

*The  
Sigma Tau Delta  
Rectangle*

**Journal of Creative Writing  
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Volume 87, 2012**

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# 2011–2012 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

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## Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Wil Norton

“The Collective Unconscious, Zen Buddhism, and Zeami’s *Atsumori*:  
Aesthetics as a Means of Transcending the Self”

## Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Wil Norton

“The Collective Unconscious, Zen Buddhism, and Zeami’s *Atsumori*:  
Aesthetics as a Means of Transcending the Self”

## Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Ainsley Kelly

“Firestorm”

## Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

Sarah Tarkany

“One Hundred”

## Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award

Margaret O’Brien

“Sweet Water”

## Judge for Writing Awards

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SUZANNE BERNE is the author of three novels and a book of nonfiction. Her first novel, *A Crime in the Neighborhood* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) won Great Britain’s Orange Prize, awarded annually to the best book of fiction by a woman published in the UK. It was also a finalist for the Edgar Award and the *Los Angeles Times* First Fiction Award, and it was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, as was her second novel, *A Perfect Arrangement*. Her third novel, *The Ghost at the Table*, was named one of the best books of the year by the *Boston Globe* and was featured on NPR’s *The Diane Rehm Show*. Her short stories, reviews, and essays have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, *Allure*, *The Washington Post*, *Mademoiselle*, *Ploughshares*, *The London Sunday Times*, and *Agni*. Berne has taught at Harvard University, the Radcliffe Institute, and Wellesley College. Currently she teaches creative writing at Boston College and is on the faculty of the Ranier Writing Workshop in Tacoma, Washington. Her most recent book is *Missing Lucile*, a biography of her paternal grandmother.

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# Poetry

*Firestorm*

*Revolution*

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*Black Milk*

*Muscadine*

*US-74 W*

*The Last Time I Went to Church*

*If Penelope's Mother Had Been There*

# Firestorm

| Ainsley Kelly

By the end of August, even the chaparral  
has dried out and died in the faulted canyons.  
One October Santa Anna, we woke to ash  
falling from an orange sky. Any form of friction

can cause a spark. The fires moved faster  
than a car can drive; they passed within a mile  
on either side of Summer's Past Farm  
where we bought our flowers. Air quality: poor

heavy particulate, said the radio. We ran outside  
to catch leaf skeletons, falling in flakes,  
stemmed grey veins, carried fifty miles  
from the mountains by the wind, dissolved

when they touched our palms. Some things  
fall down to us: bulbs transplanted  
from a lost ranch, a silver ladle, wallet  
of an uncle who died at seventeen.

We trooped inside coughing, leaving  
cinder footprints on the Chinese rug,  
soiling the gift my grandmother saved  
from her mother's disgust. In the backcountry

the root systems of great oaks  
smoldered for months. Ash  
coated the pool with film, gathered  
in gutters. Name the dead

you inherited at birth. After the fires,  
they found the animals: fox, deer, coyote,  
mountain lion, rabbit, charred carcasses  
grouped together in a hollow. Miles

of blackened dirt along the interstate,  
children catching ashes,  
and, finally, in December,  
half an inch of rain.



This was the story I always asked for  
because I knew  
she didn't hesitate  
just coolly walked to the window

and dropped  
the teacup  
out—

tea boiled in the air—

and something shattered  
in the quad  
below.

*Ainsley Kelly is a senior English major and Religious Studies minor at Santa Clara University. She is currently working on a poetry manuscript as a senior project, with the help of a Canterbury Fellowship from her university's English Department. Ainsley was awarded the Shipsey Poetry Prize in 2010 and the Academy of American Poets/Tamera Verga Prize in 2011. She is the poetry editor of the Santa Clara Review.*

# Mariner

| Mary Katherine Foster

—*an erasure to Odysseas Elytis*

In the constant reversal of the world, everything is  
sheet-metal, screws, and flotation devices—  
full miracles and danger sharing the same body.  
The house near the senses, lit and solitary, renders our reality linear,  
and a flash of birds from the sea, reaching to no one,  
reaches this place.

Here, I have said *I will go deep within my body*—  
and there I have found: wind, years full of whispers,  
language grasped less and less by distance,  
meaning whose light has ceased to revolve.

You who taught me to place at one end of existence a great sorrow  
and at the other a blank field of soul,  
I am innocent.  
Whether or not we are the exchange between black and everlasting,  
we are duration—surely,  
even the sun has transparency, love, and eyelashes  
as it pronounces dawn, gathers where mountains divide,  
looks white in the eye.

Brown hills, abandoned chapel, small children asleep,  
I don't mean movement in a specific direction. I mean only  
the same bright pulses that sustain the impossible spaces within us  
where dew and fire meet.

*Mary Katherine Foster studied Literature, Creative Writing, and Leadership Theory at Birmingham-Southern College and recently graduated cum laude as a member of Phi Beta Kappa with a B.A. in English. She plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing in the coming years and eventually earn a Ph.D.*

## sunday service

| Alexa Johnson

in orleans,  
after the roof  
was replaced from  
water damage and  
the flood marks  
started to fade,  
sun-bleached  
from the buildings,  
reverend bowman  
talked about zion  
and this earth-based  
dilemma, chewing  
on sermons  
about cyprus  
trees and how  
the reverse  
exodus will be  
steady and slow.

she tells us  
we will germinate,  
we will put down  
roots, and in the pews  
our saturated  
mouths struggle.  
we miss  
the sound of crying  
infants and their weight  
in our hands.  
we stare  
at the new  
ceiling.

# bonding

| Alexa Johnson

after removing  
the ice cube  
from the left  
nipple, she  
cupped  
the other girl's  
breast for  
a moment  
before her thick  
fingers slid up  
to the bashful  
areola  
and pulled  
at the tip  
with one  
hand and  
opened  
the safety  
pin with the other.

hold still, she said,  
hold still.

*Alexa Johnson is a senior at Elon University in North Carolina, where she is a double major in Strategic Communications and English, with a concentration in Creative Writing. She is currently a satellite editor for First Inkling Magazine and an editor for Colonnades, Elon's literary magazine. After graduation she plans on joining Teach for America, working on sex education campaigns, and eventually pursuing an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.*

# Lost or Discarded

| John Watkins

As winter  
winnows the willows,  
birds' nests appear,  
trussed  
with the most various  
stuff—a little lost  
blue ribbon,  
as if pulled  
from the memory  
of your niece's hair,  
or some old  
green fishing line,  
the kind used when  
you and your father  
slid down the muddy bank  
of Hopewell Lake.  
Only birds  
seem to take  
from what's lost,  
thinking the past  
good enough  
to build a home of.

*John Watkins attends Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, where he majors in Literature. His poetry has previously been published in Lee Review and North Central Review. He enjoys falling leaves, and his favorite bird is the mockingbird.*

# Posed Photo from a Christmas Morning

| Hannah Ross

She is holding an unwrapped Christmas present,  
two ceramic fairies enchanted by a votive candle holder.  
Behind her is the piano. It remains untuned.  
Random tinkering on the keys produces  
artless, twangy tones as it waits for someone  
to tend to the ordered tangle of loose cords  
inside its varnished shell.

The doorway behind her leads to a cluttered dining room.  
Plates from breakfast and unfinished homework litter the table.  
The mess is alright, it's not in the shot.  
If you could wait a few moments  
you would hear a brief Merry Christmas,  
her father's uncertain words  
coming from the phone, her awkward and uneasy reply,  
the cables not truly connecting them.

The wrapping paper was beautiful, the presents  
tied with flashy green and gold ribbons  
curled into springy homemade bows. Such  
work went into making the tree look the same as it had  
the year before, and the year before that  
care had been taken to keep the fights  
from spilling out of the bedroom,  
but the walls were thin and the door opened too easily.

## Roadside Funeral

| Evanne Lindley

He wipes his brow and sighs a breath—  
sends condensed tears  
like hay dust in the sun  
into the sepia sage.

His horse labors, where she lies  
in the ditch,  
sprawled out by the elephant bones  
of a dead cottonwood tree.  
Her lungs rasping. Eyes showing white.  
Struggling against calm,  
her tail washed across the rocks in which she fell.

He thinks of the wild mare  
who left the herd  
to be with her defeated stallion—  
in exile.  
Of how animals love.

But she's not that mare.  
She's just his good working horse,  
with the thin bone of her fetlock  
splintered.

He thinks of the coyote  
who crosses the street at the stop light.  
Who stops on red  
and trots across on green.  
Grey paws on yellow stripes.

He thinks of that still place on Highway 6.  
Four more howling brothers  
strung up on barbed wire  
like plastic sacks made lifelike  
by each passing car.

Like men hanging from a gallows.  
Their pointed canines dry,  
they look toward the sun.  
Dried blood on dead legs.  
Silently howling.

Her hooves rang against the road  
like bells striking.  
She gloried in the power,  
wouldn't listen to him,  
only to her iron shoes  
on that hard surface.

He handles his gun,  
won't watch her bleed—  
his father's filly.  
He squeezes the shell in his hand.  
If only he'd been born in a different century.  
One that wouldn't betray him.

Tonight, he'll walk home,  
because the west is dead.  
We strung her up on barbed wire.

*Evanne Lindley is a senior at Pepperdine University, where she double majors in English Literature and Creative Writing. She is the current president of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Her post-graduation plans remain hazy, but she is considering a creative career in the entertainment industry.*

## Marbles for Madness

| Adam Brown

I was born in the bowels of men's minds, a cauldron of molten dreams and bones where boys are tempered into killing men. Equal portions of steel, gunpowder, brass and blinders. The factory runs all night by conveyor belts across America, piles of brawny arms and legs wait to be sewn to cookie cutter torsos, complete with detachable cammies and a high and tight, the number is almost a finished product. A propaganda parasite is whispered into my ear, tunneling through my frontal lobe like Swiss cheese. The boy-beast is branded **[GOVERNMENT ISSUE]** and bound by a blood signature, four years of Frankenstein without any humanity immunization, a jail for Beelzebub and Gabriel. A man with collared silver stars and a megaphone mouth tells me to run, gun, and shout how much I hate (warriors don't cry, they tell me). Pain is weakness leaving the body: cold, blue and broken. A blond skin shell with black and white vision. The contractual meat grinder processing flesh into men, names into numbers. Oiled by taxes and boosted defense budgets it never stops stamping and welding robots. I march outside with pack and rifle to the western horizon where my enemies wait to dismember my parts and AI. I tread next to other fleshbots crushing hills, jungles, and the blue pacific to a desert city of ratholes . . . And so the marble playing boy dies to beget a granite gunfighter, a splinter scarecrow.

*Upon honorable discharge from the United States Marine Corps, Adam Brown earned a B.A. from Western Illinois University, where he studied English and Creative Writing. He plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and to continue writing poetry.*

## Putting Up Corn

| Catherine Pritchard Childress

In August, he places a bushel bag at my feet  
bursting with pride at the sweet corn he brings  
from the rusty bed of an old man's truck.

Three dollars a dozen will cost me  
eight hours. Shucking, silking, washing, cutting  
cooking what could be bought  
from the freezer section where I find  
green beans our mothers would plant  
pick, cook and can, planning  
for hard winter which might not come,  
hungry children who would.

I peel back rough, green husks to reveal  
so many teeth that need brushing, smiling  
knowing smiles because he has delivered  
my submission.

I strip silk with a small brush  
turning each ear over in my hand,  
rosary said to the blessed mother  
whose purity he thinks I lack.

*Our Father who art in Heaven, I didn't do the dishes today.  
Hail Mary, full of grace, I don't own an iron.  
Glory be to the Father, I speak my mind.  
Hail Holy Queen, I called for take out again.*

I cut each kernel lose with a sharp blade.  
Shave away what I believe in, what he would change,  
scrape the cob and my soul clean  
leaving nothing behind.

I place a dozen gallon bags at his feet  
bursting with my sweet-corn yield,  
in a kitchen where I don't belong, planning  
for hard winter which might not come,  
hungry children who will.  
Made as reparation for being  
the woman I am, placed in a freezer  
where each time a bag is removed  
he will be reminded that once, in August,  
I was the wife he wished for.

*Catherine Pritchard Childress lives in the mountains of East Tennessee, where she studies Literature and Creative Writing as a graduate student at East Tennessee State University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Connecticut Review, Cape Rock, Town Creek Poetry, and KAIMANA.*

## Small Lives

| Amanda Blythe

i.

You read books in the library. Limber volumes of poetry. You read about women. You read about their bodies, the deep strangling fleshy hollows and brightnesses of their sexual bodies. You wonder what it must be to be an adolescent boy, trip-wire hard at the slope of an instep or hair fallen out of a knot against the neck, slightly sweating. You steep in a confused image, wanting, in a small way, to be a boy. You want to scratch at your groin. You want libido. You want evidence of it, thick in your hand. You want to be awoken to activity at a moment's notice. You want to feel your body bristling with smooth planed muscle and heavy building bones. The first thing you learned about your cunt was how to stopper it with cotton, even as it churned away your mysterious insides.

Your own body is blurry, on the tip of your tongue but never articulate. Your body seems to have no defined ending, like you are an Impressionist painting. Fatty pockets, haphazard, the problem areas. You cannot say how big they actually are only that they feel immeasurable and weighty. You feel weighed down by your body. Watching boys, playing baseball, racing to the corner store, wrestling in the sandy-coloured grass, and you envy them their energy their frenzy their inability to sit still in class. You shrink away. Your body protrudes itself, ungainly, invulnerable, like a trash island in the Pacific. Weighing you down. You are a puddle on the ground. You feel your femininity as a piano falling from a building, inexorably hurtling and inevitable.

So you read books. You read books to find your body.

ii.

She wrote haikus. She was never once in her life precocious. She spent childhood coloring in the backgrounds of her manga, but she didn't speak until the age of three and couldn't read or write until much later.

When her baby brother died in his sleep, she spilled the ink all over her calligraphy desk, ruining the charms she had wrought painstakingly with trembling hands.

When she first read a haiku, she buried her nose deep in the musky pages early in the morning. When she emerged many hours later, the first winter's snow had begun to fall on the garden. Her first manuscript—homespun, the binding tenuous—was thrust into her father's hands like an apology. She kept her head down, avoiding his level gaze, but their fingertips touched under the shared weight of her poems in their matching hands.

When her father died in his sleep, a man on a bicycle knocked her into the mud on his way to work, and she had dark spots on her knees all through the funeral. When she stopped sleeping altogether at the age of twenty-five, she filled the thick inky nights with milk tea and white chocolate and the light touch of frost on the leaves and the trees and her notebook paper. She scratched with pens and fingers and lips at the page, not level syllables in careful haiku stacks but stretched languidly. Blind forward momentum. She died as she wrote, outside in the garden with frozen prose folded neatly in her lap. The housekeeper found her as the frost melted under wan winter sun, dampening the soil and seeping into thin cotton socks on her feet.

iii.

This is the moment when my life changes.

My boyfriend is still a rather large variable to me. We have only been dating for a week or two, and known each other only a little longer. I asked him, deep in damp of early October. Would he mind terribly if I were to admit to having a spectacular crush on him? As it turned out, he was, in fact, amenable. We held hands in public spaces. We are stretched out on my twin bed, face down and side by side, like chopsticks or pre-teens at a sleepover. I have constructed a microwave cake and he is working his way slowly through the caramel sauce. We trade bites on a single spoon. My roommate is

gone but her pink coverlet infuses the room with heady comfort. My hands are sticky and burnt-sugar smell spills between us.

Quiet conversation at a distance of inches, nose to nose.

This is not my first kiss, nor is it his. But we are both playing it close to the chest. He can't bring himself to cast the bait, to stare down cool indifference or feeble consent. Besides, he is a better judge of character than I will ever be and he knows that I will crumble first. Just as he will know three months later that I'm drawing away towards some brighter, warmer man-boy, even before I see it happening. Just as he will know how to tether me back to him, with the promise of debate, courting my refusal to be at fault. Just as he will know how to cradle my head in his large hands to make me feel pleasantly small.

I huff with impatience. We have been waltzing around each other's lips for hours. I can't stand pretence. We are cross-eyed from colluding conversation. And I stampede over romance and coy and suave. I can't help but bare my neck with honesty. And when he laughs at my brazen disregard for any kind of cool, happiness feels like coming home from the beach and being rocked by the waves in my dark bed. I press my cheek to my shoulder and feel the sun.

"We can make out if you want."

*Amanda Blythe is a senior at Ursinus College, where she is double majoring in Dance and English and minoring in Creative Writing. She is a contributor and editor for the Lantern, Ursinus College's creative writing magazine, and a choreographer for the student dance company. Upon graduating in 2012, she plans to pursue a professional career as a dancer.*



# Doing the Laundry

| Samantha Killmeyer

At this hour you are  
the only one alone.  
And your back forms an  
arching slope that slides  
down the bow of your backside  
to the concrete earth. Farther  
along these confrontations, moments  
so painful I will remember them  
forever wait, like pairs of socks  
within the basket.  
In the dim light dryer  
sheets flit and waft and never think  
once about who wears  
the clothes  
    they soften.

This  
is the world as I've always  
found it, late  
in dusky corners machines  
shine white in.  
And these  
senseless arguments run straight  
through the marrow of the marriage: some  
words, many snaking years  
later, the mouth will open  
out like the sky between  
clouds in a storm, and I won't,  
for a moment, know  
whether I am the small girl standing  
beside the overturned table, or the certain route  
the laundry always takes through the hands  
of my mother, her eyes still damp  
and large  
in this abundance of loss.

*Samantha Killmeyer is a senior English major with a Secondary Education minor at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. She is the features editor for the student-run newspaper, The Holcad, and a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority. She also plays varsity soccer and volunteers for her chapter of Habitat for Humanity. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English after graduation.*

# Black Milk

| Matt Baker

It is raining. Again  
it is raining and goats  
and ponies are being drenched  
in open fields.  
The ponies edge their mouths  
close to the grass and bite.  
Water splashes up their noses  
and mud. Their manes matted  
against prickly hair-skin.  
The ponies are too short, but these goats try  
huddling under the rounded,  
distended-looking bellies.  
Beards sopping and horns  
pressing against the soft flesh,  
the under-flesh.  
That is it, the hiding, seeking  
protection, shelter.  
The ponies swish their tails.  
The goats shake their watered faces.  
A red bird's call pierces the pouring  
and is carried away by the wind.

*Matt Baker is a recent graduate of Elon University with a B.A in English Literature and Creative Writing. When not agonizing over how to construct the perfect line of poetry, he sells books at a used bookstore. He wants an M.F.A. in Poetry, so he's going to get one. Eventually.*

# Muscadine

| Hanna Allen

Late summer vines  
 gnarl heavy  
     above my head;  
 my fingertips,  
     stained fuchsia, itch  
 for musky,  
     thick-skinned grapes.

I pop bronze-pelted  
     scuppernongs  
     between my teeth  
     as you slide  
 calloused hands  
 around my hips  
 and whisper  
 in a language  
     multiplicitous  
     as their names—

Black Beauty,  
 Vitis rotundifolia, Alachua  
 Sugargate, Muscadinia,  
 Triumph.

Below your botanist slang,  
     I know the muscadine—  
                     how tough ebony splits,  
  
 exposing silky underbelly.

Slick juicy pulp  
pirouettes translucent,  
  
wine-wild  
  
like your taste,  
  
deep as porphyry  
  
in my mouth.

## US-74 W

| Hanna Allen

Whirling dervish, I spiral  
across the Appalachians.

Car revs over mountain bulk.  
I negotiate the hulking shoulders

with a determined squeal, blasting  
shameless into the gulping night

while some dusk-driven Reverend  
screams from the dash, AM 720;

his voice stretches high, intoxicating  
as the bends I hug, ducking

slickly between lanes. Speedometer  
needle crawls past seventy—

jaw set, teeth clenched.  
The murky arrival of evening,

cold beckon of swollen hills,  
this inkwell of isolated road—

a damning myriad of prospects.  
Swerving toward the garbled

screech of the preacher: *Keep  
your hands on the wheel; for*

*God's sake, keep your eyes  
on the road.*

*Hanna Allen is a senior at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where she majors in English with a concentration in Professional Writing and minors in Art. After graduating in December 2011, she hopes to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and continue to develop her portfolio in ceramics and painting.*

# The Last Time I Went to Church

| Meg Lindsay

I saw a man cry—  
his face looked  
bloated like a surfaced body  
on crime TV.

I lit a candle and prayed  
to the God of car accidents.  
*Dear god of falling asleep,  
of broken tires and teenage  
ego,  
of thunderstorms,  
eighteen wheelers,  
brake pads.*

I wore a stiff skirt borrowed  
from my mom  
that made my legs itch,  
sang a song, and said  
*thanks be to God* when the preacher  
said *this is the word of the LORD*  
(of automobiles).

I listened to a girl  
tell a story about the time she  
and the boy whose name was printed  
in the church bulletin in my hand  
went fishing.

The last time I went fishing  
I caught a two pound rainbow trout  
and cried over his ruined mouth  
when I pulled him into the boat (or her).

I prayed as I itched my legs,  
*Dear god of fishing hooks.*

I watched the man cry,  
felt the preacher's comfort  
words scratch.

I looked away from  
the man's clenched face,  
and winced when the preacher  
said *rejoice*.

## If Penelope's Mother Had Been There

| Jennifer Weber

By night she would have done more than half  
the unweaving, and come morning found every  
shade of red Penelope needed, handed  
the threads to her between pieces of bread.

She would not have spoken the husband's name,  
would not have lied to Penelope regardless  
of her homecoming speeches, because she would not  
have been able to bear the unraveling of the hope  
Penelope always took to bed with her.

And when her daughter's fingers  
could not move for their trembling  
she would have rubbed her hands,  
maybe hummed a melody and brushed  
Penelope's hair until it shone again, promising every night  
there would still be threads to use in the morning.

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# Creative Non-Fiction

*Sweet Water*

*An Accent on Moving*

*The Isolated Islands*

*Montezuma's Revenge, Coca-Cola Salvation, and a Mexican Graveyard*

*Abandoned Horizon*

*Trigger Happy*

*Orange Geysers*

*This is the House the Munsters Built*

*Ashes and Ghosts*

## Sweet Water

| Margaret O'Brien

I drive my mother to the pharmacy on the fourth day after Helen Kueter Bonham has gone missing. Though the name is fake—my parents fear that using her true name may attract the attention of local Mafioso—the woman and her mystery are very real. On our way to the pharmacy, we pass along Lakeshore Drive, the grand divided median, the ribbon highway along the waterfront of Lake Saint Clair. When the Council of Three Fires first settled this lake, almost 500 years ago, they called it Oiatinonchikebo—Sweet Water. The word is Ojibwe, Potawatomi, or Ottawa. When I try to pronounce it on my smooth, WASP tongue, the word sounds fierce and perpetuating, as ancient as the mottled blue-brown sand beneath the waves.

We pass St. Paul's and its ugly, brown steeple seems to absorb the afternoon sun. Against the soft, half-melted snow, I can see where the yellow crime-scene tape is spread—both at St. Paul's and at the water's edge. As if improvising, the tape hangs from scraggly pine trees and speed limit signs. I take my eyes from the road for a moment, see the line of vehicles parked on the seawall. The black vans and police cruisers cannot obscure the scores of volunteers in orange dry suits. Out in the bay, they stand with arms outstretched, sweeping in great crescents. Farther out, where the water is deepest, port-colored Coast Guard boats oscillate and sway about anchored bows, while the movement of the divers in the water is haphazard, at the mercy of the current. Tenuously, they dip beneath the surface. After twenty minutes, their skin grows too cold and they climb out onto the boats where another team of divers await their turn. Three days now, they have searched, and still no body.

