

The Oval

Volume 7
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 1

2014

The Oval, 2014 - Staff Issue

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(2014) "The Oval, 2014 - Staff Issue," *The Oval*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

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The

OVAL

Staff Issue 2014



The Oval: Staff Issue

Spring, 2014

The University of Montana

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WOOLGATHERING IN COUNT-BASIE-POCKET

Kalen Walther

Voices gather cirrus
Seep through transom eyelid like
Two a.m. low noon
Slip the door sink Greyhound pendular
Absorb the slow tether
Cough up the dirge and let the evening sway

Spring 2014

UNTITLED

Jenna Franklin



DROWNING

Zachary Shearer

Upon leaving his church of five years, First United Methodist of Evanston, IL, Walter imagined himself spending Sunday mornings drinking tea and reading novels that explored love, life and morality, but that was not the case. Instead, he restlessly moved around his apartment, cooked too much food, and watched reruns of M*A*S*H. The novels that he did pick up from the library remained in a bag next to his bed until they were due back, at which point Walter returned them untouched.

At first, Walter felt this was a fine way of spending his Sundays—it was just like having a second Saturday. He let the stress from his work week at the printing shop slip off him, and did as he pleased without worry. But soon, his apartment turned small and faded on those lonely mornings. He tried to cook to keep his mind occupied, but one can only eat so much chicken curry, so his fridge filled up with deteriorating food that left an odor each time he opened the door. M*A*S*H episodes lost their appeal as well, each one blending into the next, Hawkeye making the same cracks over and over again.

One such Sunday, as he hunched over his coffee table, Walter ate a bowl of rice and beans that seemed a little too grey. After five or six bites, he noticed the rice and beans become a tasteless mash—which was to be expected from his cooking, but in this particular instance it was more of a numbing sensation, in that his mouth held responsibility for the lack of taste rather than his dreary food. As he pondered this peculiarity, the numbness spread from his mouth out to his ears and then down to his ankles—stopping just before his toes. Looking around his apartment, it seemed as it always had: small kitchen adjacent to the small living room containing a tv, poofy red couch, and the coffee table, but a greyness had settled over everything, like a fog somehow snuck indoors. Only Walter's toes escaped the numbing and the greyness, so he wiggled them frantically as they were his only grasp on reality. He felt that if he were to lie on the floor and push down, the apartment would disintegrate into an ocean of grey nothingness and he would become an inconsequential jellyfish floating along. This appealed somewhat to a tired Walter, but instead of lying down, he let his head fall into the bowl of rice and beans. To his surprise, his face didn't fall into an empty void, but a soft warmth pressed against his face and a few rice grains moved up into his nostrils. Perhaps, he thought, this was what

food poisoning was like; perhaps this was not the impending collapse of reality. But he remembered his cousin Morgan eating a bad chicken burrito and puking all night at his sleepover, and Walter didn't feel the least bit nauseous, so it probably wasn't that. Face still in bowl, Walter decided it was time he found himself something spiritually reassuring to do on Sunday mornings.

As a child, after telling him off for eating too much, or splashing other children during his swim lesson, Walter's mother often said to him, "Body, mind, and soul, dear. Keep them healthy and you'll do alright. Just look at your father." Walter then looked to his father, a goateed man in a green cardigan, who would nod and sip his coffee with a quiet reverence that only a man of strong body, mind, and soul can have. In Walter's memory, his father was always bright, without the least bit of grey about him. Walter thought he wanted to be able to sip his coffee with colored satisfaction too, and a healthy spirit seemed to be the only thing in his way.

The most straightforward route would be to join a new church. Walter looked up a few different congregations online: Catholics, Presbyterians, Unitarians, each one sporting a website with smiling faces and a signature Bible verse scrolled across the top. Despite the enthusiastic webpages, Walter decided against returning to Christ's domain for the same reasons he left First United to begin with: too much devotion was required. Too many requests to go on men's retreats in the woods, or be an usher every fifth Sunday, or to even just chat at the after service coffee hour. Walter wished for a quiet Sunday lecture that reaffirmed some inkling of cosmic certainty. That was all he needed, and that was all he wanted.

Of course, there was another reason for his deciding to leave First United, which was his growing infatuation with the pastor's wife Connie. She was a red-faced, big breasted woman who had a strong laugh, and every Sunday would say to Walter, "Well, Walt, are you feeling wonderful today?" and he always did feel wonderful just because she asked. Soon though, he found himself lingering too long in her end-of-service goodbye hugs, peeking down her blouse during prayer time, and fantasizing about clandestine coat room meetings. Walter always fretted over such occurrences, yet any attempts to temper his

feelings just made them worse. When Walter lost sleep over thoughts of her and subsequently shambled through days dead tired, he knew he had to leave. If he were to start attending a new church, the chance of another Connie situation arising seemed slim but, still, Walter didn't want to risk it. He needed another option.

Walter decided to ask his ex-girlfriend Abbie for advice, so he called her up and they made plans to go for a walk along the lakefront.

"You should start coming to my book club," said Abbie upon hearing of Walter's search. "We meet on Sunday mornings."

Walter remembered Abbie's book club from when they dated two years ago. They would both return from their respective Sunday morning assemblies to meet for lunch. Abbie told Walter about the various characters in her group, all of whom were in their mid-twenties, sexually liberated, and donning some variation of the name Christina. Walter responded with tales of the eager, repressed gentiles at First United. A few times Abbie arrived at lunch, tipsy from morning wine and ready to sexually liberate herself, only to find Walter in a state of dismal prudence from that morning's sermon. Their relationship only lasted three months but they remained friends.

"I'm not sure if I'd fit in with your book club," said Walter. "Besides, I don't think romance novels lead to a healthy soul."

Abbie, never one to take a slight without returning the favor, said, "Well, sexuality can provide spirit if you have the ability," and then refused to provide any sort of helpful response for the rest of their walk along Lake Michigan. Instead, they appreciated the crash of the waves, the gulls overhead, and the forgotten comfort of each other's presence.

The silence of their relationship was, except for a few devastatingly quiet moments, what Walter liked most about Abbie. Their evenings spent sipping tea and holding hands; they were his ultimate comfort. It was the same comfort he found building sand castles on the beach as a child with his father standing knee deep in the water face to the wind, and his mother reading a book next to him. The same comfort he found in Connie's arms.

This silence stood in strong contrast to their moments of intimacy. Walter valued Abbie's strength and straightforwardness, but in bed, those aspects of her character left him shaken, often quite literally. She'd straddle him and pull at his hair, working her way into a greater and greater intensity, which Walter could only uncomfortably marvel at.

When they reached the end of the trail and decided to part ways, Walter gave Abbie a brief hug and then stepped back to look at her one last time. She shifted her weight and placed her arm on her hip.

"I miss you," he said.

"I know, Walt," she said, and smiled. "If you really want to find some spiritual fulfillment like your father, maybe you should get a new girlfriend."

"Only if she's a guru," Walter called back to her as she walked away.

On Wednesday afternoon, right before closing time, Walter's manager at the printing and graphics shop he worked at informed him that he would no longer be employed there.

"We've been considering terminating your position for awhile now," his manager said while fiddling with a green dinosaur figurine on his desk and making no eye contact with Walt. "And recently, your work has been, well, terrible."

Walter thought back to his recent days at work and couldn't disagree. Before he had left First United and his mind was focused only on Connie, his work became both visibly shoddy and slightly erotic. While working on a poster design for a local pottery club's charity auction he had neglected to include any ceramics in the image, but the phrase "hand molded clay breasts" worked its way in. After he left First United, his work had initially improved, but recently it devolved into a minimalism that didn't speak too well to the everyday patron's graphic needs—lots of red triangles placed askew on a white background. This was likely a symptom of the rice and beans attack and his unhealthy soul. That he would be fired for sub par work was of no surprise to Walter at all.

So, Walter thanked his manager for his time and gathered his things from his desk into a cardboard box. Before he could leave the shop, he began to feel the heat of the

stares of his four ex-coworkers: Dan, Andres, Mark, and Meg. They had been good co-workers in that they mostly left him alone. But they were also bad co-workers in that Walt liked none of them and they never asked him to join them for lunch. Walt didn't think he would miss this place too much.

As Walter left the shop for the final time, Dan approached him.

"Hey Walt, I'm sorry about how all this happened."

"Shut up, Dan," said Walt and he let the door slam behind him.

Ten minutes later, he sat down at a corner table at Maxie's Cafe and ordered his first drink in four years, a glass of Veranda Merlot, 2010, Napa Valley. As he took careful sips of the wine and sifted through the cardboard box of his things that sat on the table in front of him, Walter decided that figuring out his spiritual needs, his soul, his inner psyche, was of utmost priority. He remembered his father nodding to himself in his green cardigan, and wished he could call him and ask him what to do, but a strict nursing home and a bad case of Alzheimer's prevented that. Walter felt his hand start to shake as he lifted the wine glass to his face and hoped that it was only jitters from being fired.

The next day, before he could get started on a new search, Walter's old pastor, Jeff, stopped by his apartment with Connie for an unannounced visit. Walter wore sweats and was in the middle of another episode of M*A*S*H when he heard a knock on the door and Jeff's voice.

"Walt, son, we've come to say hi."

Five minutes later, Walter sat between Jeff and Connie on the puffy red couch as a kettle of water for tea heated on the stove. Pushed up against him, Connie wore a tight, dark cardigan and smelled of fruity shampoo. Jeff put his hand on Walter's knee and squeezed, as a father would.

"We noticed you haven't been in church recently," said Jeff.

"We were worried about you," said Connie.

Walter nodded, and tried to think of an acceptable response to their concern but all he thought of was the way Connie's knee pressed against his and how wonderful

that felt. He was also very much aware of the tight grip on his other knee that Jeff had, a grip that seemed to only get tighter with time. Walter, while being quite literally squashed on the couch, felt as if he was being pulled apart by the opposing forces of desire and respectability. Thinking back to the rice and beans fiasco, Walter wished he was in that space again, floating away from all the pressures. However, Jeff and Connie were keeping him firmly anchored in reality at the moment: Jeff's arm tightened around his knee and a smile widened on his face; Connie's smell and brief touches grew more intoxicating. Walter felt, like a balloon blown too large, ready to burst. After a few moments of desperate silence, the kettle started to whistle and Walter excused himself from the couch to prepare the tea.

"We stopped by to make sure you were doing alright," Jeff said from the couch.

"You are doing alright, aren't you?" Connie asked.

Walter poured the tea out carefully into the three blue mugs he had received from his mother a year before her death and considered telling Jeff and Connie all that had been going on. He imagined himself explaining the over eager churchgoers, the bowl of beans and rice, how he got fired, and even his feelings for Connie. He imagined they'd react with sympathy and grace. Jeff would stroke his beard, employ a few choice Bible verses, and give Walter a good firm handshake. Connie would blush and look away and say, "Well that's not exactly wonderful, Walt, but we forgive you." Walter wanted to tell them everything and have the heavy weight, the one that seemed to sit on his shoulders day in and day out, fade away for at least a little while.

Walter walked back out to the cramped living room, balancing the three teacups on a tray, and he felt his hands shake as he did so. After placing the tray down on the coffee table, Walter straightened up and looked Jeff in the eye.

"I'm afraid I can't attend First United anymore," he said.

"And why's that, son?" asked Jeff.

Walter made the mistake of turning his gaze to Connie then. He saw the way her cardigan outlined the curve of her body, the way it left just a tiny white skin showing underneath her collarbone. He felt the familiar flutter in his heart as she smiled softly up

at him. For a second he was entranced.

"It's just that I, um, I..." he said. Walter felt as if the tiny devil and angel of morality each sat on a shoulder, both pulling him downwards.

"Go on," said Connie.

"Yes, what is it, son?" said Jeff, who stood up and put his arm around Walter, "you can tell us anything."

"It's just that I," said Walter, and he felt the embrace of Jeff and the heart-sinking fear that came with it. He felt his confession disappear and an instinct for escape take over.

"It's just that I'm gay," Walter said.

"Oh," Jeff said, and pulled back his arm.

"Well," said Connie, blushing.

"I know it's hard," said Jeff. "But sometimes we need to work to control our desires."

Walter turned red, kicked at the coffee table at his feet, and still felt trapped. He supposed he was in too deep at this point.

"I know," he said to Jeff, looking him in the eye. "It's just difficult with you being around sometimes."

"We should probably go," said Jeff.

Walter just nodded and showed them door, breathing freely again only when they were well away.

That night, Walter once again had trouble sleeping. He lay in bed, twisted up in his sheets, and thought of Connie. He imagined them together—her laying next to him on the bed. He felt her leg press against his, as it had that morning on the couch. He imagined her say, "Wonderful Walt, just wonderful," while she played with his hair. And then, Connie turned into Abbie who chuckled and pulled at her own brown hair and curled her bare leg around Walter's.

"You remember how we used to swim together?" she said, mouth pressed up close to his ear. He remembered the green swimsuit that he got her for her birthday because she always complained about the unflattering stripes on her old one; and how it mesmerized

him as she leapt from the diving board. She splashed up next to him, and told him, "I love the suit," and then, "I love you too."

Walt realized that maybe she was right at the end of their walk, maybe he did need a girlfriend. But maybe not a new one. Maybe he just needed his old girlfriend.

"That sounds nice," said Abbie next to him, and she started to hum softly, sending Walter off to sleep.

Walter formulated his plan to get Abbie back the next morning while still in bed and still wearing his sweats. It was so simple at this point, and Walter laughed at himself for not realizing it sooner. His problems hadn't started because he stopped going to church, they had started because Abbie broke up with him. Walter remembered the day she walked into his apartment holding the ring box he had hidden in his car. Their differences hadn't seemed like much of an issue to him then, just something that could be forgotten and ignored in a corner until they eventually disappeared. He had bought the ring one week before, a wavy gold band set with a small diamond.

"Who's this for?" Abbie asked.

"For you," he said.

She stood in front of him, and tears swam from her eyes. Walter couldn't tell if they were good or not, so he remained standing where he was, a deep well forming in his stomach. Abbie put the ring box into his hands, still closed.

"I'm sorry," she said and walked out.

They talked on the phone later that night. Walter fought back tears as Abbie argued her way into a greater and greater frenzy until she just hung up, and Walter didn't have the heart to call her back.

Walter's fascination with Connie started soon afterwards, maybe three weeks, maybe four. Walter realized his feelings began when Connie had taken him into her arms one Sunday, after he had shared his break-up during prayer time and sat crying in the pews. Her smile made him smile and he felt he could fall asleep against her chest.

But she was just a reaction, Walter decided, a replacement. And that replacement

was what caused all of his troubles. If he could just have Abbie back, then all would be better. She was the real deal. The person who swam with him and could sit for hours at tea with him. Who could make him healthy. And as for their differences, Walter was aware of them now. They were a something that Walter could strive to overcome; a source of energy that he might pull into himself. With Abbie in his life again, everything would be fine. Walter stretched out his legs and got up from his bed with a smile on his face. Everything would be alright.

Walter invited Abbie out to dinner at a place called The Lucky Platter. They served spruced up diner food, lined their walls with modern art, and stuck aluminum foil balls to the ceiling as decoration. It was a popular restaurant, so when Walter and Abbie were seated, the waiter led them to a claustrophobic two-person table in a nonexistent center row, surrounded by laughing urbanites in booths. Waiters and bathroom-goers brushed past their table every few minutes. After three or four passes, Abbie growled, “You’re excused,” to anyone who hit their table.

Walter kept a wooden box in his lap. It was something he’d made in wood shop back in high school—simple and square. For the past eight years or so, it had sat in his closet holding an assortment of forgotten knick-knacks. Now, he held it with sweaty palms and hoped it would save his life, something his high school self never considered when measuring out the board lengths, and fitting in screws.

After they had their drinks delivered, water for both, Abbie kicked his shin and nodded at his lap.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” she said, “What’s the box for?”

Walter paled and shrugged. He felt the same instinct for escape he’d had when Jeff pulled him close the previous day. But here, in the restaurant, he was hemmed in and there was no way out. He took a long drink of water before he answered.

“This box is my life without you,” he said, and then placed the box on the table, swung open the crooked hinges, and revealed an inside that was empty and free of knick knacks. Abbie stared.

"I lost my job," he said.

"You lost your job? At the print shop?"

Walter nodded. "And I can't sleep, and I don't have a church to go to anymore. You told me I should get a girlfriend last week. You were right. I need you back, Abbie. I'm worthless without you. And, I've changed too. We can make it work. It'll be better, I promise." Walter heard the desperation in his stomach creep into his voice, so he stopped talking.

Abbie sat for a second, and then took her own, long, slow drink of water. She tapped her fingers on the table and frowned. A waiter walked past and bumped against their table.

"So, that box is for me?" said Abbie.

"Yes," said Walter.

"I'm sorry," said Abbie. "Things haven't changed, Walt. And I can't just be a band-aid for you. I think you should get some help. Get a psychiatrist."

With that, she stood up and walked out of the restaurant and Walter could do nothing but watch and hope that he could somehow dissolve into the floor. A waiter came to the table and asked if Walter would be staying.

"Yes, I'll stay," said Walter, before ordering a bottle of the first wine on the list, and since they didn't have rice and beans on their menu, a bowl of chili.

Later, Walter curled his toes in the soft sand on the shores of Lake Michigan, reveled in the dooming buzz of wine, and wrote his last words down on a piece of paper torn from a notebook. They came out scratchy and indecipherable but he still scribbled them furiously. When he was finished, he fit the note into the empty wine bottle he had taken with him, and shoved the cork back in as far as it would go. He let the bottle fall to the ground with satisfying thunk against the wet sand.

