she wanted to cry,  
Not in sorrow, but in awe of my generosity.  
My innocent gift a threat to her motherhood.

Later, when my father's Volkswagon van whined into sight  
and illuminated our shadows,  
making that wilderness seem so fluorescent and fake,  
we cheered  
and gulped great gulps of water  
before bumping down the road to our camp and tents.

We had hiked for hours in sand and sage,  
and my father felt like he'd failed us.  
He has, in fact, since asked for forgiveness.  
But to a boy he was heroic,  
legs dangling over a rusted truck bed,  
disappearing in the dark,  
rolling over the rise,  
unknown and full of red dust.



To me, it seemed so easy being lost.  
Safe and sleeping that night,  
I couldn't wait to be lost with them again—  
to give all we had together  
in such selfless moments.

# Legacy

Maura Bradshaw

When he died, they asked me to collect the remainder of his things: a cardboard box with photos, letters, and the clothes he was wearing when he was incarcerated twenty years ago. I have been only a few times to the prison. Visits were difficult while living in another state, though I've made the effort over the years. Never like this.

The guard says my dad was a good man and he was sorry to see him go. The burial was taken care of by the county. I feel no need to see the grave.

I take the box to my hotel and look at the pictures my sister and I had sent my father. School photos of me as a young boy are worn and flimsy. They've been looked at a lot. We couldn't send cards or anything decorated. When my sister was married, she complained about not being able to send an invitation because of the paper it was printed on. Photos were okay, and letters.

My father's legacy is a cardboard box. A stack of photos. A pile of papers.

He was forty-five years old when he went in—fifteen years older than my mother. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by his death, though sixty-five years is a short life. I know he was doing pills in there; I know how it was. The official cause was a heart attack. It seemed he had been startled by someone and dropped to the floor in the mess hall. By the time he was examined by a doctor, all they could do was put a toe-tag on him. I know what made his heart weak.

Tomorrow, I will be in Sheridan where he was arrested. I will see my mother and give my sister the letters that she wrote our father, if she wants them. I'm not sure yet what I'll do with my share of our inheritance, these souvenirs. The trash can would be an optimal place for them, but there are very few letters and photos; it is not as if they will take up much space in my apartment. And my father already seems to have rooted through and picked only what he valued most. I sent him countless letters but find only two left



written in my hand. There are no remaining pictures of my sister's ex-husband, and the photo I had sent of me with the girl I dated, who stole my TV and moved to Las Vegas, is also gone.

I pick up one of the letters in feminine hand, expecting it to be my sister's. Our mother never wrote him.

Robert—

*I must say that your last letter surprised me. I did not expect to hear back from you so soon. How is your health?*

*It sounds as if you have come to terms with your past and present circumstances—accepted them for what they are. I believe that you should find resolution within this acceptance. I could never imagine what you feel while surrounded by men who have nothing left outside of the lives they've built in prison. Even without realizing it, I imagine this life would consume you too.*

*I understand your hesitance to tell your son, but I also believe that lying by omission would be a step in the wrong direction. The time has come for you to think of someone you should have thought of long before now. Do not let him live his life without knowing. You have the power to change something outside of your limited surroundings, in your limited time. Do not let the opportunity escape you.*

Paula

I do not know who Paula is. There is one picture of her in the box that I can find. It has her name on the back in my father's handwriting, as if he was reminding himself. She is a thin brunette with heavy eyebrows, standing next to a horse, the lead held loosely in her hands. She does not seem like a rider: her posture is too weak and she looks timid next to the large palomino.

I look at the return address: PO box 417, Dayton, Wyoming. Ten minutes from Sheridan. I could stop on my way.

I call my mother and remind her I'll be there tomorrow, but she does not want to talk. Her voice is sluggish as if she has thick smoke leaking from her mouth. I see her with a cigarette in her hand, crushed white powder on the table before her. She rasps out a quick "love you" before hanging up.

The next day, I'm back on the road, heading to the valley at the foot of the Big Horns where I grew up: Sheridan, Wyoming. First, I am going to Dayton. Paula waits.

The prairie is dry. I speed down the highway through the squarest state with no one around. Three hundred miles over the mountain and I arrive in Dayton to 760 people, two cafés, and one Sinclair. I stop here and ask the cashier where the post office is. He draws me a map, completely unnecessary in this tiny town. At the post office, I ask the cashiers if they can give me this woman's address and show them the letter.

One of the ladies says, "Paula? Oh, the woman from Rawlins."

The other woman looks up as the first continues, "Well the thing about Paula..." and cuts her off to tell me of course they cannot share with me where she lives. They wait for me to leave, watching through the window.

I hadn't expected much, but it was worth a try.

I get to Sheridan and take the road behind the train tracks to my mother's house. The porch is sagging. The cherry tree is dead in the front yard and there are piss stains on the white siding of the house. The concrete path to the back crumbles into the grass. There is an oven by the back door, a sink connected to nothing with a bar of soap on the rim and a dirty toothbrush, the bristles splayed as if someone has been sucking on it. Where the flowers used to be in the garden, there are beer bottles and cigarette butts.

Inside, a man sleeps on the couch. A woman is curled around the toilet in the bathroom and thick yellow vomit crusts the seat, her hands, and is smeared into the skin of her cheek. My mother is in her bed with the duvet over her head. The windows are covered with black sheets. I pull them off but she does not move in the evening light. I wonder if she's dead.

"Ma," I say.

She does not move.

I pinch her nose closed until her mouth drops open and she rolls over. Her eyes are unperceptive when she opens them. She looks through me. Even when she's awake, she might as well not be.

She stands up only to plod to the next room and sit on the couch by the stranger's feet. The woman in the bathroom does not stir. There is no "hello" hug, there is no "It's so good to see you, son," though I didn't expect it. She packs a bowl, alternating hits



with puffs off her cigarette. There are more butts outside of the ashtray than in, pill bottles tipped and emptying onto the coffee table. A layer of white dust coats the wood, the round ends of little spoons, and rolled-up dollar bills.