As I drive, I remember the story of my grandfather's lost wallet; during a summer regatta it slipped out of his pocket into the waves. A year later, he received a telephone call from a man on the shores of Lake Erie who had found his driver's license tucked among the trash on the beach. The water entering Lake Saint Clair from the

watershed in the northeast leaves south, through the Detroit River, after an average stay of seven days. This week, the wind has been gusty, strong, southeasterly; three days is all it would take to dump the water now. I shake my head as the search team vanishes around the curve of the road. My mother and I leave the lakeshore behind, as Helen must have done four days ago.

When we arrive at the pharmacy, my mother goes in to collect her medications and I wait in the car, the engine running. In the rearview mirror, I watch plumes of damp exhaust dissipate into the January afternoon. As my mother returns after a few minutes, I smile.

“You’ve got everything?” I ask her.

She waggles her head to and fro and smiles back. I look down at the bulging paper bags. We drive home, past the rescue teams and over potholes in the pavement, and the medicines jingle cheerily. My mother puts the bags inside her purse and the sounds become muffled. I pretend not to notice. As I hit my blinker, take the turn up the street to my house, I wonder if Helen takes medications like my mother—to keep the running voices and encroaching darkness of her bruised mind at bay. I wonder if the voices, finally too loud and too ruinous to ignore, drove Helen over the edge at last. Because the voices are everywhere, lately, and Helen is the word on everyone’s lips.

She is the word that I hear from the mouths of the choir members at the Protestant memorial church; their speculations are bitter, whispered notes, harmonized early morning echoes borne upon the coffee-laden breath of middle-aged Presbyterians. She is the word on the news stories on television, the anchormen and women sympathetic, unsmiling and startlingly sterile. On the radio I hear the interviews of shallow breasted family members and police officers with gruff voices and no explanations. I have even heard the priest at St. Paul’s speak about Helen, about his undying faith that she would not take her own life. They say he knows her well.

This year, for the first time in my memory, the lake has yet to

freeze all of the way. They say that the night Helen went missing—a cold Tuesday, mid-January—the thin layer of ice over the shallows had just begun to break up. The papers tell us that Helen drives a nice silver Lexus with a vanity plate and a smooth paint job. She is a mother, a devout Catholic, a successful businesswoman. Helen made brownies for bake sales and drove her daughters to tennis lessons. The papers do not tell us that even people like Helen need reassurance once in a while, and they do not tell us that her brother is in with the Detroit Partnership, the tri-family collaboration of metro Mafioso. Everyone in town—even Donna, the clerk at Ted’s corner store on Kercheval—keeps saying that it couldn’t be suicide, that if so, they would have found Helen by now. But I am not so sure.

I watch the news channel every day, hoping more information will come up, but the story hasn’t changed. On a Tuesday evening, just as the winter sun was setting behind the mansions of Lakeshore Drive, Helen told her daughter that she was going to church, “like she always does” the girl in the interview says. Her daughter, Maureen, is tall, black-haired and plump like her mother. The shaky camera job is rushed and on my big screen TV her face is distorted. Maureen’s eyes are watery and she looks like the kind of girl who would have worn makeup at another time. “She just said she’s going to church like she always does, saying a Rosary like she always does. This time, she just never came home.” Maureen turns away, wiping tears from her face. She wears a high school swim team sweatshirt and a friendship bracelet on her round wrist; I realize how young she is. I wonder how it feels to have a mother lost out there.

Now, when I talk about Helen, it gets harder to blink away the face of my own mother. I choose my words carefully, the weight of the reality, or unreality—nothing like this has happened in so long—too gravid. When I go to sleep at night, I watch my mother from the doorway, already snoring. I tell myself that I am not checking on her but something inside of me knows the truth. Secretly, in the dim nightlight of the kitchen, I count my mother’s pills, make sure that

they are all there. In the room across the hall I hear my father turn over, the gentle rustle of the winter comforter, and wonder what it feels like for them to dream alone after so many years. I wonder if Helen's husband feels her absence like a coldness in the bed. Or perhaps, like my parents, in their later years Helen and her husband slept apart already, so that night in its blackness is a comfort, a familiar routine. Waking, I reflect, must be more a nightmare for the husband, the reminders constant, perpetual, insistent.

For though Helen is missing, she is everywhere. When I drive to Ted's for groceries, to the gas stations, I cannot avoid the poorly photocopied flyers posted in the front windows. They're all the same: "MISSING WOMAN" in bold black letters across the top, and Helen's picture underneath, smudged. The picture is a close up of her face, printed in black and white so that you cannot see her eyes are really a deep, yellow-brown, or that in person, her skin is a healthy hue of tanned olive.

The police are the ones that suggested the flyers, though so far they have been but sad reminders. Even their report is shaky: on Tuesday, January 12th, Helen's car was found in the St. Paul's parking lot at 9:55 p.m. By then the suburbs would have been dark. No one would have been there to hear the soft split of the ice then gentle splash, to see her vanishing figure beyond the hazy blue glow of the streetlights. The last person to see Helen was a fellow churchgoer, around 7:05 p.m. inside of St. Paul's. A trail of footprints—now melted—was left behind in the snow. They led from the driver's side of Helen's Lexus, across the lawn of the church, the medians of Lakeshore, all of the way to the embankment. There, policemen found an impression, giving the appearance that someone had sat for a while at the water's edge.

The police do not speculate as to whether her legs would have grown cold, sitting there, or whether she could have slipped. They do not wonder of the many voices running through her head, the bite of Michigan winter on her nose or the gentle, almost innocent creaks of the ice flows grinding together. They do not say if the

trip over the edge would have been quick, intentional, impossible to miscalculate or if the ice may have held her up, if only for a moment. The report leaves such things to our imaginations, to the darkness of bedrooms in the moments before sleep, when the long day refuses to release and the privacy of our own minds become our worst enemies. What did she think when the waves first covered her? It is shallow there, just off the seawall. So shallow she could have stood, could have climbed if she wanted—and I have to roll over, a pillow on my head to mute the gentle gasping sounds of water-weighted lungs.

It has been a week and still, despite the flyers, divers, volunteers, there is no sign of Helen Kueter Bonham. My father says that the Detroit Partnership probably did her in as a warning to her family and my brother agrees, says it is too clean of a job to have been anyone but the Italians. I told them both that they watch too many movies. I think, though no one wants to say it, we all know what happened. To admit it would be too painful. To say the words out loud, to proclaim such a tragedy so close to home—but if I close my eyes I can see Helen's round face, her done-up hair badly mussed by the waves and tangled with trash and the reeds of some riverbank. In my mind, her blue lips are parted as though in surprise or revelation. On her neck, the tarnished chain and golden cross have worn a dark-brown ring into the flesh. Her little, four-foot frame is still in her church dress, the body badly bloated and just beginning to smell. Her stockings, barely intact, have been torn by drifting ice flows as though by a desperate lover's fingers, and her feet are bare. In a few months, someone might find one of her leather high heels stuck in the murky shallows of Zug Island and wonder how it came to be, but by then it won't matter.

It has been seven days and the body still has not been found. The police have called the search off. The family is now offering a reward for any information, and under everyone's breath blames are given to "underground crime." It seems as though everyone will go back to their lives. In another week, the posters in the storefronts will come

down, the reporters and papers will lose interest and, eventually, people will forget; yet I can't help but wonder if that stretch of shore is stained now.

...

Today, on a warm, February afternoon, I walk with my dogs along the water's edge. Though it is brilliantly sunny and it is nearly spring now, the ice flows from the lake have not yet melted; instead they are built up against the seawall in Antarctic mounds. The free water farther out past the bay glows a burnished, chilly blue, electrified, charged with the color of new life and a new season. As we near the spot of Helen's disappearance, the beveling rushes of passing cars and the wheeze of the onshore breeze in my aching ears seem to fall away. Out in the shipping channel, the freighters still have yet to return to their routes, just another sign that the cold has not yet let up for good. A line of mallards—like strings of augury beads—rip and coast, their wings whipping just above the placid surface. As I stand, looking out over the expanse of unforgiving water, I wonder what The Council of Three Fires would make of Helen. Amongst the chilly white peaks of broken ice flows, the yellow "DO NOT CROSS" tape of the crime scene has been gnashed and torn by the fury of winter. Sweet Water, they called it long ago.

The dogs sniff around in circles, tangling their leashes under frantic legs. In my stomach, I feel the harsh recoil of my senses and the vernal wind whispers monotone syllables and I am alone. I stick my hand into the ice-pile, pull out a fragment of crime scene tape. In my white and withered fingers the tape is tattered, impotent. In the face of nature we have failed. Modern forensics can solve fifty-year-old crimes, but the lake has swallowed any sign of Helen; against its ceaseless, un-capitulating force we have been beaten, and it would be hubris to see it any other way.

I shiver, the temporal insistence of the changing season and the shards of a lost life creeping up along my neck. I know in

my heart that this piece of lakefront has been changed for good, whether Helen meant to change it or not. As I stand under the caress of the early spring sun, I imagine that in the years to come, when people no longer remember who Helen Kueter Bonham was or even what she did, they will still shiver walking by this, her voiceless mausoleum. On their arms, they will feel the prickle of energy, smell the deep and unsettling redolence of wet hairspray and seaweed; for a moment in their hearts they will taste the anguish of a desperate, ruined woman, the startling horror of surprise at how cold a lake can truly be. This ghost—memory, specter, energy?—will vanish, almost as quickly as it appears, and the people will continue on, dragging their leashed dogs behind them, shuddering and inextricably afraid.

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## An Accent on Moving

| Wietske Maria Smeele

“It’s *the*, Mum. Not *de*. Say in right!” And she reads the sentence again, taking precious care to pronounce the “th” properly. She is reading the Laura Ingles Wilder books to me, all of them. But I don’t always like how Mum reads. I know I can read it better than her. I don’t have such a strong accent. Even if I don’t know all the words, at least I don’t pronounce the little ones wrong.

And then, a few years later, Mum tells me: “We are moving to de United States of America” and I can’t think of what to say. I don’t know what America is. I don’t know what it looks like or smells of. Do they speak English there?

We pick up our motor home, brand new and shining, from my parents’ friend. He also says “de motor home” and I think maybe all people in America and all people who move to America say “de” instead of “the.” Should I start to say “de”? We get on the road. In the motor home it’s just the family—all seven of us lined up in the inside and speeding down highways too big to be allowed. We make jokes about the huge American cars, the huge American birds, and the huge Americans. It’s safe in the motor home because Mum and Papa can say “de” without me noticing, and no one calls us “foreigners” in there.

In Tennessee we take a tour of Elvis’s home. The tour guide calls him the “King of Rock and Roll” and rolls his tongue up at the “r”s in such a funny way that I have to stifle my giggles. On the way back from Graceland, Papa puts on a new tape of Elvis’s greatest hits and we all belt out: “You can do anything, but lay off of my blue suede shoes.” And I wonder what suede is, and think it must have something to do with being American and rich, just like Elvis. And if it is an American thing I will never understand because I am not American.

Back at the campground, when the motor home is tucked tightly in her spot, Mum starts talking to some neighbors. She tells them about Graceland. Smiles cross the Americans’ faces at our accents.

The father has tattoos and the mother is big and wearing a towel-sized t-shirt. It's pink. I hate the color. The father and mother ask Mum where we are going next.

"We are going to Ar-Kansas" says Mum, and she looks excited about the next step of our pilgrimage. I see the big mother grow red. She makes Mum say "Ar-Kansas" five more times, all the while laughing hysterically. I want to run at her and punch her big pink belly. What's wrong with Ar-Kansas?

Finally she sputters through laughter: "Aw, but isn't that sweet," and my fury flares. No one, absolutely no one calls Mum sweet! "It's 'Arkan-saw' honey, not 'Ar-Kansas.'" And she says "Arkansas" a few more times, making the "Ar" sound whiny, in the same way that the tour guide at Graceland rolled his tongue into a ball. The fat mother even pops into another motor home and tells more Americans to come out and meet the "foreigners who say 'Ar-Kansas.'" We have to take a picture with both American families, "to remember 'Ar-Kansas,'" the fat one says. I don't smile.

We continue on the road for ten more weeks. Our tires touch the Pacific and even kiss into Canada. It is a wonderful trip. It is safe when it is just the family. And then it is time to start American school.

The first few weeks I keep my mouth shut. I don't want to say "Ar-Kansas" and have everyone laugh at me like the fat one did to Mum. But, after three weeks of silence I got up the courage to ask my neighbor:

"Can I borrow your rubber? I wrote my maths wrong." She doesn't understand. I say it again and can feel my cheeks flame fire. I know it is another "Ar-Kansas" moment and I want to rewind time and write the sums correctly so I don't need to embarrass myself. Finally, I just reach over and take the rubber from her pencil case.

"Oh!" she understands, "you want the eraser. What did you call it?" I mutter "rubber" again. In the break time she collects some of her friends and they all gather around where I sit alone at my desk.

"She called it 'roober,'" Eraser-girl says. The other girls laugh.

They ask me to say more, but I don't want to. I want to be back in England where everyone understands me. But I soon learn to say "eraser," "trash," "garbage," "trunk," and countless other words that sound foreign; it's not enough.

One break time, a few weeks after the start of school, ten or more classmates gather around, trying to make me talk.

"Say 'Fluffy-Marshmallows'" shouts a tiny blond girl, trying to put on an English accent.

"Say 'Pooh-Bear'" yells another, leaving the "r" off of "bear" to make it sound British. I shut my mouth and refuse to say anything. I even put some bread and cheese into it to keep any stray, pressured words from escaping. But it doesn't help. More and more suggestions for amusement at my expense are thrown about and I soon cave.

I wish I hadn't repeated their prompts. I wouldn't have Americanized so quickly if I'd have just kept my mouth shut. If I had stayed silent and hadn't listened to them my return to England the following Christmas wouldn't have been so embarrassing.

"Ugh! You sound so American!" Ann spits out in disgust a year later. "Say 'Hamburgers and Hotdogs' will ya." And I do. I think that, because Ann and the others are my friends, they won't laugh at my changing accent. But they do. I wanted my flame-red cheeks to combust. I don't want to live if talking is so embarrassing. Sounding American is the epitome of shame and I know it.

"It's not my fault. You can't stay English over there, especially when everyone sounds so whiny," I plead. But it doesn't help. Everyone I meet comments on my "American" accent. In my head I swear to myself that I will stay English.

When, after a few weeks, I return to America the "Fluffy-Marshmallow" and "Pooh-Bear" taunts that had died out a bit before I went to England return. But this time I don't mind. I have decided to be English and to talk English. O.K, I will say "eraser" instead of "rubber" and "Mac 'n' Cheese" instead of the more

proper “macaroni and cheese.” But I will not be embarrassed by my accent any more.

Today, when people ask me why, after ten years, I still have such an accent I say: “I guess I am just subconsciously stubborn. I can’t seem to lose it.” That’s a lie. I can lose it, I know I can. I got too close once and got scared. I made a conscious decision to keep my roots alive in my voice. I know it is good; people remember me for it. And if they don’t, they at least ask where I am from. I always have a story to introduce myself with.

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# The Isolated Islands

| Kaelin Holland

*“I have seen nothing so desolate” – J. M. Synge, The Aran Islands*

## The Island

The boat pulls up to the harbor, nudging a greeting to the ancient dock. Never have I seen so many grays in my entire life. We’re in the realm of the Aran Islands, a set of three small islands off the coast of Galway containing some of the last remnants of the traditional Irish way of life and remaining relatively untouched by modern society. Inis Meáin (pronounced “Inish Maan”) is the middle island and the least visited. Only three by five kilometers, the island is visible to the boating traveler as a slab of rock surrounded by an expanse of ocean. It has no town hall, no police station, no fire station, and no streetlights, just a cluster of small houses huddled together against the wind.

*“Wherever I turn there is the same grey obsession twining and wreathing itself among the narrow fields, and the same wail from the wind that shrieks, and whistles in the loose rubble of the walls”*  
– Synge, *The Aran Islands*

The gray extends as far as your eyes take you until it dives and merges with the silvery ocean. Thick, flat stones are piled on top of each other to make walls; they fit together, compressed and sunk with the weight of time. The majority of the island is laid out in messy units of grazing areas, separated by these simple walls. Near the middle of the island is a Dun, a pagan fort with remains of circular stone walls and steps. They stand battered by the constant wind. The only marker of the Dun is a small, whitewashed sign; there are no brightly colored, detailed tour guide signs or “KEEP OFF” warnings that normally characterize these types of remains. We climb up the steps and walk around the top walls of the stones,

amazed at the vista of ocean and sky that encircles our bodies.

One loses one's sense of visual perspective here. At one of the high points on the island, the sea is in view from 360 degrees. Deciding to circumnavigate the island (a supposedly easy feat due to its size, we are told), we become lost in a labyrinthine maze of stone enclosures. Grass, moss, and mud cling to our feet in silent mockery while we march through. As we move closer to the windmill on the opposite side of the island, it looks farther and farther away until we experience defeat by this surreal nature of the island. Tired of climbing walls and scraping legs against the inhospitable thorns and branches, we surrender and scramble back to the lonely house.

## The Sea

*"They're all gone now . . . there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with two noises, and they hitting one on the other."*  
 – Synge, *Riders to the Sea*

The sea surrounds, envelops, and washes you in waves of simultaneous beauty and despondency. It provides the food and commerce for the island people as well as mercilessly takes the island's fishermen in its storms. The color of the water is an ever-changing kaleidoscope of blue, gray, green, and black, and it continually batters the island in waves to let you know it has remained, and will remain, for eternity.

"Be careful," my professor says, "the cliffs here are very seductive." As we set out to visit these cliffs, I feel a magnetic pull towards their edge. Hearing the howls and roars of the waves, I keep walking towards the steep gray edges. I sit down on the cold stone, letting my feet dangle over the precipice, still wanting to inch closer and closer to meet the inevitable fall towards the churning white waves massaging the stone beach below. I'm feeling vertigo, as

Milan Kundera defines it, which is “something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.”

## **The Sky**

At night, we walk from the house we’re visiting and venture towards the pub in the center of the island. We experience a darkness that our eyes can’t adjust to; it pervades our eyes and ears and nostrils and settles into our pores. The only light we have is from the stars, which are clearer and closer than any of us have ever seen. I’m reminded of a time when my cousin and I poked holes into a large cardboard box and laid underneath in the darkness, staring at the light peeking through the holes; we made our own planetarium. Now, tonight, this beautiful sky was pressing down on us, pushing our heads back so the only thing we could do was stare upwards.

During the day, I walk alone towards the other end of the island. The sun is merciful today and the glittering blue of the ocean and the sky now offsets the slate stones. After finding a smooth, solitary rock wall next to the thin road, I lay down and stare up at the sky. The constant breezes from the ocean lift and caress my clothes before dancing onwards. I see all the edges of the bright blue dome, feeling so small and isolated on this tiny island against this great eternal expanse of atmosphere. My feelings of awe and desolation crash together in my mind as effortlessly as the sea meets the land.

## **The People**

Less than two hundred souls inhabit this island. While the Irish language was squeezed out of Ireland during the country’s forced conversion to English language and customs, the people still speak Irish as their first language (they prefer to say “Irish” rather than

“Gaelic”). When the writer J. M. Synge (1871-1909) stayed here to draw inspiration from the elemental power and beauty of the island, he admired the community’s innocence from the corrupting nature of civilization. Their life, as he saw it, retained something wild and pure that we as a species have lost along the way of human progress.

*“The continual passing in this island between the misery of last night and the splendour of to-day seems to create an affinity between the moods of these people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists, and in certain forms of alienation.”* – Synge, *The Aran Islands*

We stay with a couple named Sean and Maura, who live in a small home on one of the highest points of the island and close to where a large rock, “Synge’s Chair,” remains. The house is decorated with knitted blankets, needlepoints, and faded Catholic artwork. The Virgin Mary’s tired eyes and outstretched hands welcome me in the hallway. We only see Maura at mealtime, when she generously serves us round after round of tea and home-cooked meals including vegetables from the back garden. She mentions working tomorrow at the knitting factory, saying that she can serve us breakfast anytime as she has “flexi-hours,” a phrase she delivers with a kind weariness.

The factory is where most of the women work on the island; the people of the Aran Islands are known for the quality of their traditional hand-knit sweaters. The women of Synge’s play, *Riders to the Sea*, knew when they had lost their fishermen to the sea by recognizing the individual knit pattern of the clothes that washed up on shore. The factory now sells these hand-knit items to the most upscale retailers in Europe and the U.S. I think of the woman who picks up one of these sweaters in Nordstrom’s, admiring the soft wool and detail of the pattern, so different from the mother that retrieves the worn sweater from the beach soaked with saltwater and covered in seaweed, realizing that she has lost the last of her sons to the sea.

Most of the men either fish or tend to the cows, sheep, and horses that graze throughout the island. Sean, our tall and stooping host whose face is creased by continuous exposure to the elements, is more talkative than Maura. Leaning in the doorway in a threadbare sweater, petting his ancient dog, and staring out at the expanse of silver surrounding us, he tells us about his morning feeding the baby goats and explains the grazing system of the island. He surprises us with the amount of traveling he's done throughout his life and the different places that he's lived in, but he returned here to stay. It's his home after all, he says.

As the ferry rocks back towards Galway, I see a lone sailboat in the distance silhouetted by the light illuminating the sea and the sky. The gray colors of both are so similar that there is, visually, no distinction between the two. Soft rays of light follow the waves that guide the sailboat along its path. The sailboat, the island, and the cardboard planetarium all now exist in the crevices of the gray matter in my head, continuing in solitude until something so powerful pushes my head back again to the great and beautiful expanse of atmosphere surrounding the isolated islands of our selves.

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## Montezuma's Revenge, Coca-Cola Salvation, and a Mexican Graveyard

| David Guyott

Did you know they bury them in a little box and leave them to rot?

Well, that's inaccurate. They don't bury them, *per se*; the graves are left open. And to say "box" doesn't do justice to whoever jammed some into urns and vases and bowls. But leaving them—yes, that's good. Corpses as whole as the day they died, though maybe a little moldier and slightly rearranged to account for space. There's a head looking out from atop its nest of skin and bones, as natural as if this were a magic show. The body, lively and unbroken, simply hides underneath a tablecloth.

"This one was my buddy," Miguel says, peeking into the tomb and asking "¿Cómo estás, amigo?"

Welcome to the cemetery of Pomuch: Christianity, meet Maya. Religious syncretism—this explains the crosses and why the colorful Mexican tombs are not-so-traditionally set up as columns and rows of little stone-framed windows, almost like a morgue. Only difference is, there's no sliding drawer to hide the body from view—just sunken eyes exposed to wind, rain, and blazing Mexican heat. But hell, the only syncretism I'm thinking about is the parasites synchronizing their grubby little claws with my large intestine. Sure, go ahead and criticize the metaphor. They probably don't *really* have claws, but when you're in a strange Mexican graveyard and you feel like your bowels are about to explode (or maybe implode—would that make a singularity?), you find yourself in want of a nice distraction. Such as, for example, picturing the thing from *Alien* bursting forth from your gaping stomach cavity wearing a stereotypical sombrero and shaking some maracas.