As he swam out farther and farther from shore, he began to laugh at his grotesque reversal of the message in a bottle scenario. Some unfortunate person would find him washed up on a shore and his story would be far far away, left on the shore. Stroke after

stroke, he propelled himself away from everything. It was time to let the weight that sat on his shoulders the last few weeks pull him down, to escape into the grey ocean that he couldn't find in the bowl of rice and beans. He was too tired for anything else.

Eventually, he couldn't see land anymore, only the stars in the night sky and the dark, dark waves washing around him. He felt a chill take over his senses and fill him up, replacing the warmth of the alcohol. He began to shiver. He began to sink, and he supposed this was the time to let go.

He felt his head submerge, and the water close around him. He blew air out into bubbles and felt himself sink into the lake. His lungs began to empty of air and life started to fall out of him. Then, a panic set in. He kicked and pushed himself back to the surface of the lake, gasping for breath.

Walter sucked in air and looked up at the stars. The weight slipped off his back. Oxygen rushed through his body. He felt like an idiot. Of course he couldn't actually kill himself, he didn't even know why he bothered trying. The note he left in the bottle on the shore was terrible as well, just drunken blatherings. This was stupid, Walter thought. He was stupid.

He realized was cold and wanted to get to shore, so he could dry off and sleep.

Walter started swimming in the direction of land. His limbs were heavy and he wasn't sure he'd make it.

Spring 2014

UNTITLED

Jenna Franklin



THE FAYE WILL COME OUT TO PLAY

Court Cathers

“Paint me a picture, Calciminer,”

Dressed in robes of rich color,
Fabrics of velvet and silk,
Dyed in deep purple with a red collar,
Buttons and sashes as white as milk.

He wanders this place of danger,
Filled with demons and ghosts,
When emerges a gorgeous stranger,
Pleading to be his gracious host.

Skin resembling the Blue Flower,
Her eyes as vast and black as night,
Elegant body raging with power,
She begins to sway in the dim light.

While the beauty before him twirls,
Endless pictures unfold.
As hues and tones begin to swirl,
He does not notice the creeping cold.

“Dance me a dance, Troupier,”

Her dance entices him from hiding,
Luring him into her garden.
He hears internal chiding,
But he does not beg its pardon.

Stumbling through thorns and brush,
Stomping through swamp and mud,
Becoming clumsy in his rush,
He does not notice his dripping blood.

Finally close enough to touch her skin,
She grabs his hands to lead him in dance,
Twirling through the air in one quick spin,
She captures him in her deadly trance.

“Make the days pass, Sorcerer,”

They twirl and spin for hours,
But he does not notice the pain,
Unaware of her evil powers,
He desires to be her swain.

Falling for her tricks and spells,
He cannot see beyond her glamour,
Creating mental images and smells,
He begins praying to Amor.

The day begins to fade,
And predators seek their prey.
He is not one bit afraid,
Much to his everlasting dismay.

The dancing comes to an end,
As she leads him to her bed,

Onto soft sheets they descend,
Only she knows he will soon be dead.

“Help the roses sing, Minstrel,”

The roses are blooming,
As he rests his weary eyes.
He does not feel her consuming,
Nor does he hear her lies.

She promises days of joy,
Never ending food and wine,
He cannot see through her ploy,
On his soul she continues to dine.

He believes her to be an angel,
To him she can do no wrong,
Powerful and ever so graceful,
With her he shall forever belong.

Body is separated from soul,
She enhances his everlasting bliss,
As she turns him from human to troll,
He shall be hers with one last kiss.

Soft lips graze his burning flesh,
Shivers pulse up and down his spine,
As body and soul cease to mesh,
He feels as though he could shine.

“And the Faye will come out to play.”

Flopping onto bloody sheets,
She wipes him off her mouth,
As his heart no longer beats,
He never should have come South.

On an adventure looking for glory,
To defend the helpless elves,
She made him into a lovely story,
To be stored on one of her shelves.

He will soon be forgotten
As he dances, sings, and paints.
His body will become rotten,
Yet his soul lives without complaints.

RIISING SUN

Court Cathers



AS IT TURNS OUT

Lauren Korn

The girl who loved you a short time ago gave you a book you keep on the top shelf of your tallest bookcase. Inside the book's cover, written as though never intended to be seen or read or looked at again, is the name Jane Melrose and the numbers 9, 8, and 5. What comes next? You will never know, because the girl who loved you tore it away from her mother when she—her mother—was writing her name on the inside cover: an attempt to keep the book in her distant possession. The girl who loved you thought this a ridiculous gesture; she gave the book to you. On the cover, there is an illustration of a lion, and later—much later—when you come across the book (during your move in and out of that small studio apartment with that narrow, winding staircase, and again during your move in and out of your best friend's basement, home to spiders and spiders and spiders), you will be reminded of a lion and a leaky faucet in a desert marketplace.

You think of Jane Melrose, and not the girl who loved you, as you sit at a desk you call yours for three hours every Wednesday. The walls you stare at are white and turquoise—a turquoise that reminds you of the bandana that covered your eyes first when you wept for your sister, and then again when you smeared your face with red paint for three days, because it was the only thing you could think of to do, alone, by a river in Montana.

You weren't actually in Montana, of course. You were dreaming for the first time since Julie Ryder told you bending spoons was an act of the mind, and not (as it turns out) of someone strong enough to bend metal. The river was flowing just as quickly as you remember it when you were there last summer, drunk and naked, when you jumped in, not bothering to think of a disastrous end—that, when they found your body torn apart by rocks, you would be naked and unable to hide the birthmark on your ass or the single dark hair next to your belly button.

Dreaming, however, you didn't get naked, and you didn't jump in. You stayed on the beach, on the shore, on the sand, on the rocks, and found in the sun's waves a warmth you'd been afraid to feel since the blazing bastard gave you second degree burns two summers ago in your father's green canoe. When you glanced at your bare feet, you noticed, instead of something you can't quite remember, a single rock. You picked it up. You held it in the palm of your hand and pressed your fingers into it. They sank into its

surface—touched a starched liquid—and when you brought them to your face, they were red. They were covered in paint. Your face was red and wet with the paint for three days. But it wasn't, really. You were only dreaming.

Spring 2014

KOI
Grace Yon



ON THE SCALE

Emily Johnson

On the scale. Off the scale. 94. The scale must be lying. That's too much, the earth is going to collapse underneath me. What did I eat today? Dried Cranberries, Rice cakes, salad, high fiber cereal, fish oil supplement (10 calories), and steamed eggplant with balsamic. If my hip bones aren't protruding like a bird's beak then I have definitely eaten too much today. How many bowel movements have I had? Only two. Maybe I'll drink some Epsom salt. Shit stings. I can't keep my eyes open but I need to go on a hike I can squeeze two miles in today but I have to be in bed by 11. I need sleep, hoping that nightmare doesn't come back: "Emily, why don't you have some toast to settle the stomach?" Get that shit away from me, the carbohydrates are going to seep through my skin and into my thighs. In fact, I don't need food at all. Humans are gluttonous I need to be less dependent. "Um, does this have caffeine? I can't drink things that dehydrate me." I need more water, that's better than food. Scrape the avocado off the rice cake, too much fat. Is that regular or nonfat? I need nonfat. Carbohydrates slow me down and block my plumbing, can't, won't, not worth it. "What are you doing Emily?" My nightly crunches and leg lifts, can't sit still have to keep moving I haven't had enough exercise today. Am I lesbian? I can't stop looking at pictures of perfect skinny women. I'm fantasizing about having their legs, I need those legs. I'll trade you my arms for those legs. Give them. Please don't ask me to eat the pasta, please, please, please. Ninety, that's what I want to see, but maybe six more pounds would be better. "Why don't you fucking eat something Emily?"

No thank you, I'm fine.

The area around my weak and brittle nails resembles tornado stricken land. My never-ending cycle of self-torture begins with a clean slate. I begin to feel a certain dryness crisp over my young and tiny hands, that's when I know its time to prey. A dryness that most people solve with a simple dab of lotion, but I slowly descend upon the young newly formed skin without mercy. The innocent centimeter that stares back at me cries, "Not again!" No matter the amount of times I tell myself to be good, to resist my animalistic urges, it's always too late. The skin that once lay so delicately is torn apart, bit-

by-bit. All that resides in the concave area upon the most vital instrument on my body is an irritated, screaming red, sorry excuse for skin. It stares back, "Why? You idiot" and I stare at my fingers asking for forgiveness. I have no self-control. The self-mutilation happens without rhyme or reason. I seem to find myself gazing at other's perfectly moisturized hands that look untouched. Their smooth unscarred skin is inviting. Shaking someone's hand is the death of me, or rather them shaking mine will be the death of them. I never initiate handshakes. Dermatillomania, Trichotillomania, OCD, Anxiety, Kleptomania, it's all the same in my book. I picked all my eyelashes out right before my fifth grade school picture and had no remorse at all, just a lot of questions from the photographer.

My grandmother picks the same skin I do. She used to tell me that "a woman must always keep their hands busy," now she tells me to wear Band-Aids.

UNTITLED

Erika Tibbetts



A STAGE OF ONE'S OWN

Reed Roberts

Where I went to high school, the old clichés and stereotypical truths still holdfast against ravages the progressive thinking that saturates liberal communities like the one I grew up in. No matter how much time the PTA board dedicated to lofty ideals such as acceptance and diversity, Hellgate High School remained always a place of hormonal segregation and juvenile ambition. In short, Hellgate was much like any other high school. Finding a group of like-minded individuals to associate with would defend you against the swells of intolerance that flood high school halls. To be alone and friendless not only meant that you were considered a failure your peers' eyes, but you also were prey for the bully's, the fear mongers, and the disreputable gym teachers; strength in numbers, death to the lame and antisocial; survival of the fittest among the ill fit and maladjusted.

In hindsight, a mob of drama kids who could make a linebacker hasten down the hall is fairly atypical of the traditional high school experience. But that was how it was at Hellgate High. We (perhaps delusional) thespians regarded ourselves as the elite, and that is how we conducted our lives: full of self-confidence verging on arrogance that stemmed from feeling protected. Unlike most others, if the social pressures ever became too great, we had a retreat, a home base if you will, where we could escape.

The Auditorium: lair of the thespians and domain of Bolton Rothwell. Mr. Rothwell, our drama teacher/life coach, was a bald, thick-chested man with a fondness for Altoids, salmon colored tee shirts, and had an unconscious habit of rubbing his nipples when waxing poetic. Memories of Rothwell and of his auditorium are hard to separate at times. He was always grumbling in his office, or singing along to the Talking Heads while standing precariously atop a ladder, twenty feet in the air, rigging lights for the next show. No matter where you were in the 500-seat house, you could hear the echo of his grizzly bear laugh. Four years of my life were spent under his tutelage, under his guidance. I think if not for him I would have never have made it through high school, and perhaps, for better or for worse, would not have been stuck with this elitist outlook on life.

Our respect for "Boltar the Magnificent," as we lovingly referred to him when he was out of earshot, was matched only by our fear of him. His wrath was the thing of legends: from throwing rings of keys at students for forgetting their props to tossing teachers out

of his auditorium for putting their feet on the seats, his word was law. Despite this, as a high school student, it is an unspoken rule that rules are meant to be circumnavigated, by any means possible if need be. We, the minions of Rothwell, may have taken this mentality too far at times, doing exactly what the rumors about us stated: having sex with each other. In the green room, in the dressing rooms, backstage, on the couch in stage-right well, we were as promiscuous as we were elitist. We experimented with each other, and condemned the rest of the school for not liberating themselves as we did.

Outside our comfortable home away from home, we were stoics, inside we became kids again: laughing, teasing, playing, crying, falling in love, getting in fights and starting overzealous tickle wars backstage. In the end, I suppose we weren't much different from our untheatrical peers.

Mr. Rothwell is dead now and the theater now bears his name. As he lay dying, the cancer eating away at his body, I visited him. We ate pastries and drank coffee. He poured a healthy dose of bourbon into his drink. "I know it's only ten," he said to me, "but what's the point of being a dying man if I can't break the damn rules some?" The last words he said to me were, "Reed. My good man, indeed, a great man. Keep acting kid, the stage will be worse without you." He was dead and buried three days later, and I have not been on stage since. I think that in reality the stage will never miss me. His stage though, Rothwell's stage, and the auditorium so important to him, will never be the same without that strange and brilliant man.

Spring 2014

OCEAN

Robert Taylor



A BRIEF CIGARETTE BREAK

Kat Gurley

Leaning against the bus stop.
Thumb spins the rusted wheel.
A flame wavers, spits its last spark,
and disappears.

His scaly lips crack over an expletive
I'm too far away to hear.

The cigarette leaves an
ashy hollow in the snow.

His weather worn hat makes me think
he's an American Spirits man
and the spokes of a bicycle
click rhythmically in the distance.

He tongues the tips of his fingers
for moisture
and flicks the wheel
once.
Twice.
A halfhearted spark.

A tree deposits its burden
down the back of my tattered
coat.

Flattening gooseflesh
with the prickling palms

of my hands,
I watch my breath take form
against the darkening sky.
Ghostly. Changing.

A car alarm,
Then—

Nothing.
The world in whitewash.

The world on mute.

He throws the lighter
into the street.

TEREZIN

Erika Tibbetts



Spring 2014

THE BOAT HOUSE

Court Cathers



CATALYST

Ismael Pallares

It was 1986 and we were bored. Trouble, that's what happens when you can't figure out what to do; you focus on something that helps pass the time. I focused on Princess.

Her family was the only Latino family in the neighborhood, and maybe because that embarrassed her, she didn't act it. Always wore white washed denim jeans and leather jackets, polo shirts that matched her socks. She wore her hair long and straight, always had a piece of gum in her mouth, and always talked about college and leaving Detroit. She was whiter than some of the white girls I knew. It was the guys who gave her a hard time, though. They loved clowning her about her name. Hey Princess, let me be your Prince Charming, they would say. But she just blew them off. Always going to some after school elective like photography.

My best friend back then was Marcus. The coolest black kid I knew. Always had a constellation of girls in orbit. He was the kind of guy who ran five miles in the afternoon and still went to the gym.

I had known Marcus since we were in grade school. Our neighborhood was mostly a mix of whites, Italians, and Scotch-Irish. We were poor whites, but poor whites with union jobs. Marcus's family had left the east-side and never looked back. Everybody was fleeing to the suburbs back then. My dad used to joke that even chocolate city was too dark for some blacks. But my dad was a racist and nobody liked his jokes. I liked Marcus though. Blacks and whites didn't get along well, but we didn't know any better. When we were younger we jumped our bikes over milk crates and went swimming in the summer. Friendship was important when everybody wanted to be the tough guy. We were part of the same clique. I wasn't black, but Marcus called me his nigger and that mattered for something.

Marcus worked a push broom at a tool shop near the Ford Factory afterschool. I would walk with him to work sometimes. One day we saw Princess's Buick at the Marathon gas station. We all knew her car. She was the only girl on Joy Road that not only drove a car, but also owned it outright, a gift from her father. Most of us were still driving our dads' primer stained Chevrolets. That sea-blue '78 Buick Regal had a long nose and short rear-end, the exact opposite of Princess.

She was on the curb having words with some guy in a green mesh trucker cap. I walked up, maybe I was trying to be heroic, the good-guy, or maybe I wanted a reason to talk to her. I thought she was pretty, and I thought that meant something too. I walked up behind the guy in the green cap. "Hey, mami, dame un," he said. "Fuck off, wino," she told the guy.

I tapped the guy on the shoulder and he turned around. His eyes curtsied up and down, taking me in from head to toe in a split second, and he coldcocked me in the right eye. I wish I could say I punched him right back, knocked him on his ass, but I can't. I went down with the Power Cosmic popping behind my eyes. When the world came back into focus I saw Marcus jump over my limp body and grab Trucker Cap by the throat. Princess was in her Buick telling us to get in. Marcus shoved the guy onto the pavement. That was when officer Mitch Adamek showed up. He was a friend of my family, knew my mom from way back. He didn't even hit the misery lights; he just strolled over to the wino who hesitated between running and fighting back. Mitch didn't even blink, just kicked the guy once and told him to get the ever-loving fuck off the street, or he would pull him in for vagrancy. Mitch helped me up and into Princess's Buick. We won't tell your mom about this, he said. Princess thanked Mitch, and off we rode, cotton in my head, riding shotgun. That's how I finally got to ride with her.

After that we were tight. In the hallways we acknowledged each other.

"Your highness," Marcus said.

"Asshole," Princess called Marcus.

"Hey, Princess," I said.

"Charlie," she would say to me. I loved the way she said my name, the way she made the "a" soft in the first syllable of Charlie. From the moment she held my bleeding head in her Buick, I knew I had to have her. But for all the Spanish slang, or insults she threw at him, she still had eyes for Marcus.

It started out innocent enough. We drove up to Rue a lot, catching the last of mid-afternoon traffic. At the end of the night, when Princess checked her watch, I knew

it was time to call it. She started dropping me off first. I couldn't be mad. Marcus was my friend. It still burned though, especially when they made out in the back seat of her car while I sat on the diving board hood. What could I do? Go home and stare at my Frazetta poster of Vampirella?

Senior year, Marcus and Princess got serious. Princess already made up her mind to attend NYU, and I had my dad breathing down my neck with his Budweiser breath to meet his union guy. We finally got into it that October.

"You come work with me," my dad said.

I laughed in his face. His face turned ruddy and the jaundice around his eyes got a little more yellow.

