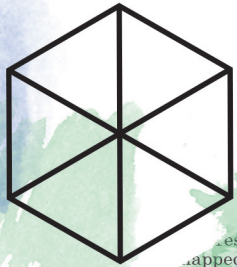


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2015

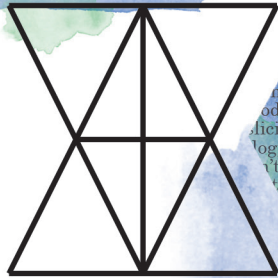
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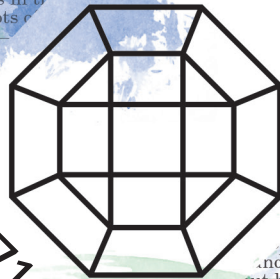


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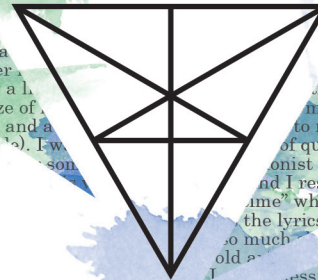
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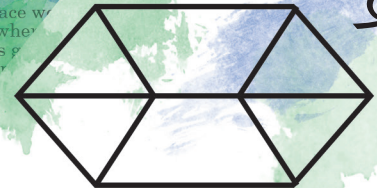
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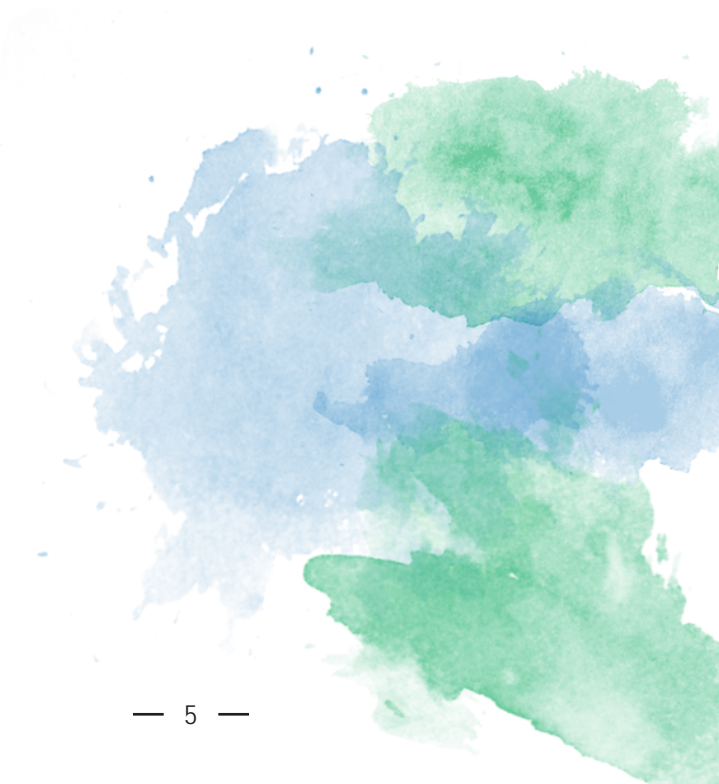
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PAST LANDESCAPES

Founding Staff of LandEscapes

Keith Ancker	Christina Howard
Boyd W. Benson	Brandon McGovern
Eva Bernfeld	Sara Okert
Jennifer Carmody	Shana Pennington
Catherine Cline	Rick Rogahn
Todd Cullison	Jeanne Rodriguez
Amy Day	John Stilson
Chantel Hobbs	Elle Thompson

Founding Advisor

Peter Chilson

Note From The Founding Editor In Chief

“Upon entering this grand, illustrious and ever so exalted project with absolutely no idea of what we were doing, and thereafter having pursued the guidance of various friends and faculty members and of our own charge, after considerable deliberation we determined at once to fake it.

Well, after nearly a year in the process, we did it, ambling over. Though the staff was short in number, they worked their tails off and came up with something good. A creative outlet for WSU students, a high-cultured flyswatter, a mag, a rag, late for dinner - call it anything you want. LandEscapes belongs to WSU. A gift.”

- *Boyd W. Benson*

2014



2013



ABOUT THE COVER



This journal attempts to marry two very different concepts: organic and geometric.

Over the past two years, our staff has been trying to come up with a new look for *LandEscapes*. When given ideas, the other editors told me they liked the idea of something organic, yet geometric. I designed last year's journal with that concept in mind, and this year have tried to keep that style while still creating an entirely new journal. Elements of the last journal are there including references to writing and art (pencils and ink or watercolor) and the newly introduced symbols for each section. It's the bright and graceful version of its dark and brooding older brother. I hope to leave a sort of legacy or standard for the design of future editions of *LandEscapes* with the two journals I have been so lucky to be a part of.

- Kelsey Johnson

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I cannot imagine my college experience without *LandEscapes*: mostly because it's taken over my life and my social life and a little bit of my sanity, but I digress.

LandEscapes has practically been my entire college experience and if I hadn't taken the plunge and gone to that informational meeting my freshman year (thanks for the tip, Leisa) I have no doubts that I'd still be living under a rock reading webcomics at all hours. Though, to be fair, I still do one of those things.

I've met some of the most talented, brilliant, and truly kind people these past three years. I've met world renowned authors, poet laureates, editors of national literary magazines, comedians, and eco-poets, but as my time here comes to a close I know I owe the most to the people here at WSU.

Prepare yourselves. Thank you are coming.

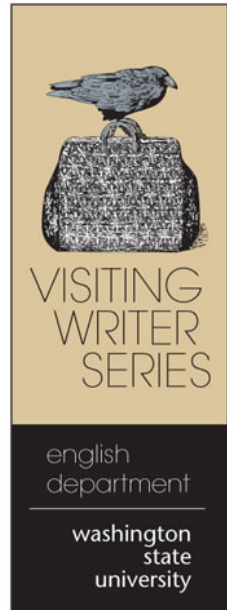
I'd like to thank my entire staff for your dedication to the journal and your love of creative works. I could not have done it without you. Thank you to Kelsey for producing yet another beautiful layout for our journal and for sticking through it with me; I continue to be impressed by you. Thank you to Mara for taking my rough and not-entirely-well-thought-out vision for a new website and making it a reality. Thank you to Alex and Travis, who will be taking over when I'm gone. I know I've left my baby in good hands. Thank you to Debbie and Linda and the entire VWS staff for your commitment to bringing voices to this campus that embody all that is literature, global consciousness, and a strong love of words. Thank you to Peter for, well, everything. You became more than just my faculty advisor. You became my mentor, my sounding board, and my strongly worded email writer. Maybe one of these days you'll pronounce my name correctly. Thank you to Gups. I love ya. Thanks for loving me.

And of course and most importantly thank YOU, dear reader. You are the reason this journal even exists.

Auf wiedersehen meine Lieben,
Ana Schmidt

VISITING WRITERS SERIES

The WSU Visiting Writer Series brings to campus nationally and internationally renown poets and writers of fiction and nonfiction for readings, class visits, workshops, and collaborative exchanges across intellectual and artistic disciplines. The series also sponsors an annual editing and publishing workshop as part of our professional editing certificate.



Most Recent Visitors



Robert Michael Pyle



Allison Cobb

Earlier This Year

Brenda Hillman

Ted Tremper

Dinah Lenney

Marcia Parlow



FICTION

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The Stop

Sossna Shumet

The crispy chill of the morning air struck my cheek, stinging my eyes with unshed tears. Pulling the drawstrings of my hoodie close, I tried to contain what little heat I had left. Quickly, I jammed my hands underneath my armpits, desperate to keep them warm. In the corner of my eye I spotted the convenience store that wasn't far from my seven fifty am bus stop. Each time the wind became too strong, hitting me carelessly and causing a new series of quivers, I was ready to cave in and trek my way over. The store isn't that far...I could easily see the bus come from inside. Right? With a huff of resignation, I began to wade through the snow and make my way over, swatting the short wisps of black hair that escaped my hoodie away from my face.

As I got closer to the entrance my body began to hum in anticipation for the warmth. Pulling the door open my chilled face was instantly hit with delicious heat. As the door closed behind me I lowered my face down and caught my breath. I glanced up and made eye contact with what looked like the manager and almost scoffed in amusement. Since when were they hiring kids? With that long, shaggy, greasy hair covering his pimple-infested face he looked no older than fifteen years old. Looking around, I came to the conclusion that he and I were the only ones in the store.