The only thing really there, though, is the chill of this Coke bottle that I'm pressing into my gut like the last chance of salvation in the entire god-forsaken world. It's a little, wavy core of peace

within the living hell of this hundred-something degree Mexican furnace. Miguel, our tour guide, is leading us through the narrow paths of this labyrinth of leering heads (or skulls, depending on your personal preference and how much skin they've got left), but everyone else is, like me, fighting their own battles. Most of them are either put off and fighting vomit or staring with morbid fascination, except, of course, for our professor on this study abroad excursion, Dr. Griffin. He's just excited to be here—you have to get the town council's permission, after all (and I'm sure that's in high demand).

Yet all I can think about is whether or not they're going to stuff me into one of those awful boxes when I keel over and do a faceplant right on top of one of the in-ground graves we're supposed to avoid stepping on. Because, in all honesty, death would be a good thing right now—and what better place to die in than a cemetery, right? Come on, we all know Miguel's buddy was trying to say something with that look: "Just do it, man!" That's the great thing about body language; this guy probably never even spoke English, but we just bonded anyway.

Only, I can't just die—see, I'm thinking about what all these ridiculous people would do if I did. Would they be properly mournful? If you were on a trip and someone just up and died, would that ruin your whole trip? Or would you forget all about it the next day when you're trying to climb that Mayan pyramid without falling off? Tip—karma is a bitch, you might want to watch your step there. But what I'd really like is a huge uproar, a great outcry of the tragedy, the *inhumanity*, something that would inspire poets for generations to come. Something that would make it straight to the front page of the newspapers. Look, I'm not asking for much here—I'd even take something in *The Onion* making fun of the fact that I died in a graveyard. Maybe one of those little plaques Millsaps puts up to remember students who died before graduating . . . oh, and a memorial scholarship? No, that's probably over the top. Just a plaque will do, thanks.

“So after about twenty years and the bodies have mostly decayed, they remove them from the tombs and bury them in the ground over here,” Miguel says.

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## Abandoned Horizon

| Kelly Cernetich

The Shangri-La always appeared as a court-shaped graveyard of gravel and mud surrounded by a thicket of forest. An abandoned and mysterious place, the neighborhood children were always attracted to it, whether because of the rickety vacant house that stood at the far north end, or the murky brown pools that developed over summer from periodic light rains.

It was a depressing place to be sure, and a far cry from Hilton's mystical Tibetan utopia. There were countless broken bottles strewn about in the mess; these green and brown mosaics had been crunched into the gravel by the repeated landings of skateboarders, who routinely built jumps and ramps across a thick slab of concrete whose origin was unknown to me as an adolescent. I was more worried when my brother wanted to venture inside the almost comically staggered, rotting brown wood abandoned house.

Filled with mouse carcasses and shedded snakeskins, a broken toilet seat lid and a large oak desk—which was missing the two legs cattycorner to each other so it tipped precariously to the side, ready to roll over the minute I got too close—any creak or shudder within the deserted former home caused me to startle. The place made hairs you didn't even know existed stand at attention and prickle your skin.

I found out in junior high that the place I called Shangri-La was not named for the *Lost Horizon* paradise, but had in fact been the location of an old bar-slash-restaurant that formerly stood on that old concrete-slab-turned-makeshift-skate-park. Once a teacher told me she even went there for dinner before her high school prom, although she made me promise I would never tell anyone, lest she feel old. Apparently the Shangri-La Lodge was at one time owned by a local mobster, operating his illegal gambling ring as caporegime to Pittsburgh's LaRocca crime family. Never have I heard it questioned how the place burnt down in the 1960s. Or maybe 1970s. The history was never made clear to me.

Walking past the restaurant's remains and the haunting abode just beyond it, the court veers left to a patch of open field with waist-high grass that tickles your nose with pollen and makes your legs itch in jean shorts. Once or twice I came across what I thought to be frog or toad bones, not that I could tell the difference, but I would not dare reach down to touch it. There was a faint, lingering feeling of foreboding about the Shangri-La. No quiet, peaceful afternoons were spent lost with one's thoughts or hopes. It was just something to do, wandering around the circle in hopes of discovering some historical relic, a strange flower or weed.

Twice in my junior year of high school, my neighbor and best friend directed her then-boyfriend to go parking at the Shangri-La. On occasion, there was a large big rig's front end parked there, on account of a young neighborhood boy's dad being a trucker for a living. On those nights, it was relatively safe to go parking there, as police cars rarely wanted to go through the hassle of patrolling the place when they couldn't back their cruiser out of the space. The annoyance of a three-point-turn had kept them from busting her before, but two nights in a row Mari had been mistaken that "maybe they won't come here tonight" and "since they were here last night, they wouldn't come back again."

I will never forget the pink tinge to her face as she told the back-to-back humiliation over a double mocha, no whip at the Richland Starbucks the next day. A balmy Sunday afternoon, a town rarity, brought everyone out of their houses, and we were surrounded on all sides by high school kids chatting with friends or playing with rhinestoned cell phones, or veteran coffee drinkers who sprawled the Tribune-Democrat across their tiny round tables, thankfully (or hopefully) not absorbing a word that was said between us. I guessed it had been one of the happier incidents that took place there.

Rounding the circular lot once more brought me to a place where I could just see in the distance the entrance to the Shangri-La. But at the path before me stood deep craters in the earth, cut from

the gravel and bearing the thick, muddy ponds. Every time I pass by this spot as a teenager, I cannot help but recall my sixth grade year. It was the *one* year my brother and I wore the same shoe size, and in the event that I didn't have my sneakers available to me, I would reach into the hallway closet and swipe his beloved neon orange Converse low-tops. A prized possession, he had only let me wear them once—when I wore orange to school for a retro-themed Spirit Day in anticipation of Homecoming.

After a friend from up the road had canceled plans to hang out at her place, I decided that the next best use of my time would be to put my bicycle to good use. Being that my road takes a steep dip to the right after the Shangri-La entrance, I turned into the lot once I reached it in the hopes of riding a few laps before my mom got home. I stopped at the cement slab, pondered running one of the jumps but thinking better of it, I rode on. I pulled out the kickstand with my right foot at the old house, wandering around the outside lazily without bothering to go inside. I whisked through the tall grass, praying that I did not hear a squishing ribbity sound. And I made it to the final muddy pits.

At the beginning of summer the ponds are not so deep, sending only a tiny splash of green-brown water spinning from the spokes of one's bicycle with a rhythmic *whish, whish*. But towards the end of summer, when the weather takes a bad turn and the winds and rains pick up, signifying the gloom of impending winter, the ponds thicken and fill to the brim, sinking pebbles with a heavy *pumb, pumb, pumb* as they are cradled to the bottom. Whether empowered by the relatively uneventful rounding of the Shangri-La lot or the feel of devilish rebellion of *yes, I will make it through this puddle, dammit*, I set my foot on the pedal and rushed forward.

The first puddle was a small dip, and the mud made a glooping, oozing noise as I pushed through it, but the second puddle was larger than I had anticipated. My tires got caught halfway in and my bike began to tilt. Without hesitating, I put my foot out to catch my fall, as my right foot sunk ankle-deep into the muck. In

hindsight, had I leaned to the left I may have caught the edge of the embankment and spared my brother's poor shoes, which—even after two consecutive washings, heavy on the stain remover—never glowed the same bright orange that they once did. If he had a memory for such events, subconsciously I still might not have been forgiven for my thievery and betrayal.

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It has been years since I ventured to the Shangri-La, and in that time the place has become a graveyard in more than one way. During my freshman year of college, the father of one of my high school classmates pulled into the lot one day, far back so no one would hear him, and muffled the sound of his suicide.

No one knows how people found out about it even before school was over; everyone suspected that Josh's mom had found a suicide note and called the police. Driving past the scene on my way home, there stood the big rig, parked in the middle of the road. There were police car lights, an ambulance, and the school nurse's lone unmarked vehicle as she stood, driver's side door swung open, clumsily digging through her supplies, trying to find something so she could help. I imagined what would happen to the children who might go there unaccompanied the next week to play and wander as I did, to stumble upon a piece of brain matter that the workers might have missed in the cleanup. I wonder if they might think, as I did, that the squishy discolored thing in their hands was frog skin, or toad skin, as they too might not be able to tell the difference.

It was obvious upon examining the body at the viewing that the funeral director had done the best he could; however, Josh's father's face looked rubbery and fake. It was layered with clown makeup thick as cake batter, and his cheeks were painted a dull ruddy shade; his lips were the color of salmon. His hollowed-out eyelids, possibly stuffed with cotton balls to make them look real, made it appear as if he were still alive, just sleeping.

I wasn't mad at him for being so selfish, ruining a spot of mystery from my childhood and turning it into a gruesome crime scene, with

numbers to mark evidence and experts in their CSI-esque outfits picking through the debris and broken bottles to find the bullet or casing. I just felt lost—for poor Josh, who had just been awarded a scholarship and was coming home that weekend to tell his dad that their loans wouldn't have to be quite so big next year.

I felt lost for my classmates, who remembered Josh's father as the CamTran driver who could recognize us by our cars and honk as we walked from the parking lot to Bi-Lo, crossing in front of his bus to a warm wave and a smile. I even felt lost for Josh's father, who was gone and could no longer feel lost himself, but who must have been driven to such a point of madness and despair—over money, over his home life, over his job—that he could not take it another day.

And in his madness, I was sure that a sense of loss must have led him to seek out such a place to end his life: a place of emptiness and questions without answers; a place that shelters the bodies of mice and frogs; a place that even hunters never park and venture through to move themselves deep into the woods, choosing instead to park a quarter-mile farther away from the place to use as their vantage point.

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I don't know if I'll ever go back there again. I think I have grown tired of the empty and hollowed places that need a voice to fill them and a story to make them matter. I think the history of the Shangri-La is so hard to uncover because it is a place about which no one wants to write. It is a parking lot; it is a skate park; it is an abandoned house standing on unstable ground. It is at once a desert in the forest, and a graveyard in a courtyard.

And it is a silence in the middle of a neighborhood filled with life and families, pierced at least once by a fire, once by a gunshot, and silent thereafter.

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# Trigger Happy

| Jacqueline Sheppard

*“Use your best eye,” he said.*

*That’s my right, I think. Okay, stay calm, stay focused. Oh no. It’s blurring. The target is blurring. I can’t see the X. I can’t see!*

“Practical purposes, Jackie,” Ariana reminded me as I filled out my waiver for the shooting range at Shooting Sports, an off-the-road indoor gun shop and range.

“In case of zombie invasion,” I said, trying to focus on reading each rule the waiver specified to no avail.

“No, be realistic. Self-defense. If someone pulls a gun on you, what do you do?”

“Run and hope they can’t aim.”

“No, you pull out your gun and have a better aim than your opponent.”

“That might work if you’re far away. If someone puts a gun to my temple, though, I don’t think it’ll matter whether or not I have a pistol in my back pocket. I’ll be dead before I can get the gun.”

*Let’s try my left eye. All right, it’s clearer. Line up the tip with the X. Keep your hands steady. Don’t cross your thumbs. Steady. Steady.*

Ariana, James, Daphne, and I all signed waivers together. The three of them were adamant that I should learn how to shoot. They had all gone to this exact range a month ago. James, being the most experienced in firearms, told me that I would be especially amusing to watch at the range. There must be something hilarious about a small, neurotic girl wielding a gun.

On the car ride to the range, he attempted to explain to me how a gun works. Unfortunately, I didn’t hear much outside of “load the magazine” and “don’t pull the trigger until you’re ready to shoot.”

“You’ll be shooting with a .22 caliber,” James said while he was filling out his waiver. “It’s not much of a gun at all.”

“Yeah,” Daphne added. “It’ll be like a video game, Jackie. You’ve done first-person shooters with no problems.”

At that point, a small old woman with wiry blonde hair and a cheery disposition and her son, a tall man with gelled black hair and tattoos, came to fill out their waivers. The woman tapped James on the shoulder with her index finger.

“Excuse me, young man,” she said. “Did I hear you say that a .22 couldn’t kill? Because this is my baby.”

For some reason, I thought she was going to point to her son. Instead she produced a polished wooden box about the size of a necklace case. “It can fire six times in a row,” she said, opening the box to reveal a silver handgun, no bigger than her fist. “If that doesn’t kill a grown man, I don’t know what will.”

My friends then cooed over the tiny gun as though they were cooing over, well, a baby.

“I filled out my form-thing, everyone!” I said. “What do I do next?”

“Next” involved getting the gun, ammo, and targets and suiting up. Ariana and I rented a Ruger, purchased fifty bullets (allowing her three rounds of ten and me two), and each picked our own target. Out of the nine targets available, four had pictures of people. I chose the beginner’s target—which looked like a dartboard. Again, I tried to think from Ariana’s point of view. If I had to protect myself from a person far away, I’d learn how to shoot. The person must be far away for her scenario to work.

Before entering the shooting range, I put on my protective glasses and bright blue silencer earmuffs. If I was going to shoot a gun, I thought, I might as well do it looking like a humanoid beetle.

As my friends and I walked in, I tried to remain as calm as possible. No panicking from Jacqueline. Nope. That was not my style. If James, Daphne, and Ariana could be chill about this, then so could I.

BANG.

“You all right, Jackie?” Daphne asked. “You just jumped *ten feet* in the air.”

“I’m fine,” I muttered. I did not jump after hearing one measly gunshot. Even if I did, I certainly didn’t jump ten feet. The shot was . . . sudden. That’s all. Gunshots are loud. I hugged the earmuffs closer over my ears.

The shooting range was a lot smaller than I imagined. Since it was all indoors, there were only ten shooting booths. In each booth, there was a cord line, so patrons could clip their targets and wheel it out into the range.

“You want to start?” Ariana asked.

“Oh no. I am a gracious beginner. By all means, you should go first,” I answered. I am so polite.

I waited until Ariana was finished with her ten shots. While I stood in the back, I inured myself to the sudden gunshots. If I was going to use a firearm, the least I could do was not be scared of its sounds.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG-BANG-BANG.

At the very, very least I wouldn’t be scared. I would just have to get used to a massive headache.

“You excited, Jackie?” Daphne asked, shouting so that I could hear over the gunshots and earmuffs.

“Yeah, I guess.” I replied.

“What?”

“I said, ‘yeah, I guess.’”

“Oh. It’s fun. You’ll like it. It’s like having power in your hands.”

*Don’t shoot the clip. You’ll have to pay for that. If your hand jerks again, that’ll be an extra five dollars. Whatever you do, don’t panic.*

My turn. I wheeled out my target into the range. I noticed that to my left, the old lady was pounding bullets away at a human-shaped target. Wow.

I poured ten bullets out of the container. Before I loaded each

bullet into the magazine, I carefully inspected each one. All had golden shafts with rose-tinted heads. They were almost like small penises. That must be why so many people assert their masculinity with firearms. With a gun, they have ten penises to penetrate their victims.

The Ruger was loaded and ready to fire. It was surprisingly heavy. Movies must have tricked me for years. Movie characters can carry guns with ease and shoot with one steady hand. In real life, I needed both hands on the gun. That way, my left could stop my right from recoiling when I pulled the trigger. I took a deep breath and aimed towards the target. My goal was that small X, smack in the center. I needed to trust the gun, follow the gun, love the gun.

Since I needed to have a brief relationship with that gun, I gave it a name. “Sigmund” was fitting. Much better than Ruger. Okay. I am in love with a gun named Sigmund. This gun will let me hit that X.

I tried my hardest to recall some of the rules James told me earlier. What was it? “Use your best eye”? . . .

I’m right-handed. That would make it my right, wouldn’t it?

With a blast of gunpowder and a hot bullet shell, the bullet rocketed out of the muzzle. My hand jerked back. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe.

“Great job, Jackie! It was a little too far up and to the left, but not bad!” I heard Ariana cheer—or, more accurately, scream at the top of her lungs, since I could hear her through the earmuffs.

My hands started to shake. If I was going to finish this round, I had to be strong. After all, my friends loved this sport so much. Maybe a few more shots would teach me the joy that they had?

Ready. Set. Aim. Fire. Again, too far to the left. Again, I wasn’t enjoying myself. Fine. Third time’s the charm, right?

Blast of gunpowder. Hot bullet shell. Hot bullet shell on my arm. I put the gun downrange and flailed. Not my brightest idea, but I wanted something other than a hot bullet shell resting on my arm.

“Jackie, are you okay?” Ariana called from the back.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, adding a wave in case she couldn’t hear me.

“You shot your target down.”

“Of course I did.”

“No, I mean you shot your target *down*.”

I turned back towards the range. My paper target was now on the floor. I had shot the clip that held the target.

With no pride left, I walked towards the front desk. For the first time, it’s free, but if I shot the clip a second time, I would pay five dollars for the new clip and target. Still seven more bullets. Seven more times to mess up. Not a good sign.

I wheeled out my new target. Now my anxiety had escalated another notch. It’s bad enough when I feel like I shouldn’t be controlling a highly dangerous firearm without any sort of training, but to know that I’ll be charged for my potential failures adds more panic to the situation.

*You are in control, Jacqueline. No one can stop you. If you can do this, you can save yourself.*

Three shots. One too high, one too low, and one too far left again. My eyesight started to blur. I could hardly see the numbers on the target, let alone the X. How can I shoot when I can’t see?

*Don’t get burned. If worse comes to worst, you’ll only have a slight scar. What’s a slight scar from the burn of a bullet shell?*

My headache throbbed even more. All the gunshots ringing out at odd intervals were taking a toll on my concentration. Two shots. Another bullet shell landed on my arm. Sigmund and I were in a terribly unhealthy relationship.

*Stay calm. When everything around is mad, Jacqueline, you must stay calm at all times.*

One shot. I stopped looking where I hit the target. So long as it wasn't the clip I didn't care. I just wanted to finish this round. If I could finish this round, I'd leave the rest of the ammo to Ariana so she could shoot as many rounds as she wanted. After this last shot, I was going back to the lobby to wait for my three friends to finish pumping their targets through with phallic symbols.

*There is only one person you can fear with a gun in your hand. And that person . . .*

“. . . is myself,” I whispered as I pulled the trigger for my last shot.

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## Orange Geyser

| Maria E. Taylor

I took my seat in the middle of the classroom, three rows back to get a good view of the pull-down screen, and divided my attention between the old-fashioned French café in the film clip and the pastiche of French foods arrayed across my desk: *pain au chocolat*, baguette, creamy French butter, three different cheeses—each with its own sharp, unnerving smell—and a drink called Orangina in a round bottle nubbily-textured like an orange peel. “Pulpy, juicy, zesty sparkling citrus beverage with natural pulp: 12% juice, 2% pulp,” the deep blue label read. “Shake well before opening.”

On the screen, an old woman was sitting at a table by herself. “*Garçon!*” she called to the waiter. The class exploded with laughter. Only naïve American tourists and elderly French snobs call waiters *garçon* because it essentially means, “Get over here, boy!” I devoured the sticky chocolate bun and gingerly tasted the cheese. I had chosen the kind that Madame, my French professor, had said most Americans like, and she had laughed, her thick red hair brushing the shoulders of her stylish dress. I’m not very brave when it comes to cheese.

I swirled the orange drink on my desk, running my thumbnail over the bumps and watching the layer of pulp on the bottom rustle up and down. Even in the darkened room, the glass bottle was flashy with its blue label across the sunny liquid, but I was not fond of pulpy orange juice. I had only taken it because I was afraid I would be thirsty after the *pain au chocolat*. I finished the baguette as the persnickety old woman called for a different knife. Then I picked up the Orangina. I tipped it sideways and liquid splashed into the neck with the *plunk* of a heavy rock thrown into a stream. “Shake well,” the label advised, and since I dreaded meeting a mouthful of pulp at the bottom, I gave the bottle a few hard shakes before unscrewing the orange-adorned cap.

With a hiss like an escaping genie, white foam surged up and crowded out from under the barely-lifted cap. A stifled shriek flew

up with the old woman's cries of "Garçon!" as Orangina fizzed over my hand and onto my desk, soaking the paper towel plates that had once held the bread and cheese, foaming down onto the floor as I instinctively held the little gusher to my right to avoid spoiling my jeans.

I jerked out of astonishment and clamped the lid back on. Madame appeared, her turquoise heeled sandals clumping quietly across the blue carpet to my rescue. She didn't say anything, just gave me some paper towels and returned to the front of the room. I set the bottle down in a pool on my desk, then clumsily mopped up the sticky liquid as best I could. I shot my eyes around the room. Everyone was still watching the elderly Frenchwoman complaining about her lobster, not staring at me. I was in my own safe little world, floating in darkness that smelled faintly of fruit. I cautiously licked my fingers and the tangy, tingly taste of Orangina tickled my tongue. And the bottle was already half-empty.

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# This is the House the Munsters Built

| Jacqueline Fetzer

I am Eddie Munster. My family has a house in the suburbs and works normal jobs and goes to college like the rest of the American middle class. But even total strangers can tell that there is something *off* about us. They see through the white-picket façade, and we let them. Because my family would honestly prefer to scare off the neighbors anyway. The whole Fetzer clan brings a new definition to the word ridiculous: a houseful of hermits, a commune of crazies. We live in the same reality as our neighbors, but we're a different species altogether. Most people live in the extremes: they grew up with the Brady Bunch or they eventually escaped from Mommy Dearest. But my family isn't even in the same magnetic field as the polar good and bad. Instead, the Fetzers fluctuate between flamboyant and cynical, benevolent churchgoers and bat-slaying maniacs. We may have our moments of community involvement or brief associations with popular culture. But there is no way that anyone could mistake us for normal.

My training as a social recluse began when I was eleven and my parents introduced me to the "family business." My mom sat my seven-year-old brother Doug and me down and gifted us each with an IBM ThinkPad. The laptops themselves were thick hunks of black plastic that had already outlived their glory days as my parents' work computers, slower than a Southern accent. But they were computers nonetheless, and my parents were determined that we substitute the internet for reality at an early age. "Alright, don't drop these, cause then I'd have to steal another one from work. Jackie, you have a choice: C++ or Visual Basic. Doug, no choice for you, dude. Touch typing." I was slowly and ineffably drawn into the cyber world, away from my classmates—who I already knew were silly creatures—and into the realm of the techie. Most parents try to limit their children's internet time. My parents encouraged it: when I was the first person in my high school with a Myspace page, I was showered with praise. My already-present reclusive tendencies

flourished, and I gladly adopted my parent's technological hermitage as my own. We quickly became the family that brings more laptops on vacation than actual human beings.

I soon accepted my destiny, disengaged from the social norm and joined the cult of recreational people-hating. My tenth-grade English teacher assigned a "Family Narrative" project, in which we were to relate the origins of our families, Indigenous Creation-Myth style. Most of the room had predictable, Bible-Belt-approved narratives.

"My parents met on a mission trip."

"My parents were college sweethearts!"

"My parents met in the Peace Corps and donated their wedding presents to starving orphans in China."

"My parents met in a bar. My mom dumped mustard in my dad's lap, got pregnant with me and they slapped together a shotgun wedding during their lunch break from their computer programming jobs. They had a kegger as their formal reception and lived in my grandfather's basement until I was born!"

Dead. Silence. My poor teacher hadn't factored *that* Creation Myth into her lesson plan. The story made the rounds of our church within the week, and the Fetzer family became the most scandalous thing to hit Stanley, North Carolina since Beatlemania. Instead of demonstrating a proper level of shame and regret, my parents were pleased with my family narrative. "Now they won't give you a hard time when you come back from college a flaming liberal, Jack-a-lope. They'll just blame it all on our deviancy!" My father is an impeccable logician.