I had to laugh. My dad didn't work. He was home four or five days a week. Absenteeism his bosses called it. Not a big deal his union rep called it. My dad spent his mornings sleeping off a hangover and his afternoons waiting for my mom to serve dinner so he could go out with a full stomach. He liked playing poker, or betting anything game really. My mom wasn't stupid. She watched the news. She watched their checkbook too. She blamed Young for destroying the city back in the 70's like everybody else, but she knew that my dad could destroy the things closer to her. And she knew that the union couldn't save a job that didn't exist. I loved her.

"Betty, tell your son I'm not paying for him no more," Dad said.

"Mom, tell Dad I'll go to work when he does," I said.

My mom put down her wrinkled Town and Country magazine and smiled. I thought I made a good point, and I hoped she agreed. But my dad was her husband.

"Charlie, you're almost done with school. You are not a kid anymore," she said. "Talk to your father's friend."

"You will go down there Monday morning," Dad said.

"I'll go in with you," I said, looking him straight in his sick eye.

My dad didn't so much laugh as blow some air out of his nose. He went back to the couch and turned up the volume on the Mets game. I went to Marcus's house.

Marcus lived two blocks down from me on the Road. My house was almost directly between Rue River and the Jeffers Freeway. It separated the WASP-y Lavonia from the darker everything else. When I was younger all the houses on the road had lights on and mowed lawns. People cared. As I walked, every other house was vacant. No "For Sale" signs, just empty houses and hard caked dirt for lawns.

Someone had burned down a house across the street from Marcus. People had been doing that a lot lately. People had been burning bits of Detroit since Devil's Night. Now people just burned buildings for fun. Cheaper than a movie.

Marcus's mother answered the door. Lyvette dressed like every day was Sunday service. She was a secretary for a church back on the East Side. She wore a salmon colored dress and was happy to see me.

"Charlie, come in. Are you hungry?" she said, putting on her glasses.

"No thanks, I'm just looking for Marcus," I said.

"He's in his room," she said.

"Who's that there," Marcus's father said. Roy got up from his kitchen table and came over and put a hand on my shoulder. "You coming to work at the plant?"

Roy worked at the same plant as my dad, but on a different line. He showed up every day of the work week. "I'm thinking about it," I said.

"Don't just think, son," he said. "Lyvette what is it with these kids? Marcus doesn't want to work and now Charlie over here."

I shrugged.

"Don't blow it off. You're already ahead of the game. You're white," Roy said.

Roy went back to his kitchen table, shaking his head. Lyvette said she had some mashed potato leftovers. I told her I wasn't hungry.

"Suit yourself," she said. In the kitchen, Roy had lit a cigarette and opened his newspaper. Lyvette kissed him on his head.

Marcus was in his room doing push-ups, his younger brother, Benji, reading a book. He had his stereo turned down low, Michael Jackson singing about something in falsetto.

"Let's go out," I said.

“Hold on a minute,” Marcus said.

He finished his rep and started doing sit-ups. I sat on his bed next to Benji. I took the book out of his hands. The Hobbit. I handed it back to him and nodded.

Marcus finished his sit-ups.

“Go where?” Marcus said.

“I don’t know, but we need a car,” I said.

October air slapped me from the passenger side window, and I shivered in my threadbare T-shirt. Marcus was in the back seat of the Buick eating Pop Rocks. Princess, pristine in her leather jacket, kept driving up Joy looking for a gas station that still had its lights on.

“Check this out,” Marcus said. “Listen.”

He leaned between Princess and me, and he opened his mouth next to her ear.

“I don’t hear shit,” Princess said.

“That’s because your hair is in the way. Here, now listen,” Marcus said.

“Sit back down. Why don’t you brush your teeth?” she said.

“I’m sorry, your highness,” Marcus said.

Princess fixed her hair in the rearview and flipped Marcus off. I rolled up the window and asked Marcus what time he wanted to go home.

“Screw going home,” he said. “Let’s have some fun for a change. It’s almost Halloween. Know what that means?”

“Means you’re going to dress up like Wonder Woman and go trick-or-treating,” I said.

Marcus kicked my seat.

Sure, but only if you let me borrow your bra,” Marcus said. “But for real, let’s light something on fire.

Princess smiled at me. “It’s time to drop you guys off,” she said.

As we rounded the off-ramp on Jeffers Freeway I asked Marcus what he was going to do?

“What do you mean?” Marcus said.

"For work. You going to work with your dad?" I said.

"Maybe, maybe not. There's always a job somewhere," he said.

I wondered if that was true. I thought of my dad, his jaundiced eye. I hoped it was.

We pulled into a Marathon station and bought some Cokes. I wished I had grabbed a jacket. Under the fluorescent lights, Marcus hugged Princess and they looked like a couple in love. I told myself that I could stand them together like that.

"Let's burn something down," I said to no one in particular.

"Now you're talking," Marcus said.

"You guys can burn whatever you want but not with my car," Princess said.

"Don't be like that," Marcus said.

"Like what?" Princess said.

Marcus sucked air through his teeth. "I'll let you hold the matches," he said.

She didn't say anything. She just touched his face. A car backfired somewhere in the night, and the streetlight turned green. We were quiet. And then we were quiet for a second longer than that. They kissed. I wasn't too far from my house and I told them I was going.

The wind kicked up. I wanted to go home and I didn't want to go home. There were no stars out, only the piss yellow of a streetlight. I was farther from my house than I thought. I put my head down. I tried to be nondescript, invisible on a deserted street.

I heard someone call out to me. I waited for a Coke bottle on the back of my head, or a knife somewhere soft, but it was Officer Adamek was in his cruiser.

"Get in," he said.

Mitch didn't say anything on the way to my house. The cruiser's radio crackled to life every few seconds, breaking the silence. Before I stepped out of the car I asked if he always wanted to be a cop.

"No," he said. "I wanted to be a fireman. But that union is lousy. Your granddad had to be one first, foot in the door sort of thing. And I wasn't going to work in the plant."

"Your parents give you a hard time about making up your mind?" I said.

“No, I just gave myself one,” Mitch said.

I left his cruiser and went inside my parents’ house. My dad was sleeping on the couch.

“You are not as smart as you think,” Marcus told me the next day.

We were riding in Princess’s car, killing time before Marcus had to go to work. The day was like any other day: nothing, nothing, and nothing. Princess ate potato chips and steered with her free hand. I reclined across the back seat, my feet pressed against the window. Marcus played with the shutter release on Princess’s grey Nikon. He was fooling around like he was going to take pictures of her. She lifted her Ray-Bans and blew him a kiss. Then she blew a kiss to me in the review. I sat up.

“You think you can go to college?” Marcus said.

I had asked myself the same question that morning. My dad was not on the couch when I finally got out of bed. My mom asked when I had gotten in and when I told her about Mitch she only said, “Oh.”

She didn’t know where Dad was. His union guy still wanted to see me. If only I could see the future, but everything was opaque in my mind. Was this what life would be from now on? One moment of hesitation and then eternity.

“Do you think you can go to college?” I said to Marcus, meaner than I wanted.

Marcus sniffed. He kept clicking the shutter. He held the camera out the window and snapped a picture of the Marathon station.

“You should take pictures of all the gas stations in Detroit,” I said to Princess.

“Why?” Marcus said.

“Gas stations are the only stores in this town,” I said. “How many super markets do you see anymore, anyway? Gas stations are the only things that exist on this side of the burbs.”

“That’s a stupid idea,” Marcus said.

Princess tossed the bag of chips on Marcus’s lap. She took the camera from his hands.

“You are stupid,” Princess said to Marcus. “I think that’s a great idea,” Princess said

to me.

"I have to go to work soon," Marcus said.

We drove around for a little while longer. The sky was turning the color of a nickel. On the way towards Lavonia, Halloween decorations were out. They carved pumpkins on that side of town. I guess they didn't have to worry about letting their kids trick-or-treat. We did one last loop off Jeffers.

We pulled up to the tool shop. Princess circled around the chain-link fence and got out of the car with him. She left the car running and the radio on. I turned it off. Marcus and Princess hugged in front of the car, framed within the windshield. Marcus said something that I couldn't make out. All I heard was Princess saying, Okay. Marcus walked over to a group of black guys and bumped fists with them.

Princess got back into the car and I jumped into the passenger seat. We didn't say anything at first. For Princess and me to be in the car together was rare.

"What happened last night?" I said.

"That's what I was thinking. You left pretty damn quick," she said.

"I didn't want to bother you and Marcus. I didn't want to be a third wheel," I said.

"Is that how it is?" she said.

Princess drove down Joy all the way to the freeway. The houses were getting nicer again. They had mowed lawns, and metal siding. "Let's go find another gas station," she said. She tossed the camera in my lap. We found another Marathon heading over to Westland. We got out of the car and she showed me how to load a roll of film. I took a photo of her smiling. She took one of me. I don't remember what I was doing in the shot. Princess told me it would be a good picture, though. She drove us over to Rue again and she took pictures of the stagnant water. She climbed down a little bank and checked the shutter speed on the camera. She looked good in the half-light, but what I liked more was the way she tossed her hair over her shoulder before she took a photo.

With Marcus gone, I didn't know what to say. The Buick felt a littler bigger. Princess rolled past the corner where officer Adamek had picked me up. The black guys were gone.

We drove and drove following an invisible path of familiar streets. Gas station, empty lot, vacant house, park, and then we ended up in front of my house. Snow was on the way and the heater in the Buick was on full blast. The street was empty. My dad's Impala was gone. Princess turned off the engine and the whole world got quiet. Our breath fogged the windshield. Princess raised her eyebrows. She said, "So?" The question was so open-ended. My dad's car was gone.

Princess looked at every picture in the hallway. The light bulb had burned out and she had to get close to see them: me at six years old playing in the yard, me at twelve, that kind of thing. She picked one photo off the wall and held it. How strange it was to see that. I had never pulled one down from the wall before She lifted it off the nail so easily I almost snatched it from her hands.

"I didn't know you won a science fair," she said.

I asked to see it. I placed the framed certificate back on the nail.

"That was a few years ago," I said. "I placed third. I built a trebuchet."

"What's that?" she said.

"It's like a catapult."

I opened the door to my room. Princess sat on the bed, the sheets bunched under her legs. I leaned against my desk that used to be the dining table, before we got the bigger one. She put her hands in her jeans. I became aware of how my room must have looked to her: the stack of Marvel Presents on the floor, the popcorn ceiling, the bookshelf with The Inverted World sitting on top. It's embarrassing seeing your life from someone else's eyes.

I sat next to her on the bed. She didn't get up.

"I'm not a nerd," I said.

"Are you going to college?" Princess said. "I thought you told Marcus you were thinking about going."

"Thinking about it," I said

"What happened last night?" she said.

“I went home. You and Marcus were doing all right,” I said.

“You weren’t bothering anybody,” she said. “Were we bothering you?”

I didn’t have an answer for that one. Not one that I wanted to say out loud. I had a best friend whose girlfriend I wanted. I had Princess in my room, on my bed.

“I’m leaving soon. He knows that,” she said.

I kissed her. I remember the taste of mint and Marlboro cigarette.

She didn’t stop me, but she didn’t kiss me back.

A fire stops burning when there isn’t anything left to burn.

Last autumn, I drove back down Joy Road. Marcus’s house was gone, but mine was still there. The porch had collapsed, and there was a hole in the roof. The yard was more meadow now. I pulled myself in through the back door. There was nothing in the hallway. My mom had taken all the pictures with her. Everything was gone. After I had stood in the dark long enough, I took the matches from my pocket and put them on the kitchen counter and I left. I don’t plan to ever go back.

YOUR DIVORCE

Brendan Jordan

You overruled my sympathies: if we then slept
my saffron pillows might have saved you the
embarrassment: or me the pail of tapwater I poured to
wash the muddy footprints away: we did not once
agree: we took the long route home and longer
errands at the office: I am still
awaiting the psalter you mail-ordered: did I tell
you? did you ever think of broken seashells?
did pot roast re-visit your tongue later, when
you ate squashes cooked some other way? When the long
drive to Maine thrilled you still: when towers over these
savage plains sparkled: but I hated the telephone
wires: the Chevrolets idled daily at dawn: if I could have
graffitied every driveway: you could have
followed me to the last fencerows when I left
town: neither summer would have bled so
slow into the next: your new kitchenette
would have sparked with blue flowers
I would have sent: the letters too: we
would have one day met in a gravel lot overlooking
the Pacific: we would have known the
botched nights of wine and candle were the
spoiled dreams of children: alone amongst
cattails in March: it still snows: I try to follow the gaps
left by crashing foxes or children dragging
sleds: you brought me once to the home
where your grandmother was prepared for her long
trip in a dark rowboat: when I offered to amend
your vision I offered lilacs: sunhats
tilted against sweet lemonade: those
miles of country roads where childhood friends
return nightly to their rope swings

Spring 2014

WATCH THE SKIES
Grace Yon



AND THERE WERE CUL-DE-SACS AS FAR AS THE EYE COULD SEE

Brendan Jordan

Beyond Limon, Colorado, there's a field I waited for.
It grew emerald in the velvet of April's first
reluctant skies: the August startled me, burnt gold like
a mudflat and waving curious sea, spitting up
seedpods instead of foam,
and in Arizona, which I do not remember, but for hotel
balconies pierced by the glow of exit-ramp LED,
separated from the sandstone spires
that circle wordlessly in a purple dusk beyond the city—
when we stare out at them, leaning jittery elbows
on railings too tall, the nighttime fell like a curtain
and the television called, an overworked father,
to lull us with stolen images of colorful birds
that somewhere traverse floodplains, a carpet of wings rolling up
into the dusty storage bin of extinction.
When the waves take us,
our graffiti can scream fuck you in neon,
rage with stylized Marxian fists painted neon
green, and still the bricks of the alley
will admit graciously the ocean to devour them.
The rail platforms will be empty, dismembered knots
of wire flicking blue sparks as the metal antennae
of abandoned traincars wave uselessly in the gale;
and somethings will be left,
orange sunhats dropped like spare change into gutters
and beloved how-to manuals left fluttering, broken insects
sitting baffled on iron tables in deserted plazas.
Someone will tell you, "I told you so."
Someone will pray beside a man who counts the last

dollars he could pilfer from the bashed-in ATM,
and folds them up again, stuffing the once-current-
cy under the leather tongues of chapped boots.
Meanwhile, trucks loaded not full enough with plastic jugs
of purified water roll into trembling neighborhoods
and woolen blankets rain from helicopters like odd manna
falling in trampled lawns:

We were all born here,
the suburban cloister where brick-walled
shopping malls rise like steeples, lifting the holy
beacons of neon logos, interchangeable halos
tossed like discus out of heaven.

Our children prefer to chop the pixelated arms off zombies
with their y-button chainsaws they won in the last
level—there was a time we preferred
that they stole the magnifying glass from the puritanical studies
of serious fathers, and trotted out to the yard
to blast the blueish armor of beetles till they burst
into puffs of Fourth of July smoke. This
has always been the flag they pledged too,
why eighteen-year-olds who fret about acne
and store gin in their winter boots make better
soldiers, who see the desert through the red filter of a scope
and come home with swelled arms and trigger fingers
for kisses. They taste white phosphorous in the shredded wheat
and drum rhythms like a rain of debris against the countertop.

APRIL SHOWERS

Mason Harper

I leave my shoes in the car.

Damp grass becomes wet earth,
the grains catch and grate
between my toes.

The tide is out and
I walk down to the water's edge,
where the wind pushes it against gravity.

The rain on my hood drowns out
the sound of the wind and surf.

Water lapses over my
ankles, and
something hard traces its way along the
inner arch of the right foot.

Looking down, I see
a crab; its shell is dark and weathered.
Suspended in the water,
the legs search lazily for some footing.

Currents spin, flip, and push it along
like an elm leaf in October.
When the tide recedes, the
small crustacean is pulled along
with it.

Three times the tide comes in,
Three times it goes out,
Three times the hermit's journey is hindered,
And three times he begins again.

GABBY & MICHAEL
Emily Johnson



PARIS

Kristine Quint

I arrived at the Giddy Up Café fifteen minutes early so everything could be ready when the doors opened at seven. Inside always smelled like frying butter, Folgers, and cleaning supplies, even before the cooks came in. I flicked on the lights in the glass tank, which would later hold cakes and pies with wrinkled crusts, and navigated through the comfortably crowded tables to start coffee in the back. As it gurgled into the awaiting pots, I stared out the windows of the diner at the interstate, and the red and tan bluffs of Rock Springs, and imagined I was in Paris.

The buttes turned into marble-front apartments with periwinkle roofs and petite rust-orange chimneystacks. The overcrowded sagebrush were swaying treetops peeking over gray cathedrals and pale monuments. Sometimes, after an early rain, the interstate glowed sleek and smooth under streetlights, and it looked just like the Seine I'd seen in all the pictures and movies, wide and defining. As the cooks and other waitresses wandered in, I imagined there was a pleasant afternoon rain shower in Montmartre, and the French were gathering in cafés or strolling through gardens toting red umbrellas under soft veils of rain, the sun still shining through the clouds and filtering faded colors across the city like light in old photographs. If I lived in Paris, maybe I'd really start painting. Of course I'd still work—I would serve soft, steaming pastries and espresso to polite Frenchmen and their elegant wives rather than slabby slapjacks to coal miners with mud-soaked jeans. But I'd be inspired, like the generations of artists living in the City of Light before me. Perhaps I'd meet others like me. Not just expatriates, but people who moved to Paris to live the good life.