It wasn't until his face started to twitch and redden that I noticed I had been staring intently at him the whole time. Recoiling, I averted my eyes and turned my back to

him, altering to stare out the window and keep a watch out for my bus instead. I cannot be late again. Rhonda already threatened me the last time I was late. After losing my last job waitressing due to pouring a pot of coffee on the lap of a too handsy customer who just happened to be the mayor's nephew, I found myself becoming the pariah of my small town. It never ceased to amaze me how fast scandal traveled there. Even though it was all lies. But honestly, what else would a girl do in that situation? He was lucky it was just the coffee I poured on him. So after moving to a new location, a new life, landing another job at Rhonda's shop so soon was a blessing.

Rhonda's flower shop would make it my third job this month. There's no way I could mess this one up. I mean, it couldn't be as difficult to keep since Rhonda had already deemed me worthy of a bonus on my last check. My first bonus. And with that bonus I bought a comfortable, thick gray hoodie and my very first smartphone. Though I had the cheapest plan, it was the most luxurious item I've ever owned, other than my home if you can even call that cockroach-infested apartment a home. I took up most of my time messing around with my phone on quiet days at the shop. Even though Rhonda was my only listed contact, I still manage to spend hours on that thing, imagining that someday I'd have a less measly list filled with people who weren't so quick to turn their backs. It wasn't until my phone was taken away from me a couple weeks after purchasing it that I realized how invested I was in that little fairy-tale.

❧ ❧ ❧

Mr. Norn wasn't buying his usual lilies today. I barely registered him at first because he was a regular at our store and always seemed around. But what grabbed my attention was seeing him divert from his usual path leading to our storefront display to an aisle hiding in the shadows found further in the back. I watched him walk straight towards the back, open the fridge, and grab a bouquet of roses. Red roses. I dismissed my confusion figuring it might be a spe-

cial day. Clearing his throat, he strode over and placed the roses on my counter.

“Oh, roses today Mr. Norn? Must be a special day,” I teasingly voiced my thoughts while setting down my phone on the counter.

“Mm hm,” he mumbled while grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket. After wrapping up the bouquet, I began to write up the card, like I usually did. But, pen in my hand, Mr. Norn stopped me.

“No, no...this isn’t for the missus.”

“Oh,” I paused.

“Yeah, write it out for a Kate instead”

“Ah, your daughter,” I realized.

“No,” he answered.

“Niece?”

“No.”

“...Granddaughter?” With each question, I tried desperately to believe that perhaps there was an innocent explanation. But each time Mr. Norn’s face darkened into a hateful, indignant mask at each rejected answer, I knew there wasn’t. And here I thought for once not all men were shady bastards.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “Just write it out for Kate!”

Taken aback by his tone, I tried to count to ten and reign in my growing anger. I didn’t make it past four.

“No,” I said as I slammed the pen down. “I will not let a disgusting, cheat of a man use our flower for his affair!” Eyes bulging, I saw his enraged gaze land onto my cell. Though I caught onto his train of thought, I was seconds too late to prevent Mr. Norn from swiping my phone into his grubby hands.



All I remember after that was screeching, flying bodies (possibly over counters) and a lot of rose petals scattering the floor—as well as the death of my precious phone. I’m sure the loss of that job would have been added to my list of failures if it weren’t for that fact that Rhonda had just recently divorced a philandering excuse of a husband. It also

helped that I was right about Mr. Norn. If it wasn’t for him, I could have passed the time in this convenience store with my phone. Now glaring through the door, I heard shuffling behind me and a faint voice. Turning back around I looked at the kid and stared questioningly.

“Come again?” I asked.

Clearing his voice he spoke again, slowly he crossed his arms, “Umm, if you’re not going to buy anything, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Please.” he added.

You’re going to have to? With a smile pasted on my face I cheerily responded, “Oh, I’m sorry, but it’s just sooo cold outside. I’m only waiting here till my bus arrives.” For good measure I appealingly brushed my hair behind my ear. “You understand right?”

Taking his silence as compliance, I turned back around with a smug smile and continued to stare out the door. Almost giddy, I started to hum a random song until I heard his voice once again.

“Sorry lady but this is a 7-eleven, not a place for you to squat.”

My smile dropped off my face and I whirled around in disbelief.

“What did you just say?!”

“You heard me. Buy something or leave,” he pressed, his chin raised.

Still in shock, I stood there with my mouth agape. Did this kid really just call me a squatter? Looking down I took in my gray hoodie—which was still reasonably new—and my black jeans. Not even a stain. I took deep calming breath and tried to erase the idea of flinging myself across the room and throttling his scrawny little neck.

“Excuse me? Miss? Did you hear me?”

“Yes!” I spat. Startled, the kid lurched a few steps back. Trying to diffuse the situation, I asked, “Can you at least give me a heads up if you see a bus coming while I look for something?”

“Sorry, not my problem.” In awe of his cruelty, I stared at him incredulously.

“What?” he blurted.

Jeeringly, I mocked his response and walked through a random aisle. I hastily scanned different brightly wrapped candy packages on the shelf before me, contemplating what looked most appetizing. I spotted a Mars Bar and almost grabbed for it but I realized all I had on me was enough for my bus fare. Retracting my arm back, I began to stall and moved to the opposite side of the aisle, hoping to be able to see the bus coming while browsing. After peeking over the shelf for the third time, I noted a beat-up Honda struggle to pull up and park in the deep snow. Giving up, the driver recklessly parked awry and angrily got out, slamming his door shut. Seems like I'm not the only one having a shitty day. Turning back to the kid, I noticed him watching the stranger just as curiously. With the chime of the door opening, I looked back over and saw the stranger more clearly; his 5 o'clock shadow and blood-shot beady eyes weren't doing him any favors. I took in his thin long-sleeved shirt with questionable stains and torn up jeans. How is he not freezing with only that on? Staring longer, I dimly observed his right arm twitching and the ski mask in his hand. As if in slow motion, I watched him slip the mask over his face and reach behind his back. Oh, sweet baby Jesus. Frozen, I watched the gun appear from the back of his jeans.

"Okay everybody!" he shouted. "You know the drill. Follow my directions and nobody'll get hurt."

The drill? What fucking drill? Anger clouding over my fear, my frozen state began to thaw. As if sensing a storm brewing, the crook flickered his gaze over to my corner.

"You over there, come to the front with your hands raised," he ordered while waving his gun in the air.

This cannot be happening right now. I need to make that bus.

"Hey! Are you deaf, I told you to fucking move!"

Catching that last bit, I fully roused and raised my arms above my head while I shuffled my way up and ran through every foul word I knew in my head. I desperately wished for my phone at that moment. I wonder if the kid has one. Peeking at him as I made my way near the front, I was amazed he hadn't keeled over yet. Sweat dripped down

his face, drenching his uniform and he had grown as pale as the snow outside. When I finally reached the front, I turned towards the crook, arms still raised, and snapped, "Now what?"

Wincing, I chided myself for my damn mouth. Gun aimed straight at my head, he descended upon me furiously, "Now you're going to get onto your knees and shut your fucking mouth." I followed his directions stiffly, and perhaps with a little attitude as I raised my gaze towards his direction. With the muzzle of the gun, he nudged my hood down and brought his mouth to the side of my face and whispered, "Don't move and I don't shoot."

I grudgingly remained still as I jerked my head away from his rank breath. Approaching the kid behind the counter, the crook peered down at his chest. Squinting, I could see a name tag attached under the flap of his shirt pocket. Leslie? Oh...how unfortunate. The crook reached into his back left pocket and took out a mini laundry bag, shoving it into Leslie's chest.

"Okay now, Leslie, here's a bag. You're going to open that cash register and put everything in it. Do anything stupid and I'll have no choice but to blow your fucking brains out. Got it?"

Nervously, Leslie fumbled with the drawer and carried out the task. After placing everything in, the kid stepped back. Confused, the crook grabbed the bag and shook it wildly.

"What the fuck is this?" he snarled. Flipping the bag, he dumped the money onto the counter. Hastily he counted the amount and gave a large shout.

"What the fuck is this!" he repeated. Now a blubbing mess, the kid stood with his mouth opening and closing silently. Furiously, the crook slapped the bag into the kid's face.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with forty-seven fucking bucks?" he growled. Scared out of his wits, the kid trembled mutely. I watched the crook heatedly churn by the second before he lunged over the counter to grab Leslie's collar. Bringing him to his face, the crook barked, "I asked

you a fucking question! Where's the rest!"

Though I had some resentment for Leslie in the beginning, he was still a kid after all. So I did what I knew was stupid and sprung up from my knees. "You got your money. Just leave before you do anything stupid!" I cried out. Shit, there goes my mouth again. As quick as my new found bravery came, it vanished. Wide-eyed, I watched the crook shove Leslie away and menacingly stalk towards me. Gun raised he spoke, "Didn't I say to keep still?"