But the pinnacle of my family's reclusiveness came when I was fifteen and my parents built themselves a log cabin out of stuff they bought on eBay. I think they finally got fed up with living in the suburbs, bored of their Levittown-style tract house, and sick of people in general. Our sprawling subdivision on the outskirts of Charlotte was a nod to Brady Bunch creepiness, what with its pastoral duck pond, close-cropped crabgrass and suspiciously high birth rate. Judging by the overwhelming number of seven-foot

“It’s a BOY!” stork cutouts on our street alone, you would think that we were living on some secret government fertility commune. So somewhere between the tricycles in the street and the three lemonade stands on the block and the baby that kept defecating in the swimming pool, my parents took a long look at their two mostly-grown kids, dug in their collective heels and decided that they were done with the whole “neighborhood” thing. The Fetzer family was moving to Hickville.

To achieve maximum recluse-factor, we bought an acre and a half of land up in Ferguson, North Carolina. To get from Civilization to Ferguson, drive an hour and a half on the interstate, get off at any prime-number exit, stop at the second gas station, transfer all personal effects into the time machine in the women’s bathroom and blast off to 1883. Don’t worry if the time machine lands a few years short of the mark: nothing has really changed in the last hundred-or-so years. You’ll know you’re getting close when you pass through North Wilkesboro, the town with two houses, half a mobile home and a goat tethered to a Cheerwine billboard. It is far enough from organized society that no one would notice if you blew up the deep-fryer or erected a shed for your sauna or drank juice boxes filled with wine in the hot tub. Which was perfect, because my family would eventually attempt all of these actions that “decent society” would frown upon.

With the completion of the log cabin came the fruition of my parents’ plans: disengagement with the rest of the world. They could sell our suburban monster-house and buy a tiny house in the town center for when they are contractually required to be at work. They could buy a giant framed photo of an angry bluebird and display it prominently above the fireplace, let the dog drink the foam off the top of their beer mugs, and install a playground swing on the back porch. They could move their oldest daughter into the master bedroom walk-in closet without anyone taking offense. They could have three-day marathons of ridiculously outdated television shows like *Father Ted* and *Hogan’s Heroes*, could declare an entire bathroom

to be the domain of their pet chinchilla. My family isn't out of touch with the world; on the contrary, we are so worldly that we have grown disdainful and chosen anarchy. We reject your reality and substitute our own.

*Jacqueline Fetzer is a recent graduate of Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, where she received her degree in English Writing and Rhetoric with a minor in Spanish. She intends to pursue a Ph.D. in Rhetoric, and in the interim she is working transient jobs and living in her parents' master bedroom walk-in closet.*

## Ashes and Ghosts

| Michael Carpenter

Abandoned locales are the greatest form of frozen-in-time imagery, and they're journeyed to in hopes of finding, intact, a momentous mosaic portraying life unfolding within the folds of a transient event; encapsulating a scene of life-as-always right before the influence of need, tragedy, panic, or progress drove its occupiers from their abodes. What's left behind is unessential, bare-bones sorts of remains and lies as fossilized real estate.

At times it's a common scene. As one photographer, Henk van Rensbergen, stated of a modest house he had photographed mere days before its demolition, "religious symbols, holiday souvenirs and paintings on the wall . . . they tell a story that millions of people live everyday but remains unique time and again." It's a sort of amateur archaeology to sift through remains of decades and decide if they are throwaway debris from a throwaway society, homage to modern living, or true tragedy under the ashes of plaster-of-Pompeii.

The obsession itself could probably be crudely summarized as insatiability for the mysterious and a hard-on for architecture. People like me began their interest poring through the online photo galleries of trespassing photographers, perusing captured images of the cadavers of structures in the various stages of their decay like the cataloguing of a forensic photographer.

The first shots to leave me mildly slack-jawed were of a massive abandoned amusement park: Takakanonuma Greenland in the Fukushima prefecture of Japan. They're novel images, just seeing what is normally a hub for herds of humans, desolate and sunken into wreathes of fog. The normal radiance of carnival colors are overwritten by a default roan rust on the parallel bars of rollercoaster trestles. The website for the adventure photographer, Spiral, is all in Japanese. I don't have a reason for its closure and neglect, a location, or even a translatable name, which withholds from me all the information I want to know involving what I viewed. The obsession drives me to search for at least an hour in attempts to

decode what I want to know. Hence the mystery.

Some of the most popular and reliably chilling structures within the world of abandonment are insane asylums. Ever a victim to neglect or transition, mental institutions often find themselves being run dry of funding due to the perceived inefficacy of its treatment; would state coffers be better off emptying the contents of the asylum into prisons or the awaiting arms of alleyways? It was common for early asylums circa 1900 to be converted from stately mansions into sprawling campuses.

At least from a distance, Hellingly Asylum (its real, true name) maintains a somewhat dignified frontage. Inside, the walls discard their dandruff of plaster and paint onto piles of immigrated foliage. Chairs—always chairs, to remind of the former residents—congregated in social circles. Lone seats found near the only window in an expansive space for a photographer's perfect play on shadows, to invoke the imaginings of spectral schizophrenics. Being that this building encased madness in its concrete confines, it holds an extra amount of eeriness in its context over the viewers of its ruins. It's expected to own a history of torturous electroshock and zombifying lobotomies, as well as the unspeakable histories of trauma that shattered the minds of its patients. One commenter of the photos admitted they almost expected those same clients to continue to prowl their lives' only sanctuary. Why is it that we expect trauma to leave behind metaphysical residue? It's like approaching the remains of a deceased with the trepidation that the forces who felled them could still turn fang to you. Or maybe it's simply dangerous to be so close to decay.

Some threats linger in the ruins they degrade. Centralia, Pennsylvania is suburban decay in the most radical sense. A modest mining town of around one thousand people in 1962 was reduced to a population of nine after a fire sparked in a garbage dump, lighting a fuse-like seam of coal near the surface. The slow burning anthracite traveled underground to light fellow fuel deposits, immolating the crisscrossing tunnels and superheating

the foundation of the town. Mine subsidence hastened to buckle homes as fissures rended roads three feet apart, bowing mounds of concrete into disuse. Conflagration continues to inhale the hillsides, whispering out the remaining vapors of its consumption into the air around Centralia. A persistent nine have decided to linger in their homes, despite how accelerated mine subsidence and the constant presence of vented gases from the mine fire threaten their homes and lives. When the fire first began, a young boy named Todd Domboski had nearly been killed when a massive four foot wide, one hundred and fifty foot deep sinkhole opened under his feet. Nearby tree roots and the vigilant response of his cousin to pull him to safety saved the boy from the maw of heat and gases, which would have instantly killed him had he fallen just a few feet farther. This frighteningly close call not only sparked national attention to the problem, but also made clear the present danger to those who would begin the exodus from their former town.

These images of abandoned locations are so very common, yet the emotions they most often elicit are awe, creepiness, and settling dread. There is no violence portrayed in these images, no inhumane behavior. We see condemned warehouses, boarded storefronts, and foreclosed homes all the time in the greater context of a living city, and little do we dread. Yet the selective lens singles out the breakdown of these ruins alone. There is poignancy in this view that successfully elicits trepidation. In looking long enough at these images, one sees a permanent structure undone without constant care. The amusement park closed in 1994, yet the overgrowth already crests overtop all but the tallest creations, which are nonetheless being compromised from a molecular level. The maintenance and upkeep of our communities resist chaos, but only stem the tide for as long as our efforts are continued.

Our abandoned niches of civilization show us the inevitable end result to our legacy, a glimpse of the eventual void. The moment a structure is erected it begins to decay.

*Michael Carpenter graduated from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in April 2011 with a B.S. in Psychology and a minor in Creative Writing. Currently he is pursuing an M.S. in Health and Rehabilitative Sciences with a concentration in Rehabilitation Counseling. He hopes to write in the future to advocate for individuals with disabilities.*

# Short Fiction

*One Hundred*

*You Discover One Long Weekend That Japanese Antacids Are Not As Strong As Ours*

*Deeper Still*

*Displaced*

*The Contracting of a Womb and Long-Distance Goats*

*Just Let It Rest*

*The Hotel Franklin*

*The Third Saturday in October*

*Extinguishing a Memory*

*Just The One*

# One Hundred

| Sarah Tarkany

I will not tell you everything I have done. I will not tell you what I have eaten or if I have eaten at all. I will not tell you about Venice. I will not tell you how the canals in the morning waft a ripeness like sour gazpacho through the markets. I will not tell you how the water is so smooth and green it looks like a blackboard, the wakes of gondole and speedboats scraping across the impenetrable surface like chalk. I will not tell you it's probably not even water at this point—reeking of bad fish and the chemicals used to darken gondole into that trademark chocolate varnish. I will not tell you how the rain looks in Italy, how the mildew growing up half-submerged houses blooms even blacker across stucco smeared on the exteriors of buildings like cream cheese. I will not tell you that even rain cannot keep Italy from being beautiful.

I will not tell you, Marshall, about my first day here with Anna, when a gondolier told us we looked so light, he'll take us for half price. I will not tell you we barely made the boat tip, while he poled us around corners and through alleys, telling us that Venice was built on 120 islands, each with their own church. I will especially not tell you his name was Marco, and gondoliers sing to each other before turning corners so they don't crash, or how his grandfather is the one who built his gondola, the same one Marco's son is now training to use.

I will not tell you my calorie count. I will not tell you how Anna and I go into bakeries to just smell for hours, how just the sight of verdant countryside full of ripe wheat fields and happy poppies is enough for a month. I will not tell you that the smell of these fields or of olive oil or pasta drying on racks is enough. I will not tell you it is not hard not to eat like you said it would be. I will not tell you that in a few days I will have the best birthday ever because no one will be standing over me, begging *just one small piece of cake, Natalie, please, just try it.*

I will not tell you that I don't have to eat anything on my

birthday if I don't want to. You should know I don't want to. I will not tell you my mother sent me a card for my birthday, how it got to my residence hall in Siena before I even left for Venice. You will want to know what it said, so I will not tell you that nineteen won't be any different from eighteen. My mother wrote at the very bottom *please take care of yourself, Natalie*. I won't tell you that's how she ends phone conversations, too, her pleading voice only making it worse, the whimper that caught in her larynx after dad left hurting my head. I will not tell you that Anna is a vegan, that she understands me, admires my will power. I will not tell you she thinks my mother can go to hell, too.

I will not pretend I am home in your office where you put the silver tip of your pen against your lips and say *Tell me about Anna* and wait silently until I start talking. I will not tell you Anna is a lesbian. That's none of your business. I won't even tell you she is at least six feet tall and has dark hair that lets her pass for Italian when she wants to, something my blond hair prevents me from doing, no matter how good my Italian is. I will not *go into detail and write as if you were talking to me*. Marshall, you're a million miles away, and I'm grateful for every centimeter.

I will not tell you how you seem to have chased me even to Italy, how when Anna and I went to see the Peggy Guggenheim collection, I stared at Giacommetti's woman with her throat cut, her trachea pulled out like taffy in bronze, and what I suppose are lungs sticking out like angel wings. I will not tell you that then I rounded a corner in the museum and ran right into *The Sun in Its Jewel Case*. You already know you have the same picture in your office, but I never knew that was its name. It's just an abandoned playground with an erect banana slug in the middle. What would Freud say about a painting like that in a psychiatrist's office?

Now you are saying, *Let's just talk about one thing at a time, ok?* and making that face when you draw your eyebrows together and touch the right one with your index finger.

You also do this when you think I'm being dishonest, like about

my birthday being great. But you still probably think I don't notice these things, or the way you uncross your legs and then cross them again when I decide I should cry. Christ, Marshall, for a psychiatrist you sure get uncomfortable when people cry.

But I won't tell you anything. I certainly won't cry. I won't even tell you things that are of no consequence, just to make conversation, because you will find a way to make huge assumptions out of little things I say in passing. I can't tell you one thing about Anna because you will find something huge and traumatic and completely necessary of being *talked out and analyzed*. So I will not tell you that there are times when I feel like Anna is the only one that could ever make me happy. She's the only one that understands me. Anna introduced herself as *Anna the lesbian and nice to meet you, anorexic Natalie* before I even opened my mouth. There's no point in hiding anything from her. We are closer than sisters, and are small enough to sleep in the same bed when we want.

Don't say it, Marshall. Don't say *how do you feel when the two of you share a bed?* Because I won't answer. I won't say that it just makes me feel safe, just because I know you are thinking erotic things about me with some other girl. So I won't tell you how well we know each other's thoughts, or that her body is so much thinner and not disgusting at all like mine. Food has no hold over Anna, and that's what I love about her. She is not weak like everyone else.

I will not think about home. I will definitely not miss it, even though, at this time of year, the maples and Bradford pears have fired their leaves into a flaming red. I will not even tell you since you already know that sometimes snow falls even before all the leaves do and then puddles along the curb solidify, holding acorns and pine straw as if in glass cases. Of all the things I do not miss from home, I do miss the tangy autumn air caught between the mountains of North Carolina. It's ok, though. There are mountains in Italy, too, more beautiful ones with fresher air. I will not tell you how it took Anna and me hours and hours to climb mountains in Umbria, which I prefer to the lolling hills of Tuscany.

Anna is from Ohio, where it is flat. She is not used to walking up and down, so she likes Venice more than the countryside. The streets are just winding enough to get lost when you want to. But, Marshall, I will not tell you, will not even write in small letters that being in Italy these past two months has been like living in an entirely different world, like a dream state. Nothing feels real. There are times when I almost forget I am *Natalie the anorexic*. I guess that's why you said it would be ok for me to study abroad. I will not tell you how hard it has been, though. In Italy, everyone gathers around food, so for the first month, before I met Anna, I didn't talk to anyone. It is rude not to eat here—and eat a lot.

Marshall, I don't want to tell you what happened today. I don't want to tell you that I am sitting outside the hostel and though it is already past three in the morning, the streets are just now starting to become empty. There is an old woman who has been pacing the perimeter of this square asking for money. She has one of those babies that look almost real until you look closely. Since it is dark and the tourists are drunk, she has made quite a bit of money. Now she sits on the steps of a closed gelateria to wait for the next wave of tourists. Back home, you would say I am *avoiding the subject that brought me in to see you in the first place*. But I don't want to tell you about today. I won't tell you that I don't know where Anna is. Anna called home today. The conversation was something like

*Hello? Meredith? (Meredith is her girlfriend in Ohio)*

*Pause*

*I miss you, too. I bought you something here in Venice.*

*Pause*

*No, it's really beautiful. No, Meredith, don't cry.*

*Pause*

*Meredith.*

*Pause*

*Meredith. What happened?*

*Pause*

*Hey, listen, it's ok.*

*Pause*

*Yeah, we're having lots of fun, Natalie and I.*

*Pause*

*No, I told you, remember? Natalie? She doesn't eat.*

*Pause*

*Pause*

*Pause*

*Stop, please, I miss you, too.*

*Pause*

*I love you, too. Bye, baby.*

After that, Anna just said she was going for a walk, and left, leaving me alone to start thinking of all the relationships I had had that failed before. Anna is lucky to have someone who loves her so much. I only have Mom, who has done her best to hold the two of us together since dad left. Even though we've talked about it, I realized at that moment just how terribly alone I am. Even being skinnier hasn't helped. I went around the corner from our hostel to a cute little café where Anna and I usually go when we feel like picking at plates of food. The little old lady who waits the tables stared when I ordered both courses, something I had never done before. Once I started eating, it was easier to eat more and faster. I finished the farfalle first course and started on the breaded fish. The pasta was good, my first real bites of Italian pasta, with mushrooms, tomatoes, and basil. I don't know what kind of fish it was; it doesn't matter. After paying the bill, I decided to try and find Anna. But my stomach was not used to so much distending it. I walked two blocks, shoved my fingers down my throat, and vomited.

As I knelt there, both of my hands pressed against the bricks of a wall, my stomach heaving and throat burning, I realized not even food could make me normal again.

But Marshall, there are things I do want to tell you when I get back. I want to tell you that in Siena is a huge brown church dedicated to a saint named Catherine. This is the one anecdote I will share, so you must lean forward and listen. That church is

where I met Anna. Because I didn't know anyone and really had no inclination to meet anyone when I first got here, I would walk. I walked to this church on my second day in Italy. On top of a hill, they have encrusted what used to be her house in blue and gold paint, studding the walls with marble carvings of angels. In the actual church, though, big and silent except for the wads of Asian tourists, they have her head: her actual head. They actually have, displayed, Catherine's 600-year-old head, her skin black and wrinkled. As if her head weren't enough, they have a finger there, too. It is not black, but grey, like it were made of rubber, and they put it in a glass case with her prayer book and the whip she made to torture herself. So I learned this, that Catherine starved herself for the good of God's kingdom, at least, that's what she believed. Catherine is a freak, too, and while in Siena, I go to the church every day to talk to her. A severed head and a finger in a glass case are much better listeners than you, Marshall, even if you do charge \$170 a visit.

I will not tell you, though, I will not tell you that as I pushed against the wall and wiped my mouth, I will not tell you how hard I've tried. I will not tell you what it's been like these two years. And now, as I write this, Marshall, it doesn't change anything. And maybe sometimes people cannot change back. Because, Marshall, this all was my choice. This was not my dad leaving his family because, because, who knows why. And this was not like dating Jeremy, with the screaming and fighting and *I can't help you*.

I will tell you what happened the first full day I went without food. It was in September, a few weeks after dad left. I had no appetite lately, and the change in my stomach fascinated me. The first full day was in September. I woke up for school to the sound of Mom's Camry pulling out of the driveway. If she was going to be a single mom, she had to work more hours, so I hardly saw her anymore. When I woke up, I felt that familiar wet heavy thickness in my throat, stuck there by grief and only slightly less swollen after a long cry. I didn't cry that morning. I got up and went to shower.

As I undressed, I saw the hickey Jeremy had left on my left thigh still red. It's strange what you notice in states of assuaging grief, like when you lose someone. I lost my dad. I will not tell you it was kind of easy to move on.

But I will not tell you it was then that I noticed, my fingers tracing the outline of my thigh, how much easier things are when you don't eat. Of course, before I hadn't eaten every second of the day, but that day is the day I made a promise to myself to make myself something better. Not eating is like being superhuman. And that day I went to all my classes, almost smug in the knowledge that I am stronger than the other people in the world: I have discipline. Such feelings are intoxicating, Marshall.

Still, these are things I won't tell you. I won't tell you that I broke one hundred pounds two days ago. But when I was throwing up after eating all that pasta and fish, I knew one hundred was just a milestone: it's not the end. There has always been food. There will always be food. And there will always be some who eat without any feelings of guilt and no knowledge that what they are doing is degrading.

I will not tell you, Marshall, that it is more than enough for me to climb to the hill atop Siena and stare at the tan, sandy mountains looking like they were covered in brown sugar. I will not tell you it is enough to smell the odor of baking croissants as I walk past a shop, the outside plaster looking like lobster bisque with sour cream trim and shutters the color of chives.

I have no need to fill my stomach when all my other senses are filled with beauty. It is much easier not to eat here, even where everything is the color of food.

*Sarah Tarkany is a recent graduate of The College of Charleston, where she earned a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She currently attends Columbia College in Chicago in pursuit of her M.F.A. in Poetry.*

## You Discover One Long Weekend That Japanese Antacids Are Not As Strong As Ours

| Cody Greene

This is one of the things that could happen: because you are waiting alone for a late-night train in the deepest part of the Takeda station, the man standing next to you, the one biting his nails—despite, you’ve noticed, the distinct lack of fingernails altogether—the one who appears dextrous with a boning knife, will murder you. He will hit you first with his briefcase, probably at the base of the skull, or maybe he’ll smother you with a potent Japanese chloroform, though you’ve noticed he doesn’t seem to carry a handkerchief. This strikes you as odd, considering that there are no paper towels to speak of in all of Japan. After you’re dead and no one will be able to find you, your dads will receive a letter, dictated in pretty awful English, explaining that their daughter is nowhere to be found and that the authorities have tried everything. Dad #2 will look at Dad #1 and say, “Well, Paul, I told her so. I did tell her this would happen.”

He does not kill you. Not at the station anyway, and on the way back to the New Miyako, the not so terrible hotel you’re staying at for the long weekend, the two of you are the only ones in the car. He’s still chewing. The nubs of his fingers look like cotton swabs, but shinier, scar tissue where nails used to be. You wonder what is left to chew, but on some fingers he has slivers, crescents of cuticles he keeps teeth-trimmed, probably until they fall off like all the rest. With these nerves and the slow tapping of his foot he is beginning to remind you of Rise’s silent boyfriend whom you met when the three of you went out for ramen the week before you left Tokyo. You think that you should call Rise to warn her, because in all likelihood he too is a psycho-killer. That would be Rise’s type though, you think, and if that’s the case then maybe your new half-Japanese best friend may not be the best company to keep.

The nailless man is antsy for the next couple of stops, standing now, still chewing, which makes you more nervous, especially when his eyes scan the mottled train floor, landing on your feet. When he looks away, you gather yourself, bunch all your tiny muscles together into springs. You think of Dad #1's "snake in the can of peanuts trick" and imagine yourself exploding out at the nailless man with the same speed of fear, and you'd like to think that you'd even say "surprise!" while you do it, but you're unsure of the Japanese for it. He leaves the station before you, and the air that rushes into the compartment as the doors close smells fishy.

Next is your station, Kyoto Station, the one that gets blown up by Gamera, the giant turtle, in the movie Dad #1 rented when you told him you were visiting Kyoto. He explained over the phone how the glass fell and the skyways of the station collapsed onto the trains below. You could hear Dad #2 saying, "That's not funny, Paul." It wasn't funny, but neither was how incredibly sick you were of teaching English in Tokyo, which is why you came to the old capital. The feeling has not changed. In fact, very little has changed during your first six months in Japan. Your Japanese has not improved—a fault of your own as Rise is still the only Japanese person you've actually spent much time with, and she's only half. You still have to pretend to like tofu and soy, and you're pretty sure the kids in your class hate you. You haven't died yet though, and this feels like a good thing.

In your hotel room, there's a message blinking for you. The thing that put Dad #1 in the hospital last week hasn't really gotten any better. What they know, Dad #2 says, is that he has pneumonia, or at least something that acts like it, but the doctors don't think that has anything to do with what's wrong with his blood. Your salary will not support all these international calls, but it's good to hear Dad #2's voice, and every time you hope he'll put Dad #1 on for just a few seconds, an "I love you, kid" maybe. There is a reason you secretly call them Dad #1 and Dad #2, though admittedly Dad #2

has been earning brownie points during all this hospital business. Before he hangs up Dad #2 says, “Emily, don’t overreact and buy a plane ticket or anything, but you should know that some of the doctors are toying with the word ‘leukemia,’ but they still can’t do any of the tests until he gets better, so it’s just a theory.” It’s in his worried voice. You realize how hard the mattresses seem to be in Kyoto and how scratchy the sheets are. In the morning, you’ll go to Mister Donut—which, conveniently, you can see from your window—where you’ll earn club member points for the coffee and five doughnuts you plan on eating.

This is probably a thing that will happen: the school will discover how terrified you actually are of teaching (maybe something you let slip during karaoke with Rise) and they will fire you—as they should, because not so secretly you are incompetent—and when you return to Tokyo, your apartment will be lonelier because you can’t afford it. You will think about Martin, but still you will not call him, because also not so secretly you are having trouble thinking of him as your actual boyfriend and not just your college boyfriend. You will eat everything in your pantry and then you will starve and no one will find you until your neighbors knock politely about the smell. A young police officer will call your dads, but since they don’t know Japanese, they’ll hang up.