"Good morning, Nicole!" Tiffany Jones was our first customer at seven sharp. She came in every morning for a sourdough pancake and "a cup of joe." I put in the order before I brought a mug of coffee over and sat down across from her.

"Hey, sweetie pie," she said, sipping through a lipstick stained mouth while her bright brown eyes scanned over me. "I still don't see why no one has snatched you up yet. When you going to find a man to take you on a honeymoon?"

"Tiffany, do you see any of these men taking me to Paris, let alone the altar?" We glanced around the diner, already starting to fill with old men in faded Levi's and

pimple-faced teenagers playing hooky.

“Well, you never know, do you?” she said, twirling a spoon on her paper napkin. “Any day now, some rich man on his way to New York City might drive right through Rock Springs, run out of gas, and come in to look for help, only to leave with a new fiancé.”

Carly, another waitress, swept past us with five plates perched on her thin arms.

“Nicole, it’s 8:15. Your shift started five minutes ago.” Tiffany rolled her eyes at Carly’s back.

“Think she learned to balance plates like that feeding hay to all her cows?”

I smiled and stood up to put on my apron, turning so Tiffany could tie the strings.

“I’ll leave a big tip for you,” she called after me as I went to greet two old men who had just come in.

My big brother Jake never understood why I fantasized about Paris. He scoffed when I checked out CDs from the library when I tried to learn French and mocked me in a Pepé Le Pew accent when he wanted to get on my nerves. Most the time I didn’t care because I knew Jake was usually down and out, and just needed to feel better than someone. He’d gotten in trouble a few times for petty theft and vandalism. I’d had to help him foot the bill because Mom retired to Topeka, Kansas with her fourth husband and converted to Baptism and wanted nothing to do with her heathen children. I think she figured that since we were damned sinners anyways, she might as well cut the cord before Jesus damned her by association. But Jake had always been grateful for my help; he paid me back by buying me breakfast or a new pair of shoes. We had no one but each other; how could I not help him when he needed me?

The last time I talked to Jake was almost a month ago. He told me he was going to move to Cheyenne to look for work, and asked for help with gas money to get there. I hoped he was doing well and keeping out of trouble. But no news was good news when it came to my big brother.

By the end of the day, I’d made fifty in tips and picked up a paycheck. As soon as I

got home, I turned on my laptop and checked my Rock Springs Credit Union account. I sighed when I saw the credit card balance in red. After rent and bills, I could add another \$300 to my savings, which would leave me with \$3,000. It was the best I could do working at the Café and sometimes helping Jake.

To cheer myself up, I poured a glass of wine and looked up one-way flights from Salt Lake to Paris. If I left in a month I'd spend just over \$900 on a ticket, which would leave me about \$2,100. After Googling long-term apartment rentals, I realized I'd need at least \$3,500 before I could afford to rent the cheapest apartment I could find and still afford food, not to mention utilities. Even Parisians needed to pay for their electricity. It would take me a few weeks to find work, but what I had would last me until then.

That's when I realized—I already had \$3,000. All I needed was \$500 to move to The City of Lights. Paris. It was all I worked for, and it was so close. But I needed \$500.

Suddenly I heard a few sharp raps on my front door. It was Jake.

"Hey, Nic." His breath tumbled from his mouth, unfurling into the darkening sky. I flipped on the porch light as he glanced into the apartment over my shoulder. "Mind if I crash here tonight?" He gave me a quick hug and slipped through the doorway.

"What are you doing here?"

"I picked up Chinese. It's in the truck, with a couple of other treats. But the deal is you have to go get it."

"Jake, I'm not even hungry—"

"I got sweet and sour chicken."

"Alright," I sighed.

The truck was unlocked. The interior stung with the scent of cologne and cigarettes, and a Colt 45 tall boy was perched on the dash. Behind the driver's seat was steaming food in slick plastic boxes and a bag with extra fortune cookies. A plastic bag next to the food held clinking bottles of Everclear and Black Velvet.

Back in the apartment, Jake has clicking through something on my computer.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just checkin' my email," he said before closing the screen. I grabbed two forks and a

set of glasses from the kitchen and poured us each a whiskey.

Through forkfuls of rice and sweet and sour chicken, Jake told me about how much he hated Cheyenne, how he had tried to date some girl someone else had already knocked up, and that was just typical drama.

“Don’t even get me started on what the real losers do,” he said through a mouthful of rice. “After all the shit in Cheyenne, I decided Rock Springs was heaven. And here I am. Sorry I didn’t call, I just had to go.”

I thought about telling him I almost had enough money to move to Paris, but kept silent and cradled the whiskey in my palm.

When Jake got tired of the Black Velvet, he moved on to mixing Everclear with the Coke in my fridge. He moved closer to me each time he poured a drink, his stories about Cheyenne becoming more extravagant. Eventually he crept across the couch until we sat right next to each other. Soon his hand was on my knee. Only two boys had ever put their hands on my knee before—once in middle school, and once after prom. Those hands were soft and warm. Jake’s were hard and hot, even through my jeans.

“Look, it’s midnight. I really should go to bed,” I said. “Do you need to stay here?”

“Actually,” he slurred, “I was wondering if I could borrow a little money.”

“What? For what?”

“Just enough to start me off in an apartment with a deposit.” He tried to take a sip from his glass, but it was empty, so he tossed it to the table and grabbed the bottle of whiskey.

“No.”

“Aw, come on Nic. I promise I’ll pay you back. You know I will. I love you, sis.” He tried to wrap an arm around my neck but I pushed him off.

“Jake, I’ve helped you enough in the last couple of years, and, well, frankly, I can’t afford to help you right now.” He took another swing.

“That’s not true. You always save,” he said, wiping a sleeve across his mouth. “What did you spend it all on? You haven’t even moved.”

“I’m going to move to Paris.” He laughed, slopping whiskey down his shirt.

“And why the hell would you do that, little sister?” He put the bottle on the table. “Oh wait, I know. You’d rather spend your money on your own stupid selfish dream than help your own brother. Your only family.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I’ve helped you a lot. But this money is for me, to go to Paris. If you don’t like it, too bad. If you need an apartment, get a job. You can stay here for a couple days if you need to.”

I picked up the empty boxes of Chinese food and the glasses covered in the sticky ringlets of our fingerprints and took it all into the kitchen. Just as I began to rinse the cups, Jake came up behind me. I could feel the warmth of his body first at the low of my back, then on my neck and around my shoulders, and down at my knees. He pressed me into the kitchen counter until my belt buckle began to sink into my skin.

“Please?” he asked.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll pay you back,” he murmured.

“Go away, Jake.”

“Please,” he whispered, closer to my ear. His left hand cupped my shoulder and ran down my arm until it rested on top of my damp hand on the sink. His other hand began to push past my hip and further down my leg.

“Jake, leave me the hell alone, or I’m calling the cops and you’ll never get a cent out of me again.”

He grabbed the soapy glass from my hand and threw it against the wall. It didn’t shatter until it hit the floor, splintering across the checkered linoleum like a swarm of fallen stars. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“Why won’t you help me? You’ve never wanted to lend me any money, even when you did. You’re such a penny-pinching whore!” He shook me again as I tried to push him away from me.

Then he seemed to realize what he had done. He stepped back.

“I’m sorry, Nicole, I’m just drunk, I’ll buy you a new one, I’m really sorry—”

He picked up a rag from the counter and started to pick up the shards from the

floor. I stumbled away from him and ran to my room, locking the door behind me. I half expected him to begin breaking more dishes, or to throw awful words like knives and pound on my bedroom door, but there was only silence throughout the apartment. All I heard for the rest of the night was the clock on my wall, ticking.

The next morning, the kitchen was clean and showed no signs of the night before. The trash was taken out and the bag replaced. No glass winked at me from the floor when I turned on the light, and the dishes were washed and left in the dish rack. Relieved that I wouldn't have to clean up before work, I tossed a packet of Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop Tarts into the toaster before getting my laptop from the living room. Looking for apartments in Paris before another shift at the Café seemed like a good way to unwind before the day started.

I stepped into my living room. Jake had cleaned the kitchen, but destroyed everything else. My Vogue magazines, organized by date on a bookshelf the day before, were ripped into thin shreds of color ads and black and white text on the living room floor. The Lonely Planet guides to Europe, France, and Paris were shoved between couch cushions, some of their pages strewn on the floor like dead birds. A butter knife was sticking out of a couch cushion, a weak attempt at inflicting damage. It was a miracle he had left my laptop unscathed.

Hands shaking, I brought it into the kitchen and went online, trying to stay calm. I checked the browser history for the night before. The last page that had been pulled up was my bank account. Whatever Jake had been doing on my computer, he'd had time to delete the history. I opened the link, knowing the numbers would give me comfort. I only needed \$500 for Paris. If that wouldn't get me through the day, I didn't know what would.

The Rock Springs Credit Union site told me my account was empty. Last night I had had \$3,000. Today, I had \$100. I started to sway, lightheaded, and checked my transaction history.

Last night at eight, \$2,900 had been transferred to an outside account. I remembered checking it just before Jake had come home—I must not have closed the window before

answering the door. He'd probably seen the screen was open, and when I'd gone out to the truck to get the food...but why had he tried to get me to give him money when he'd already taken it all?

I slammed my fist on the table. "Damnit, Jake!" Now more angry than scared, I stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth and put on makeup. I needed to do something normal before work. Now more than ever I needed to work, even if I got my money back.

Jake had found a Sharpie from somewhere in my apartment and inflicted its permanent ink on my bathroom mirror. The scribbles started with "Fuck you" and were illegible till the end, where he wrote "sorry." I decided to put my makeup on in the car.

I tried to pretend nothing had happened. I gave Tiffany a hard smile when she came in but didn't make conversation, and felt an ache of guilt when she left me a larger tip than normal. Customers came in, took one look at me, and smiled at the other waitresses, hoping to be seated in their sections instead. I shuffled the menus at the front counter into a neat pile over and over, not able to get my mind off my money and Jake. Should I call the cops? The bank? Was this something I could even get them to help me with? Would they even bother, when I had been stupid enough to let my notoriously ill-behaved brother into my home? And even worse, what would Jake do if he found out I'd reported him? I didn't think about what would happen if I couldn't get my money back—I just knew I needed to.

The bell at the front counter pinged, breaking through into the thick, pancake-infused air. An old man kept one wrinkled finger on it and stared at me. I sat him and his friend in my section. I figured if they thought they had the right be so rude to their waitress, they could put up with me for the next hour.

The phone rang as I walked their order to the kitchen. Carly answered the phone with a curt, "Giddyup Café, how can I help you?" I could hear the person on the other end of the line over the hissing bacon and murmurs of the diners. Carly frowned.

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" The voice on the other end garbled until she said,

“Fine, whatever, I’ll tell her,” and hung up. She turned to me, forehead wrinkled. “Your idiot brother just called.”

“What did he say?” I asked, my heart thrumming.

“He wanted me to tell you he’s back in Cheyenne. I don’t know why he wouldn’t just tell you himself, but whatever.” She started to walk away.

“Carly,” I said. She turned to look at me. “Will you cover my shift for a little while? I have something I really need to take care of.”

“I’ve been covering your ass all morning. My tables are full. Where do you need to go?”

“It’s personal. An emergency,” I said.

“Fine, whatever,” she huffed. “More tips for me.”

“Thanks, I owe you one,” I said as I stepped out the door.

I called Jake while I drove to the police station. I could hardly hear my voice over my rushing heartbeat as the phone rang.

“Hey, what’s up, you reached Jake. Leave a message, I might call you back.”

I was surprised he even had his voicemail set up.

“Jake, it’s Nicole. Carly told me you’re in Cheyenne. I know what you did so there’s no point avoiding me. Look, if you transfer my money back today, as in right now, I won’t hold this against you. But if you don’t call me back within the next five minutes, I’m going to the police.”

When I pulled into the parking lot, five minutes had passed. I sat in the car for another five and thought about calling him again, but decided against it.

Inside the police station, the secretary took my name and ushered me into the sheriff’s office, where he sat reclined in a monstrous office chair. I sat on an uncomfortable plastic bench on the other side of his desk and told him what had happened while he twiddled his thumbs, his hands resting on his gut as if pregnant.

“Basically, what you’re saying, ma’am,” he said, “is that your brother stole all your money.”

He scratched at the stubble on his neck. I recognized him as a regular weekend customer. He always ordered banana pancakes and hot cocoa.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, if he did it from your account as you say, it could be difficult to prove that you didn't just transfer the money yourself."

"Sherriff, with all due respect, why the hell would I be reporting him if I had wanted to give him all my money?"

"Hey now," he said, holding up his hands. "Just trying to help."

"Look, my brother stole a significant amount of money right from under my nose. If you can't get him for that, couldn't you at least arrest him for something else?"

"Like what, Miss...Nicole? That's your name, right?"

"He came to my apartment last night. He stole money from me. He vandalized my home. He stabbed a knife through my couch. And he stole almost \$3,000 from me. Vandalism and assault, if not theft? Hasn't this police force or whatever you want to call it arrested him multiple times before? I'm sure you can find a warrant for a skipped trial somewhere," I said. There was no doing this halfway; now that I'd reported him, they might as well catch him.

The sheriff leaned forward and scribbled something on a piece of paper before settling back into his chair with a squeak.

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "You said you think he is in Cheyenne?"

"Yes," I said. Perhaps this was going somewhere.

"Well, I have his vehicle information and a description. I'll call my associates at the police department and tell them to keep an eye out. I'll let you know if we hear of anything."

"Can I get my money back?" I leaned forward, hands on his desk. He looked at them uncomfortably, shifting notebooks and papers as if to create a wall between us. "If you catch him, can I get my money back?"

"We'll have to find him first, miss," he said. My eyes lingered on him a moment before I thanked him and walked out.

I returned to the Café and clocked back in. As I tied the apron strings behind my back, Carly came up, propping up a tray of pancakes against her hip.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Fine.”

“I’ve been serving everyone in your section. Not a big deal, but, I’ll keep the tips. I hope you’ll be here for the rest of your shift, the afternoon crowd will be here soon.” She walked away, hips swaying, pancakes held high above her like an offer to the gods.

I greeted the next customers and sat them in my section, my waitress charm turned up full throttle. Yesterday I only needed \$500 to go to Paris, but today I needed \$3,500. Who knew when Jake would show up again? When he did, he would have spent all my money, there was no doubt about that. But by the time he would think to come to my home and grovel at my feet for money again, I hoped to be long gone.

Spring 2014

RAY PRICE

Robert Taylor



UNTITLED

Emily Johnson



MY GRANDMA'S BOYFRIENDS

Maggie Mattinson

"He's really something else, Maggie. I can't wait for you to meet him. Anyways, enough about me, what about you? Have you met any cute boys recently?"

I rolled my eyes and took a deep breath. It should be pathetic that for the last year of her newly acquired singlehood, my grandma had more stories of first dates and new relationships than I did. They blossomed from the many circles of friends she kept in Rock Springs, Wyoming: she had her quilting circle, McDonalds Senior 10 cent coffee Monday group, librarian ladies from the high school in Sweetwater County where she was able to patrol my dad and uncle's every move during their teenage years as the head librarian, and most recently, her grief counseling pals.

"Uh, not really," I said, biting the inside of my cheek as I spoke into the phone. I reached down to pet my cat, noting the irony of the situation. The thought that I should be the one buzzing about boys I was dating while my Grandma should be the one sitting at home with her cat didn't pass me by.

"Oh, honey. Well, that's okay. Take all the time you need, dear. You'll get back out there. You have lots of time. Just look at me! But you probably can't understand. It probably sounds crazy to hear about your seventy-six-year old grandma falling in love, right?"

"It doesn't sound crazy," I said. "I'm excited for you, grandma,". I forced myself to sound chipper as I spoke, hiding everything else I was thinking about my grandma's dating life that was like an episode of The Bachelor. She giggled once more and I set my phone down on my desk, turning on the speakerphone so that I could open the Valentine's Day card she had sent that week with a \$20 folded bill inside. I wasn't sure if I was the only college student that still got \$4.99 greeting cards from Hallmark for every holiday from their grandma with money inside, but I wasn't about to complain. Someday I might tell her that half of the time the money she sent bought me printer ink the night before a paper was due and a half-gallon of Popov vodka the other half. I may not have been actively looking for a new piece of arm candy like my grandma had been for the last year, but what I couldn't tell her was that I had more fun walking into house parties uninvited in the University District, playing beer pong and drunkenly adding people on

Facebook I'd never talk to again than trying to find a boyfriend.

My Grandpa died when I was ten. For the next decade after his death, my Grandma had one life partner who lasted eight years and a series of other dates to talk about during the two years when she wasn't being snatched up by a lucky senior bachelor of Rock Springs, Wyoming. She was a hot commodity. Armed with the stockpile of my Grandpa's retirement money from his years on the railroad, my Grandma could afford all of the fine knit turtlenecks from Christopher & Bank that she wanted and to get her hair styled every other day at a salon. My Grandpa had intended to spend his hard earned retirement loot living their life in luxury after skimping for years and working sixty-hour weeks miles from home, but his early death created an entirely different future for my Grandma without him. After he'd passed away in his early 60's of a sudden heart attack when I was 10, phone calls to my grandma became a weekly routine. I was the oldest grandchild of five and having someone who would happily listen to every college anecdote, girl cat fight, and boyfriend problem had been invaluable to me. Sometimes, you just need someone who will listen.