Being this close to my face, I saw that his teeth were grotesquely yellow and lined by rot. Noticing my stare, the crook scowled. "What are looking at? Don't you know it's rude to stare?"

I scoffed quietly and averted my gaze. At least, I thought it was quietly.

Grabbing my cheeks hotly, he wrenched my face back towards his own.

"Why can't you people follow these fucking simple instructions? Do you want me to shoot?"

Wincing, I prayed the spittle that rained on my face was just my imagination and remained soundless. Squeezing my face harder, he mockingly jeered,

"Oh no, that smart mouth got nothing to say? You finally listening?"

Silent, I continued to just stand there. Lots. I have lots to say to you but I want to live to see the end of this day. Before he could say more, the chime of the door rung. Three heads and one gun turning, all three of us stared at the man gawkily standing half-way through the doorway. Standing at practically six feet tall with an impressively large frame, he appeared as if God-sent and I inwardly sighed with relief. Finally. Rescue. Time seemed to tick by as nobody moved. The staring match seemed to intensify with each one. Unbelievably, the giant began to gently step backwards his eyes remaining intently on the crook's gun.

"No!" I screamed. As if jarred awake from a spell, my rescuer stumbled back outside. The crook shoved me away and I watched him raise his gun towards the fleeing giant's back and fired.

Ears ringing, I gaped as I watched the giant tumble over onto the crisp white snow. Blood began to seep out underneath him and stain what was once white to a shocking red. Shaking, I turned slowly towards the cursing crook.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Twisting back towards me he accused, "This is your fault!"

"This was supposed to be a simple fucking robbery! No one was supposed to get shot." Abruptly, he began to knock down items on the rack in front of the register.

"Stupid, stupid! Can't get anything done!" he shouted.

My body began to shiver as cold air wafted into the store. I glanced back and noticed that the giant's leg kept the door open. Wrapping my arms around myself, I stared at his fallen body, nearly a foot taller than my own and blocking the entrance. I was so distracted that the distant rumble went unnoticed at first. As the sound become louder I looked beyond the body and spied my bus come into focus in disbelief. Checking back, the crook was still berserk and a sparing glance at Leslie showed he was not too far away from unhinging as well. Another glance to the door affirmed my blossoming plan. A sudden burst of adrenaline fueled me as I sped out towards the tight opening. Please let me make it through. Taking a swift intake of breath, I leapt over the body and squeezed out into the frosty air. Ignoring the shrill shouts behind me, I ran as fast as I could through the rooted snow. Its depth seemed to drag on each step I took and with a sudden bang, I heard the sound of the gun firing behind me with another quick shot to follow. But I couldn't stop. I needed to make it. My heartbeat roared through my ears at each lunge.

I arrived at the stop as my body hunched over in exhaustion. Something foul coated my throat and I found myself unable to fight back the puke emerging up my throat. Rising back up, I wiped my mouth just as the bus came to the stop. Without a glance back, I staggered up the stairs and fell back against the pay toll as the bus began to move. "\$1.50."

Eyebrows scrunched, I raised my head. Looking up, I saw the bus driver quickly look back at me curiously before

returning her attention back towards the road.

“The fare. It’s \$1.50,” she repeated warily while her eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nodding, I attempted to reach my hoodies pocket for change but my hands trembled violently.

“Are you okay?”

Glancing up once more, I opened my mouth to respond but began to choke instead. Coughing out into my hand, I looked down and saw a red smear. Before I could wipe it away, another harsh cough ripped through my lungs and warm liquid started to course pass my lips. I looked down as a dark blot on my hoodie began to bloom right below my chest. Dazed, I touched the stain with shaking hands and slowly raised bloody hands up to my face in appall.

I wasn’t going to make it to work.

EDITOR’S CHOICE

We chose “Body Art” for the vibrancy of its imagery and the underlying twistedness of its characters and story. Anna Cloud’s ability to hint at and develop darker themes without explicitly revealing them early on entranced us and made her story an easy pick for our Editors’ Choice.

Body Art

Anna Cloud

It was meant to be viewed from right to left. Most people looked all at once. The guard knew better. First: a baby, oddly elongated on a rock beside a group of adults. A yellow figure perpetually reaches upwards towards a piece of fruit, long and waving at the forefront of the painting like a piece of stretched cloth. Next to them: an old woman beside a depthless pool and in the background a blue idol glows in the purple twilight. A woman, hands held to her chest, looks away. What Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Going? The guard liked the title even less than he did the painting itself.

The museum had a few of Gauguin’s on loan and had set up a special exhibit for the occasion. Lots of advertising. Lots of foot traffic. The guard had done his rounds several times already and felt himself only half-waking. The warm walls and dim lights – tilted eyes and cheekbones and orange – were beginning to blur into reality: voluptuous figures in an Eden of palms, pomegranates, and nudity. Everywhere maddening brown eyes watched the guard.

It was the guard’s job to look. He studied faces (arched brows, pursed lips, and over there an impatient, twitching

limb eager to leave). He had to watch out for kids especially, couldn't have them touching the art. Did they think feeling it would make it real? Mostly they just whined and fell asleep on the cushioned benches. The guard thought they could be on to something: egg yolk lights (effusive, membranous) successions of images, platters of eyes, it was all like falling asleep. A shivering heat starting at the top of his head. In any case, it was better than the adults who never did much beyond slowing their gait (heel-toe, pendulum hips) and pausing briefly before each painting, then moving on and on and on, sometimes staring longer at their weakly reflected forms in the glass, feigning aloofness, each stop as meaningless as the last.

A few feet from the guard a girl drags lipstick across her fat, purple mouth before Gauguin's self-portrait.

There had been a few women. He had a hard time recalling how they looked, rather, in his mind all of them coalesced into a single image, an impression. How long ago was Josephine? Was it six years? Seven? The guard could not remember. Conjuring up the invented face, he saw the lips – he remembered those lips – her short black hair, maybe even her eyes.

He loved her in fall. When Josephine was a phantom before him. An idea in the cold and the fog and the stillness.

He met her in Florence, when they were both studying art at the university. The rhythm of patrons' boots in the exhibit reminded him of Josephine's against the cobblestones. He felt again the mist on the bridge, and everywhere lamplight until it was all an impression of yellow and black and cold and the faded scent of pepper on her clothing. Everything was good then. Art was still beautiful. She was beautiful.

They used to walk the city at night. She was always in front, each slow step thrust her hip out and in, out and in. He could just see the disturbances her movements made (ovals on the ground, parenthetical hips, beams of light from her swinging arms) he saw it all as a faint blue etch in the air. A haunting afterimage of Josephine. For a while, that was all.

Later, she led him up to her apartment. Squares of light hung in the windows while he felt for her footprints on the stairs. She never saw him. She left the door open.

That night was vivid in the guard's memory. The studio dissolved in color, painting eyes in the valleys of her hips and twisting dancers on her belly. Once, he made her a bright blue sky and clouds like sails ambled over her clavicle, soft inner thigh, round breast, consuming her fingertips and the birthmark on her forearm, so white it hurt – while he had her copy whirling Van Gogh's on his back, until it was all blurred and the yellow was in her hair and he was orange and everything smelled of pigment and chalk and wax.

A brunette in a red jacket eyed him. Sometimes, women looked. Occasionally, it amused the guard. Skittish eyes, their slowly rocking steps. But it mostly just annoyed him. None of them were really worth it. Not like Josephine.

The guard watched a tour group meander away from Gauguin's masterpiece. For a moment it was alone against the wall and the guard felt the blue – blazing, burning blue – from where he stood across the room. The idol was still there in the gloom and so was the old woman. She was curled inwards, holding her hands against her head. His eyes caught on the painting's hypnotic pool.

Sundays, they swam in the lake. And it was windy and the rocks slashed his feet, his legs, and his father used to hold him underwater, forcing his lungs to expand until he went limp and when he came up he saw the most marvelous colors, felt the painful and wonderful revival of his suspended body.

He dimly heard the woman in red ask him about his job. Did he like it? She had always wondered what it was like being a security guard. He watched her lean against the wall. She told him she was an art enthusiast. When he did not respond, she said that it must be amazing to be around these incredible artworks all day. He must love it. He was lucky.

The guard remembered his last show in Florence. His sculpture was still there somewhere. Splayed in pieces

across fifteen feet, the fragmented and larger-than-life wood body floating face up, strung from the ceiling. He had decorated her all over with colorful prisms and smeared handprints, but one could clearly see the muscles in the severed thigh, her jointed spinal cord and her grey brain displayed at the end of the hall. The critics had called it “wonderfully disturbing.” But that was after Josephine.