“You go to see your dad again?” she asks.

“Didn’t make it in time to see him. Just picked up his stuff. He’s been gone for a few days now.”

“Of course; I remember. That’s what I meant.” She laughs.

“He gave up everything for you,” I say.

“Yeah, well he gave me up too.”

The guy next to her laughs, coughing so hard he cries, and a glob of his spit lands on my hand where I’m sweeping up the ash on the table.

I stop to look at him but he doesn’t notice—he’s reaching under his blanket, pulling out a bottle of vodka and taking a swig; he’s crushing up a pill and snorting it off the dirty table. I imagine the dust and ash going straight to his brain.

“Ma,” I say, “you know a lady named Paula? She lives in Dayton.”

“Hey, baby,” she says to me, “you still live in Idaho?”

“Iowa, Ma. You know that.”

“I want a grandson. You ever gonna give me one? That bitch of a sister of yours chases off every chance she ever had.”

“It’s not her fault,” I say.

The man on the couch starts laughing again though he sees the tears in my mother’s eyes. My hands shake.

My mother is muttering to herself, sucking her cigarette down so fast the ash hangs off the end like a skeleton.

“I’m gonna go see Sis,” I tell her, “Clean this place up. You look like shit.”

My sister lives in an apartment downtown. It is clean, with finished oak and natural light. We sit in matching wooden chairs by her kitchen table, drinking tea.

“What was the last thing you said to him?” she asks me.

“That I loved him.”

“The last thing I said was ‘You fucked your life up and now you

have to live it.' We were talking on the phone and I got upset when he told me how much he missed Mom."

"We don't always get perfect endings, Sis."

"I don't think anyone gets happy endings."

"You know a lady named Paula?" I say, "She was sending Dad letters."

"Probably someone he knew a long time ago."

"She talked about me in her letters."

"She say anything about me?"

"No, just me. She said she loved him a couple times."

"Nah," she says, "I don't know anyone named Paula."

In the morning before I leave, Sis gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I love you," she says. "I mean it. I love you."

She makes me say it back.

I was five years old, sitting on the couch by my mother's feet; she was smoking a bowl and blowing smoke rings around my head while I put my finger through to break them. We were watching *Alice in Wonderland*.

The front door came open with a bang, smashing into the wall behind it. A woman walked in. She had hoop earrings on that came down to her chin, her hair in a ponytail pulling her severe eyebrows higher.

My mother turned her head with her mouth full of smoke and said, like the caterpillar, "Whooo aare youu?"

I giggled, but the lady didn't think it was funny. She walked over to my mother and grabbed her arm, trying to yank her off the couch.

"You sold my husband some bum pills, you fucking bitch. He's dead because of you. You hear me? He's dead. Died last night, slobbering. Fucking twitching. I coulda turned you in to the cops, you druggie bitch. I'll kill you."

Her eyeballs bugged out of her head, but her pupils were infinitesimal even in the darkness of the living room. She yanked my mother off the couch. Her hoop earrings swayed as she kicked. My mother lay on the floor, curling in on herself, whimpering and





groaning. The lady got on top of her and punched her in the face; I heard Ma's nose snap and she was nothing but blood. The woman's butt crack was exposed as she sat on top of my mother's chest, picking up her head and slamming it back down.

"I'll kill you, you fucking druggie bitch."

I heard the bedroom door open.

I heard my father say, "Get off her, you junkie."

She turned her head so fast her ponytail and hoops came around to slap her in the face.

I followed her turn and saw my father's smooth face, his white shirt so clean. The rifle was already aimed.

The lady said, "Fuck."

And then the bullet. And the blood, the screams. My sister crying as she came out of her room and my mother yelled, "Get this bitch off me."

I am finally back at my house in Iowa. Everything is flat here.

Seeing what's left of my family, realizing how far away I am now, I think I would have liked a chance to say goodbye to my old man. I still don't know why he took the blame for the pills my mother sold, including the one that killed a man. He probably would have gotten off on defense of Ma if it hadn't been for the drugs. He went to prison for her, and she never went to see him or answered his letters. I know she can't take care of herself, and he knew it too. How did he expect her to take care of us, then? I always wonder if the next time I go into that house, if I ever do, I'll find her tweaker pals snorting pills around her dead body.

My father's box is in my closet. My clothes hang over it; everything seems to be giving it space, like it has not yet found a permanent place in there. Sometimes I take it out. Sometimes I look at the picture of Paula. Judging only by what has been left in this box by my father, I don't know who he was. People are remembered only by flash images. My mother in smoke rings, my sister surrounded by light, my father in his white shirt, and Paula with this horse. I'll never know anything else about her.

I wish I could talk to Paula; she seems wise. She would know what I should do with myself now, but she is only the one letter

and the one picture. I write her a message. I tell her who I am and that my father is dead. Then I ask what it was that she was urging him to tell me. It's five sentences long and my signature; I put it in the mail.

I wait a week for a response. When I see the letter in my mailbox, I know it is from her. No one writes letters anymore, and it's not a bill or an advertisement.

I take the envelope out of the box, and turn it so I can see Paula's letters spelling out my name the way they spelled my father's.

The short block letters startle me. It is my own handwriting, covered with a stamp, "Return to Sender. No Forwarding Address."

Growing up without a father, I felt I had so much to offer to a son. And now here I am. Fatherless. Sonless. Alone. Here in-between these white walls with a box full of pictures of my life and letters about my life—moments I barely remember. Here's my history all leading up to now. There's still time, but it's moving faster, and it's never enough.

Before my father died, we sat across from each other, that wall of glass between us, and ladies with their hands up against it, like they could feel the warmth of their husbands' fingertips through the barrier. My thigh was jiggling tensely; it had calmed down a bit since he'd first walked out. I pressed the cold phone against my ear but neither of us said anything. The guards told us we had only a minute left and the both of us struggled for a way to say goodbye that would convey everything we hadn't been able to in the time leading up to it. I couldn't find words.