However, her dating life didn't go over well with anyone in our family. It wasn't until I entered college that I realized that there was a lot she wasn't telling me during our weekly phone calls about her boyfriend, Barry. She would later admit she would have married him but due to the retirement plan my Grandpa had set up before he died, if she ever remarried in the case of his death, she'd lose 60% of his retirement money. It was money he intended to use to pay for each of their grandchildren's college tuition so we would never struggle in the poverty they did in their early days of marriage. She wanted to marry Barry during the eight years they were together, which I never found out until later. However, there were even worse details she would fail to tell me she was even more ashamed to admit.

I had just turned thirteen the first time my grandma introduced us to Barry. We met at our family cabin in the middle of the Wind River mountains just south of Jackson,

Wyoming. I knew it bugged my dad that she was bringing her new boyfriend to the place where we not only had years of memories stored, including my first steps as a baby, and where we stayed every summer while we went fishing in the mountains, but it was also the place where my grandpa had suffered his heart attack barely two years ago. My dad stood with his arms crossed outside of the cabin. It was so hot the prairie's horizon blurred and the top of the Wind Rivers seemed to blend into the blue sky. A breeze made the wind chimes hanging on the clothesline jingle and the trill of the river that ran alongside the cabin could be heard from where we were standing in a circle.

My mom stood by my dad's side with her mouth in a matching straight line. I was confused. I didn't understand why they weren't excited. I had squealed on the phone when my grandma first told me she had a date with a man. I vividly remembered the look on my grandma's face at Grandpa's funeral and the way she looked at me like we were now her only reason for living. We couldn't mention his name for months without making her cry. Seeing her happy now seemed like it should have been a great thing and I glared at my parents who seemed less than enthused.

"This is Barry, everyone," my grandma said. She smiled wider than I'd seen her smile in years and the happiness in her eyes was obvious. We all looked at my dad, who remained silent. I glanced at him and widened my eyes in his direction, waiting for him to ease the awkwardness. Finally, he took a step forward and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you, sir," my dad said. Barry immediately lit up and relaxed, but he didn't know dad like we did. My dad was painfully friendly to the point of embarrassing me at grocery stores and public places by making friends wherever he went. I glanced at Barry again, looking more closely this time. He had a skinny nose that looked like a pencil was glued to his face and circular eyes that made him look like a fly. He was the opposite of my Grandpa. The women in my family always compared my Grandpa to a James Dean with his broad shoulders and square jaw-line even until his death. Barry reminded me of a teddy bear, but not a new one in a store, an old battered one found under a kid's bed after a new toy had replaced it. He looked friendly enough, though, despite looking a little awkward. I saw the way my grandma's skin glowed and the perkiness in her voice as she

spoke and tried to ignore everything else.

Barry turned to look down at me and outstretched his hand as well. I took it eagerly. “Well, you must be Miss Maggie. You’re the one who always interrupts us at dinner with your phone calls, eh?” He winked and I smiled at my grandma who laughed out loud.

“Oh, Barry, stop. Maggie can call whenever she wants.”

My dad cleared his throat and I stepped backwards in line with my younger sister, Sophie.

“I know, Judy, it’s just that my steak usually gets cold by the time you get back from talking to Maggie on the phone,” he said, chuckling louder than anyone in the circle. This time I looked at the ground, blushing slightly. I glanced at him to see him smiling at me with a goofy grin on his face and laughed just loudly enough that he could hear it. I felt my dad next to me take a step backwards as he leaned against the truck with his arms folded.

“Oh, Barry,” my grandma said. She laughed and poked his giant belly that looked like he had a basketball hidden underneath his shirt, which I had failed to notice at first. “In that case, Maggie needs to call more often. We need to watch your figure.”

They giggled again and it was like watching kids at my school in the hallways. My sister didn’t say anything but shielded the sun with a hand across her brows. I raised my eyebrows at her and instead of acknowledging me, she crossed her arms and looked at the ground.

“Come on, let’s get in the car, girls. We’re going to town, Mom, to get some groceries. Anything we can pick up for you, Barry?” my dad said. He was looking Barry squarely in the eye this time with less friendliness than even before.

“Just a tin of chew, if you would there, Scotty,” Barry said. The wind seemed to stop at that very second and all noise seemed to cease. Scotty had been my Grandpa’s nickname for my dad and there was no way my dad would be okay with being called that.

In the car, my dad barely spoke a word for the twenty miles into town. The only time he spoke it was to tell Sophie and I to stop laughing in the back as we laughed obnoxiously about Barry’s nose. The rest of the vacation passed uneventfully as my dad

avoided being in the same room as Barry under all costs. At dinner, he escaped to the shower and my mom was forced to make small talk with a smile on her face at the table to make up for it. Barry didn't seem to notice, though, as he laughed the whole hour of dinner each night, cracking jokes no one seemed to think were half as funny as he did.

"I woke up and heard scratching outside my window and could have sworn it was a bear. So what do I do? Grab my shotgun and head outside in my skivvies only to leap out of my boots to see not a bear but a raccoon! Nearly shit my pants!" Barry would say, telling the same story over and over again of why he was afraid to sleep alone in his own cabin just twenty minutes away from ours.

We didn't see Barry that often for the duration of their eight-year relationship. For the first couple of years, the phone conversations with my grandma centered on me and the perils of being a fifteen year old that couldn't wear a pair of Abercrombie jeans that all of my friends wore because it cost too much money to get six inches hemmed. I also seemed to be the only one in my group of friends who hadn't had a boyfriend yet. Everything mattered more than my grandma's spiraling relationship and I didn't start to notice that anything was even beginning to go wrong clear into high school.

"Maggie, have you talked to grandma recently?" my mom asked one day after school. I was in 11th grade and just starting to realize life was more than wearing the same clothes everyone else did. Most people sucked as I started to realize, anyways, and the genius of being short was that I could wear heels to school and still be inches shorter than everyone else. I also realized fictional boyfriends in TV shows and books definitely beat the real boys I knew who thought it was sexy to stick their tongues in your ear within twenty seconds of giving you your first kiss.

"Um, duh. I called her yesterday. Why?" I said.

"Did she say everything was alright? Did she sound okay? Mention anything... about Barry?" my mom said.

I shook my head but this time, my interest peaked.

"No, why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. If she hasn't mentioned it to you, I don't want to tell you."

“No, tell me. What’s going on?” I asked more persistently this time. My grandma and I had only become closer over the years and although I still hadn’t really warmed to the jolly teddy bear, I had been happy that she had seemed happy.

“Just ask Grandma next time you talk to her. You’re old enough to know but it’s up to her to tell you. Barry hasn’t been... feeling well lately.”

I called her that very night. I sat on the cold floor of my bedroom pressed against my door. My grandma was visiting in a couple weeks and I was surprised that anything could be wrong when lately all we could talk about was our shared excitement of her coming to Idaho to visit us.

“Grandma,” I said after talking for about twenty minutes, “is everything okay? Is... Barry okay?” I wasn’t really sure what to say since I didn’t know what was wrong.

“Oh, um, he’s having some trouble right now. But I don’t want you to worry about it, honey. Your dad and I have it under control,” she said. I sighed and allowed her to switch the subject. I figured if my dad was taking care of it, then there wasn’t much to worry about.

“I just can’t wait to see you next week! We’re going to have so much fun!” she said.

Two weeks later, my grandma arrived. She was staying for four days, overlapping with Sophie’s birthday. Most of the trip was focused on birthday shopping for Sophie, going to movies, picking out ice cream cakes at Baskin Robbins, and “girl time.” Nothing seemed weird. The excitement of the trip masked any awkwardness between my dad and grandma that I might have noticed if I was paying closer attention. But because my grandma so happy, any question about Barry sort of got shoved in the back of my mind.

On the third day of her visit and the day of my sister’s birthday, the phone rang as we were cutting her birthday cake. My mom answered it and in the middle of everyone scrambling for pieces of cake, I didn’t notice my grandma get up and take the phone.

As we started opening presents, Sophie looked up from the biggest gift in the pile that everyone knew was from my grandma, “Where’s grandma?”

I walked to the back of the house to my grandma's room to find her. Her back was turned to me as I entered the room. Immediately, she jumped as she heard me step into the room and I quickly saw the mascara streaked down her cheeks.

"What's wrong, grandma?" I asked. I wrapped my arms around her waist and she fell into my hug immediately. I staggered as I felt her body weight shift into mine and I stood up a little straighter to keep us upright.

"Barry... Oh, honey. Barry's having a tough time."

"Is he sick?" I asked.

"No—well, yes. He's ill. I have to go home to take care of this," she said. Her voice shook as she struggled to put together every word. Her breathing was irregular and she gasped for air between each word.

"This?" I said. I imagined a cold or maybe walking pneumonia. But I couldn't understand what would make him sick enough for her to leave.

"You can tell me, Grandma. I can help you, even," I said, speaking slowly so maybe I'd sound older than I was. I felt desperate to know what was wrong and thought of the hours I'd spent complaining to her about everything that seemed so terrible about my life. Not once had she ever mentioned anything bad in hers.

"Oh, honey—I'm sorry. I haven't told you because your dad has been so upset but Barry has been struggling with his depression and, um, he hasn't been all right in the head."

"What do you mean? He's depressed?" I said, more loudly this time, still not putting the pieces together. My jaw was clenched and I made sure my grandma couldn't look away from my eyes as I pleaded with her to tell me the whole truth. I knew that like my grandma, he'd lost his spouse shortly before they had met.

With this, my mom walked into the room and helped her finish packing. My mom squeezed my shoulder as I left the room so that they could talk about whatever was wrong with Barry. She drove my grandma to the airport minutes later. That evening my dad worked in his shed all night. I could hear banging past dark and couldn't help but stay awake wondering what it was my grandma never told me but was clearly telling my

parents. I tried to remember the first time my mom and dad asked me if my grandma had told me anything about Barry. I tried to remember phone calls where my grandma might have sounded less cheerful than usual. I wasn't sure if I was more worried or angry. The week passed slowly and we didn't hear from my grandma the night she flew out or the next morning.

"Dad?" I asked my dad one morning as he was stretching in the living room before his run. He nodded at me, permitting me to continue.

"Has Grandma called yet?"

He shook his head quickly and started whistling.

"What's—I mean, what's wrong with Barry?"

"Barry is a big problem, Maggie. But it's grandma that is the bigger problem," he said, rolling his eyes. He stood up and glanced at me before leaving for his run.

"I don't even want to know what she's telling you," he said, slamming the door shut behind him.

My grandma called two days later and when I asked if everything was okay, all she could do was insist that it was and that Barry was going to be "much better." I believed her, partly because I didn't know any better but mostly because I wanted to. It was so far from the truth, but I ignored the signs for years even as they became increasingly frequent. I ignored that my parents continually asked me for "updates on Grandma" and didn't ask about Barry on the phone with her unless she volunteered information. I ignored the fact that during our annual visits, Barry never visited the house while we were in Wyoming. I became the line of communication between my parents and my grandma, except for the occasional email they sent one another. It was almost like Barry didn't exist except in the silence between my dad and grandma.

It was the day after Christmas. I was twenty. We were spending Christmas with my grandma in Wyoming. My grandma started the morning by announcing to my sister and me, who were transfixed by Netflix episodes of *The Office*, that she expected Barry would stop by the house to say hi sometime that morning. We barely heard her and I

didn't register any worry in her voice.

"Judy, I'm sure he'll call," I heard my mom say after a couple hours. I looked at the clock. It was eleven in the morning and while we were still in our pajamas, my grandma was dolled up already in her cashmere turtleneck and gold hoop earrings.

"It's just—he knows I worry. He has never gone even half of a day without calling," my grandma said.

I paused the episode and listened from the living room. Her voice rang through the quiet house and I didn't hear any sign of her withholding any worry she might have hid from us normally. I heard footsteps and I turned slightly on the couch to watch. I gulped. My mom was hugging her reassuringly but my grandma kept her arms crossed across her waist.

"No, he always calls. Something isn't okay."

For the next hour, my sister and I half-heartedly paid attention to the television. We heard snippets of the next course of events: my grandma called Barry's son who agreed to go over to his house to check on everything. There was something we gathered between the lines about them not hearing from him since they'd opened presents on Christmas morning the day before. That morning, my mom sat on the couch next to my grandma while they held the phone in their hands waiting for the call from Barry's son. My dad sat at the dining room table silently with his head in his hands. We expected the worst, but surprising to us all, was that we were hoping for the best.

"Mom, I'm sure he's alright," my dad said after it had been about twenty minutes that we'd spoken to Barry's son.

"Thanks, Scott," my grandma said. She brushed at her eyes with the Kleenex my dad brought her. She grabbed his hand before he went back to his spot at the dining room table and he let her squeeze it.

A couple minutes later, the phone rang. My grandma looked at all of us, pausing on each face, before jamming the answer button on the phone.

I knew before I heard the scream seconds after, paralyzing us all to our spots in the house. I tugged at the threads on the new polka dot sweater in my favorite color that

my grandma had bought for me for Christmas, fighting the urge to cry as my grandma knelt on the ground with her head in my mom's lap. I glanced out of the large glass front window at the kids across the street who made snowmen and whose screams could be heard from here. I think we'd all known, really, the moment she'd said something had been wrong that there wasn't going to be a happy ending to the day.

We prolonged our trip by a week so we could go to the funeral with my grandma. It was at a church on the outskirts of Rock Springs, in a building that looked like a jail with its brick exterior and barred windows. I walked in first, holding my grandma's hand. A blur of faces I didn't know reached out to take their turns hugging my grandma.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear," someone said. I looked at my grandma to see her reaction until I realized that this stranger I'd never seen before was talking to me. I nodded.

We reached the back room where the minister stood in front of Barry's immediate family. As we walked in, they each jumped from their chairs to hug my grandma, too. I watched as they came together and moved to the edge of the room where my family stood quietly in the corner. After talking to my grandma, each of Barry's family members shook our hands, addressing us by our first names. I looked at my mom and motioned towards them with a flick of my elbow. Did she know their names? I didn't know nor had I ever met a single one of them.

The minister addressed my sister and I next. She grasped our hands, folding them to her chest and murmured a prayer.

"Now, girls, I want you to stand with all of the grandchildren during the ceremony. We are all family here, blood or not. Under God's eye, you are as much his family as everyone," the minister said. My eyes darted to my mom's, who immediately walked forward.

"It's really okay," my mom said, "that's not necessary."

"Yeah," I said, my voice vacant of any emotion as I struggled to withhold my laughter and disgust, "we don't need to be a part of it. It's for Barry's family after all."

"Honey, you are Barry's family," the minister said.

My grandma started to shake her head as she caught wind of the conversation and waved the minister off as well, but she didn't have any of it. I glanced at Barry's grandchildren, the oldest of whom was about my age and didn't hide her anger. Barry's son also cast us a look I couldn't decipher and I felt my dad stiffen next to me.

"I don't get it," I said to my dad, whispering. He ignored me.

Halfway into the service, the minister asked if the grandchildren would all come forward and place a flower of our choosing on the casket. My sister and I shuffled towards the front. I tried to ignore the hundreds of faces behind me and then tried to ignore the chorus of gasps as we placed a flower on his casket. I turned around and saw hundreds of pairs of eyes on me. I gulped and resumed standing next to Barry's grandchildren who were audibly sobbing while my eyes were drier than a desert. Every few seconds, I made eye contact with one of them and received looks of hatred that made me wonder what we'd done.

I was twenty-one, and my grandma, mom, and I were all visiting Sophie in Virginia where she was a freshman. My grandma had bought all three round-trip plane tickets and demanded on the second night we switch hotel chains completely, moving from a Double Tree to a Hilton. At the mere mention of grabbing Chik-Fil-A for dinner, she immediately suggested we drive to the nearest Olive Garden on her bill.

Sitting at Olive Garden in a four-person booth, we mulled over the menu. Sophie had a textbook in front of her while she highlighted notes for an upcoming midterm and my mom and I talked amongst ourselves. The whole weekend had sort of gone like this: Sophie with her nose in a book and my mom and I whispering during breaks of conversation with my grandma.

"Isn't this so nice, girls?" my grandma said. My mom and I both looked up. My grandma was grinning warmly, her eyes sweeter than milk chocolate. I gulped and smiled back.

"I'm so glad we could all make this trip. Thank you, Suzy, for organizing the whole thing. I could never do this on my own," she said, continuing.

“Sure you could, Judy,” my mom said. Her eyes flitted over mine and we shared a knowing glance.

“The history here is just outstanding. Everything is so beautiful,” my grandma said. I rolled my eyes and when the waiter came back, ordered a glass of wine. Now probably wasn’t the time to bring up the subject of Walter, her new boyfriend, who my mom seemed to push out of every conversation the moment he was brought up.

“It’s so special,” she said, “to spend time together like this. To eat in nice restaurants and share a nice hotel room together.”

“You’re right, Judy. It is,” my mom said. She squeezed my hand from under the table and I unclenched my hands before I nodded in agreement.

“I think tomorrow we need to visit the downtown to do some shopping, don’t you think?” my grandma said. She nodded at me, smiling. I didn’t return her smile and looked back down at my drink. I wondered if I could get away with ordering another. After a few seconds, I decided I didn’t care if I could or couldn’t, and asked the waiter for another glass of wine for \$8 which was twice as much money as I’d ever spent on one drink for myself.

“Oh, you probably think I’m crazy” my grandma said. “You’re too young to understand,” I grabbed a piece of my hair and twirled it between my fingers, willing myself to keep staring at the hotel carpet. I felt my heart rate accelerate.