The woman smiled coquettishly. Her shoulder was still against the wall and the guard wondered if it was beginning to ache at all. She looked at every part of him, but her eyes lingered on his mouth. It was the same look his father gave to his mother. But that was when he didn’t hit her.

The guard’s mother had always told him it was impolite to stare and would cuff his head for looking too long at a person. He trained himself to stare at art instead. At mass, he would meander about the paintings while his mother prayed. Lofty, old imagery. He wanted to be their creator, to manipulate nature. He craved to twist and ravage the viewers’ emotions. Art fanned his desire for control. In the background, pews scraped against the floor, he heard whispered conversations and above it all the muted voice of his mother: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*

He remembered her trying to describe the idea of the soul, and now, just like then, he conceived of a sort of airy cavity at the center of the body. It lives inside of you, she said, but it’s not physical the way your body is. Of course he knew that wasn’t how it worked, but he couldn’t stop himself, becoming preoccupied with the frustrating reality that were he to excavate the body, beginning at the naval and slicing and digging beyond the burst stomach, the blood and the spine and were to come out the other side, he would find it was all merely bones and hot organs, layers of striped, steaming biology and nothing else.

Gauguin painted bodies yellow. Yellow like his mother’s bathroom, the same color as the eyes of her cat, blindly looking up at him through a sheet of water.

The guard regarded the brown-headed woman in front of him, feeling only a vague pleasure and an empty ache where he wanted his soul to be. This was no Josephine. He

grinned. The saliva glittered on his teeth. His smile was so wide his eyes ran. The woman shrunk a little. She said something and stepped away, fear on her face. They always did what he wanted.

He remembered afterwards plucking the grey hairs from his arm, watching the water and blood churn down the unstopped drain. Mother had always loved it more. He had fixed it. Hadn’t he?

The guard no longer cared to look. The paintings had become hateful to him. Eyes, eyes, eyes...nothing was good. All that nobility was unreal to the guard. It had all become color without feeling.

He was an exile. A detached observer. But those episodes, as brief as they were, he lived with a deranged intensity. At those times he was the artist. Consumed in bodies like Gauguin in Polynesia. The guard imagined the artist throwing off his old self, the whole grey of Paris, and everything blooming into fire of color and brown eyes. Mad, bizarre joy and orange until he forgot himself in a mirage of images – beauties in the sun – and somewhere in the warmth a sudden grief wherein the cries “Papa! Papa!” deafened him. There was Emile in her nightgown, still a child, crying because she fell and her face was just a little pink shell, and he wanted to hold her but she would vanish, like always, and then there was only moonlight and the sea breeze in the empty hallway and he sobbed and clawed his face, painting until the old joy came back just like before. Just like before. It will all be just like before. A voice was saying his name. Was it Josephine’s? His head throbbed. It must be the lights, it had to be the lights. Or the colors, the damn colors.

The guard slid into an adjacent room, a smaller one with gray walls and less people. How long had it been? He wasn’t in Athens was he? Or was it Berlin? Time moved differently here. He was in a hazy reality and afterwards he would walk home feeling blank and detached as he looked at the people passing by. So many eager, empty faces.

The guard sat for a time in one of those black, plastic chairs in the corner of the room, looking at women (Blue

hat. Stumpy legs. Josephine-esque legs) and at nothing, a presence in the back, a crow.

A pregnant woman wandered in accompanied by a man. He, handsome and well dressed, glanced vaguely at the paintings and, like most, his eyes would briefly absorb the image before going on until it was all a nightmare of bodies and color. The woman's eyes moved faster. But there was something different about it. She was looking for something specific. They were desperate, and when her eyes finally landed on a small panting off to the left, the guard studying her could tell that it was a joyless discovery. Her lovely features were masked by a hollow determination as she walked carefully over to the painting while her companion supported her elbow as she sat down.

"Such vivid colors. I can see why you like him honey."

The woman had red hair. She was silent.

He tried again. "Really, his style is reminiscent of Van Gogh."

"Glad you read the guidebook."

He looked sad and offended. The guard in the corner stifled a laugh.

"You got me. But really, it was quite interesting. Did you know that they were roommates?"

"Who?"

"Van Gogh and Gauguin."

"Oh."

The man was wearing khakis and a white shirt. Blonde. Pale-eyed. He appeared unfinished. Like all the color had run out.

"It says here Gauguin may have contributed to his madness."

"Sometimes living together does that to people."

"Yes, but most people wouldn't just cut off their earlobe and give it to someone."

"Maybe some just aren't in the right mindset to do it."

The man tapped his foot hard against the floor. Across the room, the guard watched a young girl lift her head from her sister's shoulder.

"I don't think there was anything right about his mind-

set, honey."

"It was a physical manifestation of his feelings. Like this exhibit is Gauguin's. It doesn't have to be right."

The man's voice gained volume. The young girl turned and glared.

"You're being argumentative again. I told you, the doctor said —"

"No."

"Honey, it's normal for you to be more hormonal. The baby —"

"It's not the baby."

"I know you were hesitant at first—"

"That's not the problem, Paul."

The woman had not ceased looking at the painting. The security guard saw her eyes start to water. He did not know if it was because she was genuinely upset or if it was from looking wide-eyed at one place for too long. The guard watched the woman shiver. She worried a thread on her sweater, frantically unwinding the bright white knit.

The man grabbed her hand. "Stop it Monique! That sweater was expensive!"

The woman went still.

"I don't care goddamn it. I don't care!"

People began to stare. The man folded his hands and casually placed his elbows against his thighs. His foot twitched rapidly against the tile.

"You'll be happy when it's all over. Now, I'm going to go walk around the rest of the exhibit, give you some time."

He kissed her cheek and stood up. To the guard, he was a milk glass.

"I love you." the man said and walked away.

A few people still cast accusatory glances at the woman's back but most just filtered out. There wasn't anything there to hold their attention any longer.

The woman still looked at the painting, motionless and clear-eyed. The guard watched her sit there for a long time. Unmoving, her body was straight and her arms arched over her belly.

The guard edged closer, curious to see what it was about

this painting that captivated her. It was small, most people barely spared it a glance, instead gravitating towards the large and long, more notable paintings featured in the brochures. His first impression was of yellow. A hill of golden feathers in the sun. A distant shrine was perched at the top while gargantuan flowers bloomed along a winding fence that reminded him of a pattern on a dress. It was a surreal landscape, devoid of people, it was almost apocalyptic.

"You are supposed to be over there," he said, pointing to Gauguin's masterpiece. The baby was still a baby and the adults were still living. The old woman was in the same position but the pool was different each time.

"I was. I like it over here better."

"Too much for you?"

"No. They're all saying the same thing."

Her red hair reminded him of winter berries. For a moment, he saw them bright against the snow.

"What do they say?"

"Something spiritual, I suppose."

The guard felt shaky, the way he had when Josephine left. Weak-boned and thick-eyed, the certainty that everything had gone on without him. What Are We? What Do We Come From? Where Are We Going? He thought he had it once. Almost. It came as a shiver in his chest. But only for Josephine. He hadn't felt it since. He had tried.

The woman pointed to the painting. "I first saw this at a museum in Amsterdam, right after I married Paul."

"Most people wouldn't care to see the same work twice. You must like it."

"I wouldn't say I liked it," she said laughing, "In fact I would say it's the opposite."

She had shadows on the tender skin below her eyes. Her thin limbs amplified her swollen abdomen. It looked unnatural.

"Why? Why would you search out a painting you hate?"

"Just look. There is not a soul in sight, but it doesn't feel lonely does it? There are other things...spirits, I guess you'd call them. When I look at it, I can smell the grass and hear the wind. It's the perfect kind of isolation. I've never

encountered anything else like it."

The woman looked wistful. Her face showed a faint joy, but the guard mostly saw the blue veins in her hands, the burst blood vessels in her eyes.

She looked back at the man and began laughing. Brittle laughter that hurt and made the few people nearby turn their heads.

"Don't you just want to go in?" she asked, "Just go in and feel the feathers and the wind and the solitude? It's like a reminder. A terrible reminder, but if I let it go it'll be worse."

The guard had the queerest feeling he was talking with the artist. He started to sweat, his head wasn't right and he wasn't quite solid anymore. The paintings expanded and he heard the palms and high laughter, there was singing and when he rubbed his hands over his face all he saw was the woman's body, small and bent, and Josephine walking away leaving nothing but a bucket of eyes and her black jacket. He gripped her arm. Oh Josephine...Oh Mother. He never wanted them to leave, but he had made them. But they were so cruel. But he didn't know! He didn't! A pair of yellow eyes blindly looked up at him through a sheet of water. His first. Maybe he had gone wrong then? But it didn't matter anymore. He would fix it. He heard a woman yelling but he couldn't remember to whose voice it belonged. Was it Mother's? He was sorry, so sorry. He felt claws against his arm, the same thrashing, the same pain.