These are your thoughts while the cashier cheerfully wraps your last strawberry doughnut. She reminds you of the older version of one of your students and she keeps looking at the bracelet Martin bought you, because it’s garish, American. You and Martin were still Juniors when he gave you that bracelet, back when you were both still thinking seriously about grad school, back when your first semester of Japanese was easy and came naturally. You feel fat, so you drink more coffee and promise yourself that tomorrow you will not eat five doughnuts. You think it could be funny if you were an obese American in Japan for the rest of your life.

When you were first in Japan, you were enchanted, enthralled by vending machines with hot cocoa, all the cute charms and dangly things girls can hang off their phones and backpacks. Now you've gotten a little obsessive about the sidewalks, which have raised bumpy strips to help the blind. Less and less you notice how polite everyone is, and more and more you notice people like the nailless man—people, it seems, whose everything has gotten the better of them. Which is why you've started smoking. Rise supported you, saying that this was how Japanese women got noticed, the particular way they hold cigarettes.

In Tokyo, while you work, you do a pretty good job of keeping your wanton nicotine lust to a minimum, but in Kyoto you've been doing what you want, so you figure why the hell not, especially since you can buy cigarettes from vending machines. You know there is one such machine on the other side of the station where the buses roll in, so you start walking. Most weekend tourists hit the temples, the old imperial palace, but you've contented yourself with underground tunnels, which eliminate some of your environmental fears, but shade your social ones with a sinister edge. When you first started getting heartburn in Japan, you thought it was because of the curry you'd been eating, but it turns out you're just anxious. You pop antacids anyway. Just like they're candy. You are good at forming habits.

Cellophane from a fresh pack in you pocket, you're smoking next to the blood drive bus that pulls into the station every day, businessmen with rumpled sleeves and red, red IVs. You feel like an expert on blood transfusions right now, and you smile and wave at the businessmen who do not see you. The girl putting yen into the vending machine is fifteen. You can tell because she looks like one of the girls you were starting prepositions with last week in Tokyo. She's buying, of all things, Virginia Slims.

"Can you do that?" you ask in English, naturally because all the Japanese teachers told you not to speak to the kids in anything but. You sound like Dad #2 and for some reason that doesn't seem to

bother you.

“Yes,” she says, and her English is practiced. You begin to feel motherly when she starts walking away, already tearing through the inside foil, a pink lighter at hand. There are a number of things you could say to her back, a few of which you even know the Japanese for and it feels like that would make a difference. Cancer is one of those words, but only because one pronunciation is a cognate. When you mouth it, somewhere on the palate, *kyansa*, the y makes it sound more threatening and, appropriately enough, foreign. Mostly when a word is a cognate, you use the English, and it becomes easier when you don’t have to think so hard.

Martin liked Dad #2 the best, and when you told him that was only because he felt less threatened by him, he said, “No, he’s just nicer.” You thought for a while that this could be true. Growing up, Dad #1 was the one who would watch marathons of the scary episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* with popcorn and the lights out, which is why you’re so jumpy. He was also the one in Chicago all of the time on business. Martin called him fun but unavailable. Because Dad #1 taught you how to drink, you wanted to appear mistrustful of this.

Dad #2 carried his Pre-med track at William & Mary with him, and as a result, dealt well with fevers and colds, and warned you at least once a year before recess that you should be careful on the monkey bars, because if you weren’t, you’d fall, break your spine, and have to spend the rest of your life bolted into a halo. He drove you every morning in middle school, and for two years all the girls were convinced that the pleasantly attractive middle-aged man bringing you in was your single father, a deep and sad widower, and they pitied you. You wanted friends so you said nothing about Dad #1 even though he’d started playing catch with you so you could try dating some boy on the baseball team.

You worried about bringing Martin home the first time to meet

your dads, but you liked him well enough at the time, so it seemed like something that should have happened. The four of you spent a long weekend in your gray New Hampshire house, and mostly it was quiet. Dad #2 told you he thought Martin was cute, good for you, while he sliced a grapefruit in the morning. Dad #1 told you Martin was cute. On the cool enough nights, you all sat outside around the fire pit, dads and Martin working on beers, you on something ginny, since that's what Martin drank back at school and you wanted to be able to keep up with him. What you remember from that night was how Martin sat on your right, watching the fire, hands in lap, and your fathers across from you, holding hands, their thumbnails bright in the fire-glow, smoothing the backs of knuckles. This is what you have of love, why Martin still paralyzes you.

This is a thing you know could happen to you today: Martin will call you. Rise will have tracked him down and given him your new number in Japan, the gossipy bitch, and he'll sound upset, but really he's just breaking up with you for being cold and distant and in Japan. You expect this but you are allowed to be angry. When you hang up, concierge will ring you with a message—an international message!—and you'll start shaking when you hold the receiver listening to Dad #2's breathing, and you will know, know, that this is the worst day anyone could spend so far from home. But just then there will be a knock at your door and you'll tearfully answer and it will be the nailless man. Briefcase. Chloroform. You will be lost and murdered and no one will ever be able to find you. Except Rise. Who will know where you are and do nothing.

It is Monday now and you're still awake, four in the morning, insomnia and worrying—something that Dad #2 jokes you inherited from him, but you're adopted. You do want your old life to call you, even if it is the hospital, even if it is bad news because at least it wouldn't be in Japanese and you could at least feel sure about something. Either "It's a miracle!" or "It's a tragedy!" There would be no fumbling for the polite way to say something.

If you left now, you could still make it back to Tokyo in time for class but you're not sure if that's something you would like to do. You kind of want to hold Martin, but the more you think about it, the more sure you are that he's moved on, even though he tried to tell your dads how much he liked you at your graduation dinner when all the passports and visas were already in place. There is an image that keeps playing over and over in your head. In the Kyoto station, there is conveyor belt sushi bar, where plates of single serving sushi loops around the restaurant on a miniature people mover, and you can choose whatever you want from it, whenever you'd like to, and if you miss it the first time the plate will come back around so long as someone on the other side of the bar doesn't grab your plate first. Often you feel confident that they will.

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## Deeper Still

| Taylor Madaffari

I had no idea I'd like the aquarium so much, certainly not two months ago when my mom tossed the brochure on my lap and told me I had to get off the couch and do something with myself. I think my bumming around the house was making her anxious. She could have given me the brochure for anything, lifeguarding at the country club pool or finger painting with kindergarteners at the local summer camp, but I think she settled on fish because she remembered the series of goldfish I owned when I was seven, coming home from carnivals or pet stores with those knotted plastic baggies and a smile. The part she must have forgotten is that they were all dead and flushed within a week.

It's the summer before community college, the summer before I start taking gen-reqs. and dozing in lecture halls. So I volunteered at the South Carolina Aquarium because it was something to do, and I was wanting for things to do. Plus, I had taken a SCUBA certification course two summers ago, so I decided I might as well put it to use. And now I dive.

I sit at the lip of the Great Ocean tank. In the wavering water, my finned feet look detached at the ankle. I begin my pre-dive safety checks while Chad zips up my wet suit to the top knob of my spine. One ear bud sticks in his left ear while the other hangs listlessly at his chest. On his skinny neck, his head nods to the music. I'm sure this violates some fine print clause in the employee handbook, but I don't say anything. As vague as Chad is, he's alright to work with. He's thirty-two but looks twenty-four, and he knows his fish. Sometimes I imagine his brain as a great Marine Biology textbook and him, just flipping through the pages.

I strap on my BCD vest and inflate it before feeling that the integrated weights are snapped firmly into place. Chad tugs on my tank band, humming off-key. I look at my pressure gauge, see that my air tank is full, and take a few experimental breaths through the mouthpiece. The air always tastes tinny and recycled. I stand up,

adjust my face mask, and jump. I bob on the surface for a moment then tap the top of my head to signal to Chad that everything is okay. He gives me the thumbs up, so I deflate my BCD and descend into 385,000 gallons of saltwater.

It is cool and only a little murky. Everything is quiet and muffled; the only sounds are the faint rustlings and clickings of the fish and the susurrant of my mechanized breath. If I pay very close attention, I can hear my heart beating inside of my chest. In the tank, there are no pressing responsibilities, no obligations. There is no pressure to conform, to succeed, to know exactly who you are and where you're going. There is only the need to float.

I find it such a relief. I don't think my mom is too thrilled I am going to community college this fall, but she's happy I'm doing something with my life, at least. I think she secretly believes the junior college will act as a gateway to the College of Charleston. But I don't see the point in it. I will probably major in something meaningless, something like eighteenth-century French History or Creative Writing just because it seems like the only thing to do, because it is a whim and I am without a plan. I told her almost a year ago I didn't want to attend college, but after a solid year of nagging, she'd finally worn me down enough to agree to community college. She filled out the application and requested my transcripts and everything else. All I had to do was sign and date the forms. I thought that would be the end of it. But the to-do list she taped to my bedroom door only grows longer: register for classes, plan a schedule, look for a part-time job, start thinking about where I'd like to transfer to, consider any majors, extracurricular activities, or internships I might be interested in, and on and on. Just reading the items on the list exhausts me. I don't care to actually do any of them.

In the tank I do not feed the fish immediately. I just swim. As I fin beside them, their surprised, wide set eyes regard me with disinterest. They open and close their mouths. The nurse sharks are nocturnal, so most of them are floating languidly in their home

caves. Chad's voice is suddenly in my head, "*One possible origin for the nurse shark's name is the suckling sound it makes when it eats. A sound like a nursing baby.*" The surgeonfish are one of my favorites. Maybe it's because they fit their name so well—their icy blue borders seem almost clinical, the spines that sit on each side of their tail scalpel-shaped and sharp. But then there's also the Green Moray Eels. They look like something out of a nightmare or this PBS documentary I saw once called "Encountering Sea Monsters." They're electric green with fierce blue eyes, their skin like crepe paper.

Luminescent moon jellies undulate right past my nose, a ballet of umbrella fish. They are the wimps of the jellyfish world with their stubby tentacles and mild sting. They are often found washed up and withered on the beach. But even their crumpled bodies are fragile, beautiful. I shiver as a sand tiger shark slips by my right shoulder, its rows and rows of spiky teeth looking particularly pointed. Its body cuts through the water like a razor blade. I can't help myself; the *Jaws* theme sounds in my brain. I guess fear is not original. The underwater world is not always a completely stress-free place, although somewhere in the back of my mind I know I am not part of his diet.

The thing I love about the tank is that the fish adhere to some sort of hierarchy, but it's not rigid or necessarily enforced. No one is there telling them the rules. They just naturally and easily find themselves in the niche where they belong. And for that, I envy them, if it's even possible to envy fish. I have never really found my own niche. I've quit everything I ever started—ballet, art classes, ice-skating and tennis lessons. In eighth grade I quit the school play a week before opening night. I have simply drifted on the currents of my life, finding no interests, forming few attachments. I think there must be something wrong with me.

Even my last relationship of a year and a half was of little consequence. His name was Roger. He was nice and normal, if a little boring. We got along fine. But that was it. It was just fine, dull, routine. Maybe it was because he was pretty dull and routine. He

reminded me of Richie Cunningham from “Happy Days.” Shortly after we graduated high school, we sat across from each other at IHOP and discussed breaking up like it was a business contract. He was going away for college, and I was staying here. We didn’t want to try the long distance thing. We didn’t even care to see it out through the summer. So, he scooped up the last of his runny egg with his wheat toast, paid the check—it was the least he could do, he said—and hugged me so passionlessly it might as well have been a brusque handshake. I was not sad about breaking up with him. I was just sad that I didn’t feel anything.

I see my favorite resident of the Great Ocean tank, the octopus. When I first started at the aquarium, she wouldn’t come near me. And once, when I got too close, she turned instantly from her deep merlot color to the shade of the rocks behind her and shot me with a jet of black ink that clouded and then dissipated in the water. That probably would have been the end to our relationship, but then encyclopedic Chad told me, “Octopuses have the most complex brains of all invertebrates: they have both long and short term memory, have been taught behaviors, and can even learn to problem solve.” His eyes seemed to shine like they always do when he relays the facts. What I gathered was that octopuses are smart. I began to notice her watching me. It was probably my imagination, but she seemed to take a keen interest. Curiosity was beyond the capabilities of the other fish, but she followed me for minutes at a time during my dives, popping her oblong head out of caves I’d just swum past, fanning her body over coral reefs I was inspecting. I didn’t notice at first, but she is coming closer and closer to me every day.

She is slinking along one of her favored rocky outcroppings now, her slender limbs roiling around her. I move toward her slowly, making sure that she sees me. I don’t want to scare her and get another blast of ink in the face. She watches me as I come. I stop just short of her and fin quietly. I think she inches toward me, but I’m not sure. She reaches out a tentacle, polka-dotted with suckers that look like miniature suction cups. She waves it through the

water then tentatively taps my arm. She brings another tentacle around and brushes my side. There are three then four grasping tentacles on my wet suit, and I know she is feeling me. The problem is that it tickles. I laugh and bubbles escape in a stream from my mouthpiece. She stiffens, and in seconds she's surged away from me, her retreating body like a blossoming flower as she swims.

I look through the viewing windows of the tank. It's Wednesday afternoon and the aquarium is pretty empty. There are no squawking babies or bustling families or young boys pressing their spread palms to the glass, straining to see the secrets the ocean has to reveal. The few people walking through the hallway seem far away and indistinct, less immediate and real than what just went on inside the glass.

I shake my head in amazement and incredulity and I don't know what, and then begin my ascent. As I rise, I feel lighter and lighter, like the pressure of the water is changing, and me with it. Back on the surface, Chad grabs me under my armpits and helps me out of the tank.

"You were under for awhile. Everything alright?"

"Yeah." I stand up and start taking off my gear. I don't feel like telling him about the octopus. I don't think he would understand even if I tried.

"Cool," he says. He is still dipping his head to the music.

Nothing seems to concern him for very long. He starts whistling to himself as he helps me put my gear away. It occurs to me that Chad is perfect for this job with his cool surface calm. He's so much like the world under the water. Everything he does is like it's in slow motion. I wonder if he knows that. I asked him once what made him want to be an assistant aquarist, and he said, "I like fish."

When I get home, I find the college's fall course catalogue on my desk with a "Planning My Schedule" sheet. My mom rarely says anything she thinks might put undue pressure on me. She knows I'm not any good under pressure, has known it ever since I threw up during my ballet recital when I was nine. The kind of pressure

she exerts is much more subtle and therefore pernicious. So it's no surprise that she's barely uttered two words about my upcoming semester. Instead, she puts the course catalogue on my desk almost every morning, and almost every evening I throw it away. I figure I'll just take the classes they make every freshman take: College Writing and Statistics and Global History. I'm sure they won't offer anything that interests me. Actually, I'm not even sure what I find interesting. I go to throw the booklet in the trash as I usually do, but this time I riffle through the pages first.

At the aquarium the next morning, while I am cleaning the Saltmarsh tank, I find a striped pufferfish floating dead on the surface, its belly to the sky. I have seen a number of fish die since I began working here, but none of them seemed to matter so much, not like this one. I don't know what it is about it. Maybe it's because it's such a pretty little fish or that it fits inside of my cupped palm or that something covered in spikes so long and menacing could die so easily. Maybe I have just started to care more about things. That's all I can figure.

I look up and see Chad at the end of the hallway, sheepish with a shoebox in one hand and dinged shovel in the other. He is sneaking toward the exit door. I put the pufferfish in a biohazard bag and lay it on my cart then run down the hallway, one broken wheel squealing. I hook Chad by his collared shirt just as he puts his hand on the door handle.

"What are you doing?"

He looks guiltily at me. He knows he's been caught at whatever it is he's up to.

"Burying a fish," he mumbles.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I just bury them out back sometimes. It seems in a way more decent than throwing them in the trash, more humane." He looks at the biohazard bag on my cart and raises his eyebrows.

"Do you want to bury it?"

I'm thinking a fish funeral is kind of a dumb idea as I watch

Chad dig a hole. He asks me if I want to say a prayer or anything.

“Really? No. They’re just fish, after all,” I say.

But then Chad begins covering the shoeboxes with dirt, and there is something sad, suddenly, about watching them get swallowed by the earth. I picture the fish’s body in my gloved hand, his vivid purple color and limp shimmery fins. Chad is right. The ground is better than the trash, but maybe we should have put him in the sea. Still, I think the puffer will like his views of the Charleston Harbor, with the whales coming in, and it makes me feel somehow better.

Later that afternoon, after I eat my bag lunch and start to think about things other than the puffer, I’m in the Great Ocean tank again, feeding the fish. Chad says it takes a certain type of person to get into a tank of hungry fish. If I knew all the statistics about shark attacks and shark-related deaths and the evolutionary characteristics that make sharks one of the most lethal predators on the planet, he says, I wouldn’t want to dive down there either. He can’t understand why I often refuse to wear the chain mail sheath and outer layer of Kevlar and go in with nothing more protecting my hands than cotton gloves. But I like knowing there is almost nothing between us, them and me. Some logical part of me knows I could get fired, or hurt. But I am eighteen and invincibility is on my side. Dying is not something I think about, especially not underwater, a cloudy dream world where pain and misfortune seem unlikely.

For some reason, I have agreed to do a dive show for museum visitors, something I never do. I guess I thought I needed to stop spending all of my time with fish and interact more with the world. But it seems like a stupid idea now that Katie is standing in front of the tank with a microphone, introducing the exhibit and me to a restless crowd. “This is our Great Ocean tank. As you can see, it spans two stories and holds hundreds of animals,” she says, her amplified voice mechanical sounding.

The food bucket is heavy today, and fish are nipping at it almost before I am completely submerged.

“And here is our diver.” I give a half-hearted wave and then start throwing out handfuls of shrimp and mollusks and baitfish. The shrimp twirl end over end through the water. Then they stop, suspended for a just moment, pale moons, before their pearly bodies are snapped in half and disappear inside of the fishes’ mouths. I love the feel of the fishes’ flitting bodies that touch me and then are gone. I am rocked slightly by the currents their fins are making. I think I have never been happier, that this must be what happiness is.

Then something goes wrong. I am tossing another handful of chum when a sand tiger shark carves through the water in front of me, its jagged teeth nicking my skin. I pull my hand back in surprise. The glove is sliced open. On my palm, a thin red line appears. After a second, it looks like my skin unzips, and the red line widens. I think immediately about how sharks are attracted to blood. I am nervously reaching for my extra pair of gloves from a pocket in my BCD vest, when a passing fish bumps my mouthpiece. It falls out of my mouth and saltwater rushes in. Now I can’t breathe, and there is an interminable moment of panic. I drop the bucket, and as it falls, fish pieces rise out of it and drift through the water. Fish begin to swarm me. They fight to get the loose food. I am engulfed by the chaos of thrashing water and beating bodies. I am buffeted by their surprisingly strong tails, and it feels like I am being beaten. I whip my head back and look for Chad, but all I can see are hundreds of glinting fish, a swirling cyclone that goes up and up.

By now, the audience has noticed something is not right. There are gasps and a few screams. I see a woman in a Pepto-Bismol pink dress, waving her arms, frantically telling Katie it looks like I’m in some sort of trouble. Katie spins around and her eyes go wide. She walkie-talkies Chad. The people have rushed en masse to the glass, a blur of humanity. They remind me of the thronging fish. My chest is tight and my lungs are burning. My vision starts to go spotty. I tell myself I better get it together or I will surely die. I orient myself and reach with shaking fingers for my mouthpiece, hanging somewhere down by my side. The vibrant color of the tank is dimming. And

then I have it in my hand. I push it between my lips and press the button that clears the water from my mouth. The air is stale and thin, but I am so glad for it. I don't bother ascending properly. At this particular moment, I don't care so much about barotrauma. I just take a few deep breaths through my mouthpiece and then pull as hard as I can for the surface. I think I hear muted clapping from the other side of the glass.

When I break through the water and into the air, I rip the mouthpiece from my mouth and take another couple of great, heaving breaths. Chad is half-suited up, hopping up and down as he fits his foot inside a flipper.

"Holy shit. Are you okay?" he asks, dropping the flipper and plucking me out of the water. "I thought you were dead." It is the most emotion I've ever seen from him. "Oh God, you're bleeding. A lot. Um, we need to go. Now, I think." His face has gone white, his lips a little blue. I look down into the tank. There is a stain of fast-spreading blood, its edges unfurling, growing lighter and lighter as they dilute in the water. I am wet with blood. For the first time, I realize my hand is throbbing. It feels like the tight skin of a balloon and swollen to twice its size. The pain is so overwhelming my head swims with nausea and my knees buckle beneath me. But Chad catches me by the arm and holds me up. He grabs towels off the rack and wraps one around my body and the smaller one around my hand.

"Hold it tight, okay?" he says. Even in my woozy state, I am shocked by his competence during a crisis. I can't believe Chad, with his distracted and unconcerned personality, is so in charge of this situation. I decide to leave it all up to him and let myself melt into his sturdy body. It is nice not to be pressured for once to take full responsibility.

Chad drives me to Good Shepherd Hospital, and on the way there I tell him what happened during the dive. He pumps his fist, a double tap, against the steering wheel.

"See. It's the sharks, man. I told you that you were crazy for

feeding them, especially without the right gear, but you didn't listen." In the broken flashes of light from oncoming traffic, his face looks hard as stone. I can't believe he is so upset about this. It is very unlike him.

"I'm sorry," I say. I decide I will wear the protective gloves the next time I'm in the tank—not only to appease Chad, but also because I don't feel so invincible anymore.

The Emergency Room is crowded, but we don't wait for very long. Maybe it's the blood loss, but everything seems to happen in a blur. They put me in a room, clean off the blood, and numb my hand. The nurse injects the needle so close to the lip of the wound, I almost pass out. I get six stitches in a jagged slash down my palm. They look like the barbed tails of stingrays. At least my stingrays are holding me together instead of spearing me in the chest. This whole time Chad has been standing quietly in the corner of the hospital room, his usual abstracted look a little heavier. Now he lays his hand on my good one. It is warm and broad and completely covers mine. Chad has only known me for a couple of months, but there is more emotion in this one small touch than there was in my entire relationship with Roger.

"Sand tiger pups eat each other while they're still in the womb," he says.

"What? Why did you bring that up?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just saying things could be worse." I roll my eyes and laugh. I think it might be nice to always have Chad around, with his warm hands and vast repository of marine information, his tenderness so subtle in his jaw. And I like the way he looks in a wet suit. For a few moments I entertain the idea of Chad ten years younger.

He interrupts my thoughts. "I was coming to rescue you, you know," he says quietly. "When you were in the tank."

"I know," I say. But I think that maybe I am already rescued, somehow. I couldn't breathe and now I can. I was bleeding, but now I am not. I was frozen in place, but now I have broken free. I am still

alive, sitting on this hospital bed. It was a blip, just like the stress and uncertainty of adolescence is a blip. And some day soon, it will pass.

Even though it is not my designated area, I go to the Turtle Rehabilitation Center at work a few days later. The other volunteers like to refer to it as the Turtle Hospital, but I refuse to call it that. I check on St. Catherine like I've been doing nearly every day for the past two months. She has been here for almost two years, longer than any turtle since the aquarium opened. She was found lost, stranded on the beach. Since then, St. Catherine has been through a lot—pneumonia and bone infection and a broken flipper. She paddles lethargically in her shallow pool, her right flipper hampered by its sling.

"I know how you feel, old girl," I say, brandishing my bandaged palm. I look at the yellow and red patterning on her head and imagine how it would reflect the light refracted through the ocean's waves. When I am with St. Catherine, everything feels calm and still inside of me. I am nebulizing her and idly stroking her shell when the vet walks in. She glances at us and then scribbles on her chart.