He said, "Do yourself right and be a man."

I know it was just an attempt not to end on silence—rushed advice, a poor excuse, perhaps, for the years without him.

He was walked out of the room. The phone still against my ear, I whispered I loved him. Though he never heard it from me, I will say those were my last words to my father. The phone was greasy when I put it back. I hoped someone would clean off my sweat before another man's wife or mother picked up the receiver.



# How I Came to Exist

Josh Wagner

Sitting across from me in the semi-lucid state of looming nap he refers to as the white stage of awareness, is my father—my real father—though my mom will never admit it, will never relinquish the words: “Donald Victoria Estringi is in fact your biological father.” When he perks up he asks me about school and what kind of grades I’m getting and whether I have any boyfriends yet, and always he phrases this more like whether I’ve been knocked up, and then he asks whether there’s any chance I’ll make my move before his rigamortis flares up or, at least, like, in this century.

Donald Victoria Estringi, confined to a wheelchair, was once a military man. He yells things like “Report,” “At ease,” and “Fuck sack,” at more or less random intervals. He keeps his seventeen medals in a dark oak case on the wall. He wears a bolo tie and American flag cufflinks. A different belt buckle every day. He despises gambling and hates to eat anything without utensils. He spends a lot of time talking about the importance of rooting out communism. A wandering hematoma plagues his face. His remaining hair is blinding white, parted on the left side and combed over to the right with laser precision. Glasses hang like a rocking chair on the edge of his nose, and he prefers not to look through them. He could smell worse for his age.

A couple years ago doctors diagnosed him with Guillian-Barre Syndrome on account of his sudden paralysis, but the symptoms never spread beyond his legs. His personal psychiatrist suspects psychosomatic hysteria or a very crafty will to death.

I can tell he’s my father just by looking at him, the way you can sometimes tell a person is lying just by looking at them. Sometimes he looks back at me like he knows. Sometimes he looks at me like he knows I know.

I try to hang out with Donald as much as I can. Sometimes it’s just to avoid having to deal with all the other old people who aren’t nearly as much fun, but mostly it’s for quality time. He’s really old, and I have no idea how much longer I’ll have him around.

We usually sit in his little room and play the Chinese version of chess with pieces like elephants and cannons that you won't find in normal chess. The games start out serious and then digress into whatever daily rules fly off the top of my father's head. Sometimes he gets inspiration from the white stage of awareness. His moves take up to a half hour when the meditation consumes him.

"A true soldier only strikes betimes," he explains. So I take these opportunities to help myself to the mini-fridge and read the actual god's-honest-truth newspaper, which may or may not make me cool in certain hipster circles.

Today, my father is particularly spunky. He laughs when he makes a move. He takes one of my elephants with a cannon by jumping off a pawn and crossing the river. I'm pretty sure this is a real rule.

"Walked right into that one," he says, "the master returns without leaving."

My sigh is pointed, bitchy I guess. I scan the board. There's this question I've been meaning to ask him for an hour. It's a lead-in question on my way to my real question—the question I swear I'm going to ask every time I come to the home, but never do. This isn't the first time I've used this particular technique. It almost worked last time. I try to sound off-handed, aloof.

"What were the nineties like?"

"A long and tortured decade," he says, scooting his glass of chocolate milk closer to the edge of the table so that his face can reach the straw.

"How about, say, 1996? Was that a good year?" I know that I am not smooth, but he is old and I am desperate.

He takes a long, palsied slurp from his milk. "'96... That's the year the Ruskiies and the Chechnians really got into it. Operation Desert Strike... Taliban took Kabul... eh... Clinton re-elected."

"Where were you?"

"Sitting on my fat ass, that's where!" He laughs; he sneers; he surveys the board. I know exactly where he was in 1996. The year I was conceived.

My dad says, "It was right after my discharge. They gave me this little shit room in 'Pest while I underwent six months evaluation



and waited for a plane home.”

“How about in April? Were you still living there in April?”

“April? Christ in a deep dark well, how the hell am I supposed to remember April?”

I pick up a chariot and rub it between my fingers. My pieces are black and my chariot’s symbol looks like the kind of flag-on-a-stick thing armies once carried into war. My father’s eyes follow my hand and then drop back to the board, trying to anticipate what I’m up to.

“Well, it was the start of spring,” I say, “Sunshine, flowers, girls in short skirts—”

“Helen of Troy!”

“—birds chirping, baseball season, high rivers.”

“There’s nothing like spring in Bavaria.” He digs something out of his left ear. Stares at it for a while.

“But I guess like, what I’m asking is, what were you doing at the time?”

“I was stationed in Bavaria in the spring of ’93. Something intoxicating about those years.”

“1996, specifically, is my interest.”

“Communism already a ghost of the past. The internet was learning to crawl.”

“And, like, how you spent your time.”

“There was this feeling in the air like anything was possible.”

“Any, you know, special ladies?”

“Talk of eradicating all borders, creating a world currency, microscopic explorations hitherto unimagined. Inner space!”

“Was Viagra around at the time?”

“Was what what?”

“Vi—agra.”

My father points at the board. “You gonna move that chariot or are you waiting for its value to depreciate?”

“I’m thinking.”

My favorite rule is, when the last chariot gets captured from the board, all remaining advisor pieces undergo a crisis of faith. Being from the old school and expecting technology to solve all the world’s problems, this ends in heart attacks and death unless

one of us can sing every verse to the Battle Hymn of the Old Republic without error, which happens, like, never.

My mother literally screams when I refer to Donald Victoria Estringi as my father. She says, "I'll tell you who your father is," and then gives me some bullshit story about a trip to Cinque Terre and an Italian businessman who fucked her and split. She tells it like it's the hottest soap opera ever. Why does every woman in this town fall to pieces over men who don't exist?