"What are you doing? Let go of me! Let go of me now!"

The guard looked down just as the woman pulled herself away from him. The momentum pushed her backwards. She started to fall. The guard stood in a dazed trance. He saw her body thrown against the couch and her husband running from across the room to try and catch her. The guard could not move. And then she was folded against the cold tile, her red hair fanned against the white ground, and her husband was there, holding her and frantically asking if the baby was okay. Wide eyed, she stared at the guard, too shocked to feel pain.

"Somebody get some help!" the man called to the

stunned silence.

The guard felt something inside him lock back into place. He began running past eyes in stunned faces. He went straight through the exhibit and he heard distant shouting, bodies clawed at him, dropping from the paintings – was that the old woman lashing at his ribs? He dimly recalled a door but he thought it had a face and it was such a strange, celestial blue. All the colors swam in his head until he was lost, and his face was suddenly stinging and wet and he heard cars and the bell of a passing cyclist, and the first thing he noticed were the reds and whites of a poster reflected in a nearby puddle. It was evening.

Colors smeared in the rain. Yellows in the sidewalk, he stumbled past the river and the dark green shop stalls (locked up for the night) bleeding over the bridge, a woman's purple scarf defused before his eyes and for a moment the whole street went violet like he'd been punched in the eye. Where was Josephine now? Still in the river? He remembered her that night on the bridge, twirling and leaping like a wavering moonbeam, he remembered her kissing the man beside her – her lips must have felt like stars! – she had the radiance of last light, the fleeting beauty of wind over water. Water – she was like water. And then she had the woman's red hair. The guard imagined her in the man's arms, hurt from growing another set of bones, a body she didn't want because she picked this but the dancers were on her belly, her mouth lovely like Josephine's and it was wrong, all awfully wrong. She picked this. She picked him.

The world went violet like he'd been punched in the eye. But that was her gait! Past the fat man in brown, shoulders twisting as she avoided a passing umbrella, unhurried, hands in the pockets of her black coat. Her hood was up. It was her!

It was fall. The lamps were yellow and she was a phantom. The world reset and he remembered what it was like to hear voices in the rain. He was calm as he followed her. It would be the same now. She would make things beautiful again.

She walked through narrow, quieter streets. How unlike her, he thought, Josephine always loved watching the crowds.

This Josephine was smaller. Shorter perhaps, but he could live with that. He always preferred tall women but this one would do, he could hold her like a child and paint miniature pictures on her flesh, he already knew which ones – the dancers – she loved that, and yellows had always complimented her, his climbing rose. Water dripped off his hair, his nose, but he was feverish and did not care. Josephine! Josephine! He'd found one at last!

Her jacket was long but he knew how her hips swung beneath it, he had memorized their sensual path, all the arcs and the dips. He would have to get her a new coat. She was wearing boots – good girl! – and her thighs curved in a rounder, but not unpleasant manner.

Josephine was still unaware of him, brazenly sticking to the loneliest passages like she knew them, but the guard did not worry because he was there. She was safe with him. He studied the motion of her legs. Oh, how he longed to press his mouth to the precious backs of her knees!

Thank God for the rain masking his creeping steps. Just a little bit past this streetlamp...she was in the space between two ancient buildings now. No one was out for the rain. Thank God. It was dark. He reached for the sleeve of her soaked coat and felt her tiny bird bones beneath. She gasped and her breath was a cloud in the air. It was Josephine, the same yellow hair, her eyes (Were they blue? It didn't matter) – and the mouth! – he would not forget that mouth.

She had not screamed yet but he could see her magnificent throat working. He slammed his hand over her mouth and she bit him. She was struggling now, all her muscles quivering and straining like an unbroken horse. He had missed Josephine. Her parts. Her pulse. They would go to Tahiti. He would paint and she would love him.

Paris-Pratique

Jeffrey Wilson

Metro Daydreams

It's the metro, not the underground. That much must be clear if I'm to get along with anyone I meet in Paris. London has an underground, the lewd "tube," and it can stay there. Chicago, sparing no extra letter, has the "L" and New York has a "subway." In Paris there is the metro, to avoid all implications of the subterranean. It's terribly efficient, running frequently and well and it crosses the whole of the city with asterisk angularity and squiddish spread. I'm very attached to it, despite the urine smell, and came to know its creases intimately over a period of three days during which I pursued a dead man I had seen once on my daily commute.

It's not the oddest thing you'll see on the metro, a dead man. God knows the place swarms with musicians, marionetters, and Mormons in unsettling quantities. If life's a song, the surreal moments we find as occasionals and accidentals are left to free fantasia on those stretches of train line, and no one makes any comment, or at least I didn't when my path crossed his against all odds.

I wouldn't have recognized him at all, enthralled as I was that day with memorizing the metro announcements in French, English, and Spanish, because he was playing the guitar, and so hated are these morning melodies by weary Parisian commuters that I'd learned it was impolite to even listen. Despite the grandeur of weirdness the white-tiled

tunnels of the metro played host for, Parisian eyes never blink. The more commotion you made, the more resolutely you were ignored. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, so in Paris I learned to imitate with incredible expression and accuracy the most inanimate of walls.

So on his guitar he strummed and I stared at my own half-a-face reflected in the train car window. I came to recognize that he was playing a certain song - "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" - which I've always associated with Mr. Craig, a frequent substitute teacher at my high school, who sang it in a low, raspy, deeply inappropriate voice to us whenever he substituted for a class, no matter the subject. I remembered rolling my eyes to the classmates who shared my struggle as we listened to the repetitive wheeze and chortle of the only songs Mr. Craig seemed to know: "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" and "Molly Malone."

I'd have recognized that same voice there in that metro car if he hadn't died more than two years prior, of health complications someone more empathetic than me would have remembered - and also if it wasn't my stop.

Les Halles?... Les Halles.

Attention à la marche en descendant du train.

Please mind the gap between the train and the platform.

Cuidado con el espacio entre el vagón y el andén.

I stepped off the metro a little sluggish and my thoughts only came together as the doors did, and turning I saw familiar elbow patches on a brown jacket, the long irregular bristles of a coarsely bearded face and a guitar that had whined about sweet irish maids to irritated high schoolers years ago. The man was slim and grey, but the guitar was voluptuous. Dark and rosewood and shiny like lacquer, with a quote painted on it (from Confucius, Mr. Craig would say) "... and should they have the strength to spare, let them spend it upon the arts."

Of the world's manifold guitars, there was one alone I would recognize, and it was speeding away from me to my right down the tunnel. It would have been line 4, and I was just between classes stepping off at Les Halles to

tread rue Rambuteau in the rain, off to the most tedious class on Comparative Healthcare ever devised. I was alone and unsettled and three months into my time translating mind-the-gaps and riding metros in the city I called the “city of the plain,” Paris, where nothing new ever catches on. I was two years removed from the days spent talking to a boy back home about Mr. Craig and his guitar after school - about how odd it was to sing Irish drinking songs in math classes. I’d pretend I found the whole display romantic, to toe the line with the boy back home’s interpretation, which always assumed the best of sad old romantics.

There, in the recirculating, sweat-moistened air of the Les Halles shopping center I was reunited with him, Mr. Craig, and just as soon denied him. The story I could have come home with rang in my head over the percussive symphony of high heels and hard shoes on cement that rang through the vaulted stairways all the way up to the surface. When I stood guarding my pockets with my hands in the fresh air, I convinced myself it hadn’t happened, to save the embarrassment of losing such a good story. I made my way past crepe stands stinking of flour and butter and amnesty international clipboard kids drifting across my path like icebergs.

Alexander the Great

He had a voice like Capote and eyes like Caligula, wielding both to great effect in the mildest of conversations and the quietest of metro cars. If up until coming to Paris I’d presumed myself a gay man for the occasional lilt on my tongue or boy on my mind, Alex stifled my certainties. So aggressive was his presence that even at twice his height I seemed to vanish, while he glowed a great announcement of what the community terms “pride.” The first word I’d learned in traversing Paris was « pardon » which got me through with its final nasal punch as I bumped into people and was a general problem to those around me. Alex apologized for nothing.

We arrived on the same plane, wide-eyed travelers in a

distant land, jet-lagged and careless of our fate, and Alex was quick to introduce himself, unfazed by the same flight that had managed to deflate me. His energy, excitement, and attitude in the face of insurmountable jet lag carried me through the first three days of madness and exhaustion, and hadn’t dimmed throughout our time there. He believed us to be comrades, and so indulged me my visions of a dead man that night as we wound our way to line 4 to meet his friends at a left bank bar for Friday fun.