She points at the turtle with her pen. "She really is a fighter, that one." I think about St. Catherine's particular ability to survive, and decide that the vet is right. St. Catherine's eyes are deep, black, and luminous. I can see myself reflected in those wet orbs.

"Did you know that her release date is set for three weeks from now?" the vet asks.

"Really?"

"Yep. Our little green finally gets to go home," she says. I laugh, and happiness rises through my stomach and up into my throat.

My stint at the aquarium is almost done. I can feel that it is time to leave, even though I don't like to admit it. My first semester of college starts in a few weeks anyway. Maybe, when I transfer to the College of Charleston, I will take some classes in marine biology or animal husbandry. I think they might offer something like that. Maybe I will try accounting. I don't know for sure if I will work in

the aquarium again. It almost seems like the fish belong to a discrete part of my life that is now drawing to a close. I don't understand exactly what this summer was, but I know it made me feel connected again, gave me a purpose. I had to feed the fish.

When I walk in my front door I hear tapping. It reminds me of the sound the fish make when they break off bits of coral with their sharp little beaks and jaws. It is my mom's fingernails on the kitchen table. My course booklet is lying a couple of inches away. She looks angry. "Can you please tell me when you're going to figure out a schedule and register for your classes? You only have a couple of weeks left. You CANNOT put this off anymore! You are going to sit down right now, and we are going to figure out a plan for this school year. Do you understand me?" Her face is flushed and wisps of hair stick to her sweaty neck. The laundry basket is on the chair next to her, the clothes in it half-folded, as if she left in the middle of doing it to confront me.

"I think I want to take biology," I say.

She looks shocked, as if she expected a much bigger fight out of me. Then her face softens. "Okay, what else?" She opens the course catalogue and sits down and I sit down next to her, and together we look at the possibilities.

On my last day at the aquarium, Chad takes me out to the patio and we sit, looking at the Charleston Harbor. I imagine St. Catherine out there, somewhere in the waves.

"It was a good summer. I'm going to miss you," he says. He pulls a little white box out of his pocket. I recognize it as one of the ones from the gift shop. "Here," he says. It's a silver octopus keychain.

"To remind you of the aquarium, and your favorite thing in it. I always knew you liked her best." I laugh. Chad is obviously much more aware than I ever gave him credit for, at least when it comes to me. I realize that I'm going to miss him, too. A lot. I feel a little hollowed out. This is the sadness that was missing that morning at the IHOP.

"Will you come back and visit?"

“Of course,” I say. “It’s not like I’m moving away. We’ll still see each other.” I hope this is true. Chad is the one thing from the aquarium I want to keep in my life.

“I know. But you’ll be busy with your classes. Do you think you’ll work here again?”

“I don’t know,” I say. And it doesn’t matter that I don’t know because I am eighteen and have a lot of time to decide. I stare out over the water into the sun, until the world is washed white and I cannot see.

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# Displaced

| Stefanie Mauro

## I.

Years after she left, that house remained a rosy still life in her mind, settled in a perpetual summer. She grew up in Yonkers, in an old house with dilapidated light fixtures and modern leather couches. She attended private Catholic school, even though her family was not Catholic, because the public schools were too poor to be good. The Catholic school wasn't too good either. On the first day of first grade, she stood before the huge front doors swinging open as students flooded the hallways and she stared up at the bleached church steeple that towered above her. Its immense height frightened her, the way it seemed to grow as it climbed the sky, reaching up so that their God could grip it with his fist and judge the inhabitants of his domain. She imagined their God's big hand coming down through the clouds and seizing the steeple, shaking it to its core and scaring all the children inside. She couldn't move. Her mother had to grab her hand and pull her through the door and into the rush of noise, clattering shoes, laughter, shouts, and then the school bell rang and her mother let go of her hand and gave her a nudge down the hallway, and when the little girl looked back, her mother had already disappeared.

## II.

In school, she was taught legends, myths, and sometimes lies, or half-lies, and given answers that were influenced by personal sentiment. When her parents told her they made laws, she didn't understand. Rules, she thought, they must make rules. They obviously made the rule that she had to brush her teeth every night before she went to sleep. She couldn't understand that some laws were better than others and when, one day, someone tried to explain it to her, she brushed it off. These were her parents, after all. They

loved her.

### III.

When she was younger, her favorite book was about a gang of children who lived in the network of sewers and abandoned subway lines underneath the streets of New York City. Her parents didn't approve of the book, so she got a thrill out of reading it secretly in her room at night, reveling in her own private rebellion. When she was older, she forgot about the book lying in a cardboard box in a closet somewhere. Her life became occupied with makeup and boys and sneaking into her parents' liquor cabinet. But sometimes, when she walked through the city with her friends, something would occasionally pull at her mind. She would see a steaming pothole or glance down a dark subway entrance and it would feel somehow familiar, even if she had never seen it before.

### IV.

She took French classes. They were part of the curriculum of the Catholic school even though Spanish was more practical. She moved to Montréal partly because it was easy to disappear in a city where half the people didn't speak English. She tried to blend in as best as she could in a city filled with so many displaced Americans. One day, on the metro, she overheard a dark-skinned couple next to her speaking rapidly in a language she did not understand. She pulled out her headphones and tried to make sense of what they were saying. It was Spanish, she was sure of it, and for a moment she felt a pang of regret. Spanish was everywhere in New York. It was its second language and she had failed to connect to that part of her culture. She wondered if these people were from New York. They were obviously from the States—nearly every Spanish-speaking person in Montréal was—but how far had they traveled to get here? What were they talking about that she could not understand? And

even if she could, would it have made much of a difference?

V.

The cold infected every inch of her. No New York winter had prepared her for it. The wind clawed at her skin and froze her eyelashes so she felt as if she was walking around with icicles heavy on her eyelids. Breathing in the negative degree air that lasted through March was almost impossible. When she had to walk to the metro down the street, she held her breath. She rarely went out otherwise. She dreamed constantly of going south to the warmth of tropical sunlight. She didn't know where specifically—she had never been there—but she wanted a soft white sand beach with tall palm trees and turquoise surf. The sun and its warmth were things that were so foreign to her. During winter, she almost forgot what it felt like.

VI.

She didn't have a lover. She didn't need one. She only focused on the basic necessities of life. She needed to work at the restaurant to get money. She needed money to buy food and pay her rent and buy metro tickets so she could get to the restaurant to make money. She needed those things to live. She didn't need lovers to live, though she had had them before. But that was another life, a past life, a life before she left New York. All that was just a memory and sometimes she forgot it was even that and thought it may have been a dream. She wondered if her brain actually made some of it up to fill in the parts she couldn't remember. She didn't like the idea, but she wasn't sure how to stop it.

VII.

One time she had the flu and it nearly killed her. She was alone

in her apartment for weeks, too weak to go outside and ask for help. She realized that she had no real friends. No one would know if she died except the landlord, who would eventually come knocking on the door asking for rent and would instead find her dead body, cold and frigid, lying white in her bed. He would find all the illegal drugs stashed in cupboards and drawers, sealed in their carefully labeled containers and he would find her scales and weights and measuring equipment and no emergency contact numbers whatsoever.

*Stefanie Mauro will graduate from Ramapo College of New Jersey this May with a B.A. in Literature, a concentration in Creative Writing, and a minor in French. She is the publicist for her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, focusing on fiction.*

## The Contracting of a Womb and Long-Distance Goats

| Christina Seymour

Christmas 1996

Gabriella hugged her snowman mug with thinning hands, slipping three of her knobby fingers through the handle, trying to steal the warmth of her microwaved lemon tea. Her glassy eyes stared restlessly at the three envelopes lying in front of her like a game of solitaire on a white plastic TV tray, the TV turned to *A Charlie Brown Christmas* on mute. One letter was a perfectly impersonal white business envelope, with her typed address in a rectangular screen:

Mrs. Gabriella Bliss-Stenson  
Apartment No. 4, 8th Street  
Peachtree City, GA 30269

A bill. She set it beside her on the waterbed centered in front of the TV in the main room of her new apartment. She preferred it to a sofa. Lately, she rarely moved from the gelled-water mattress that reminded her of a perpetual bath, forever submerging her body in the life-blood of the human race, forever confined to a home like a womb.

The middle letter on the tray was in a wide, sky blue envelope with the scrawling red ink of her cousin Dorothy's handwriting. A sympathy card, no doubt, boasting some generic saying like "Sorry for your loss," "My deepest sympathy," "God must have needed Bryson on his birthday," "Christmas must be *hard*." Hard. Hard. By now, Gabriella knew that these things were just commonplace, just polite, like the realization that when people are gone they are gone; their bodies are buried or burned, their minds as elusive as egg whites, sifting through her fingers into the steel garbage can. No folded cardstock, no painted daisies, no God will reverse time,

sucking the egg whites and the bleeding yolk out of the trash and into the obliterated shell of Bryson's deteriorating skin. Gabriella didn't need polite. She needed her waterbed, her womb. She flicked the switch of the overflowing shredder by her slippered feet and fed the pity-blue envelope into the grinding teeth of the machine.

The third letter was the last, a maroon envelope in the shape of a card addressed to Gabriella's apartment, but written "To Leland and Linda Rosenfeld." A slight smile crept across Gabriella's peeling lips, and she glanced around her small apartment, at the tall cream door, at the stout oven and microwave, at the red curtains of the shower hiding in the bathroom, at Charlie Brown and Lucy gesturing on the screen. Her hands pulled the edges of her pale pink robe tight at her throat. No one was watching.

According to the return address, the sender lived in Farmland, Indiana. Gabriella carefully lifted the tip of the envelope fold, hardened with the saliva of the unknown sender, an intimate adhesive strip that attracted Gabriella's vulnerability. She wanted to smell the saliva, to maybe lick it back, but she resisted for fear that Linus or, God forbid, Lucy might see. She pulled out a green Season's Greetings card with a wreath on the front. Inside was a meaningless message typed in red that Gabriella ignored. What she did read was the handwritten note inside:

Leland and Linda,

Hope this year has brought you cheer. Vince's MS has been acting up lately, so we're all a bit on edge. The kids are managing with their schoolwork. Elizabeth is pulling B's and made the soccer team. Jared unfortunately got into a fight and broke his collar bone. I'll spare you the details for my sake. We finally got our insurance company to cover his seizure medicine, so he has been seizing much less frequently, not in school anymore, at least. I have been busy keeping the house and raising, birthing, milking, and feeding the goats. I should send you a picture of the last birth we had; it was just miraculous to watch, despite the

loss of the mother, Daisy, and much of her blood. It was very sad. We have been able to slightly supplement our income with the money we get from the corner store that sells our milk, but still, most of the money comes from Vince's plumbing business, which is threatened by the worsening of his MS. Goats are what we love, and we will never give them up, but Vince may have to find an office job maybe at the local power plant. I'm sure it will work out.

Best Wishes; say hello to Jeffie for us,

Melissa and Vince

With wide eyes, Gabriella read and re-read the letter from Melissa and Vince of Farmland, Indiana until her eyes hurt and the sharp pain of concentration struck her forehead. Gabriella smelled the mist of the letter, smoke and glue and a hint of gardenia perfume, and set the card back on the TV tray. She stretched her sore knees and legs up onto the waterbed, pulling a knit blanket to her chin. She didn't bother to turn out the lights or turn off the muted television as she drifted into dreaming of large cartoon goats birthing human baby after human baby, covered with lakes of blood and stiffening with the debilitation of muscle spasms, dizziness, and double vision. Melissa and Vince. Vince and Melissa. Vince must brush Melissa's hair from her eyes when they dance at weddings. Melissa must settle her hand in Vince's waistband during movies. Vince must twist quietly in his sleep while Melissa lies awake feeling the pulse of the bed, thanking God for this love, this person. Gabriella, Gabriella and Bryson.

Christmas 1997

Gabriella sat down on her water mattress with a white TV tray in front of *The Price is Right* on television. She began to eat a chicken alfredo Banquet meal, but pushed the tray away when the mail fell through door slot. In the stack of five pieces of mail, Gabriella grabbed just one, a wide green envelope from Melissa and Vince.

Leland and Linda,

It's the holiday season again already. Can you believe it? This year has been a good one for us, as long as we stay positive. Vince found a new job at the power plant. He says so far, he just has to push papers and type up correspondence, but he's working his way up. We had to up his intake of steroids, Novantrone, Betaseron, and Cytoxan because his symptoms are staying as bad as they were last year, but at least he's not on his feet all day. Elizabeth is excited about her new pet hamster we bought because of her good report card. She's becoming very interested in Zoology. In her class, she dissected a small shark and a crayfish (she wants me to tell everyone that). Jared has been helping with the goats, mainly because he dropped out of school. It's not for everyone, I guess. And frankly, we can use all the help we can get around here. He could make a nice farm business if the bank would loan him money to buy some land. I have also been tending our beautiful goats and caring for our prize-winning one, Melody. She is the first daughter of Daisy, who died in childbirth last year. She is a slight thing but she gives milk like a miracle, a true winner. Hope you enjoy the outfit for Jeffie we sent along. He should have fun with it.

Melissa and Vince

In a thick bubble wrap envelope on Gabriella's floor was a tiny leopard print dog's outfit. A twang of guilt leapt into Gabriella's throat, and her eyes softened. She remembered—although realistically it was imagining—Vince, a crippling man, pushing buttons behind a button-covered desk, Elizabeth, a young, smart girl with pigtails cutting ravenously into an embalmed creature and reveling in its guts, Jared, a tough, muscular boy thrusting a wobbly baby goat across his wide, tan shoulders, and Melissa, an exhausted friend, with a checkered bandana on her head and ripped blue jeans hugging her curvy legs, careful fingers clasping a fountain pen and writing effortlessly about her curiously easy life. Who are Leland and Linda, Gabriella wondered. How do they know Vince and

Melissa? Through school? Or family? And what kind of dog do they have? Will their dog miss this outfit? Will they think that Vince and Melissa are ignoring them during the holidays? Do the couples ever contact each other throughout the year? And if so, do they mention these cards, wondering why Leland and Linda never get them? I have to tell them who I really am, she thought.

Gabriella retrieved a pen and notebook paper from her end-table drawer and drafted a letter on the TV tray.

“I love hearing about your family. You really brighten my holidays with your cards. But I’m not Leland and Linda. I’m Gabriella.”

No. Gabriella crossed that out.

“You are not writing to the right person. Leland and Linda don’t live here anymore. I do. I’m Gabriella and Bryson. We are, we are Gabriella and Bryson.”

No. She crossed that out, too. She started again.

“Thanks so much for your cards last year and this year. I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to respond. We’ve been very busy with our jobs, but we love hearing from you. Maybe we could visit you someday soon? We would like that. We’ve been enjoying the Georgia sun and our dog Jeffie loves the gift. We want to do anything to take away Vince’s pain, but we know we can’t do that. Not with a letter. I wish we could tell you about miraculous goats and our smart and helpful children who dissect things and throw wobbly goats across their strong shoulders, but we can’t. We mostly watch TV nowadays, the Christmas specials this time of year, game shows, Oprah when it’s not about tragedy, and the food network. Paula Dean is my favorite. We eat whatever my mother drops off outside the door. We like taking long baths in the middle of the night, only to return to our waterbed, feeling the small waves on our vanishing muscles. It does get lonely. It does. We are really just in love. So in love every day. It drips from our pores. Holidays are hard. Christmas is

hard. Harder than our love ever was.

Linda and Leland”

On December 26, 1997, Gabriella mailed the letter in a simple white envelope.

#### Christmas 1998

After Christmas dinner with her mom and dad and her aunt’s family at her homestead two towns over, Gabriella returned to her apartment. Though surrounded by people at the dinner, Gabriella could not stop thinking about Melissa and Vince. How are they this year? Did they send another gift? What should I get for them? Something for their goats? Or maybe a Chemistry set for Elizabeth. Maybe money to help with their medical bills and their goat’s milk business. Vince must have gripped Melissa’s shoulder as she wrote the letter this year, bending over to kiss her on the hair, his softener scent pouring over Melissa, concentrating on their life details but encircled by Vince’s love. As soon as she stepped inside her apartment door, she paged hastily through her mail looking for Vince’s and Melissa’s card, but none came. She scrambled to the end-table, pulling out a notebook and a pen.

“Vince and Melissa,

We haven’t heard from you this Christmas. How is everything? The goats? And Elizabeth and Jared? How are you, Melissa, busy with bottling and selling milk? I hope everything is okay with Vince’s MS. You two were always so in love. It just seems like a bad omen that you haven’t written. I saw my family today. Made me want to be around friends like you instead.

Gabriella”

#### Christmas 1999

Gabriella lay flat on the dirty wooden floor of her apartment, the telephone ringing every ten minutes, her mother begging her to come to dinner again this year. Gabriella’s new black and brown

terrier, Jeffie, licked the soles of her socked feet. She didn't feel like eating. She didn't feel like turning on the television to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* on mute. She no longer craved the comfort of an amniotic bath or the lilting water of her water bed. She twitched on the unbending floor acting like a goat soaked in blood and stiff, autopsied sharks, the stray nails on the floorboards nicking her skin and the hard wood straining the arch of her neck. She wondered how a goat felt while being born, pushing long, knobby legs through a pulsing uterine canal, and every stiff hair of her body matted to her skin with fluid and sharp smelling blood. Gabriella broke so hard through the uterine opening that the mother goat split in two, ripped apart by the baby she sheltered in her warm stomach. The baby's only glimpse of her mother, and the mother's only glimpse of her daughter, a shutting of her globe eyes and returning to aching darkness.

Gabriella's face crinkled with the sinus pain of crying so violently, and she slammed her skeletal fists on the dusty floor, shot up onto her bruised knees and retrieved the telephone. She returned Indian style to the floor, leaning against the edge of the unsheeted waterbed like an awakened baby goat crying for its mother, testing her legs for the first time.

On the next ring, Gabriella placed the receiver of the phone in her lap. "Christmas is hard," she repeated emphatically three times in three different ways. Not to her mother on the other end, or to Jeffie, eyes agape. It was not the other side of the world listening, not Melissa and Vince, Leland and Linda, wives and husbands, Bryson, Bryson. Enduring Gabriella's words was no one distant. No one imagined.

*At age four, Christina Seymour wondered, "Why does people have eyes?" She attends the M.F.A. program at West Virginia University for poetry. Her works have appeared in Speak Peace—American Voices Respond to Vietnamese Children's Paintings, Backbone Mountain Review, Three Rivers Review, and Mind Murals.*

## Just Let It Rest

| Melissa Miller

Concealed inside Oma Mable's dingy set of dresser drawers, that cubbyhole had withstood more than one round of SS searches. Here in Vienna nearly two decades after the war, it is commonly thought that there is no more need for such concealment among honest people. Still, I keep this secret compartment, hidden inside the same chest of drawers, though it contains less offensive contents than black market wares and forged papers. No, my secret cache now guards a compact tin box sealed tight against the damp—filled with rolls of undeveloped film.

"Bernd, this is absurd," I can still hear Ezra Mencher—the only living soul who knows my secret—as he argued with me one evening. "These photographs do no one any good hidden away in a box."

Yet in the box the film remains, in its secret haven, where I think of it only occasionally.

Today I'm at the corner market. Markets still delight me—meats, sugar, vodka—all in stock, all legal. I pause over some fruit near the front window and find a boy staring at me through the glass. A street child, his features sharp, his eyes bright and intent. I photographed a boy like this, I remember, while secretly offering him a crust of bread. The boy hesitated at first, seeing my camera, but he soon lunged for the bread, and ran toward the relative cover of the latrines.

*Did the photograph turn out?* The curious part of me wonders, thinking back to the box hidden in my apartment. It would be easy to find out . . .

*But they do me no good developed,* I remind myself.

When I look up again, the boy in the window has disappeared.

I continue my shopping. Carrots . . . celery . . . potatoes. I'll make vegetable stew tonight, healthy like Dr. Cohen recommended. He also said no booze, but maybe I'll go out for a drink with the boys anyway. But only the boys I met after the war, not Mencher. Last time I got drunk with him I said too much. Babbled about how

we met in Treblinka—him a prisoner and me a clerk.

“Whatever happened to all those photographs you were always taking, Beckenbauer?” Mencher asked me. “You develop them?”

“No.”

“Destroy them?”

“No.”

And the rest had spilled out. Since then Mencher never let the subject rest.

“Bernd, they have to be developed. Think of all the history, the documentation. They are last remnants of some peoples’ lives.”

“No, Mencher. We need to move on. Why can’t you just let it rest?” I was so worked up at that point, I fell into a coughing fit and that was the end of it. For a while, anyway.

I set my basket of groceries on the front counter. A rather pretty blonde girl waits behind me with an air of absolute boredom. *Click—click—click*—her polished nails tap the counter. Behind her an older man looks intently at me, his brow furrowed and his mouth unsmiling.

*What does he know?* It’s an old paranoia for me, even after the war. The old regime never disappeared completely. Plenty are still out there, holding secret meetings and raging drunkenly about the traitors to their great system of inhumanity. I have reason to believe my own name surfaced at these gatherings. In the midst of the postwar trials, I testified against my old employers in Treblinka; this was enough to earn me a little press. Only a little press, but enough to make the former SS thugs aware of me. It’s a thought that chills me—that any middle-aged Aryan man might know my name and face and think me the enemy. A few rocks thrown through my bedroom window a decade back convinced me to change my residence to a different part of the city. On the streets, there have been whispered comments and threats, and a year or two back, someone tried to run me over with a bicycle . . . Of course, that might have just been a coincidence. Maybe I’m reading too much into it. But either way, these incidents occur occasionally, leaving me just enough time to

gather my bearings before another man glares at me in the market.

Telling the cashier to keep the change, I hasten for the door. I'm no longer a young man; I'm far too old to be dealing with this sort of stress.

I hurry along, bent against the wind, determined not to see any more images—stripe-clad ghosts toiling in the mud, sneering dogs with wreaths of blood encircling their muzzles, the commander's cool gaze, the glares of passersby, and the devil-eyes of the man on the bicycle as he bears down on me . . .

*Gott! Leave me alone! I'm too old for this!* I collapse on a street bench gasping and wheezing. I sit there awhile breathing deeply and willing the ghosts away.

Not everything has been bad. Why, just last year a man recognized me on the street. Apparently, I had given him some bread when he was a youth in Treblinka. I myself cannot remember this exchange—in those days I tried not to memorize individual faces. However, this man remembered it perfectly. To show his gratitude he insisted I come to dinner at his home the following evening—the first night of Hanukah. Maybe they'll invite me again this holiday. I would like to spend this last one with them . . .

I should rest a bit longer on this bench to get my bearings, but the glaring man may not be so far away. Coughing quietly into my scarf, I set off again on a more roundabout way home—a way with less shadows and more people to hide among. From a block away I can see the top of the apartment building that I had chosen for its plain exterior and for the Polish couple who tended it, collecting rent with no more than a "*Danka, Herr Beckenbauer.*"

I don't usually have too much trouble climbing the flight of stairs to my second floor rooms, but today when I arrive at my door I am wheezing. I think I'll turn in early tonight. No drink with the boys after all.

Entering, it takes me a moment to realize that the lights are on—I didn't leave the lights on.

Two men are sitting on the davenport. SS! I leap for the door

and almost make it—*damn these old legs!*—before one of the men grabs my shoulder.