"Ah, the nineties," says Donald, drifting into the opiate grin of old-farts. Excellent teeth for his age, though. "Optimism was in the air. The dawn of a new era. If I could freeze time, I'd freeze it in '91. I was still in Berlin, helping rebuild."

There are days I can get him to talk about the dark side of his time in Europe, the two years before he left for the states. The two years before I was born. When he's in the mood he'll say things that give me the creeps, but he lets go only in fragments and gasps. Some seriously crazy shit about the Slovakian forests. Talking trees. An underground network of root systems and human mind control. He worked on a base in West Germany through most of the eighties until the Wall came down. Then, he took part in some of the original diplomatic missions through the old Bloc countries. Eventually, they stationed him in East Berlin. I guess sometime around '94 he was moved to Budapest on secret intelligence missions where he ran into something that messed him up for good. I've heard from multiple sources that in 'Pest there's a hole dug all the way down to the center of the earth. The Nazis started it and the Commies finished it. Donald says its somewhere below a pre-fabricated seventies housing project on Szigony Street. Who knows what kind of crazy Area 51 shit they brought back up, but my father must've dipped into whatever it was because he left the army a sixty-two-year-old fountain of fertility.

Eventually, he got back to the States and ended up here, living on the streets. He spent seven or eight months taking handouts and drinking himself, and everyone else, crazy. I guess he used to sing old German songs at the top of his lungs and run around telling people's fortunes, offering to give away high-level government secrets for the price of a bottle. According to some other old timers



I've interrogated, three federal sedans pulled into town and tracked him down in an alley and had a nice long chat with him. After that, the checks started coming in and he moved into a condo until he lost the use of his limbs. His other daughter, who I have never met and who was going to move out from Virginia to help him, eventually decided it would be easier to just put him in the home.

The point is he was in Budapest in '96. And so was my mother.

"My mom must've been pretty back then." I nibble on my lip. "In the nineties, I mean."

"Have I met your mother?"

Evasive, Mr. Estringi. Very evasive. I watch his hands. A man's lies slip out through his fingers.

I don't know what really happened, but Brooks and I have talked about it a lot. Brooks used to live down the street from Donald's condo. Brooks says he's pretty sure the old man is my dad, and Brooks knows secrets like that. I've put a lot of thought into it and I've finally got a story I like. It's a little bit of what my mother says, a little more of what I know, and mostly what I made up because it sounds right. Brooks says the stuff I make up is more important than the stuff I know.

So it's like this. My mom was single, stupid, recently divorced, and on some sort of mid-life crisis bullshit backpacking through Europe thing, wrestling cultural crisis and a biological Big Ben when she and her girlfriends rented a place in Budapest. My father was fresh off his mind-altering experience with the evil experiments of the enemy. While waiting for the army to decide his fate, Donald Victoria Estringi wandered into local church confessionals several times a week, looking for some peace of mind. What he had to tell drove two priests out of town. The Church of St. Margaret is where they met. Neither had come for the services. She was walking with a friend. He was planning to shoot himself in the head and splatter as many dendrites, glial cells, and myelinated axons as possible over the stained glass.

He brought his issue side arm along and wore his stripes. He pulled his cap low on his brow and placed the barrel against the patch of the United States flag. My father intended to pass that bullet not only through his brain, but also through the state that

drove him mad and the church that could not repair him. He knelt in the grass. Both hands held the gun upside-down, thumbs folded as in prayer across the trigger. The angle of trajectory would shatter the glass on the east side of the nave, piercing Christ's side, tear through the chapel, and finally exit out the eye of St. George's Dragon.

My mother walked back across the street for a second time just as Donald was finishing his sidearm drills. The friend she'd left at the door had forgotten her wallet in my mom's purse. Mom went all the way up to the front doors but was too intimidated to open them. She crept around the side, thinking maybe she could see her friend through a window and signal her. Donald was praying out loud: "To the principalities that swarm the throne of the Most High, obscuring the threefold face, the tri-part blade, the blender of consciousness, the hole at the center of the galaxy, the flesh around which this tiny shroud of the universe drapes. To the cocksucker who stole my marbles, to the first and the last, to the tooth and the scapula, to the purity of love which can by no means find further expression—not with his creation devouring him like a goddamn pack of wolves—oh, infinite spirit of the holy intractable neon mainframe, I release thee from this chamber of blood and pulp into which thou hast haphazardly submerged thyself. This tomb of a head, this labyrinth of a body, this rotten cage of meat." And then he closed his eyes. He snapped off the safety and kinesthetically estimated the angle most likely to bind both Holy Son and Dragon in 9x19mm of cosmic wedlock.

My mother, who had heard it all, said, "Excuse me," but she didn't say it right away. First, she took a step backward. She squelched the impulse to take three more and pretend she'd been around the corner when the shot went off. But something in her overcame this instinct. She reached out a hand.

"Excuse me. Don't do that."

Donald Victoria Estringi neither lowered the gun nor squeezed the trigger as he caught my mother's eye. Her hair a mess, her fashion sense less than spectacular, her eyes starting to sag a bit, same as her breasts—such an angel she must've seemed to him, to whatever part of him thought suicide an inescapable recourse





to the demons of his mind. Still on his knees, he turned trembling toward her. She came to him and took the gun from his hands. She crouched down to embrace his ancient frame, the great sobbing hulk in his uniform—such a synthesis of masculine and feminine. Did they do it right there on the church lawn? No, that's probably taking it way too far. They walked back to her place or took a tram to get a drink and talk it out.

My mother knew what she was doing. A man returning from the brink of death is not something to waste, and she soaked up every drop of emanating life force that old Donald intended to launch out the back of his skull, but which he now redirected into a physical, mental, and emotional flowering, not unlike the rapture of the Buddha or the resurrection of Christ. He unleashed his own fiery dragon and hurled it deep into my mother's womb.

Some people hate that part of the story, but it's my conception and I'll describe it however I want, thank you very much.