“He was playing the guitar and singing “Kisses Sweeter than Wine’.”

“And that’s important because...?” Alex asked, summoning up from his impossibly tight pants a chiming smart-phone.

“Well my old teacher only sang two songs and that was one of them. Same elbow patches, he always wore them, and same sort of hair. Same sort of... old lobster face.”

“Old lobster face?” Alex said with an injuriously raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t get a good look, but, really red cheeks, bristly beard, beady dark eyes.”

“Can we agree you don’t know what a lobster looks like?”

I tried to laugh but Alex had begun to fiddle with his phone, the first sign of an impending maelstrom. Alex had a knack for using his piping voice to strike you still across busy streets or to shoot down conversations point blank just to make room for another Youtube video. He had tablets, phones, mp3 players, and more on hand at any given moment, and enough videos to swallow up the most well-meant evening. He knew every video by heart and I could see him mouth along to them as he watched his victims pretend to watch.

This was intolerable behavior on the metro, these videos, as evidenced by the woman with the sack of laundry between her legs beside us closing her eyes in irritation as Alex wrangled with the buttons of his phone to raise the volume.

With his eyes on me I heard his voice in eerie sequence to some blogger's fresh complaint. Something tedious about unfamiliar neighbors showing up in apartment hallways. I followed the example of the wincing businessman holding on to my same grab handle and receded into myself against the noise, trying to think of a better term than lobster-faced to describe the specter I'd seen. Santa Claus had red cheeks, but Mr. Craig wasn't jolly, always drooping and melancholy,

At Reaumur-Sebastopol we changed to line 4, and waited on the platform for Aya, one of the numerous names Alex had brought up in his description of the night. When she arrived we feigned intimate French familiarity and "bised" bumping cheeks to the sounds of smooching, a total absurdity as we hadn't quite mastered our adopted mannerisms, and Aya and I had never said a word to each other until that point on the platform. She said to me,

"Did you know they sell peanut butter at Hema?"

Alex, unenthused, said, "Do you think that's what you should be spending your money on, honey? Keeps you off the runway" and gave Aya's side an accusatory pinch.

His phone suddenly spouted a blogger's commentary on the faults of stores like Hema and Target without even stopping to buffer. From the pulpit of tolerance espoused by the oft-oppressed community to which Alex and I belonged, he never failed to critique, deride, nor diminish anyone - friend or foe - for their looks, thoughts, and mannerisms, citing "because I'm gay and you're trashy." This was his particular mandate from heaven, should his authority be questioned. Such constant badgering was, to him, a sign of a healthy relationship and bespoke a strong spirit in those who could endure the onslaught, as he could.

"So you both found something you loved from America here, how cute." Alex said, pushing Aya into me, at which she joined me in the incredulous eyebrow raising that was quickly leaping from face to face in that particular traincar like a wake trailing behind Alex's voice.

"What did you find?" She asked me, as the train tore off.

"I thought I saw an old substitute teacher playing music

on the metro this morning."

"Oh cool, did you talk to him?" she asked

"Well no, we were on the metro and I just got off before I noticed him."

Alex interjected, "But how could you be miss a chance to talk to lobster face."

Aya ignored the interjection, "You're sure it was him?"

"Well no, I mean, it was definitely his guitar - he used to play guitar - and he wore the same sort of outfit, same sort of shape. He was singing the same song."

"He was singing?"

"Yeah, 'Kisses Sweeter than Wine'."

"Wouldn't you recognize his voice?"

"I mean. I think so, yeah. It's sort of raspy. He was really old, I mean, he's supposed to be dead."

Aya made Alex her audience for a beleaguered sitcom-inspired blink, "You didn't want to lead with that?"

"I mean. I thought he was dead. I'm pretty sure he's dead. So he wouldn't be singing on the metro. Cue the twilight zone theme - I guess."

"On a topic that matters, have you guys seen this? If not you need to," Alex said, cutting me off from Aya with a phone playing some favorite music video involving men showering. Aya, revealing obvious talent for dealing with Alex's electronic intercessions, delivered a snide remark about his jacket, which Alex parried with a slight at what he dubbed her "Cleopatra-bang-me-bangs."

At Réaumur-Sébastopol we changed to line 4 and Aya probed me about Mr. Craig. This metro car was more crowded, and loud, and in the American fashion we raised our voices over the dull roar in order to be heard, exacerbating the problem. At my height I comfortably talked over Alex's head at Aya.

"I'd love to catch him again in the metro, just to shock everyone back home with the story - Mr. Craig is alive and well and living in Paris."

A person bumped against me, and we exchanged a polite « pardon » to each other, which undoes most affronts that happen on the metro.

“You sort of have to think he’s living it up while he’s dying from cancer or something, right?” Alex said, “Doing the “Eat Pray Love” thing.”

“Yet all three of those things are exactly what no one does on the metro,” I said.

“Where are we getting off?” Aya asked.

“Here, metro Odéon,” I said. “The place where odes are sung.”

“Okay Webster’s, I’m pretty sure that’s not what it means,” said Alex, “there’s a statue of Odéon at the stop, it’s a guy.”

I attempted a stiff pace out of the metro car to put some distance between myself and Alex.

“Probably from the French revolution,” he added, as he passed me. Alex went everywhere at a half-gallop so he could have the pleasure of turning his head back and hissing “Can we all stop moving at a glacial pace” to anyone behind him. We climbed the very shallow stairs of Odéon metro stop as he did so, to be greeted by its statue of George Jacque Danton, near Odéon Theater. Alex’s bar, named for some marsupial, was full and roaring.

Inside, the crowd lumped Aya and I together as mutual friends of Alex - only to find we were yet as virgins to his rapacious use of youtube videos, which were his first order of business, and second, and third, indefinitely postponing introductions and matters of the day. I took drink orders to offer a round to the harassed crowd, but the smarter ones denied, certain they wanted something specific only the barman could know. Aya and I crept away from the faces lit up by the latest Saturday Night Live video gleaming from Alex’s hands.

At the bar, Aya turned towards me to say, exasperated, “Is that him? That smell?”

Paris has a distinct smell of urine in its metros and occasionally above, probably from being steeped in the stuff for thousands of years before civilization caught up with bathroom technologies. Alex, however, had a smell more like burning coal, or melting rubber.

Between all his primping, behind what I considered

his pretension, which he called his “polish,” there was the problem of his smell. He’d admitted it as a flaw, which was astounding. This seemed more an attempt to slide the smell under a veneer of self-satisfaction than an actual admission. He claimed it was a side effect of the overactive metabolism that kept him “hot” - aspiration on the “h.”

That night I took up smoking just to spare others the smell. I taught Aya how to hold a cigarette we’d bummed as we tucked into each other’s conversation outside, safe from the acrid smell of Alex. The ties that bind. She revealed she had something planned to shut Alex up for us all, and to stop the incessant videos.

Inside, we opened up to the indistinct interactions encouraged by alcohol. Aya revealed she knew every line of “Rocky Horror” by heart. I shared the story of Mr. Craig to any who would hear me, expanding on the Leonard Cohen quality he took on in our classrooms. The sad romantic. How certain I was he lived in New York as a young man and kept a harem of beautiful women at arm’s length his whole life, until one day he saw his arm was withered and the women had gone and he was just singing sad songs to high school students. All things I’d discussed at length, bubbled and frothed over, long before, back home - but people here found the rich imagining quite impressive for something on the spot. We drank toasts to him, this ragged romantic hiding away before his death as a forgotten man in a Paris metro.

We heard impressions and barked at each other about technology and politics; we raised a drink to the live singer, whose strong forearms and tattoos of musical notes enticed us all and loomed over us throughout the night as he winked and glinted.

“Somebody sleep with him for me - Aya?” I asked, to laughter - and its ripples and recourse throughout the night. As drinks were poured and laughter became more forceful, we started to shake off Alex’s control. It took him a little longer to reign discussions back to one video, and we’d maneuvered him around the bar table so his back was to the wall. He held out his phone, glowing with a gay-rights

blogger “who could stand to hit the gym” in Alex’s opinion. But his voice was drowned out by the bar’s din, and his eyes dimmed as we moved freely away from him unfazed.

As hospitality was extended across tables to strangers-made-temporary-friends he began to orbit us, passing from group to group with less and less to say. I had talked at length with Aya that night about hypothetical revenge-plots on Alex, as we practiced our cigarettes and just how to ask for a light in French.