“Yeah, you’re probably right, Grandma,” I said. “I am too young.” I bit my tongue and drummed my fingers on the bed. After a three second pause, I looked over to see if she was still there. She was smiling and her cheeks were flushed. We were back from dinner and my grandma had found me on my bed with my Kindle after she’d gotten off the phone with Walter. She held her hand across her chest and it made me want to leave the hotel immediately even if it meant sleeping on the floor of my sister’s dorm. I wasn’t a kid anymore and I was sick of her pretending like everything was perfect. I was sick of her acting like I couldn’t notice the tension between her and my dad, whose relationship seemed to have taken another hit when she started dating Walter four months after Bar-

ry died. They met in grief counseling of all places and everyone thought it was nothing short of ridiculous after the emotional turmoil Barry's death had taken on her.

"I know it's crazy, but lately I've been thinking... And I never thought this with Barry in the eight years we were together, but I think, I think I could marry Walt," she said. I whipped my head around to face her, not even trying to hide my surprise now. She waited for me to say something but I didn't budge. After a few seconds she reached across the bed to squeeze my hand. She sat up from the hotel bed. Before leaving the room, she paused at the doorway.

"Don't worry, you'll understand someday."

Later that night, while my grandma was snoring in the next room, I told my mom what my grandma had told me earlier that evening about wanting to marry Walt someday. I knew what it meant, for our family and for my dad. His silence and me being the "news-updater" on my grandma suddenly made sense. She didn't know that I was aware that she'd lose most of my grandpa's retirement if she remarried and her eagerness to get me as excited as she was about it made me mad.

"She would really give up all of the money Grandpa worked for so she'd have a nice life to a guy she just met. Your grandpa wanted her to be happy but I just don't think she gets it. This is bad, Maggie," my mom said beside me in the queen sized bed we shared. Her voice was steady but careful, like she didn't want to say the words out loud that would mean it was true.

"Mom," I said. Now that I was old enough to clue into what was happening, the question of what really happened with Barry felt more important than ever. I remembered the look on Barry's son's face condemning us for something I didn't know. I knew I couldn't ask my grandma anything more about it either. Until she had met Walter, she'd openly admitted her life felt empty without Barry in it anymore.

"What was wrong with Barry?" I asked.

"You never knew?" she said, her voice ringing loudly in the mute hotel room.

"No, she never told me. No one ever told Sophie and I what was actually

happening,” I said, trying not to sound bitter. I wanted to know, needed to know. She sighed and turned on her side so she was facing me. It was completely dark in the room and nearing two in the morning. Neither of us had adjusted to the East coast time change and the smell of the pizza we’d ordered a couple hours prior lingered. My grandma, on the other hand, had fallen asleep promptly by ten each night, leaving the late nights to us.

“Barry had a multiple personality disorder. It was brought on by his depression. That’s why Dad was so scared. He wasn’t safe for her to be around,” she said slowly. I heard her voice catch as she said the last word, and she cleared her throat.

“Is that why she had to leave on Sophie’s birthday?” I asked.

“Yes, that was the first time he had an attack.”

“An attack?”

She nodded, “He tried to kill himself, Maggie. He was a hunter and had whole cases of guns at home. That was only the first time, he had more that followed. Grandma stayed with him through it all even when he turned on her. He almost sent her to the hospital a few times. We were scared... he was going to try to hurt her worse than he wanted to hurt himself.”

I considered this for a moment and felt the blood rise to my cheeks. The years of phone calls my grandma and I had shared, and all of the secrets I’d told her that I had never mentioned to either of my parents felt suspended in my mind. She was my confidant and maybe it had been naïve of me to think that she would treat me as her equal, but instead I saw that what she’d hidden from me had been a means of validating her own actions.

“So she didn’t tell me... because she told Dad and it made him mad?”

“Of course,” my mom said, “she never wanted to be told she was wrong. Your grandma is so kind, but she never puts herself first and it’s like she can’t stand the idea of just being alone. Does she just need to be with someone all the time? We wanted her out years ago.”

“So... Walter?”

“Yep, Walter. He lost his wife six months ago and here she is again. Who knows what

problems he has?”

I rolled over in bed. Confusion filled my mind as I tried to navigate through the problems that were light-years from what I knew how to wrap my mind around. I thought of the way she giggled whenever she talked about Walter, the same giggle she showcased openly when we'd first been introduced to Barry. I thought of the way I'd been kept in the dark, not to protect me, but maybe as a means of protecting herself. I didn't want to think about that. It seemed easier to pretend all those years she was protecting me. And lastly, I thought of my grandpa.

“What do you think Grandpa would say?” I asked my mom. She shifted again.

“Don't you think,” she began, “that's part of what bothers dad so much?”

I shook my head, not knowing whether I understood the truth of it or not. What did I know about life after your spouse dies? However, I thought I knew more about getting too wrapped up in a boy too soon than she did. And, I thought I knew more about trust than she did, too.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to say to her, mom,” I said.

“None of us do, sweetie.”

A couple of days after I got back from Virginia, my grandma called me. I answered the phone and said hello with genuine enthusiasm.

“That sure was a fun trip,” she said. “But it's so nice to be back. I missed home and Walt.”

“I understand,” I said. I understood that while it was pretty clear to my grandma that my dad would probably never stop worrying about her and her relationships and while she still thought I was blind from the truth, she wouldn't stop pretending everything was normal. I decided for the time being, I didn't want to stop, either. I wasn't sure I could keep it up forever but for the moment, I wasn't ready to lose more than I already had.

BIG SUR

Robert Taylor



FORSYNTHIA TUNNELS

Court Cathers

For Sweetie

Spring.
Until today,
I did not know their name.
Merely a faint recollection
Of tiny yellow flora.
Forsythia.

~

Summer.
The flowers rained down,
Leaving tunnels barren and spiky.
Wood, dirt and bugs,
Thorns, weeds and roots
Filled the tunnels.
Musky, wet and muddy,
Blue sky only through slits.
Slime and jewel lined walls,
Swords and spikes threaten to fall.
Tiny creatures question our presence.
A fat cat of brown and tan,
Roams this forbidden space.
Imagining fantastical tales
Of slaying beasts,
I'd follow her to evil places.
A tiny furry dragon.

Fall.
Tunnels cold and rotting,

Death threatens to claim us.
Spikes and swords get sharper,
Hooking onto our clothes,
Trying to keep us here forever.
Companions following my moves,
We wiggle and twist.
Ripping cloth and skin,
Drawing blood and danger,
Traps and spikes behind us.
Dragon tail in front.
Weapons out and at the ready,
Thrusting and slashing.
Claws cutting through air,
Fire exploding and burning flesh,
One good stab to the chest,
Wounded she runs.
Demon hurt and gone,
Slowly we escape our prison.
Free at last we roam these tunnels,
Searching and questing for sky,
Lost in this labyrinth.

Winter.
Bursting through rubble,
We have found our escape.
Ground white and frozen,
We shiver in our tattered clothing,
Looking back to our cage,
Only Forsythia Tunnels.

Spring 2014

UNDERNEATH LILLY PADS

Court Cathers



REAL WOMEN

Robert Taylor

I don't drink. Out with friends or clients I'll maybe have a couple, but I'm not a beer guy. I like Rum and Coke or a tasty mixed drink, and for me they go down like Kool-Aid. I could guzzle a bottle of Kahlua without cream, so I generally stay away from alcohol. I'm a human resources consultant, and I could get toasted constantly off big shot managers who take us to fancy local hangouts for dinner and drinks on an open company card, then tough out the daily hangover like my peers. But why be miserable? I eat their steak and lob, have a soda, a big slice of cheesecake, and sneak off early.

I live in Montana and work the Northwest so Seattle and Portland are about the extent of my big city experiences, but a while back we did our annual training in Memphis, a city with character. I didn't go out with the team after work at night and socialize like you do when you're out of town. One guy called me crazy because I was missing out on the ladies. But I'm tired of all that. I never get anywhere with real women. Drinking doesn't help there either. Things go bad for me when I drink around women. I ogle breasts, examine tattoos and armpits, blurt out random comments like, "You're beautiful," expecting them to jump all over me I guess. They don't. I'm in my thirties now so I don't look for things to change in that department, and I like doing things by myself anyway.

In big cities I investigate. Intriguing things go on you don't see in small towns. Drug deals, gang fights, prostitution. I don't condone illegal activity, I'm interested in it all. I like to watch people who are not tuned in to my presence, a fly on the wall deal. I consider it research for something, or living on the edge.

The South has black women, few and far between in Montana, so they are exotic to me. That's why I stayed in Memphis an extra day, to take in the culture. Sometimes I think about what it would be like to have a black girlfriend, how we'd be together. I'm sure it's just a thing, like with Asians. I'm fond of Asian women too but I've slept with a few, at massage parlors in Seattle and Spokane, even for real once, and they aren't as big a deal for me anymore. The mystique fades.

I wanted to cruise Beale on Saturday night, so I hung out in my room at Springville Suites in my underwear most of the afternoon eating licorice and napping. I had made

a quick trip out that morning to the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King JR. was assassinated, to pay my respects. I didn't plan to stay out late that evening. My plane left at eleven-fifteen the next morning so I was going to walk Beale, have a good dinner, then rest up and get myself going early, maybe swing by Graceland before my flight.

I heard racket outside on the street and pulled back the curtain. An attractive black woman in a turquoise one-piece outfit with white stripes strutted down the sidewalk in high heels swinging a silver purse. Two homeless looking guys hollered at her. She wiggled her fingers at them, said something back, and kept walking. I opened the curtain at the far window to get another look but just caught her brown legs disappearing around the corner.

I ate more licorice and double-checked the phone book. I have this habit of going through motel phonebooks looking for all night massage parlors. Just to look. I've given up on those too, but I'm compulsively curious. Some motels are getting so they don't carry phonebooks anymore (which is sort of a relief because I'll stay anxious at a motel until I flip through those pages) but there used to be full-page ads showing twenty-four hour health spas with pictures of pretty Asian women promising relaxation, steam baths and body shampoos.

Sex at massage parlors made me hate myself. That's why I stopped going. I had to hide it, carry around this big secret, always feeling self-conscious. And it can get nasty, depending on where you go and who you wind up with. One time I pulled over on a frontage road afterward and scrubbed my cock with rubbing alcohol. There's an adventure. It's a waste anyway because you don't get a massage out of the deal. Hell no. The girl's job is to get you off as fast as she can so she can blow some other slob waiting his turn down the hall, so don't bother humiliating yourself by asking her to go slow or work out the kinks. Just one time, a pretty Korean girl shared a cigarette with me afterward.

After I rested and showered I took a muscle relaxer to loosen up then walked toward Beale Street, kept an eye out for a good place to eat. I still had over four hundred dollars mostly in fifties in my wallet and I'd be bringing most of it home. I'd be in bed at the

motel by nine, maybe stop and get a dirty magazine somewhere and bring it back with me since nobody knew me there.

It was a nice evening, about five o'clock, in the fifties. It had rained earlier so everything looked gray. You couldn't see the tops of buildings. I checked the buildings out, and said hi to folks I passed. People go slow in Memphis, stretch their legs out when they walk. They had fuzzy blue edges. I tried out the dip walk and felt cool.

Beale Street seemed quiet. I walked along rummy, purposeless. Two cop cars were parked on each end, corraling it. The officers directed traffic and socialized. You can carry a drink outside there like on Bourbon Street in New Orleans and I craved something so I could feel a part of it all. I wanted to relax like a Memphian, have a margarita maybe. I don't use drugs, but I thought a joint would be just about right, and wondered where I'd get one, to loosen my brain and set it back to right, a reset button for my head.

I wandered into a place called Wet Willy's. Behind the long bar, an endless variety of slushy drinks swirled inside ship-cabin windows in all sorts of colors—red, blue, watermelon—like big twirling gumballs, with one tall young black girl serving them up. Her eyes were round and pretty with long lashes. I ordered a White Russian. Nice girl. She asked whether I wanted a small or large cup and showed me where the straws were. “Is there a good fish joint around here?” I said. (Joint, since when do I say joint?) “Fish place.” She told me the name of a place but I couldn't make it out.

“It's just the next block,” she said.

I paid for my nine dollar drink, tipped her, and reached out my hand, “I'm Ben.”

Her palm was soft and I held it until she took it back. “Keyila,” she said.

I glanced at her perky small breasts, tried to peel back the fabric of her blouse with my eyes, she didn't say anything. I like the cute ones. I get hung up on a girl's nose or neck, ponytail, or a birthmark, and can't get enough. I stare, and sometimes wonder why they put up with it.

I sipped my slush while I walked around. It soothed my heartburn from the licorice. I poked my head into nightclubs, stopped at BB King's place and Jerry Lee Lewis's bar. The

clubs have live music and they were filling up, most of the seats and tables were taken. A fat black woman sang with BB King's band.

I wanted a nice seafood meal before I left town, so I walked a few blocks toward midtown, and bumped into a well-dressed lanky black man who asked what I needed and said his name was Darrell. I told him my name. He came up with a fish place right off, said he'd show me, he was headed that way. I've been conned before, and I sensed the con artist in him (you know, a little too interested in helping me out) so I played along and followed until I could break away. He said, "See what we do here, Ben is..." and a guy with his nose in a cellphone brushed into Darrell.

The man said, "Can you tell me where The Hightower is?"

"We're headed right by there," Darrell said. "This is Ben."

But I had already stopped. "I'm going to head on back," I said.

"Ben," Darrell said. And I noticed he had nice white teeth.

"I'm headed back."

On Beale, a cop told me where to find a good fish house. And it was. I ordered a margarita with my combination plate and they had to put it in two large glasses because they were out of fishbowls. Twenty bucks wasted there though, I couldn't get the fried oysters and shrimp past my heartburn. I managed to suck the drink down and left.

I went back to Wet Willy's and the sexy black girl asked if I'd found the fish place. "I went off route," I told her. "What do you recommend?"

"I like the strawberry," she said. "But I can make you something. Mudslides are my specialty."

"Maybe a Pina Colada this time, I guess." I tipped her another two bucks and hit the street. A large friendly homeless black man standing in the middle of the road flapped his arms and told me his name was Al. I dug into my wallet and Al looked in at my fifties. "Don't be looking in there Al," I said, and handed him a five. He said he could use a little more. I told him I'd be back.

On the far end of Beale I found a white female bartender at a club with a bar open to the sidewalk. "Seems slow out here," I said.

“Wait till the game gets out,” she said. She had a nice body. Not beautiful, but authentic, you know?

I said, “You from here?”

“West Memphis.”

“I’m from Montana,” I said. “I fly out tomorrow.”

She tilted her head, considering things. “That’s a shame.”

If I lived here, I thought, I could take her to lunch. And I could live in a place like this. She had dark hair, about mid-thirties. Laid back girl, didn’t seem anxious about anything at all.

“I’m moving into my boyfriend’s place tomorrow,” she said. “I have to pack as soon as I get off tonight.” She climbed up onto the bar and sat with her legs dangling toward the street.

“Moving’s so much work, I don’t envy you that.” I wiggled her knee and told her she had loose kneecaps. She shrugged. “You look...nice,” I said.

“I’m thirty-five but people think I’m younger. I eat right and don’t drink. I stay away from meat, just have fish sometimes.”

“I eat licorice,” I said, and patted my stomach.

“I do smoke dope,” she said.

“That’s probably not a bad thing,” I said, imagining the possibilities. “A great stress release. I’d like to sometimes but they test me at work.”

“You can fake out those tests,” she said. “There are ways.”

“The music sounds good.”

“Rockabilly, they’re the best in town.”

I think her name was Sheila. I visited with her between trips to Wet Willie’s (back and forth). I bought a blue drink from her she said was like a Long Island Iced Tea but stronger. During break the band and a couple of barmaids came out. Sheila introduced me to them all. I checked out the college-age black barmaid. She perked up when she noticed. Good people, they included me (Montana boy) in their group and we were sort of all friends, just like that. The lead singer had reddish wavy hair and looked like a fifties

rock & roller, a young Jerry Lee, with a down-home hokey way about him.

I went in to use the bathroom after the band started back. They were playing Johnny Cash songs. The lead singer said, "I bet Ben knows this one," and they lit into Cocaine Blues. I can listen to that stuff all night, and before I knew it they were announcing last call. Sheila said I could hang out while she counted her tips. When they started turning off the lights I asked her what she thought I should do, I was open for anything. She said I better go because her boyfriend was in a motorcycle gang.

I have choppy memories of the rest of that night. I woke up the next morning in my motel room an hour and a half before my flight and I don't remember how I got there. In the shower I found blood on my forearm that wasn't mine. Over the course of weeks vague scenes came together and a sketchy story formed.

I flagged down two young black females, one with silver crosses for earrings, the other with a blue neck-broach, smoking. "Can I try that? I haven't smoked in years."

"You can keep it." The one with the crosses handed it to me and they kept walking. It had a loose plastic filter, I hoped it was pot but I'm not sure. I held it in and coughed like it was. I walked lighter after that, stood taller. Folks filled the street, I smiled at the glowing lights and bumped into people milling around like cattle. I said excuse me and nobody cared. It reminded me of Reno and I felt like a cowboy, thought about buying some snakeskin boots at a pawnshop somewhere.

Al found me again. "Now Ben, you said you were coming back..."

"Al," I said, "Maintain." On a side street by where the cop cars were parked a line of cabs waited. I climbed into the front seat of the first cab and told the driver, "Gentleman's club."

"The nearest one's twenty minutes away," the driver said. "That starts at thirty dollars."

"Okay," I said, and got back out. That's when I saw her, the woman with the turquoise dress and silver purse from the motel room window. She walked deliberately down the sidewalk talking on her cellphone, heels echoing off the concrete. I felt my pulse thump. I said, "You need a date?" She looked at me seriously but kept walking. "I mean, I could

use a date. I have a nice room six blocks away. I'll get us cab if you want." She listened but kept talking on the phone. I followed her inside someplace. "Would two hundred do it? I could go three, if you'll take a card."