# A Perfect Portrait on the Morning Beach

Kris Price

We are two chess pieces,  
told how to move. I was the pawn,  
and he the king.

I stand erect like a soldier.  
My gangly arms at my side, a red, and  
White striped t-shirt, blue jean shorts dark as the ocean.  
Dirty blond hair, was immobile  
As old glue.

My paper white socks, and torn blue sneakers  
Wanting to be patched up like this photo,  
My mom is determined to take.  
I am still with a half curled smile,  
eyes hollow as a skeleton's.

Mom said a serious shout,  
“Keep the pose, Kristopher.”

My dad behind me tall as the Sequoia trees,  
In a Golden Bear visor, black shades  
His emotion concealed.

His arms loop over my bony shoulders  
Like an octopus ready to strangle.

The sea, calm as a negotiator, the sky overcast,  
As the deck holds us up like the Santa Monica Pier.

A perfect portrait on this frozen sand dune.



# Winter Recipe for Rhode Island Reds

Sam Wood

Quickly stolen, through light chicken wire and  
into the wicker basket, three red birds  
brought in to fry. This is our best laid plan

for breakfast. Brush flesh with butter and  
oil the charred pan, belly heat bowed.  
Freeze dried, ice on chicken wire and

the mornings are so cold now, my bed and  
comforter twisted with warmth. Our words,  
caught in September, gave flight to this plan;

wake just long enough to eat our fill and  
then quick back to bed. Thoughts still blurred,  
half woven from light chicken wire and

at this rate we'll eat them by New Years and  
then what? Brush our coats for sustenance, burrs  
worked out to fry. This is our best laid plan

to make it through to Spring. Rest assured—  
us here, wrapped in down, with three rusted birds  
quickly stolen from their iced up homes and  
brought in to fry, this is our best laid plan.

# Bison bison

Christian Lipscomb



# Becoming Montanan

Andrew Grossmann

I wanted to become a Montanan. I wanted in-state tuition. I turned in my paperwork, filed my Montana taxes, and got a new driver's license. I was on the road a lot and grew out my mustache and donned a Montana Highway Patrolman hat from The Fifty-Thousand Silver Dollar Bar. A nervous man in Helena told me to leave the bar. I was pulled over in Missoula; I didn't have my headlights on outside The Wilma. I rolled down the window of my '82 Mercedes diesel station wagon. It was like the officer was looking into a mirror. He said, "I like your hat. Where are you going?" "To a party," I told him. "Okay, have a good time," he said, and I went to the party.

I overheard a story at The Break in Missoula. A young man from Chicago came to Montana, wearing shiny white cowboy boots. "How do I weather-prep these?" he asked. The Montanan told him, "Pour two cans of bacon grease in each boot and let them sit overnight." "Okay," said the boy. He did like the man told him.

In Spokane, Uncle Reid told me I had a Carlos Santana mustache. It was real thin. Reid told me he used to drive a hundred miles an hour through Montana. The highway patrolmen would pass him at one-hundred-twenty miles per hour, and they drove with a glass of bourbon in their lap. Sometimes they would pull Reid over and tell him to slow down.

I worked at the Mansfield Library, Delta Gamma, and for the Intramural Program. I volunteered at Lewis and Clark Elementary and taught third-grade math. I had to pay close attention when the teacher taught the kids. I mainly tutored two kids. I worked with a female student teacher who I later saw completely naked at Goldbug Hot Springs. But to get in-state tuition I had to work for a year straight and file my Montana taxes, among other inconveniences.

I went in to see the lady in Lommasson who was supposed to help me get in-state. I dropped a class late one semester and was

down to seven credits. The rule is students are supposed to take only six credits per semester for two consecutive semesters before they can apply for in-state residency. The lady in Lommasson said, “It’s okay, a lot of students become in-state after taking seven credits. It’s all part of the process. How many credits you take is only one part of the application, there are other factors.” Six months later, when I applied, the school told me I would not receive in-state because I had taken seven credits one semester. “Sometimes that happens,” the lady said. I wrote the dean an appeal letter and Dad called the dean and said the lady misled me from the beginning. She told me to pour bacon grease in my boots, and I listened to her. Fortunately the school over-turned the decision and gave me in-state tuition, and I shaved off my mustache and threw away my highway patrolman hat.





# ändra

Stephanie Reiman

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andra with lace

Stephanie Raines

# Silver in My Hair

Benjamin Mason

“Do you swing dance?”  
You asked the moon but  
I said yes. The music stopped

And the stars scattered loosely overhead  
Marched strange beats through the sky  
For you and I. And

As we nestled our toes beneath  
The leaves like tiny toads  
In dry graves I wondered if

The silver wash would be enough—  
Enough to wake them so they could  
Skip and blink and breathe again—

But it was too cold to take off our shoes  
And we bid adieu. As I turned home  
I said to the flickering lamp

“I could just dance straight through  
December without breaking a sweat”  
And I could hear that beat once again.

The mountain loomed over me  
Like September’s cold shoulder  
With a badge. I took off my coat

And closed the blinds and I was  
Sure that I wouldn’t be able to sleep  
With all this moonlight in my hair.





# Words

Bridget Gibbons

Charles turns the page of his newspaper. A picture of a taped-off subway platform catches his attention.

Suddenly, he is there, standing on the platform's edge, waiting for the oncoming train. He tastes the stale smoke in the air. Palms sweaty, he sets his suitcase down and removes his tie, tossing it onto the tracks. A gaggle of uniformed schoolgirls with glossy lips and high heels stampedes in Charles's direction. They would later refer to him as looking "like, sad and stuff." *Better to wait until they're gone*, he thought.

The clock overhead on the graffiti wall seems to slow down, trying to interfere. Charles simply sighs and looks at the quickly growing light to his left. *Nice try, Father Time.*

His ears fill with a numbing sound like wave upon wave upon endless wave. With one deep breath, the man closes his eyes, and wonders if anyone would remember him—if anyone would care. Then, with the majesty of a balloon that has been lost to the sky forever, he jumps in front of the subway train and dies instantly.