“Calm down, Beckenbauer.” It’s Mencher. “I’m sorry,” he says. “We came to see you and you were out, so I asked the landlady to let us in to wait. She must not have seen you come in. Otherwise, she would have warned you, I’m sure. Bernd, you certainly are jittery. You need a drink, my friend,” Mencher leads me to my own table and sits me down. “Nothing happened did it?” he asks in a low voice.

“*Nein*,” I growl, eyeing the other man—average height, close-cropped brown hair, tiny golden spectacles set on a thin nose. I have never seen him before.

“Oh—Bernd, this is my friend, Roch Beringer. Herr Beringer, this is Herr Beckenbauer.”

“It’s a pleasure,” says Beringer, as he shakes my hand.

“Yes. Would you like to . . . um . . . sit down?” I say, gesturing awkwardly to the chair across from me, which Beringer immediately takes. Mencher sets my groceries in my icebox and pours us all drinks, something he brought along himself by the look of it. When he also sits down the two men are wearing businesslike expressions that remind me far too much of Commander Sturm. I took a photograph of him with that same half frown. I glance in the direction of my bedroom where, through the open door, I can see the chest of drawers tucked under the steps—a stupid thing to do, really. I quickly look back at Mencher.

“So . . . what is it that I can do for you, gentlemen?”

“You can start by taking a drink, old man,” Mencher says, placing a drink in front of me. “I still say you look a bit rattled.” He frowns in a worried manner; still I am reluctant to take more than a sip as I have vowed to never again get drunk with this man.

“Bernd,” Mencher continues, “Herr Beringer, here, is a writer. He’s working on a book about labor camps during the war. He recently interviewed me and others from Treblinka—the Stuecks, Nussenbaums, Nahal Goldstein, you remember?” I do. Flashes of

each in their prison stripes—young and thin. Most I have seen since, except Goldstein, who ended up on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. Wonder how Beringer managed that one. So that's why he's here. He wants to interview me, too.

"No!" I say, slamming down my drink, startling the writer fellow—well, good. "No. I won't talk to you about Treblinka or the war or any of it. It's over. Gott, why can't you just let it rest?"

"Bernd, calm down." Mencher comes around the table to brace me as I sway. I'm standing. I don't remember getting up. How can I not remember getting up? I remember other things so well, damn it! Ghost laborers, starving children, photos in memory not just film. I'm in my apartment, but I see a pool of blood. I see a pair of devil eyes bearing down on me. All I can do is stand there.

Mencher pushes me aside, off the sidewalk, back into my kitchen chair. I'm coughing now. I struggle for a handkerchief, but as I do I remember that it had been Mencher who dragged me aside that day, saving me from the bicyclist.

"I'm sorry," said Beringer. "Maybe I should come back a different time."

"No, please stay," Mencher says. To me, he gives his handkerchief, which I accept.

When the coughing stops, Mencher is straddling his chair in front of me, his chin resting on its back so his face is level with mine.

"Bernd, you know the past cannot rest. Not for you, not for me, not for any of us. I was there too, remember? Buck up, my friend."

Ashamed. That's what I am. Mencher had been there and in much worse circumstances than mine. But he has nothing to be ashamed of. He lived the best he could. I could have done more. Smuggled more food. Bribed more soldiers. But I didn't. Now most of those I wronged are gone and buried.

"What do you want?" I whisper.

"Well," it is Herr Beringer speaking now. "The one thing I was really hoping to find for the book was some sort of visual—regime

papers, letters, photographs. Herr Mencher hinted that you might be able to help me?"

I put my face in my hands. I cannot look at either of them. What they are asking for . . . the sum of all I did not do . . . of all the people I failed to help. How can I bear to show that to anyone, ever?

I stand and shuffle to the window to stare out at Vienna. There are plenty of them still out there—like the man at the market, the bicyclist. They will come at me in droves if I give in to Mencher. Yet I don't feel I can refuse. Has Mencher been right all along? Do the ghosts in the box want to be seen?

I stare at the red-stained handkerchief in my hand.

"How long," I ask, "will it take to publish this book?"

"Oh! Well, I'm quite far along. Assuming all goes well, the book could be on the shelves within nine months."

*Nine months!* I think. *That may be too soon . . .*

Still, I head for the bedroom and kneel before the chest of drawers. With a tug, the middle drawer pops out. I reach through the hole in the back and bring out a dusty cigar tin. I blow on it so I can see the bearded man smiling beneath a layer of grime. I cough a bit—there is an awful lot of dust—as I set the box before Herr Beringer. "Nine rolls of film—all undeveloped—to be used for your book under one condition."

"What's that?" he breathes, reaching tentatively for the box as though he's afraid it will disappear if he startles it.

"You won't publish the book until after I'm dead."

*Thump!* Herr Beringer has dropped the tin on his lap. "Until when?" he asks.

"Until I'm dead. Don't worry, that shouldn't be too long," I assure him, holding out the bloody handkerchief.

Herr Beringer stares at me in a mixture of horror and confusion, but I can tell that Mencher understands.

"Well, I think this occasion calls for a drink," Mencher says, pouring another round.

"A very large one, please," Herr Beringer laughs in nervous

agreement.

Mencher hands me my beer and raises his own glass. “To Bernd!”

“To Herr Beckenbauer,” Beringer agrees.

“To those damn persistent ghosts,” I mutter and drain the whole glass.

*Melissa Miller is looking forward to graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in May of 2012 with a double major in English and Spanish Secondary Education. She is currently completing her student teaching semester and serves as the treasurer of her local Sigma Tau Delta chapter.*

# The Hotel Franklin

| Neilee Wood

## 1

When Rory's shoulder sling comes off, Jack and the guys urge him to come with them to the Hotel Franklin. He hesitates at the invitation and manages to avoid the red brick building until the end of the school year.

All the teenagers come to the hotel at one point or another. Some only enter it once, but others come back. Rory and the guys spend summer nights there, shedding the heat and weight of their small town and filling the hotel with their voices. When they leave, they don't go far. Each night they shed the small town and escape into the hotel, but each morning they pull the heat and weight back onto their shoulders.

Rory was seven years old when he first went to the hotel. Shane fiddled with the door, pushed it open, then strode across the dusty floor. They entered the ancient air. Rory crawled up the stairs, smudged with darkness, all the corners littered with yellowed receipt slips chronicling the guests in faded black pen. Rory sat reading the names on the brittle, crackling paper until Shane said it was time to go home.

## 2

The summer day has a bit of a breeze, so Jeannie and Kat go up to the roof of the Hotel Franklin to sunbathe and smoke. Kat lays out the towels, and Jeannie tosses her the pack of cigarettes that she snuck from her mother that morning.

"Don't take them all like last time," she says. "I've gotta get them back on the counter or she'll notice."

Kat shrugs and lights the cigarette. She pulls her shirt over her head to reveal the floral bikini top she bought at the thrift store in Granite, then stretches out on the towel. The sunlight drapes over

them like a hot blanket.

“You’d think my house was this hotel,” Kat says after a while. “What with everything getting all boxed up and scattered about.”

Jeannie blows out a stream of smoke. “Just your stuff, you mean,” she corrects. “Call and tell me all about college, okay?”

Kat rolls over onto her stomach, nestling her head on top of her arms. “Not my fault you’re not comin’ too.” Her voice is muffled, as if she’s talking to the cigarette and not to her friend. Jeannie flicks her cigarette ash at Kat’s back, half hoping it will burn her, but the breeze carries it away.

Kat stretches out her arm and gestures to the far end of the roof, where the rails of the fire escape loop over the side of the building, a tail that grows into a twisting serpent of steps and landings on the other side of the wall.

“Remember when we tried to climb down that?”

“Yeah.” Of course she remembers. Kat had swung her leg over the edge, and the old rails had started to pull away from the building. While Jeannie grabbed at the metal in horror, Kat just laughed and shimmied down the rungs to the first landing.

“Get back up here!” Jeannie had shrieked.

### 3

The guys holler hellos when Rory emerges from the staircase. They push a beer bottle into one hand and a spray paint can into the other. His shoulder works again, so it doesn’t hurt when Jack punches him cheerfully. They laugh and joke, their voices ringing through hotel hall. One of the flashlights shines on the dead bird next to the KEEP OUT sign. Its beady eye gleams at them. The paint slashes across the walls, and Rory savors the destruction. He wants to rip things apart and leave them tattered and broken.

It’s partway through the night when Rory feels his stomach tighten. He sits down on a cabinet that creaks under his weight. He hasn’t felt sick in a long while. He swallows and takes a deep breath

to let the nausea subside. Must be stress.

## 4

The silence is Kat-shaped, a silhouetted void in the noise of autumn. Jeannie picks up the phone but hangs it up again. She doesn't know Kat's new number.

## 5

Rory picks at the paint under his fingernails, red spray paint from the night before. He walks home from the store. His mom told him to take the car, but he shoved the keys back into her hands.

He passes by Jeannie's house, the white one on the corner with the flowerbeds full of tulips. He once heard her singing to them as she watered them, but she isn't out today, and Rory walks on. He only pauses when Michael, the boy next door, runs up to tell him that the squirrel came to visit.

"Shane's the one who liked squirrels," he snaps.

## 6

Anyone who attends the Mangum First United Methodist Church behind the hotel knows that Jeannie can sing. The church women who serve the Saturday brunch talk about how a nine-year-old Jeannie in a ruffled white Easter dress stepped up onto the stage, and when she opened her mouth, a whole orchestra poured out. Cellos, trumpets, flutes, and all.

She doesn't go to church on Sundays now. Jeannie scurries up the steps of the Hotel Franklin, finds a room with an open window, and sings to the shattered lamps, the broken cabinets, the dead birds who listen to her voice. Sometimes the hymns of the choir of the First United Methodist Church spiral through the window.

## 7

“What’s the matter, buddy?”

Jack tosses the can of spray paint back and forth between his hands, fast, the way he tosses baseballs back and forth with the same resounding smack of skin.

Smack, smack, smack, smack.

Rory reaches out and knocks Jack’s hand; the can flies and clatters across the hotel floor. It rolls and nudges the KEEP OUT sign closer to the still wings of the dead bird.

## 8

Jeannie starts writing an aria. An English one because she doesn’t know Italian. She goes to the hotel and sits and hums and jots down measures on scraps of paper. Then she opens her mouth, and an orchestra pours out—cellos, trumpets, flutes, and all—and the empty halls of the hotel bubble with music.

## 9

At night, when they’re at the hotel, several hours pass by before Rory’s skin starts to crawl. He snaps at his friends and tells them to shut up and leave him alone.

And they do because they know what happened. They drift silently about the hallways, glide like ghosts in and out of the rooms, and Rory marvels at his power to stop their mouths, make them squirm like worms. He can plug them with a look.

He stalks home with his hands shoved in his pockets. He refuses to let them drive him.

## 10

She’s forgetting to eat. She imagines herself as one of the great

artists. Mozart, perhaps, or Beethoven. They became so consumed by their work that they forgot to eat.

That's what she's always wanted, right? To have the music consume her, to slide down its quarter note throat?

Yes, that's what she wants.

## 11

And what does he want?

To lose himself too, perhaps, but he wants to wade in paint instead of music. If he coats the hotel in colors, then the memories will drown beneath the layers.

His shoulder aches.

Rory goes to a room on the second floor, aims at the orange walls, and hears the hiss of the aerosol can. The spidery letters bleed into existence, slash across the chipped orange canvas, and stretch themselves along the walls like black gauze.

## 12

Jeannie chooses a room on the second floor. In the corner, graffiti glares at her.

"Everything is closing in."

She decides to choose a different room.

## 13

He dreams about the pressure, the broken gasp, the throbbing lights searing his eyeballs. He stumbles to the bathroom and throws up. Too much stress.

## 14

Kat calls. Her voice spills out of the telephone and floods onto

the carpet of Jeannie's living room, leaving her skin sticky and damp. Kat gripes about the professors, the roommate who won't share her cigarettes, the boy in history class who makes her heart constrict but never glances her way.

The Kat-shaped silence warps and becomes a jagged melted thing, like a piece of molten glasswork removed from the furnace too soon. Jeannie wants to throw this new thing away from her and hear it shatter against the floor.

She doesn't tell Kat that the aria is almost done.

She goes to the hotel that night.

## 15

They've got beer and Red Bull and a couple of girls at the hotel, and that's all Rory needs. His throat still convulses with an acrid aftertaste, but he grabs a Coke and drowns it. The ancient air mingles with lingering heat, and Rory breathes heavily. He climbs up the stairs smudged with darkness and picks up a yellowed receipt slip.

He thinks of Shane.

## 16

She curls up in the alcove nook sandwiched above the fourth floor and below the rooftop room that holds the squat rusted generator. She climbed up the thin wrought ladder to stay beneath this sloping roof filled with receipt slips. She stretches out on her back and moves her arms over the wood as if she were making a snow angel, causing the slips to skitter and hiss like angry insects. She smiles at the discordance.

She wants the music, dust, and dirt to scrub off the residue of Kat that sticks to her skin.

The voices of a party downstairs climb up the ladder and add a harmony to her song.

“Oh, cheer up, Rory. It’s a party!”

Jack pushes a beer into his hand and laughs. “Dude, what’s with you?”

Rory glares at him. Jack knows. All of Mangum knows, but Jack does not fall limp. He still laughs, tossing his Red Bull can back and forth in his hands.

Smack, smack, smack, smack.

The sound of skin on metal sizzles against Rory’s nerves. His shoulder made that sound; Shane’s body made that sound.

“Just shut the hell up!”

Rory reaches out and hits Jack’s hand, then his shoulder, then his face. Jack shouts, his hand flies out, and Rory feels the pressure, his own broken gasp. The throbbing lights of the streetlamps outside sear against his eyeballs as his neck wrenches to the side. He lunges, and their bodies move against each other. Arms against arms, feet finding purchase on the carpet, bruises forming from their fists pounding against each other.

Jack’s hands slam him against the wall, and Rory feels the car door again, the crushing force of motion bending the bones of his shoulder, and Shane doesn’t hear when he screams because Shane is twisted over the steering wheel, his body mangled at wrong angles, the whites of his eyes watching Rory without seeing him at all.

Rory’s head bangs against the hotel wall. This time he will make it right. This time he will die, and Shane will live.

Someone is screaming. It must be Shane.

“Jack! Stop! Stop, Jack! Stop!”

The other boys hold Jack back as Jeannie yanks Rory away. Rory, who told her she was amazing when she sang at the school talent show. Rory, who lost his brother in a car crash. Rory, who came to

school with his arm in a sling and his face covered in bruises. He will have bruises again from this night.

Jeannie guides him up the stairs; he trips, gasps, and finally notices that someone is leading him away. They stumble up the flights.

“Where are we going?” he croaks.

“The roof.”

She pushes him up the ladder. He staggers past the alcove nook and crawls onto the landing where the generator squats. She takes his hand and leads him past the silent thing, out into the open air where all of Mangum stretches out around them under the stars.

And because Jeannie does not know what else to do for Rory or herself, she begins to sing her English aria. It changes to a minor key and slides across the rooftop, a musical ghost that morphs into the shapes of Shane and Kat. The music shimmers in the night. It both stings and soothes. They want to reach out and grasp at the notes, but they know they will come up with nothing, so they simply stand side by side on the rooftop of the hotel.

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## The Third Saturday in October

| Will Lewis

Andrew lay awkwardly on a skinny, wall-length bench and began listening to portable radio as marine life swam about the cool blue glow of the Georgia Aquarium's Ocean Voyager tunnel. He plugged ear buds into the jack of his iPhone and began dialing through out of state AM stations, searching for a broadcast in which lost fathers call in with their whereabouts, made almost impossible to hear for the glass and water around him. A bad attitude and some quick maneuvering through the River Scout exhibit had stolen him away from his single mother and middle school-aged brother and into this serene space which he thought was unusually empty for an autumn Saturday. He thought, *Maybe nobody comes here when there's football on T.V.*

As a quarterback's pass pierced the flesh of the radio static, Andrew gave up hope and remained listening to the game. His mom had brought him and his brother to the zoo or to the aquarium or to Callaway Gardens or to Stone Mountain every year at this time in an attempt to cover up the trauma of how their father was missing from their once-nuclear family. Andrew's back uncoiled onto half of the plastic bench while his right leg kept him uncomfortably balanced. The boy projected his own rendition of the game onto the curved ceiling: a manta ray played the running back as he swam headlong into a group of five smaller yellow fish. Uncooperative, the group parted for the ray without incident while the running back was stuffed for no gain at the line of scrimmage.

Already bored, Andrew began to review text messages he had sent to a girl he was crushing on from a different high school than his and who had recently contacted him on Facebook about a mutual friend's forgotten cell phone number—she smoked, drank, danced, painted, listened to bands like Sublime and Slightly Stoopid, and he did not. He felt that he had made a mistake, again, by sending her five invitations over the past week to “chill” and “hang out,” none of which she had responded to—save for a single

smiley face that he felt she had sent to him by accident.

He tried to think of where he had gone wrong with her and other girls, considering the usual suspects—his immature clothes, his dry hair, his embarrassing laugh, his frail physique and lack of noticeable talent in anything other than using football coach speak and vague movie references—but choosing instead to settle on his inability to single handedly carry a conversation past, “I’m doing alright, thanks,” or “Do you mind if I sit here?”

Andrew was t-boned by guilt when he noticed a man sitting just beyond his feet.

“How’s the score look?” the man inquired. Unsure how anyone could possibly have heard the faint whistle of white noise spitting from his ear buds, Andrew pretended not to have heard him. The man tapped the boy’s left shoe with the back of his hand twice and mouthed, “Score?”

Andrew’s mouth hung slightly open as he studied the man, noting Clint Eastwood’s jaw of iron stubble and Cool Hand Luke’s eyes, hearing Rhett Butler’s suave drawl underneath a smart tuft of combed hair. Before he could consider ignoring the man a second time he had sat up on his elbows, removed one of the ear buds and blurted out, “Uh, n-nothing, nothing.”

“Still? Didn’t the Dawgs start playing at noon?”

“Oh, Georgia. Yeah, um, I’m pretty sure they beat Kentucky thirty four-ten.”

The man’s eyes stayed soft and rested as the right side of his mouth ascended into the narrowness of his cheek, revealing a slight stain of equal parts coffee and cigarettes on two of his incisors and a slightly snagged canine. “Well, shit,” he smiled. “Glad to hear the Dawgs could at least put it on someone.”

Andrew wasn’t sure whether or not he should tell the man about Stafford’s four hundred yards passing or Moreno’s three rushing touchdowns or Allen’s two interceptions. Seconds lurched by without a word. The man looked Andrew over—black Nike sneakers, light brown cargo pants, a green and white striped button down over

a blue Braves t-shirt, auburn cotton hair capped by a graying *Georgia Bulldogs* hat—before deciding to speak: “Yeah, I tell you the truth, when I was in high school I started hitching rides with my dad from Macon up to the Keeneland Horse track in Lexington for their Fall race meet. He wasn’t really ever around much when I was growing up, but when I turned sixteen he started to come by and invite me along with him on trips like this one in Kentucky. I’d ditch school and leave with him on Wednesday morning and we’d both drink beer the whole way up. I’m talking we’d tear ass straight on through Tennessee and be betting horses in Kentucky that night.”

Andrew followed along, imagining the scene in his head: *a boy his age with curly red hair dressed in blue jeans and a red Georgia Bulldogs v-neck, laughing, drinking beer on the passenger side of a tattered cloth-leather bench seat in an old blue Ford pickup that smelled like Old Spice, listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd and tossing empty beer can after empty beer can out the window and onto the warm asphalt of the big bridge in Chattanooga.*

Behind his blue eyes, the man considered the details of having to have duct taped flask-sized liquor bottles to his fuzz-covered legs or else feel his father’s unquenchable thirst for whiskey in the form of bathroom-stall beatings at the game, and of the prostitute that his father had bought for the weekend here, in Atlanta, to take with them. Andrew was removing the second squealing bud from his ear and didn’t notice when the man quaked at the momentary chill of recollection, his father’s hysterical laughter licking at his eardrums while the prostitute had taken his virginity in the parking lot of the racetrack, the burn of his throat afterward when he had stumbled drunkenly into the woods and cried until he threw up.

The man moved on quickly: “After betting on horses, come Saturday we’d spend half of what we’d earned on more beer to sneak into the game that night and then save the other half for Sunday’s afternoon race where we’d try and make up what we spent. Sometimes we’d even leave with a profit!” Andrew couldn’t help but smile at an involved father, let alone one who bet horses and drank

beer with his teenage son.

“My dad would have me pick the horses names, considered me the lucky charm. So I’d pick names like Beluetoscott and Goallinestalker and Areseecola. But, uh, what about you and this hat of yours? You been to some games in Athens before?”

“Uh, no. I mean . . . not really.” Andrew thought about his absent dad, how he had been a walk-on at Georgia in the eighties, how Andrew’s mom hated to see her son wear this hat, how Andrew was six years old when his dad drove him to Athens one Saturday in September, a year after his brother had been born and just a few weeks before his dad would leave the three of them, how his dad didn’t have tickets for the game or the money to pay a scalper for any, how his dad had “made it up to him” before the game by taking him to McDonald’s for his first Big Breakfast with Hotcakes, how he had watched while his thick, hairy hands sculpted warm butter onto the three candied sponges, how his dad had shared with him the only piece of “fatherly wisdom” he would ever get: “Eat anything but the eggs. They’ll make you ill.”

The man saw sadness crease Andrew’s eyes and forehead and tried to talk about something else. “So what game were you listening to if it wasn’t Georgia?”

“Bama, Tennessee,” he mumbled.

“Third Saturday in October!” the man cheered. “Can’t believe I forgot that was today. I’ve been to that game more than any with the Dawgs.”

Andrew found a warmth in the man. The man saw innocence in Andrew.

“Yep, my daughter is a freshman at Bama, actually. Not sure if she got tickets for the game . . . Uh, you look like you’re in college. Freshman?”

“Really? Uh, I-I’m a Junior in high school, actually. But I’m trying to graduate early, or maybe joint-enroll at a college somewhere next year.”

“That’s fine, that’s great . . . Taking any AP classes? My daughter

took a lot of those in high school.”

Andrew readjusted his posture so as to seem a little more professional on the bench. *Maybe meeting this man was supposed to happen, he began to think. Maybe he can put in a good word with his daughter and we'll meet and she'll like me and,* “Yeah, I’m taking some AP classes. Any particular reason she chose Bama?”

“Well, I like to think it’s because her mother and I met there, but it’s more likely she was just following her boyfriend.”

Oh.

“It was today, actually, the third Saturday game when her mother and I met. I was a Junior and so was she, and Bama had just scored to go up on the Vile-enteers. I was wearing khakis and a plaid crimson and white button down and a blazer. She was so cute; she got so worked up over the touchdown that she spilt her bourbon and coke all over my outfit. I remember I turned around ready to pummel some lousy frat bag and she did that thing that girls do, you know when they cup their hands over their nose and mouth. Now this will sound like a lie, but I swear I just stared at her for a minute before telling her, ‘Buy me dinner and we’re even.’ Sure enough we got married a month after graduation the next year.”

Andrew tried not to smile and the man tried not to notice. The bravado of this man, the sophistication, it was something he didn’t think he could ever know. He marveled at him, at his life, his stories, things Andrew didn’t have and didn’t know how to get. “Wow,” he whispered.

“Yeah, I ended up naming a fishing boat after this game too. Yeah . . . I told her it was because of the day we met, but really I just thought *The Third Saturday* was a nice name for a boat! We lived in Mobile for a while—”

The man paused momentarily, studying the wonder in Andrew’s face. Then he spoke: “until we got divorced. I haven’t been married to a woman in twelve years.”