My stutter echoed across the silent room. We had entered a café attached to the bar where Sheila worked and Rockabilly had played. My friends were all at a large table having breakfast, and they all stopped eating when we came in. I couldn't say anything. The whore went over by the counter for safety. I lowered my head and left. I thought about Sheila, about the good impression I'd made earlier. But I'd been found out. I'd let my friends down.

I staggered to an after-hours dance club, dropping fifties on the floor when I paid the cover. The bouncers helped me pick up the money and asked my name. A packed floor danced like they were one big couple—sexy women, arms overhead, with swirling silky butts. There were bench seats along a wall in the bar and I sat down next to some ladies who turned out to be my friends from the street with the cigarette. I said, "Hi, I remember your earrings."

The girl with the cross earrings went up to the bar. I pointed at the other girl's broach. "I like your broach," I said. She smiled shyly, touched it, and looked for her friend.

Miss earrings came back with a guy, a bartender I guess, and he sat down on the bench between me and the girl's. He said to me, "What's up."

I shook his hand and introduced myself. He wanted to know why I wasn't out dancing. "Are these ladies with you?" I asked. He nodded. I spoke up so I could be heard over the music, "I remembered her earrings."

"You should go out and dance," he said.

"I don't dance."

"What are you doing here then?"

"Enjoying the music," I said. I shook his hand again.

The bartender spoke with the women for a minute then went back to the bar. I smiled over at the girls but they didn't look at me. Rude, I thought. I slid off the bench and headed for the door. "See you Ben," the bouncers said.

I staggered around town. In an alley, I spotted a staircase with a yellow light at the top and a purple neon "Open 24 Hours" sign. I remember pulling myself up the stairs using the handrail. The waiting room smelled like strawberry lip gloss. The Asian woman who came out was older but she had smooth young thighs. She said, "You're too drunk, I'm sorry."

"I need a massage," I said. "I'm sore."

"Come back tomorrow," she said, and pushed me out the door.

A block away I heard yelling so I went to check it out. A man was up in a crying woman's face. "Cunt," he said, "You're holding out on me." He slapped her on the head a couple times. "Give it up."

I recognized the turquoise dress with white stripes, the beautiful black prostitute was crying. She screamed, "Fuck you! I gave you everything."

"Wrong answer bitch," the man said. Then he turned and saw me and I realized it was Darrell. "Ben," he said. "Ben Ben." His teeth were gleaming white. "You best move along now Ben. This isn't your deal."

I looked in the prostitute's wet eyes and her eyes told me I was a chump who couldn't do anything for her. I started to walk away but looked back in time to see Darrell punch her to the ground. I heard her squeal.

Have you ever sniffed gas? That's the best way I can describe the rest of it. My head began to pound, and as blood pumped through me my motions became robotic. La... la... la was the feeling of my movements and the noise inside my head. The scene looked like someone had flipped the switch on a strobe light. It took an eternity for me to get to Darrell with the two by two I found, like jogging in place. When I swung the slat he turned around in time to catch it across those perfect white teeth.

The woman, dress torn, kneeled beside Darrell who kicked his feet on the pavement and moaned. She yelled at me. "You crazy fucker, he'll kill me." So I smacked him with the board again and he quit squirming as much.

Her large brown breast was exposed, nipple erect. I see it clearly. I dream about it sometimes when I'm in bed, and imagine her head on my shoulder. She sat down on the

curb. I went over and sat next to her. “I think he’ll be okay,” I said. “It wasn’t that big of a stick.” She snorted and I put my arm around her shoulders. She let me hug her.

I wiped the prostitute’s tears with the edge of my palm and held her head to my chest. She relaxed a little and let go of her breath. I felt her naked skin through a rip in the back of her dress and caressed her neck. Her nipple pushed against my shirt and I twitched from goose bumps. I was holding a real woman. But I couldn’t control my roaming hands. I fondled her dress with my fingers and stroked her hair. My hands drifted to her lap and found her dark mound through the fabric of her dress and I began rubbing her lightly there while my other hand touched her warm belly.

She held me back and looked at me, confused. I remember the look in her eyes when she pushed me away. Knowing me for what I was, better than I knew myself.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m drunk. I’ll take you to get those bruises looked at.”

“You get the hell away from me,” she said. “I’ll scream if you don’t.”

I couldn’t hold my head up on the flight back to Montana. A woman next to me offered four Ibuprofen Gel Caps which I took without water. I worried that maybe I had touched that young girl’s breast when I pointed to her broach at the bar the night before, and wondered about the blood on my arm.

The man on my other side said, “I know what it’s like, I drank all night too. But I had one in the bar before I got on the plane so I’m okay now.”

I hate big cities, and I will never go back to Memphis.

Spring 2014

NIGHT ON THE CLEARING

Grace Yon



UNTITLED

Kalysta Fern

Some girls have Twitter; others get boyfriends, fifties glasses, asymmetrical hairdos. Maile Malone has found suicide.

Coming to school in tell-all tank tops, wrists elaborately butterfly-bandaged, Maile Malone asks:

Who's to judge?

DEFINITION NO. 1—REGIFTING

n. The acknowledgement of something never wanted nor asked for; a polite, thought-out rejection. SEE ALSO: Bad Christmas presents, the Backseat of a 1997 Chevy Coupe

She found her passion, originally, in literature. A prodigy, by the age of thirteen she had already made her first five attempts, each in the style of the immortal Lisbon girls. A jump from the roof at a cousin's birthday party had earned her more "Superman" jokes from various relatives than any genuine concern, and sticking her head in the oven had the rather unpleasant side effect of reminding her of Florida heat, and, consequently, Florida. ODing on sleeping pills just made her sleep, before bridging softly into hallucination; the venture would be remembered more for its portends of eventual narcotics abuse than anything else. Yet fitting her head into the makeshift noose of a neighbor's jump rope as yet another gorgeous Saturday drifted by, Maile felt the closest she ever would to something utterly sublime. But the nylon slipped, leaving only an angry scarlet bruise that would mark her for weeks and weeks, until finally fading away.

Finally, with a thrill strikingly similar to the discovery of a vocation, or even destiny, Maile Malone found cutting. There was something truly incomparable to tracing the gabardine latticework of veins down the downy edge of her arm (across if it was just for kicks, vertical if you were actually serious), in the din of smoky room. Barbies still lurking in the crevice between toy box and sex-toy box, wallpaper ballerinas bravely defying the twin influence of sun and band poster alike to pose inanely on the walls another day. Her face, in photographs, is still so unlined, so young. An Irish-Jew, with twin proclivities for augury and accounting—there is possibility here.

Dying quickly seeming not to have panned out, in the fall of her fourteenth she took up smoking. The days were getting shorter, the nights becoming longer. The world paused. Winter was coming. Up above, the leaves not already reduced to mulch on the fairway sang their own vivid requiem from the tops of trees. Breath froze in air, hanging like a gauze veil over a million little faces.

In the nights, reading a book or teetering on the edge of some anonymous bridge, a loneliness would wash over her, so much greater than death itself. At these times, the little cigarettes, with their friendly wee embers and evil little scents, seemed the loveliest things on earth. She'd come home smelling like fifteen generations of scum. She felt tied to something greater, an eternity of debauchery from Paris Hilton to the Marquis de Sade.

She was fifteen when it finally happened. She hadn't slept in six nights and hadn't eaten in two; the earth grew fuzzy and danced in small waves before her, a million little fever dreams taking shape and dissolving in the remote corners where her eyes met her brain.

And she thinks she's ready.

There's no such thing as a spontaneous suicide. She calls out in a high falsetto that she'll be a bit, she just needs to shave her legs. And then she'll be off, she adds unnecessarily, with an irony that will haunt and embarrass her for decades to come. Is there even anyone in the kitchen to hear her, or is she just calling out to empty upholstery?

She doesn't cry. Instead, walking up the narrow wooden stairs, she notes a million notches and crannies never apparent before. She wonders what else she's missed, if any of these insignificant details, taken together, might've been enough to save her. She heard once that only people wanting help, rather than death, take the time to write suicide notes; so she skips that part. For decorum, if nothing else.

So all that's left is to pry the razor from the frame, and it's so innocuous except for the way it's already cut into the summer calluses on the horizon of her fingertips. She knows, already, how easy it is, this her trump card, to tear into that narrow white region. She knows the burn of incidentally hitting a tendon. At first the skin merely parts, like

cuts of meat at a butcher shop. Then red forms in little dots, begins to bloom. The room jumps abruptly into focus. There is so much blood. She's dumfounded by the sheer volume of it which is cascading down her arms and into the bathtub. She is overtaken by it. It seeps into the crevices of her wrists and her elbows, where wrinkles would have one day spider webbed and creped the skin. Her lips part, and a fleck of spittle momentarily parts the red sea. Then it dissolves, and the vision's gone again. It's all happening so fast. She pushes herself up and over the rim into the bathtub, which is porcelain and porous, which she wants so badly not to stain, so she wraps her arms around her little body and crams her sallow wrists into the denseness of her little daisy-cream camisole, realizes that she's shaking, then closes her eyes and waits for whatever comes next.

And then she woke up. It's not such a bad ending for a story, when you think about it. There's a hospital room and some daisies, obnoxious magenta balloons sent by relatives she's never met. She felt worst of all, really, for her parents, who must be really embarrassed. She wanted to cry sometimes when she thinks about this.

But they kept mercifully quiet, and after a few weeks of mandatory therapy she got to go home. No one knew, they all promised her. If she wanted, this was hers to leave behind forever. The time had come to grow up, and this world was no one's first vocation. No one knew.

And who knew, maybe she'd do something. There were days when life opened up, seemed to bloom, moments so redolent with love and hope that she couldn't help but pause. Couldn't help but glance up from the Ace bandages on her wrist. Couldn't help but wonder.

The funny thing is, if she could make a single wish, it would be to crawl into the tiny eternity that lays between moments. She would burrow into the small, quiet place between the "tick" and the "tock" of clock, and that is where she would stay.

(Not to press the point but for the sake of example: like the moment when she's getting a text from a boy she's in love with is obsessed with and yet is such an utter bitch

to when she's around him, and she texted him even though she promised herself that she wouldn't until she felt more whole, more together, more capable of dealing with this mountain of shit that is her life and then there's that sound of the text message, of one little lifeless hunk of metal sending another little lifeless hunk of metal telepathic messages from across an ether an unseen plane where communication hurries across clouds and souls go after death maybe, and anyhow the thing buzzes with the ugliest little metallic click DRRRRROOOIIID like something tunneling up from the bowels of the earth, from some lesser circle of hell and she can't open it and she won't open it and anyhow the whole thing's about this blue school binder that in her words "kind of contained her academic future" that she couldn't find, and texted him as a last resort besides, but that she did find like ten minutes later and now she feels dumb oh god and she wishes she could just ignore it but there it is and now that she's written her back it means she can't undo it and oh god— all she wants is him all she wants is him, and it's moments like this that make her realize that maybe it's not this tawdry existence, but its cessation that is so intolerable after all—)

And life, or its double, carries on.

STREETS OF KRAKOW

Erika Tibbetts



A LOVELY BEAUTY

Court Cathers

She was once a lovely beauty,
Glowing in the night sky like a beacon for lost lovers.
She colored the darkness-covered landscapes with pastel life and
Lit the abyss like darkness with her ever-expanding radiance,
Willingly changing her form as each night passed.
Revealing all of herself only twelve times per year,
Not wanting to oversell the beautiful white light she
Spilled onto our world, filling us with warmth and love and
Thus holding the adoration and worship of many cultures.
She believed she would last forever.
At the beginning, hasn't been born yet, but Sun told her of its birth.
Watching and learning as beings sprouted from mere cells,
She was amazed as they gained intelligence.
Watching them have babies, cute little things, and
Adopting babies of other species,
She began to love the creatures growing in front of her.
She watched them create and destroy many wonders.
Crying as they enslaved themselves instead
Focusing on the birth of new life.
Crying as religions were at war instead
Focusing on the harmony religion brought to many cultures.
Crying as children and women were molested and raped instead
Focusing on the strength women gained as time drug on.
Crying as they burned monuments to the ground instead
Focusing on the building of memorials for fallen soldiers.
Crying as men became power hungry, destroying all in their path instead
Focusing on those who helped the poor and defenseless.
Crying as they took over lands and resources with war instead
Focusing on the beauty of nature and farming.

Crying when they killed themselves.
Tortured by the destruction they wrought upon themselves,
She pleaded with Sun to help, but Sun was powerless as well.
Together they cried for ages upon ages.
She could not bear to watch yet she could not pull away,
Forced to sit and stare for what seemed like forever.
Rotating this planet in an eternal dance,
She was once a lovely beauty and I miss her.
I remember watching her light dim each night and
Feeling her despair in my heart.
I remember the horror I felt on the night she left as I
Watched her tear herself apart, just to escape.
The world exploding in fear and anguish and death,
I remember feeling her die, like part of myself was vanishing.
You will only remember the idea of her beauty,
Never seeing her light up the abyss-like sky,
Only knowing the darkness-covered landscapes.
You will never truly love, adore or worship her,
Nor see her nightly change of form,
Nor will you see her monthly full glory.
She was once a lovely beauty, this is true.
Now existing only in the minds of those who knew her,
When we are gone, she will be truly lost, and then,
You, humanity, will suffer forevermore.

S

Lauren Korn



PORTRAIT OF A TIME

Erika Tibbetts

Pictured from left to right: John, my brother, Jesse, Diane, Mike, TJ, Cyndi, Allen, Kevin, Robin, Scott, Lynn, Caitlyn, Dad, Mom, Me, my sister, Scott, Christina, Evan, Poppa, Grandma, Melissa, Tristan, Sean, Liam, Sandy, Joshua. Child molester not pictured. Two aunts, seven uncles, twelve cousins, one boyfriend to one cousin, two grandparents, two siblings, two parents. And me. Twenty-nine people in the backyard when twenty-eight of them mattered, my age giving the benefit of the doubt.

Dad stands next to Lynn, smiling, before Grandma's rooms in ICU's, before Poppa has more cancer than liver. Lynn says it's just gas and hides his medication from him.

Grandma tilts her chin out. She has a ring on every finger and all of her permed hair. Her proud smile pulls up higher on the opposite side of mine behind her.

Two Altoids

I don't get as nauseous as I used to, driving with the holiday herd to the East Bay. I used to pop six Altoids and pray dad wouldn't have to pull over. Now I can make it on two, as long as I remember the steps. Everyone will say hi and hug you. Uncle Mike will ask if you're taller than your sister now. Christina and Melissa will tell your sister how gorgeous she is. All of your uncles will ask Bub about college. Poppa will tell you you look like you've lost weight and that you look more beautiful every time he sees you, and then ask you if you have a boyfriend yet. Grandma will call you her girl and hug you and always smell like Grandma. You are used to Diane's judgmental watchfulness; Robin's rigid silence; Lynn. After this you will bide your time until Dad breaks out the pudding and it's almost time to leave.

Ammonia

My age passes from nineteen to twenty in seven months of fleeting, small lumps that smell like ammonia and taste like stress. Acid and rocks against my gums.

ICU's

Kaiser Cafeteria food

Family emails

The Calendar

Lynn using her medical skills to cure Grandma

Isn't she a book keeper? For a doctor's office, Mom says. Mom tries to break up the bad news with Uncle Mark's surprising nuptials but Grandma is gone that night and Lynn wants to have the service on Dad's birthday. I don't know what is in the eulogy the minister reads the day after. I'm not listening, but staring at the flower arrangement beside the pink casket filled with pictures of grandkids and great-grandkids, not finding myself or my brother or sister. We're not among the tacky poster boards beside the chapel doors either. Or in the photo montage filled with pictures of Lynn, Christina, Caitlyn. Cyndi wrote the eulogy. Writing was always her thing. I know it doesn't say that Grandma asked Poppa out on their first date when he was trying to set her up with his best friend Dale. It doesn't say at eight months pregnant with Robin she climbed through a kitchen window in Holland because she locked herself out. Or that she gave birth to Rick on the hospital welcome mat. It doesn't say that when she worked at the theater, Poppa saw Bambi more times than a sane person could because he loved her. But every period and comma was right where it needed to be. Everyone said Poppa would be the first to go.

Modesto

In Indian summer when the grass turns to tinder, and the hills crack with dehydration, and all of the kids are shut up in classrooms again, we drive. Three hours through Sacramento, Stockton—Satan's Armpits, Mom says—on our way back in time where perms are tight, bangs are high, and you get your water from diet 7up. Where Bologna is not only acceptable but expected. Where every morning you eat cherry turnovers for breakfast and watch movies from rise to barely awake. Where inside is its own season and outside is 99 degrees.

Pallbearer

The sun is stronger in the East Bay, as if the universe is trying to instill warmth into glacial Tibbetts bodies. Not likely. The brick patio is full of holiday family, the ones I see

every birthday and Memorial Day camping trip when I'm young, and less and less as my age goes up and my opinion of them goes down. In an hour I won't have to hear their voices. In an hour I won't have to see the faces of these people that mean only anger and turmoil. In an hour the men in the Air force uniforms will fold the flag on Poppa's casket and I can stop popping Altoids. My brother-in-law waits for the service to begin with my brother, Jesse, Sean, Allen, pallbearers. Someone says Cyndi's ex-boyfriend TJ is going to be a pallbearer instead. They broke up in '09. I look to my sister and hear her grinding teeth. One more hour.