Charles turns the page and takes a sip of coffee. *One mustn't become too attached to these stories. They're much too morbid.* He takes another sip. *Imaginations like that are what cause the events in the first place.*

# Norms

Eva Stone



# Baking

April Douglas

My mother used to take me into the kitchen  
and sit me on her stool, weathered and white.  
'Tattered cookbooks. Ancient tomes. Inherited wisdom.  
She would offer me the brittle pages,  
her hands moving in practiced motion  
as I stumbled through the instructions.

They were crystal clear, her instructions:  
a teaspoon of this, a dab of that. Gems of her kitchen.  
'The flour was my favorite. Little puffs of white  
filling the air like so much ancient wisdom.  
My small hands dropped the frail pages  
as she held me high, teaching me her motions.

Whip and flip and stir and spoon. The motions  
deeply ingrained by her mother. She needed no instructions,  
this was her place. Her sanctuary. Her kitchen.  
Now, her floor is weathered with time. It isn't white  
anymore. And she has passed all of that wisdom  
on to me, endless knowledge written in the pages.

She's tucked them away for safety, those pages.  
'The recipes for life. The motions  
of our lives. More than just instructions  
for baking. Here, she describes life outside the kitchen.  
A world full of hopes. Dreams. Heartbreak. White  
pages littered with fingerprints of time convey everything she  
taught me. Her wisdom.

My children watch me. It's my turn to hold the wisdom.  
'To teach them, to pass on the legacy left in her pages.  
I hold them close to my chest, I show them her motions.  
We follow them together. All her instructions

on how to master the kitchen  
and live life. Clean. Perfect. White.

Our time passes in a blaze of white  
and I find what I miss most is her wisdom.  
Though it cannot replace her, I still have her pages.  
And the memory of her motions  
to offer me instructions.  
I hear her voice, whenever I enter my kitchen.

Memories are pale and white. Emotions overwhelm me.  
There is wisdom to be found in those ancient pages.  
In the instructions my mother left on how to run my kitchen.



# your lame starling

Juliana Lutz

while i wander our  
sheets beautiful as a washerwoman  
i prioritize the occasional closets  
we sleep in for comfort and be sure  
before you leave (if you leave first) the world  
will not renounce us its perfect egret  
shifting himself a safer distance and here  
it is very common waking up  
aisles full of preservatives and people say it  
to each other all the time how they love  
subway stations. imagine you are young  
imagine you are two feet tall and  
wanting to ride in a rickshaw  
it is not that you remember arriving  
at the silence of yourself  
it is only that in this area of the world  
the word for dog and the word for heart  
sound very similar. but we love violent  
acts of preservation. we love to eat  
with the lights off and we love our love like  
catching a pillow full of rabbits  
with this heart and its crimped wings.  
so small are its portions, our cured slices  
we bite off before going to bed each night  
that once cast aglow the wedding of our sleep  
arrives firm handfuls of stardust  
in which the importance of dreaming in animals  
appears a little taller or entirely  
our hibernation.

# Untitled

Katrina Keleher



# Roots

Sarah Poole

My memory of the moon lies still. It rose  
along with the shadows of trees  
and branches and leaves that fall  
to the growing and growling earth.  
Ash from the fire we built drops  
like rain with the rising rings of smoke.

You say you can't see the smoke  
like I do tonight. It is a rose  
that blossoms in air then drops  
from the canopy of trees.  
Umbrellas from the earth  
that bend in wind. Only, they fall

like the minutes it took you to fall.  
You lit a cigarette. The smoke  
swelled in my face as you sat on the earth  
inhaling as we rose  
into the blackened trees.  
With moonlight that drops

like your hand drops,  
you hold me and fall.  
The night sky hides in the trees.  
Swirling smoke  
surrounded your face that rose  
to meet mine, and you spilled yourself out onto the earth.

The wild wooden earth,  
impressed by rain drops,  
swallows us with rose  
petals that wilt and fall  
in the last bits of smoke,

no longer hanging in the trees.

We are broken by bellowing trees.

We rust in the earth.

Our eyes sting from smoke

and with tear drops

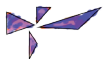
we can change the colors of Fall,

layered thick like the bud of a rose.

You became this rose beneath the trees

tonight, waiting to fall like the moon to the earth,

and we drop like the ash from lifeless collapsing smoke.





# Transcending

Shelby Johnson



# In Heaven, Everything is Fine

Teresa Fahlgren

Matthew died on a Friday. My dad sent me a text, “CALL ME DEAR,” while I was driving to Idaho. When I called, he started by saying, “I just got a sad call . . . a very sad call,” and I turned the car around. The following Monday morning I met our three closest friends to drive home for the funeral.

We hadn’t been together in almost four years. Standing by the car, we regarded each other through a haze of cigarette smoke and searched for a way to break the silence. With careful questions, measured between drags on my cigarette, I managed to dig out some details of their lives. Martin had started working on a lavender farm and sold vegetables at the Farmer’s Market. He paid real rent to live in a real house. I reserved my skepticism. The Martin I’d known had been generally homeless. Paul had a good job as a CNA. His ADD prevented him from offering any details, except that he hated it and couldn’t wait to make it back to his parents’ so he could play his drums.

Growing up together, all of us, including Matthew, had spent every night cruising the web of dirt roads surrounding our hometown, Crested Grass. *As soon as we get into the car*, I thought, *we’ll be fine*. Because in the car, we had the one real thing we had in common—music.

Martin held up fistfuls of CD’s he’d checked out from the library. “Tom Waits! Like, three Tom Waits albums!” They clattered together when he tossed them into the backseat.

“I thought you guys might appreciate this,” I said, and slid in a freshly burnt copy of Modest Mouse’s album *Building Nothing Out of Something*.