Inside Alex made weaker and weaker attempts to integrate, and Aya and I eloped outside at every opportunity for a drunken cigarette providing absolution. Alex wouldn’t touch the stuff, and he had a video of a desiccated lung to explain why. Showing this video to our table despite the cries of rejection gave Aya a devilish look in her eye, and she moved away from me with a look full of revenge.

The last I recall of Alex that night was when a hundred American and English throats opened in a loud chorus to Aux Champs-Élysees, a French song everyone in the bar seemed to know the lyrics to. The live music’s forearms holding his guitar twitched with muscle as the crowd went absolutely mad with bliss singing about the Champs-Élysees, the street no one liked or could afford to walk on - a monumental part of Paris countless metro stops away.

Between Aya leaving me to enact her plans, the cigarette smoke, and the spilled Guinness and vodka stingers around me, Alex and his smell were ultimately drowned out. I held a cigarette I’d grown sick of smoking in my hand after the drinking song had petered out, thinking I was holding it for Mr. Craig, who’d come at any moment to sing to me and the boy back home about women, cigarettes, and Biblical references in rasps and gasps.

As I walked back in I met a French man of much stronger jaw than most at the door. I saw Aya over his considerable mass of shoulder, and at the threshold of the bar we both turned to look at her. Aya’s eyes were bright and she gave a pleased nod and a thumbs-up, at which point the Frenchman punched me squarely in the side of the face.

As I held a hand against the numbness which blos-

somed into pain I only heard Aya crying out “Not that one!”

The strong jawed Gaul caught me as I leaned against the door. He herded me to a table to sit as I realized which “one” was in Aya’s assassination request.

I tried for levity, and told Aya I was proud she could employ fit Parisians in hate crimes, only suggesting that Aya, in briefing her bounty hunter, could have given Alex any other moniker than “that awful gay one.” The notion that I fit the description well enough for Etienne, the strong-jawed Gaul of lore and our night’s entertainment with the tattooed forearms, gave me grief, but I kept silent on the issue. A cold beer glass was rammed apologetically against my face.

Etienne the Parisian hulk and the barman said I was a good sport, since usually Americans were the ones to escalate, and asked if there was anything I needed or wanted to know, and my only question was the time.

By the time I’d recovered and everyone had had their laugh about the whole thing the metro had closed. Walking home, we all entertained the idea of getting a cab, until each of arrived at our doors, regretting not getting a cab. Aya and I lived closer to each other than we expected, on either side of Pere Lachaise cemetery, and we managed to walk all the way home, parting at the Voltaire roundabout with a hug, a bise, and a promise on her part to call me the next day. I walked the rest of the way home alone, up the hill to the cemetery, very cold and oddly giddy in a way that felt unnatural and a little perverse.

Day with Aya

Aya was nice enough to follow through and called me the next morning. She agreed to help me look around that Saturday for the mysterious guitar-man I’d spent the night talking about. We met at Voltaire and walked a little and ate nameless pastries of no particular value. We went down to metro Charonne and up and down line 9 seeking official-looking employees. I made Aya ask the two or three questions that seemed relevant, and with what I could

interpret we almost made a frenchman between us. The search, however, turned up little.

The day was long, traipsing up and down the foxholes through the city of light's dimmest lower reaches. We crisscrossed the city skirting past the wine cellars and the deeper graves – the old bottles and bones alike must rattle when the cars pass by. At some point Aya and I sat smirking on line 3 as the absurdities racked up on us. The day oozed with metro oddness. When we were particularly tired of running back and forth, and we'd exhausted any conversation we had about the night before, I took to staring at my own half-face reflected in the window again. I glanced into the cars and across the stations as we rolled and stopped and rolled and stopped. An old woman, shaking, her cane in one hand and a bouquet of flowers held gingerly upside down in the other sat in the car beside ours, and I must have been staring because she looked through the glass at me worriedly. But just as our cars took off in opposite directions I thought I saw her wink.

Aya was kind enough to collaborate with me on the sheer weirdness of our day as I revisited the topic nearly every hour –

“Am I having a stroke?”

To which she'd neatly reply

“Did I eat bad shrimp?”

There was the little girl, sitting alone with eyes looking straight at me through the glass. French deference and deterrence were not in those eyes, and her earmuffs had puffballs the size of her head and looked ready to transform into yapping Pomeranians at any moment. I saw her just before a metro musician stepped into our cart, delivered to us like manna from heaven. Aya is poised to ask our host of questions but he's strumming his guitar and mouthing “Let It Be” or something similarly Lennonist. He knew the syllables, clearly, but didn't seem to understand English. Aya tried to get his attention but his eyes were closed and his voice bombed, so she sat down giggling beside me to wait it out. He moved straight to French songs next without even a pause to shake his cup. He started to play *la valse a mille*

temps “the waltz in thousand time,” which fell slow and sweetly as we pulled out of Metro Parmentier – its interior covered in potato trellises. Aya was poised to pounce, but the song was slightly more involved than one or two metro stops.

I swear the man wouldn't or couldn't stop singing, and his song picked up like a rabid dog halfway through. The scenes spilled past us in stops and starts on each platform in old arthouse flamboyance. There was a man kneeling with a ring in his hand to propose in metro Republique, which stinks of urine more than most, and not an eye on him but mine, not even the woman he so solemnly proposed to. She was busying herself with a newspaper. We passed through the tunnel and slipping by the usual sexual metro ads, male frontal nudity to advertise watches and women's breasts bared to get you interested in nearby water parks. The man and his music and his silly smiling face were at their most Fellini-esque as we pulled into a station full of spilled white confetti – the metro ads were being scraped and some gush of air or scraper's folly had sent the shreds of paper everywhere. His song struck Amarcord against the subterranean flurry. He was still playing somehow, and Aya and I slumped together in the car. I saw the advertisements flip by, watch after handsome, rugged, glistening watch, like an erotic flipbook, and the man, sweating now over his guitar as he ravaged the strings for the waltz in thousand time brought the imaginary orgy to full fruition in my mind.

Then he stopped and shook his cup, and Aya asked him, and he knew nothing.

“Want to go to the Louvre? It's like two stops from here,” Aya said, her tone in tune with my own exhaustion.

I liked the idea. “Well, I'm game, but I have a question for you.”

“What?” Aya asked, poor girl.

“Are you properly louvricated?”

“Oh god. No. Just. Don't ever talk, ever again. People who say that should be sterilized.”

☒ ☒ ☒

Line 1 deposited us directly in the Louvre's subterranean annex, the Carrousel shopping mall, whose cream marble interiors and inverted glass pyramid lent Louvre-level sanctity to the Mariage Frères and Swatch Stores and the glittering Apple with its edenic absent bite.

We passed into the richelieu wing in the Louvre's remodeled foundations, wandering from masterpiece to masterpiece.

"I feel ugly at the Louvre," I said.

"Really? I always feel more talented after looking at stuff like this."

"It's not the art - it's the art students. Look at them." I pointed to a gaggle of them cloistered around a sculpture, splayed exquisitely about, sketching and glittering with well-manicured bohemian flare.

I added, "If you're an artist you should be ugly."

Aya either laughed or sighed.

"Anyway, the boy back home likes pretty artist types. Or, some idea of a pretty artist type. Meanwhile I don't know what I like about him."

Aya, who until then had laughed and sighed and cooed in ways I always found agreeable to me, stopped.

"Okay, hold up. You can't expect me to let you go on like this right? Look. We all hate on stuff we shouldn't. I hate Paris, because I have to leave it. It's terrible to be far away from home. It's hard to keep loving people when one is here and the other is somewhere else. And god knows, I thought I could come to Paris and get away, but at the same time - it's comforting. Because now you know what you want... and should the boy back home ruin the fucking Louvre for you? If you're going to complain, be like everyone else and complain about tourists wanting to see art. If he were right here, or Alex was right here - then they're right there and you have to deal with them - but when they're not they're..."

She sort of floundered and stopped. She pointed ahead of us.

"In Paris there's too much time to think. I thought I could get away, but all the time I'm just having these absurd things happen, like I'll turn the corner, and see the

Hammurabi Stele, and you know what I think? The only thing I think? I should have told that person I loved them. Like, what the fuck is wrong with us."

I looked at Aya, with her exasperation and her passion, like she was suddenly sacrosanct. I didn't like her confiding in me without a cigarette in hand, but in front of us was in fact the Hammurabi Stele she had been pointing to, and I couldn't find anything to say to her.

"Do you want to know why Oscar Wilde thinks America is such a violent country?"

Aya shook her head, off guard, and eased her tensed shoulders, saying,

"Our vice president shot a guy that one time."

I laughed and looked towards the art students and up at the windows to the street that illuminated the deep hall.