Cook & Serve

Grandma taught Mommy how to make Banana Pudding. Every Christmas Eve Eve I watch as she stirs figure eights into the yellow liquid until it turns into a pot of gold. In a year I'll be old enough to stir. I'll cut the bananas and layer them with Nilla wafers in the pink bowl Mommy's dog Lucy brought home. Until then, I watch the ripples.

Spring 2014

UNTITLED

Emily Johnson



UNTITLED

Grace Yon

I.

Go to sleep, little girl
Lay your head to
Rest your weary mind
Feel your body
Shed skin and
Float
Catch stars in soft
Palms always hide them
Well who knows what lurks in the
Quiet space beneath your eyelids
Go to sleep and when you
Dream, dream of
Me.

II.

Tightropes anchor her
Skull to the pillow
Coarse fibers knit bone
Her forehead a
Stripes of red and yellow
Circus tent
Fastened by auburn
Hair.

III.

Contortionists slip from slack lips
Brittle black fingers hushing trumpets

The orchestra wheezes one sour note and the drums
Boom against the tapered lines of her ribs and
Shadows slip in and shake their coats manifest
Bristled backs brushing vinyl and
The brass bells clank and the brass band rings
And the brass band rings and
Softly. Hush.

IV.
Her feet dangle over rushing
Water swaying gently
Feet of an acrobat twisted in
Ribbons of silence until
Ribbons of dawn dust
Her face with warmth.

GIVE IT TIME

William Matross

Of all of the things that can be crafted in the kitchen, soups are the most mysterious to me. And with all great mysteries, its enigma draws me in. When I go to restaurants, I am apt to take the soup over the salad. When the server brings the small bowl, always too small to understand the subtle nuances the chef coaxed out of the ingredients, I start with the smell. A few years ago, at Sean Kelly's Pub in Downtown Missoula, my nose was poised over a creamy sundried tomato soup. I could taste the basil as the aroma passed over my tongue. Sweet, acidic, smell of tomato followed close behind and my mouth watered. I scooped up a spoonful and it danced along my tongue. It was simple enough—cream, tomato, onions, basil, but somewhere in the ingredients I tasted home and comfort. I was going to figure out how the chef works his magic and I decided then my first attempt at cooking a soup from scratch would be something like this.

Growing up, I had mixed messages about cooking. My stepdad cooked from time to time, and when he did it was delicious. My favorite memories with my stepdad were making his seasoned meatballs and sneaking a few before they were cooked, in the days before the fear of Mad Cow. Mom, on the other hand, was an oven cook. Baked goods to Turkey dinners were always her specialty. Other than the occasional, "Here, do this," assignments to keep me from playing under foot, they never really taught me to cook. I tried to demonstrate an interest and started asking Santa for an Easy-Bake Oven. It never came. My mom told me Santa didn't bring "girl toys to boys." Soon after, my dad moved to Billings for a couple of years to go to Rocky Mountain College and took my older brother with him. After they left, food in our house basically consisted of things readily re-heated in the oven or microwave like bags of El Monterey burritos, Van de Kamps fish sticks, or Stouffer lasagnas. I was often on my own for figuring out dinner because of my mom's schedule. Desperation often set in and I would end up with wonderful culinary masterpieces like split hot dog on toast with ranch or a dish of two-way Cincinnati chili using dollar store spaghetti and a can of chili. I even took Home Ec. in high school, but just struggled with following instructions. I felt doomed. By the time I was nineteen, I gave up on cooking for myself completely and would just eat at restaurants.

About the same time, I gave up on writing. It had been my passion all through

school and provided me a place to explore my imagination. Whether they were news articles, like the ones I started when I was six or seven or the three years I served on the Helena High School Nugget staff, fantasy stories formed from dreams and playground imagination, or academic responses in various classes, I had over a decade of writing. Near the end of high school one of my teachers, disheartened by the news I wouldn't be attending college after graduation, gave me the advice to try writing exercises where I would imitate writers I enjoyed. She was trying to encourage me to keep writing and work towards publication. Unfortunately, after the cap and gown were packed away with my yearbooks and I was living on my own, I struggled with these writing exercises. I would start something and get a few paragraphs in and lock up. I would read books discussing the process of writing and I would emulate them: set up a specific place and time to write, create character profiles and plot outlines, or find various prompts. Instead of aiding me, every step pushed me farther away from the one thing I wanted to be doing. Eventually, like with cooking, I gave up and threw out everything and resigned that I wouldn't be a writer.

It took about twelve years to figure out my problem. Recipes. I have some kind of cognitive dissonance with them. Some preset expectation to follow them "or else." It didn't matter if I was following the instructions on the back of a box of Hamburger Helper or someone's preset idea of how I should write, both were equally destructive. As soon as I gave up following them strictly, the block lifted. It liberated me and I realized, whether it was writing or cooking, I couldn't let someone else tell me how to do it. I needed to play and have fun.. The same is true with my writing. Gone are the days of half finished projects or frustration so violent that would fill my room with broken pencils and hand-shredded papers.

The process for these two activities is very similar: the muse comes to me when I sleep or I let my mind wander. With food, it generally comes when I am sleeping. The colors, smells, tastes, and textures are hyper-realistic. As the dream progresses, more ingredients reveal themselves and I watch myself learning how to work with and prepare them. I often taste it at various points and the ghost tastes often have my stomach

growing by the time the alarm goes off in the morning.

That's what happened the first time I got my idea for tomato soup. I could still taste the soup from Sean Kelly's on my tongue. Of course there would be cream in it. I rolled the soup around my dream-tongue, plucking out ideas. I didn't want a simple tomato soup like 4Bs. I wanted something a bit more complex. I tasted a little oil and realized I needed sun-dried tomatoes. Piece by piece, the soup introduced itself to me and by the time I woke up I was ready to make it. I kissed my husband on the cheek and told him I hope he was ready for a treat and left to collect the ingredients.

I live in a conveniently close spot for getting food. Just a few blocks down South Third Street from my apartment is the Good Food Store, where I prefer to get most of my ingredients when the mood strikes me to play with my food. They would have everything I needed. Grabbing a basket, my first stop was a fresh head of garlic. Like my best friend Corbin, I believe garlic makes everything better and it finds a way into most things I make. I am not a connoisseur when it comes to finding the best ingredients, preferring instead to trust my nose and instinct. I pick out a large red onion, as my husband prefers them and I have learned to appreciate the layer of flavor they add. One of the many things I love about the Good Food Store is their selection of fresh herbs. My dream called for fresh basil and I grabbed a bundle of the sweet smelling leaves. I suppose if I was more of a foodie, I would make my own stock, but with a hectic schedule pre-made stocks fair well. Two large containers of low-sodium chicken broth would work perfectly and nearby I found a couple large cans of diced tomato. Snaking around, I grabbed some fresh unsalted butter and a pint of Kalispell Creamery heavy cream. Last stop in the store took me to the antipasto bar and the sun-dried tomatoes. I didn't need a small jar. I needed a large container and shoveled spoonful after spoonful into the clear plastic container, making sure to drain off most of the packing oil. The whole haul was probably more expensive than if I picked up the ingredients elsewhere, but I trusted the quality of the items I picked up which made it worth it.

At home, I started by rough chopping the onion. It was potent and had me tearing up quick. I have tried many of the various kitchen hacks for no-tear cutting and I haven't

found one that works when the onion is this potent. I put my large stock pot on medium and put in about three tablespoons of butter and add the onions. While they sauté, I chop up five cloves of garlic and added them. While those are cooking, I pick out some of the larger leaves of basil from about half the bundle and chop them up. I add the basil and sundried tomatoes to the translucent onions and stir them together.

The smell of garlic and basil brings my husband into the kitchen. “How long do I have to wait?” he asked as he stares in the stockpot.

“Not sure,” is the only response I can form. “But, we’ll need some bread and I forgot to get some.” I send him off to get some from Le Petit.

One thing I learned from my parents is to keep the kitchen clear while cooking. Growing up, we just had a pretty small kitchen and having more than one person just meant running into one another. Our kitchen is fairly large and open with not enough counter space for my taste, but keeping my husband out of the kitchen meant I am less distracted and more attentive to what my food is doing.

The rich smell of sundried tomatoes signaled it was time to add the rest of my tomatoes and the stock. I turn the heat up a little and bring the pot to a boil, allowing all of the flavors to mingle and then drop the heat back down to simmer for a few hours. My husband comes home with a loaf of Pain de Campagne, Le Petit’s version of sourdough. It will be perfect with the soup. He sneaks away into the kitchen and samples some of the soup.

“I think it needs something else,” he hollers from the kitchen.

I was thinking the same thing, but other than a little salt and pepper and the cream, there wasn’t anything else from the dream. “Just give it time.”

My internal timer goes off and I give the soup another swirl. I prefer blended soups and decide I will go that route with this one. I rinse out my blender and blade and get it ready to go. When blending warm or heated items, it is important to blend in small batches to avoid a mess and potential burns. It is a slow process of filling the blender half way and pulsing to get to the right consistency—not quite bisque. When they are done, I transfer each of them to a second pot. After the last batch, I add the cream and

bring the heat back up to help thicken the soup. I was surprised by my end result. Most creamy tomato soups are various shades of pink, but mine was a burnt-orange color with small flecks of basil. As it finished heating, I took bundles of basil and did a chiffonade as garnish.

I grabbed our olive-colored stoneware bowls, thinking the contrast in color between bowl and soup would enhance the experience, and ladled a healthy portion for the two of us and tore off two hunks of bread and set them down on our table. It wasn't Sean Kelly's soup and it wasn't like any of the others I have tasted. But it tasted even better because it was mine. The sourdough added another layer of flavor and the only thing noise in our apartment was lip smacking and slurping.

"You were right," my husband said as he stood up to get another bowl full. "I just needed to wait."

I have made the soup a few different times. While the ingredients are usually pretty similar, I have never made it exactly the same way twice. I have tried crushed tomatoes, instead of diced; oven roasted Roma tomatoes instead of sundried; rosemary and basil; or even four-cheese "grown-up" grilled cheese on sourdough instead of bread alone. Every experience of making it is different, each batch seasoned with whatever was going on in my life at the moment. And each time it reminded me I could cook. I didn't need a recipe to tell me how to make it. And, after making this one, I have gone on to make up my own "recipes," including a yellow curry chicken with turmeric and coconut rice; my special chili with Guinness, cinnamon, and chocolate; and a bacon, apple and cheddar soup. Most of what I make these days are items I haven't seen on a menu or even tasted. Just like my first soup, I just listen to my dreams and trust my intuition. My main rules when cooking are take the time and enjoy what you are doing. Like writing, it is all about a little inspiration and the decision to do it. And often times it is better than I imagined.

Spring 2014

UNTITLED

Jenna Franklin



SOUTH

Grace Yon

Your teeth are the Andes and they scrape along my back
Trailing cloud scars across the winter sky.
I stretch and a river rises, flowing South
Toward the sea. Salt itches on your tongue.
A bird with ice in its wings alights on my fingertips
And its shrill voice is mist against the sunrise.

The other birds take flight, fly South,
But this one stays with me to watch the sunrise
In silence, our silhouettes black on newborn sky.
We breath in unison, hardly daring to look back
And see sharp snow-capped mountains at your fingertips,
Unspoken words like frost beneath our tongues.

I touch soft pinions with outstretched fingertips.
A shiver runs from my neck to the small of my back
Like a silver fish darting toward the sunrise,
A cloak of water pressed against the sky.
My ice-winged brethren clicks his tongue
And, like him, the tides are urging me South.

We flee together. At our backs the sun is rising.
Air tastes like lavender on our tongues.
Our shadows race across a sun-streaked sky
And our wings flex just like fingertips.
All the while a voice inside me screams South,
South, and I feel your eyes fixed on my back.

Plains unfold beneath us, a flattened tongue

That tastes the horizon, savors the sunrise.
A lupine wind howls in my ears. It calls me back,
But my wings fill with the weightlessness of South.
Beyond muscled plains lies nothing but sky
So ripe and fragrant I can pluck it with my fingertips.

Now we see it—a curl of smoke, pale sky,
Last bitter breath rising from our tongues
And we taste South, fill our lungs with South
Reach out and comb warm soil with our fingertips,
Your jagged teeth just a smudge on the sunrise
A reminder of what awaits if we go back.

We are South, and we are never coming back.
So chew your fingertips, bite your wave-beaten tongue.
I will be here in the sky, wingtips always brushing sunrise.

E

Lauren Korn



PALACE

Jesse Rowan

For Ian and Eli, and for Lucy

It's always hard to know where to start.

Right now I think I've found happiness—or at least, I don't know, some level of acceptance, hope, the brighter future syndrome. It took a long time to reach.

At first when it happened she said there were no fireworks. She said she enjoyed it but there were no fireworks—and at the time maybe that's all it was: a night on a field on the fourth of July, a brief and explosive celebration of beauty, but disappointing—or rather, not disappointing, but not particularly exciting. It was something to see for an evening and then to let slip by, its fading colors still alive when you shut your eyes until the next beautiful day. That's how it must have been for her—but it's always been different for me. Because of where I am. Because of where I'd come from.

I was lonely for the first time in two years, morbidly lonely, dragging around my terrible, terrible—but not lonely—memories of that other girl, with deep and at last healing scars, as the snow melted and the world thawed out. And this, the final heat wave, the moving glowing bodies, that pulled me out from under the years of ice.

It started when I got back from the trip. She sat down with me and we drank honey whiskey and I told her all about it, like some passionate bard, strumming my fingers on my boots like a lyre. That night she said she likes a lot of things about me when I'm happy—and that must be why it happened, because I was happy, in that moment, a little drunk, talking about the trip that saved me, feeling refreshed and relieved, but road-weary, like coming home after a long, long, vacation, ready to lay in bed and watch the sun crawl through the window over your legs. That must be when she decided she wanted to.

But first—the trip. The God damn trip is what saved me. I wasn't close with either of the two kids I went with, but now I think three people have never seen each other through more. We drove three thousand miles, south and then back up north, running away from all that shit—that boy, my best friend, who fucked up so bad I can still hear his desperate voice in my head as he yelled at me before I said he was a piece of shit

and he broke all his windows and dropped out of school—I can see the blood on the floor and imagine his grin in the ambulance, drunk and proud and not really sure about anything but confident in whatever he thought happened, and now, months later, who knows what he’s doing or how he’s feeling—I’ll never see him again. We had to run away and we drove down south and saw the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. That God damn trip is what saved me—I was about to break. I carved the letter N into my arm when it rained the next day and I just had to leave.

I never really knew her when I was happy until I got back from that trip. She met me on a hard night—it was right at the end of that other girl, wintertime—she held me and said sweet things and I must have fallen in love with her a little bit. We sat on the ground and talked about our families and love and God it was like the sun rising after a cold night.

And then I had to grieve—nothing could work while I was grieving. I got worse and worse and then that boy fucked it all up and I left on my trip and when I came back and showered off the dirt and sand I was so ready to stop feeling everything from before. She indulged me—briefly, and she cut it off before it grew, a flower dying in bloom, possibly in its most beautiful state—and there is some perfection in that, in letting something die before it has time to run its course downhill as all things do—but it was hard. I remembered after that how hard it really was, how lonely I was but how used to it I’d become, and this little glimpse of the warm surface haunted me for three weeks. We drank and it didn’t make me feel different enough, so we took molly and it didn’t make me feel different enough, so we bought an eight ball it didn’t make me feel different enough—but at that point, moments from letting it all go and begging God to let me go home, please, please let me go home, something happened.

I couldn’t really tell you what it is. Things changed. I realized that I wasn’t still inside of it, the wild weeks, but that it was all behind me—and this summer I’ll be leaving, going home at last, and then she’ll be leaving and I won’t see her for a long, long time. But things have been different now. There’s a lot more to it than I thought. There’s a lot more between us and I don’t know what any of it is—but I guess that’s the beauty of it. It’s still over, just the way fireworks end on the fourth of July, but it’s beautiful to

know someone. It's really beautiful to know someone. I know that there's some place somewhere inside of her where I belong, and maybe she doesn't know it, or maybe she's not ready for it, or maybe it's an illusion of my romanticism—but whatever it is, well—something's there. And in that place—and I'm not there, and God knows if I'll ever be there—but in that place, it's beautiful, and it's sunny.

I'm sitting here about to have a cigarette looking at all these things surrounding me that paint a portrait of my past few months. My life is a palace of artifacts. The leatherbound Faulkner that first girl—the ice girl—gave me, and faint traces of coke in the small veiny grooves. The keys to the car that took me on that trip and saved me. A white lighter, an empty acetaminophen bottle, old and heavily worn boots, and a jewelry box full of little things. Inside the jewelry box there's a broken pocket watch, a beautiful poem written to me by a friend, a ticket to see the National, and a pack of smokes with three left, and a name written on each one that I wrote when I was home over the winter, to be smoked when I'm home again this summer. When I wrote those names—I was sitting on my bed thinking about where I was and where I'll be when I'm finally home again to smoke them. That was before everything. I never could have known what was going to happen. I could never have known things would end with that other girl, and I'd get out of the ice—what that boy would do to me, that I'd go on that trip with those two kids, two of the best people I've ever known, and then what that girl would do to me, or rather, what that girl would become to me. On the twenty first of May I'll smoke one of those cigarettes—the one with my name on it, and my two close friends the two others with their respective names—and I'll be home. I'll be home in the East. I won't see her again for a long, long time. I'll think about her, and I'll look at a photograph of us, and I'll say, at least it happened. I love it for happening. And God—it was beautiful to know someone.