Paul cheered and Martin shook his fist and grinned out the window. Jack averted his eyes. He was sitting passenger seat and I, in my naivete, thought maybe I could rely on him for some emotional support. We’d decided to split the driving between the two of us because, I reasoned, it’s *Jack*. We could conquer this together, as a team. We’d been the magnet that brought this whole



group together and, consequently, the reason for its suspension. We had our first date at fifteen and he'd left me for my best friend at twenty. A tiny part of me hoped we could get past old animosity and find some of the old strength in each other.

*"I'm the same as I was when I was six years old and oh my God I feel so damn old / I don't really feel anything,"* we sang.

Every two hours we stopped for a smoke break, and the closer we got to home, the more we took our time. I had a hopeful vision of making such little headway we'd eventually start going backward in time until Matthew was sitting in the back between Martin and Paul where he belonged. We didn't talk about him on the drive, just made dirty jokes and sang the old songs. Jack talked the least. I was hyper-aware of the few words he did say, and slowly it dawned on me that maybe we wouldn't find strength in each other through our mutual loss.

Almost to Crested Grass, with the other two sleeping in the backseat like little brothers, Jack and I listened to one of our old favorite songs on that same Modest Mouse album. *"Whenever I breathe out, you're breathing in / whenever I speak out, you take it all in."*

"It seems this might not be a love song," I said.

He took a minute to reply. "Yeah," he said, "I don't know why I never heard it that way before."

At home I sought the company of my dad. One Memorial Day years ago, he and I took bouquets of silk flowers to our family plot outside the tiny neighboring town where he grew up. Standing amid homemade tombstones of twisted diamond willow branches, in the middle of the windblown prairie, my dad pointed at each of the GALLAGHER headstones and said, "My mom, my dad, my sister, my brother, and my son. My whole family's here."

The day of Matthew's funeral we took a drive out to our family farm and he filled me in on how the cows were doing. We didn't let Matthew's death breach the safety of the cab of the pick-up until we were back home, pulling into the driveway.

"Kim said that it was definitely a suicide," he told me, but didn't say how she knew for sure. I nodded, knowing well enough to keep that to myself.

I walked to the funeral separate from the boys and sat in a pew on the right side of the Lutheran church. During the days beforehand, I'd laughed easily when talking about Matthew. Going from tears to laughter had become a superpower—I was the master of emotion. But sitting there, watching a slide show of him at all ages, was too much.

I felt a smack on my shoulder and turned to see a woman I'd known my whole life brandishing tissues at me. "Frances, here."

I tried to smile in thanks, but she just sat back and stared resolutely ahead. Jack and Paul filed in, followed by three or four other friends of Matthew's. Then a crowd of more than twenty young men surged in—*frat brothers*—followed by a smaller crowd of bleached-blond, tiny-skirted girls—*sorority sisters*.

I avoided looking at the boys, not wanting to make fun of Matthew's lifestyle even with a raised eyebrow, and focused instead on the tiny old woman sitting on my right. I wanted to slip my hand into hers and ask about her grandchildren. Ask for candy out of her tiny beaded bag.

The casket was closed and the images I'd Googled of the wreck flashed through my mind: Matthew's big SUV, the one I knew so well, wrapped around a tree. He'd gone off a cliff at eighty miles an hour. How could I expect the casket to be open? I'll never know what became of the cufflinks I gave him, the ones I'd asked he be buried in.

My tears subsided once the pastor started spewing Bible verses that Matthew would have declared bullshit, and I kept my eyes trained on a wreath of red roses until they wandered to the backs of the sorority sisters' heads. Some of them looked as if they'd been crying, and others looked unsure of how they'd gotten there. The brothers seemed like children in too-large suits. Which were his best friends? Any of them? Matthew had only gone to school in Bozeman for two semesters. I'd known him for six years.

I scanned the rest of the crowd and realized our row of about eight were the only local people our age. I saw almost every parent I knew, but felt instinctively that they were only there because a young man they'd seen around got killed in an accident—plus



there's nothing else to do in town and they'd look like jerks if they didn't come.

Matthew's mother stared stiffly ahead throughout the ceremony. At the end, as they walked out in procession to Johnny Cash, I realized with a start that the sandy-haired man locking arms with her must have been his dad.

"Wanna see a picture of my dad?" Matthew asked me when he was seventeen, having just learned his dad's name and driven across the state to meet him. "And look, I have a sister, too!" The photos he clutched were wallet-sized and worn. He gazed at them long after I'd handed them back, his grin wide, eyes glued to their matte surface.

After the funeral we all stood on the sidewalk, blinking and awkward in the bright sunlight. I found Matthew's cousin, a girl I'd gone to school with. I hugged her and told her, "I'm so sorry," and she said, "I'm sorry for you, too," and cried harder. "I never don't cry," she said, and laughed.

My dad held me tight for a long time, my face buried in his lapel. He was wearing a bolo tie, but had left his cowboy hat behind out of respect. I knew without looking he'd be wearing his good boots.

"I got mascara on your shirt," I said and looked at him. I hadn't expected his eyes to be filled with tears.

The family held an after party, and Jack led us directly to the open bar. He claimed a stool and I stood with a drink in my hand, wondering if I was expected to have fun. No one was crying anymore, just chatting as if at a church potluck. I spotted the man with the sandy hair sitting alone at the end of the bar and, without a plan, approached him.

"Are you Matthew's dad?"

"Yep." His voice was so tired. He took a deep breath and sized me up.

"He was so excited to finally get to meet you. I'm Frances. I went to high school with him. We were good friends." I hugged

him.

“Thanks. Thank you. It’s good to meet you.”

“You look just like him.”

“I know.”

“He was so happy when he got to meet you.”

“I know.”

Later when the boys and I were smoking, he came outside and slipped his own pack out of his suit pocket. I didn’t give him time to distance himself from us before I introduced him to the rest of the group. Swarming around us were nicely dressed strangers and packs of them wandered by to say small words of reassurance to him. After one strange couple in particular, he muttered, “The frat thing is a little weird.”