There was another silence between the two of them as the man tried to decide whether or not he had chosen wisely in telling him

this personal detail. But Andrew spoke up, “This is the day my dad left.”

There was a silence of relief between the two of them as they watched the fish swim overhead. Andrew debated introducing the man to his mother, thinking about all of his mom’s failed attempts at finding a decent guy, imagining a life of horse races, deep sea fishing in the Gulf coast, and having a beer with a father.

Finally the man placed his hand on Andrew’s knee. “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

Andrew looked confusedly into the man’s stern visage and saw what he had thought was a man from a generation of families and leadership, of character and chivalry. He had seen John Wayne, Fred Astaire, and James Stewart.

The man leaned into Andrew and kissed his cheek. Andrew’s frail body trembled away ten years of age, leaving him that six-year-old first grade student learning about stranger danger and the “Uh-Oh” feeling, that child that had fallen asleep all those nights hoping he would see his father come home from work, that boy that had cried every morning because he had missed seeing his dad, who had left early for work, again. Andrew shoved the man away, meaning to inflict some sort of duplicate pain upon him with his trembling, bony arms. As he ran to find his mother, lightning and resentment flashed in his eyes, and he had never before looked so much like his father.

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## Extinguishing a Memory

| Erin McChristian

High up on the mountain Alec stared down the winding ski slopes until his vision blurred and he could trick his brain into thinking the slopes were tiny white snakes. *High*, he giggled to himself. *I'm high as a fucking kite. Merry fucking Christmas Eve to me.*

He'd forgotten how much he'd liked this night. No, not Christmas Eve in general, but Christmas Eve at Alta ski resort. At night, after the moon had risen above the jagged mountain peaks, the ski-lifties started working the lifts, bringing all the employees to the top of the mountain. At the summit some words were said, but Alec and the rest of the lifties were always the last ones up to the top, and having to turn off the lift usually meant they missed most of the speaking. *But who gave a shit*, Alec had thought. That's not what he liked about the celebration anyway.

After the last words had been carried away with the chilling wind, the lifties lit each torch the employees had brought. Their job done, they sat on the edge of the raised snow pile where the lift's huge wheel creaked all day as it turned the seats around and around and sent them back to the wheel at the bottom of the lift—one big, never-ending circle. Sitting on the cold, packed snow, they dangled their heavy ski boots over the edge. A net hung below them to catch the amateur skiers who got too anxious and mistimed how early they needed to get off the lift. The lifties' skis and poles were stuck vertically in the sparkling snow outside the lift-operating hut, looking like lopsided stick figures. And then the show began.

One after the other, the employees made their way down Dreamweaver's Demise, the longest run on the mountain. A meandering slope, it sliced its way back and forth across the mountain in wide, flowing turns. Seeing by torchlight, the employees slowly descending the mountain single file, their wands of fire held high above their heads. Above the enchanting scene sat Alec and the other lifties, captivated by the long line of flickering orange lights moving, it seemed, as one massive snake down and

down the mountain. Lost in their own thoughts, nothing passed between the boys except the bottle of whiskey and the rolled-up joint.

Alec's eyes followed the slow procession of the lights down the mountain. It was one of the only times he didn't mind people skiing so unhurriedly. The first year he had worked at Alta, his family had flown from the East coast out to Salt Lake City, driven up the winding ravine, and visited him for a week. *How is it possible to ski so goddamn slow*, he remembered wondering, probably aloud, while skiing with them one day.

He couldn't help that he was better than them. His dad was pushing sixty; his mom was a short, thick Italian woman; and his sister was . . . well, she was a girl for Christ's sake. But it wasn't just that. He'd always been better than them. His mother always used to tell the story of how she decided to make him wear a helmet. Her tone was one of pride, or at least he'd always thought so.

"Alec was only six," she would always start off with. Then she'd take a pause for effect. Shit, she was annoying. "We had just started to teach Keighley how to ski because she was three and we'd started teaching Alec to ski when he was three and," looking around with a knowing glance, "you know, fair is only fair."

Unsure of whether picturing his mother's suburban housewife facial expressions or the warm whiskey sinking down his intestines was the cause of his nausea, Alec pulled himself away from his thoughts and glanced around to see who had the joint. Signaling for it out of turn was acceptable; these guys all had their own problems to deal with, and if someone needed an extra hit while the fire trickled down the mountain in front of them, it was cool with everyone. Alec watched the ember glow in front of his nose as he sucked the sweet, stinging smoke down the back of his throat and into his lungs. The torches, only a quarter of the way down the run, appeared already smaller than the spark at the end of the joint.

"So after three days of Keighley refusing to even try on skies," Alec's mother's voice jumped back into his head and continued,

“we finally get her on the bunny hill. And what do you know, just as I’m getting her to pizza-stance down a small incline, Alec comes whizzing by me,” another one of her dramatic pauses, “backwards! Backwards, can you believe it! Well I knew right then I’d have to get him a helmet.”

He’d always been better. Every time his mother told that story Alec would roll his eyes to the ceiling, “It’s not like it’s all that difficult to ski backwards, Mom,” he’d tell her.

*Fuck ’em.* He concentrated on those outlined words until the memories were forced to leave him alone. But as he tilted his head backwards to blow the smoke up into the cold night sky, he caught sight of the lift’s huge wheel and couldn’t help but smile to himself as he thought of Keighley.

When she was younger, she had been petrified of lifts. No, not the bottom of the lift; unlike all the uncoordinated skiers Alec watched, bursting with laughter as they fell on their asses and got smacked in the back of the head by the chair coming around the wheel, Keighley could time sitting down on the lift just fine. And it wasn’t the actual ride that bothered her either. The height didn’t scare her; she loved the bite of the cold on her face, the thrill she got when Alec left the safety bar up, and the panoramic views of the steep, isolated mountains. It was the top of the lift that frightened her. Alec chuckled. Maybe it was the weed. Or maybe it was the memory of Keighley’s little seven-year-old self trying to explain to him what was so scary about that big wheel.

“What if I don’t get off the lift in time? What if the wheel spins me around and eats me up? Then spits me back out and I have to ride all the way down the mountain by myself!” Her big, brown eyes had pleaded with Alec for reassurance. But he’d just laughed at her and told her that if she wasn’t getting off the lift in time, he’d push her. This hadn’t had the reaction he was looking for. She hadn’t run to their parents screaming; she’d actually been quite content with his answer. And the next time up the lift when Keighley froze at the sight of the wheel, Alec didn’t wait for the lift to stop the machine

but had pushed her just like he'd said he would. She had looked up at him with those wide eyes of hers and said, "Thanks, A!" That's what she'd always called him. A. Maybe she still did.

By now the fiery snake was halfway down the mountain. It seemed to be lengthening, and Alec had to probe through his smoke filled mind to remember that his eyes were simply seeing the skiers spread apart. In the wake of his grasping, the smoke of his mind swirled up an image of Keighley. His little sister was skinny and of medium height, but with legs that seemed to reach heaven. They were more than half the length of her body, but somehow it didn't make her look disproportioned. Her olive-toned skin and long, brown, wavy hair matched her large, brown eyes, which crinkled and sparkled when she smiled.

Another sparkle caught Alec's eye. He thought the tail of the snake was speeding towards him; it was going to whip him in the face. His thumb and forefinger burned hot suddenly, and he realized how hazy his brain was. The snake was nowhere near him; the employees and their torches were a little over halfway down the mountain. It was the ember on the end of the joint, burning down and down until it reached his fingers, stinging sharply. He took the last hit he could, a shallow puff that tasted mostly of ash. After burying the remnants, he reached into his snow-jacket and pulled out the last, slightly squished joint. As he lit it, the flame cast a brief glimpse over his bearded, rugged face, and he narrowed his already swollen, red-rimmed eyes against the sudden light. With a nod he passed the joint to his left.

He remembered the first time Keighley had gotten high. It had been with him, of course, when she was seventeen. Alec had been home for the summer from college and each of them had tickets to a concert. She'd convinced him they should drive together, and he was happy to since that meant her friends would be along for the ride too. It had been a cloudless night; the band was OAR, or Dave Matthews, or some other kind of band that meant everyone in the audience was stoned. Throughout the concert, Alec kept calling

Keighley. They'd each been off with their own friends, but Keighley had said she wanted to try smoking—she wasn't as innocent as those round brown eyes implied. She'd finally made her way over to Alec and his friends.

"Here you go, sis," Alec had said as he took the joint he'd been holding and passed it to her.

"What do I do?" Keighley had asked.

Despite the snickers from his friends, Alec had patiently explained, "Just breathe in as much as you can, then hold it in as long as you can, then just breathe out. Simple as that."

She'd followed the instructions, but added her own ending with a series of sputtering coughs accompanying her exhale. "Not bad, sis," Alec had exclaimed while patting her on the back.

As Alec watched the line of fire slither to the base of the mountain, he wondered what Keighley was doing that moment. Christmas Eve at home had always been spent around the fireplace and a pot of fondue. *It's just fucking melted cheese*, Alec had always thought. *Why do they have to make themselves sound so goddamn sophisticated?*

He and Keighley had always laughed at their parents' attempts to be the epitome of a suburbia couple. Well, maybe not laughed. Maybe they'd been nauseated. Either way, after Keighley had smoked for the first time, she and Alec had made it a tradition to get high on Christmas Eve together. They'd sit outside in the boiling hot tub before the late-night "European" dinner their parents served every year. The sweet smoke they exhaled from between their lips blended in with the steam swirling off the surface of the sweltering water.

It had been a miracle their parents never caught on. The first year they'd started the tradition, Keighley had appeared merely spaced-out for five minutes after she'd smoked. But then she had burst into a giggle fit over absolutely nothing and had to sink her head beneath the water to control herself. When she'd resurfaced, Alec had said, with a smile on his face, "I immediately regret this

decision.” Which had only sent Keighley into another wave of laughter. Dinner had been hilarious to say the least.

Alec’s bloodshot eyes squinted down at the bottom of the mountain; the tiny flickering orange lights at the head of the line were being extinguished one by one. While his glazed eyes focused on the diminishing snake below, his murky mind went through the days that had followed him and Keighley’s Christmas Eve antics. Those days had never been nearly as funny as the nights preceding them. His face was a mask, neither smiling nor frowning, and his eyes showed only interest in the scene at the base of the mountain. But his mind was on the last Christmas he’d spent at home.

It had been during his senior year in college. Who knew what else he’d gotten? All he remembered was opening his Grandma’s present.

“Dress socks, cool. Thanks, Grandma!”

“Yes, well, that was back when I thought you’d be getting more job interviews,” his grandma had responded, followed by a short silence. Alec had laughed. To break the silence? To ease the moment? To make it seem like she was only joking? He couldn’t remember why he’d laughed, because it sure as hell wasn’t funny. It had been during the fucking financial crisis, everyone had been hard pressed to find a job. *Whatever.*

Over half the twinkling lights had been doused. The snake was dying.

It had been Keighley’s idea. She had applied for a job out West in some national park every year. But her summer breaks weren’t long enough for her to work the full season so she never got accepted. When he’d gotten to Alta, Alec had sent her a picture of the view from the window in his room. The only response he’d gotten back was, “You suck. That was my dream.”

Alec looked around at the other lifties as he pulled the single icicle-tear off his cheek. They were all staring at the base of the mountain, their vision filled with black dots where the specks of

fire had been moments before. Maybe it was just getting later, but without the fiery line slithering down the mountain the chill of the air became sharp on Alec's face. Or maybe he was just coming off his high. He let out a long breath and watched the wind blow away the warm mist that protruded from his lips. The moonlight shone upon the snow, highlighting the contrast between the sparkling snow on the ski slopes and the swaying spruces standing dark and eerie. Just like how the gasoline had always swirled in with the puddles of rainwater on the driveway back home.

One by one, the lifties stood up on the ledge behind them. Off the raised snow pile one threw the butt of the last joint; another tossed the empty bottle of whiskey; a few others spit over the edge. Listening to the memories carried on the wind, but with only silence passed between each other, they snapped into their skis and turned towards Dreamweaver's Demise. Gazing down at the shadowy run through blurred eyes and cloudy minds, they pushed off slowly and began their colorless, lightless procession, snaking their way down the mountain.

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## Just the One

| Kendra Kravig

Smog hangs over the city like those last words. The words I never wanted to hear. Settled above me, making it perpetually hazy, they linger. They haunt me, choke away my passions, make it hard to breathe, a dull ache in my chest every time I suck in air.

In California, the smog regulates breathing regimens. Most days, Californians can drive with the windows down, jog briskly in the early evening, and do yoga in the park. Some days, though, we can feel life dwindling with every inhale and time evacuating with every exhale. And every once in a while, I know that with every mouthful of smog drawn in the body turns a little more into a corpse. Today, the smog hangs so thick it suffocates the Inland Empire. I drove to our diner with the windows up and the air conditioning on. I hate air conditioning—it gives me a headache—but it’s so damn hot out that I sacrifice cranial equilibrium for a sweat-free drive down the 91 freeway.

I can see the 215 from where I sit, perched on a duct-taped vinyl bar stool. Not far from here is the 215/60 interchange, a place where I’ve probably spent half my life sitting in traffic. It’s god-awful hot here, traffic sucks, and the air is quasi-toxic. Sometimes I forget why we moved here.

Spilled grains of sugar on the diner’s chipped countertop form a halo to my fork and spoon. I lick my fingertip and dab at the sugar. I pick them up, one grain at a time, and then flick them onto the stained and worn linoleum. They become fast friends with the dust bunnies that live beneath the bar stools.

“You wanna refill, honey?” asks the waitress. Darlene, her nametag reads. She reminds me of a character from a 1950s teen flick, a Rizzo or a Frenchie or a Sandra Dee, just aged thirty years. She wears a frazzled smile behind her creased eyes, the result of too many refills to pour.

I hug my white porcelain coffee mug a little closer to me. “No,” I say, “Just the one today.”

The clock above the rumbling soda machine ticks in time with the jukebox's outdated rock melodies. Dishes clatter; people chatter. Out the window, I can see another batch of freshly-polluted smog making its way into the valley, wheezing itself into Californian lungs, killing us one inhale at a time.

I think people who move to California never mean to live here.

We never meant to live here in the L.A. outcast area, a place where the smog rules your exercise routine and the leather interior of the new car you bought in November burns your ass in August. In addition to the fame and fortune that Hollywood offers to the .0001% of society, there are three reasons why people move here: the women, the weed, and the weather (of the three, we were only interested in the last). Californians exist in denial: smoking is bad but our air is clean; the haze-enriched weather which squelches our lungs succumbs to the Atkins diet; the environment rehabilitates because we buy a Toyota Prius; and when we use tanning booths it preserves sunshine. We never meant to live here. I never wanted to end up here.

A California Highway Patrolman, a "chip" to the natives, pulls up the barstool next to mine. His leather motorcycle boots squeal with resistance when he plops onto the seat. With all the suaveness of George Estrada, he flicks off his Jim Jones-esque sunglasses and sets them adjacent to my elbow. He reeks of Old Spice. "Do y'mind if I sit here?" he drawls.

I did mind; I minded every inch of his uniformed hulking presence invading my breakfast space; this is our diner, our place, but a CHP is a particular breed of jerk so I shake my head. I make a business of checking my watch even though I have nowhere to be on a Wednesday morning. This time was reserved for us.

Darlene reappears. She pours the officer a cup of joe, and he then orders a skillet of eggs and hashbrowns, a small stack of pancakes, an order of grits, a round of toast, and a cardiac arrest on the side. Darlene jots it all down and scurries away. I can imagine she's annoyed that she has to give a free breakfast to an officer in the

branch of law enforcement that no Californian likes.

The CHP douses his coffee in enough cream to make it moo and raises his chipped porcelain mug to me. "Here's to eatin' alone," he says. His handlebar mustache twitches when he speaks.

I say nothing but raise my mug and take a sip. Lukewarm coffee is vile. Perhaps I should've gotten a refill.

Didi, our waitress, walks in. As she and Darlene exchange places behind the counter she gives me a sly wink. "Just the one today?" she asks me.

"Yep."

She never understood how we could stand the burnt coffee and runny eggs week after week, and the smell of semi-truck exhaust fumes that seemed to linger long after the parking lot is empty, she says. She says she hasn't eaten in the diner since the day she was hired. She says she wants to see you there next week eating your banana pancakes smothered in peanut butter. I say I do, too.

The CHP slurps his coffee next to me. It's nine in the morning, but he already has a five-o'clock shadow. His graying mustache drips coffee as he says, "First time eatin' alone, huh?"

"Yep."

Through the diner's window, reflecting into my eyes, the sun shines. Too brightly, perhaps. It glistens at the parade of parked sub-compact cars and the bulky rows of soccer moms' SUVs. The asphalt of suburban paved roads sparkles, dancing diamonds wavering in the oppression of a California heat wave. It is too bright today, even for August; the smog increases the sun's merciless glare. It burns my eyes.

Peanut butter laces the CHP's chapped lips when he chomps into his first bite of toast. I can smell it, nutty and familiar. He slathers more peanut butter on it until it's at least a half inch thick, just like I did for you the last time we ate breakfast together. Your love for peanut butter was only superseded by your love for fast cars. Our eyes burned from the light then too, that awful fluorescent hospital lighting that even the healthy look sick under. We came

to California for the sunshine and stayed for this cold building of diagnosis and chemotherapy. “Sometimes, the road just bends that way,” you said, “Nothing you can do but follow it.” You only ate half your toast that week, and the next none at all. Our once-a-week breakfasts became everyday events. We still called them breakfasts; I still brought the take-out from the diner—the omelets and orange juice and toast and peanut butter—though we talked rather than drank, breathed rather than ate. Outside, the Californian sun consumed the meager green that the winter’s rains gave us. Inside, under the unhealthy lighting, we existed in a non-Californian sense of denial. We didn’t dare to call these days spent watching “I Love Lucy” what they really were.

That last Wednesday, which may actually have been a Saturday, we watched Lucy steal John Wayne’s footprints. You always did like redheads, you said. I said nothing. I held your hand and you breathed. We watched Lucy and Ethel traipsing through Hollywood, Ricky cursing in Spanish, Fred grumping through his time on screen. Every so often, you sighed. Underneath those awful lights you said the words that tore and relieved me, the ones I never wanted to hear.

“I’m tired, so tired,” you whispered, “Let me sleep.”

I turned down the volume on the TV; you closed your eyes. As Lucy tried to sneak her way into the movies, I laughed. You didn’t breathe.

The CHP shovels pancakes into his mouth. You would’ve asked, “Where’s the fire, man?” And then after we left the diner, you would’ve cursed the California Highway Patrol and thanked God once again for your radar detector. Our waitress, Didi, refills my coffee without my asking her to. She winks and slides away. The manager, who we always called “Ricky Ricardo” because of his Cuban ancestry and affinity with Lucy, gives his polite greetings to the CHP and offers his meal on the house. The CHP nods a thank you as half-masticated eggs wriggle their way down his throat. “No manners,” you would’ve muttered, “No damn manners.” Later on

this CHP would've become more ammunition in your arsenal of reasons why CHPs were sub-human.

Ricky asks me, "So where's your dad? Haven't seen him in a while. You all alone today?"

"Yep," I say, "Just me today."

"Well, tell him I say hello, and bring him next time. We have banana pancakes that need eating."

"He was sick," I say. "But I know he missed coming here and eating his banana pancakes." The past tense verb slips by Ricky, a California roll in a stop sign of speech.

"Well, tell him to come back in soon," Ricky says. "Enjoy your meal."

The CHP chomps the last bit of his peanut butter toast and swigs the last bit of his coffee. "Thanks, miss," he says to Didi. A vagrant hashbrown sticks to the collar of his uniform with a small blob of ketchup by his top button. His leather motorcycle boots clomp out the door but the Old Spice stench lingers.

Didi comes over, refills my coffee again, and sets a cheese danish in front of me. "On the house," she says, "For having to sit next to someone who chews on his eggs like a cow his cud. Your dad would've flinched if he'd seen that."

I say, "Yeah, he would've."

"Can I get you anything else, sweetie?"

Outside in the Californian sunshine, beyond the haze, the world curves. When you take a CHP-free mountain road over the snow-capped peaks you can see that the world does go on.

The smog only suffocates for ten-square miles.

"Yes," I tell Didi, "I'd like some banana pancakes. With peanut butter."

*Kendra Kravig is pursuing her M.A. in English at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, where she also works as a College Writing Instructor. She currently serves as vice president of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter. After completing her degree in June 2012, she hopes to travel the world and then write about it.*

## Jurors

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**Jerry Gabriel's** first book of fiction, *Drowned Boy* (Sarabande Books, 2010), was awarded the Towson Prize for Literature and named a "Discover Great New Writers" selection by Barnes and Noble. He is a visiting assistant professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

**Kevin Moffett** is the author of *Permanent Visitors* and *Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events*, published in January. His short fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *New Stories From the South*, *Tin House*, *Harvard Review*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and elsewhere. He has received the Pushcart Prize, the Nelson Algren Award, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a National Magazine Award. He teaches in the M.F.A. program at Cal State San Bernardino.

**Cherri Randall's** novel *The Memory of Orchids* was published in 2011. Her essay "Daughter Rhymes with Laughter" is forthcoming in the anthology *Impact* (Telling Our Stories Press). She has published poetry, short stories, and essays in many leading journals such as *Story South* and *Blue Earth Review*. Her creative nonfiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is currently editing a textbook on ethics and writing called *No Truer Words*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.

**Donika Ross** received her M.F.A. in poetry from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, Austin. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and a 2004 June fellow of the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, and *Best New Poets 2007*. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at Vanderbilt University.

**Shannin Schroeder** is an associate professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches composition, literature, and creative writing, as well as directing the Writing Center. Her publications include *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, and her research interests include magical realism, the contemporary novel, the American frontier, and popular culture. Currently, she is examining the role of the American flag in films and visual media, with an emphasis on the manipulation of patriotism.

**Felicia Jean Steele** is an assistant professor of English at The College of New Jersey, where she teaches historical linguistics and old British literature. Her research interests span the history of the English language, Early Modern literature, and literary theory. She is a co-sponsor of the Alpha Epsilon Alpha chapter at The College of New Jersey.

**Matthew Vollmer** teaches writing in the English Department at Virginia Tech. He is the author of *Future Missionaries of America*, a collection of stories. A recent winner of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, his work has appeared in *Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *VQR*, *Epoch*, *Oxford American*, and *Colorado Review*.

**George H. Williams** is an assistant professor of English at the University of South Carolina Upstate, where he teaches writing, British literature, and literary theory. His work in the digital humanities, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, focuses on accessibility for people with disabilities. He is a founding editor of *ProfHacker.com*, a site devoted to teaching, technology, and productivity in higher education.



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## Submission Information

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The Sigma Tau Delta Journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active chapters of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

These journals are refereed, with jurors from across the country selecting those members to be published. The journals have had illustrious head judges, including Jane Brox, Henri Cole, Jim Daniels, Maggie Dietz, W.D. Earhardt, CJ Hribal, Kyoko Mori, Katherine Russel Rich, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Mako Yoshikawa, to name a few.

The best writing is chosen in each category from around 1,000 submissions. Not only do these publications go to over 10,000 members worldwide, of an over 20,000 member organization, but they also honor the best piece of writing in each category with a monetary award. There is also an annual reading at the national conference from *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* by any of the published writers who can attend.

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