“Yeah, we’re the ones who knew Matthew before all that. We’re pre-frat Matthew.”

He nodded in approval, despite our visible tattoos and piercings. Even if we weren’t around much in the end. That fact is for us to live with. We all hugged him goodbye and he muttered something without looking at me about how he’d be glad to see me on the streets of Missoula, he goes there a lot, he’d be sure to recognize me.

“If you live long enough, your stories get to change,” I heard a woman say on NPR. “And that’s a good thing.” I don’t know who she was or what she was referring to, but as time passed my stories were able to change—only I couldn’t let them. I was haunted by the bored faces of the fraternity boys, and I was the traitor who hadn’t been there for him.

Back at school I spent my time with people who didn’t know what happened so I wouldn’t get asked how I was doing. I was sick of lying and I was sick of being honest. For a long time, all food tasted terrible and my nightmares were unbearable. I started dating someone because he helped me forget, but in the middle of the night I tended to cry and tell him about the friend I’d abandoned, the boy I couldn’t save.

Martin and Paul found their way back into my life after that trip home, though not in a big way. For the rest of the Farmer’s



Market season I'd go visit Paul at his booth, buy some squash and we'd smoke a cigarette. Paul turned twenty-one a few days after Matthew would have, but I missed the party.

I'd hoped that such a tragedy could stitch back together broken friendships and bring the forgotten good parts of people out into the open again. But, like that old Bob Wills song my dad likes to remind me of, *time changes everything*.





# Contributors

Maura Bradshaw is a senior majoring in English with options in creative writing and literature. She is from Sheridan, WY.

Jocelyn Catterson is a senior majoring in resource conservation. Her hometown is Evergreen, CO.

Katie DeGrandpre is a senior pursuing majors in Spanish teaching and English with a creative writing option, as well as a minor in Latin American studies. She is from Missoula, MT.

April Douglas is a junior majoring in English with a creative writing option. She is originally from Hingham, MT.

Teresa Fahlgren is currently in her fourth year at UM. She has a minor in studio art and is working on a degree in English with a creative writing option. She grew up on a farm outside Glasgow, MT and has lived in Arizona, Washington and Denmark since.

Jen Fredette is a junior majoring in communications. Her hometown is Alberton, MT. She took her seven-year-old out for a session in the freshly fallen snow, and her piece is one of the images from that day.

Bridget Gibbons is a fourth year psychology and English student. She is from Montana.

Andrew Grossmann is a senior majoring in English with a creative writing option. He is originally from Hinsdale, IL.

Sarah Gullickson is a senior working on a BFA in media arts. She is from Bozeman, MT.

Jeron Jennings was born in Missoula and grew up in Saint Regis, MT. He is currently a freshman majoring in English teaching.

Shelby Johnson is a senior earning her BFA in painting and K-12 art education. She is from Elliston, MT.

Katrina Keleher is a senior majoring in geosciences. She is from Wilmette IL.

Joel Kempff is a freshman majoring in English with options in literature and creative writing. San Antonio, TX is his hometown, but he has lived all over the country.

Hannah Kochel is a senior majoring in media arts. She is from Missoula, MT.

Sarah Korn is a junior studying creative writing. A native of Denver, her work has been published in the *Blue Lake Review* and in a previous issue of *The Oval*.

Christian Lipscomb is a sophomore in the wildlife biology program. He hails from Driftwood, TX. His shot of a couple of bison was taken in the Lamar Valley, in Yellowstone National Park, in November 2013.

Juliana Lutz is a central and southwest Asia studies major, minoring in Arabic. She is from Sandpoint, ID.

Benjamin Mason is a sophomore studying microbiology. Originally from Kalispell, he now counts Missoula as his home.

Erik Nielsen will graduate from the English program with an option in creative writing in the spring of 2014. He was born and raised in Missoula, MT.

Gaaby Patterson is a sophomore majoring in English with a creative writing option. Originally from Detroit, MI, she moved to Montana when she was four and bounced back and forth between here and there until she came to live in Montana permanently in 1996.

Aaron Polich is a senior currently studying clinical psychology with a minor in fine arts. Aaron was born and raised in Great Falls, MT. His major focuses in his art are on power plays based on the examination of inorganic and organic systems.

Sarah Poole is graduating in the spring with a major in English with a creative writing option and a minor in Chinese. She is originally from Helena, MT.



Kris Price has an AA in behavioral and social sciences from Modesto Junior College. He is studying English with a creative writing option, as well as film studies. His work has appeared in *Penumbra*, *Emerge*, *The Fine Line*, *the Newer York Press*, and *Diversion Press*, among many other places. He was also awarded second place in Kay Ryan's Community College Poetry Project contest.

Stephanie Reiman is currently in her third year in the BFA program for fine arts. Her concentration is printmaking and she is minoring in media arts. She was born and raised in Helena, MT. She owes all her talent, achievement and future to the Ultimate Creator, God, and she thanks Him for His grace and love.

Nathan Snow is a sophomore. He grew up in Livingston, MT. He is studying acting and writing here in Missoula. He has worked as a photographer since he was fifteen. He has had his work featured in several galleries around Montana.

Eva Stone is a junior majoring in fine art with a focus in printmaking. She grew up five hours away in Gardiner, MT next to Yellowstone National Park. Her piece was made with ink and charcoal.

Josh Wagner is a senior majoring in English with a creative writing option. He was raised in Santa Cruz, CA and went to high school in Hamilton, MT. He writes plays, fiction, and poetry. His story is an excerpt from a new untitled novel coming out this fall from Asymmetrical Press.

Sam Wood is a senior majoring in English who transferred to UM this fall. Before moving to Missoula, he attended the University of Wyoming in his hometown of Laramie for two years, followed by a year at the University of Washington. He is an intern and reader with *CutBank*, and would be lost without his green armchair.



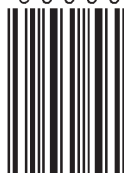
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ISBN: 978-0-9894031-6-0



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