"Because our wallpaper's so ugly. We've got ugly things to look at and it's doing ugly things to us. I guess we should focus on beautiful things, and things that are in front of us." I waved like a dizzy romantic heroine at the gaggle of art students, and to my surprise one of them, with a toss of her hair, waved back as if it was ordinary.

Aya laughed out her nose. "So is the boy back home beautiful? Or should I leave you with her."

"Uhh," I said eloquently as the girl returned to her sketching. "Well I think he's beautiful. Terrible teeth, though - yellow. But god how he talks."

"I'm guessing he talks like you? Incidentally, why do you talk like you?"

"I mean, I'm just doing my best imitation of him really - or maybe not. All we're doing in life is imitating people we like, right? I figure underneath the chipping veneer of the makeup there's a person that gets built up over time."

"What?"

"Nothing, I wrote him something like that in a letter a few days ago - I should probably stop sending them."

"You send him letters?"

"Get this - in blue envelopes." I smiled but to Aya this meant little.

"Is that like a Dr. Who thing?" She asked.

“What, no... I mean... is it?”

“I think so, but I stopped watching Dr. Who.”

“You stopped watching Dr. Who? I’ve never started it. But I’ve never heard of anyone who started - stopping. They turn into sputtering fanatics.”

“Exactly, I couldn’t keep going with it.”

“I knew I liked you - apostate from Dr. Who - that takes a staunch character. I don’t think I’d be that strong.”

“So you write him letters in blue envelopes?”

“Yeah. I sort of want to find Mr. Craig because he was his favorite teacher - substitute teacher.”

“You said he played music?”

“Yeah, only two songs, and god he was so bad at it, I mean, not bad, but it was always so -so weird. Kisses Sweeter than Wine I can’t... I can’t do it but. It was really raspy and low.”

“Why did he like his singing so much?”

“God I don’t know, really. Something just - clicked - there, that I never really understood but I went along with it because he was brilliant and if he saw something in Mr. Craig there must have been something there. He could always find the most incredible poetic meaning in things - big romantic digressions - it always blew me away.”

“Are you going to woo him with the story when you get back?”

“I don’t - I don’t think that’ll work.” I said. Aya raised an eyebrow, and then when I didn’t continue raised it again and again, and so I began.

“He’s got - he’s less interested in that stuff - I guess. He’s saying it’s not like he expected - that since he came out ‘we’ve lost our secret rendezvous.’ It wouldn’t work out.”

Aya drove her damn charm straight through her raised eyebrow and I crumbled like shortbread.

“Ugh - he’s really vain now, is all, since he came out,” I said. Statuary was all around us, and we moved without real direction. “He’s obsessed with stuff he can’t have. He did the whole repressed protestant schtick for a while, still isn’t out to his parents. I sort of want to tell him the Mr. Craig story.”

Night at St-Vincent-de-Paul

Aya was hanging tight on my arm and dragging me down, so I swung her a bit up the stairs into the train station where we had come in hot pursuit of elbow-patched jackets and a be-quoted guitar.

“I just saw him!” She no-less-than-screamed, and I knew she had because I saw him too, but we both had different ideas exactly where and our arms were still linked. She pulled her way, I pulled mine - a short strain then a sudden heave in my direction as girth and height and sheer mass made me the winner.

“Wait!” She cried out. But I never turned - the grey head was fast dissolving into the crowd.

I stopped - there he was, there he was again. Grey hair everywhere became his, I saw his lobster eyes in little girls’ faces, in the barista’s I passed. I saw guitars that were only cardboard cutouts. I wanted him to be somewhere, so I saw him in that man’s jacket and in this man’s bald head. He was bald wasn’t he? Aya and I stumbled out into the cool air, shoulders hunched, saying “Pardon” as we weaseled through the crowd.

“That was totally him.”

“So I’m not crazy?” I asked.

“No. I am absolutely justifying your craziness right now. We totally had him.”

“Well, he must have been leaving here, he wasn’t heading towards the platforms.”

The front of the train station was a sight that had a bustle to it that felt very unparisian. These crowds were less fashionable and aloof and considerably louder than any part of Paris I knew outside Les-Halles at rush hour.

One of my hallucinations waddles off and I followed it aimlessly. I could tell even at this distance that the elbow patches, the grey air, and the large sack were suspended on a frame too thick to be Mr. Craig’s, and the pace was too serene, more of a glide than a step. But I followed, and Aya held close to me reminding me I wasn’t crazy.

“Fuck I wish I got a video we could have evidence. Well I’m fucking shivering.”

We walked into a tangle of streets without enough street lamps for my taste, and the tangle of it all would have been romantic if I hadn't just missed my prize. I'd followed the latest grey illusion into an alley and wondered if I should fear being followed or if the poor person I was following feared being followed. Well, they'd have had every right to be. I wouldn't want to run into myself at a party let alone in a dark alley.

"Seriously, see me shiver?." She held out her hand to show the shake.

"With antici—"

Aya slapped me, in a way that hurt a little, and looked around.

"I don't know where the fuck we are."

Of course, neither did I. It had stairs which was always unsettling to see in a city I called the city of the plain for its flatness.

"Gare de l'Est and Gare du Nord are right around the corner from each other. Or they're one metro stop apart — you can't get lost between metro stops. It's impossible." I said, and turning the corner a cathedral lept up in front of us, with two tall towers framing it, and a huge embarcadero of steps in front reaching out for us. Aya and I didn't have much to say, but there was no reason to fall silent like we did. There were more beautiful cathedrals on our morning commute, but this one surprised us, and it stood over us looking pleased at this surprise.

"Look, what are they doing?" Aya said, pointing ahead.

Young men were throwing a ball against the steps of the Cathedral, leaping and crashing against each other to catch it and send it flying back at the face of the house of god. A small group, no more than four, were smoking on some of the lower steps as the ball whizzed and crashed, and the boys leapfrogged and rolled about on themselves. Aya observed in me a noticeable exasperation, and possibly an open mouth and faint drooling.

"Lambourghini mercy... you bitch are so thirsty..." she began, but I walked up the steps of the cathedral without another word except pardon as I passed the little, lovely

coven, following the silhouette of that idea-of-a-grey-coat-and-guitar as it vanished behind the door.

The lights in the ground glared and obscured my sight as I stepped over them, and as the darkness returned I observed that same glow illumine the great pillars and the doors, whose wooden entrance felt like a toll booth.

I walked through the doors, the first light, the second very heavy, into the cathedral St-Vincent-de-Paul. The light inside was nothing like "false twilight" of the Gothic cathedrals. The stone wasn't grey, and no part of the building felt old or weary or strained. The style was classical and harmonious. The light was golden and even, and felt like I was stepping into the splendor of some Ptolemy's tomb. Although I'd followed fast on the footsteps of that shade of an idea I entered into a space empty of humans on all sides, and only the distant sound of humming and coughing.

I'd made it halfway up the aisle, looking nowhere in particular before Aya caught me by the hand and pulled me around.

"Isn't that it?"

Only from the corner of my eyes could I see a guitar disappear behind a door from a chapel somewhere to the side of the Cathedral. Ahead I saw, in the rounded end of the Cathedral hidden just behind the altar, a communion of eleven or twelve old French men and women patting each other on the back.

Aya tugged at my ear like a nun, and at a soft gallop we came to the door. I looked at her a moment, she slapped me again.

I opened the door and slipped inside, to find the equivalent of a spacious closet.

"Shit — shit — Aya it's a confession booth!"

She had already closed the door on me, undoubtedly standing watch in case authorities would come and force us to make a cinema-ready escape.

I'd never been in a confession booth, having never had the talent to be catholic, and the claustrophobia of the whole thing and the uncomfortable wooden chair didn't—

« Tu es pas le père. » "You are not the father." came

whispered, sweetly and clearly through the mesh window in the wall.

« Pardon ! » I cried, like an infant.

“You’re just a young man.”

“Shit Aya, it’s the wrong side!” I attempted to press the door, and stop my throat from erupting in technicolor groans of vomit and shame, but now Aya seemed intent on locking me in.

“Did you follow me?” came through the screen, free of any tone of condemnation.

“No, pardon, pardon, I’m sorry I think I’m-”

I thought I heard ringing in my ears, but given the locale it could just as well have been bells. I babbled a few nasal explosions which bubbled and popped into something that seemed to connect to the woman as French.

“I’m sorry I’ve been looking for someone, I thought he was on the other side of the screen.”

“No, lui c’est moi, he’s me, who you followed.”

“I’m... sorry. Do you, have a guitar? D-did you have a guitar?” I hardly knew what language we were speaking in the rush of it all.

“Yes. I play the music for the church.” She seemed so free in her speech, and she spoke so clearly I could make out every word like she was the very voice of my high school french teacher in her enunciation.

“Bonne Soiree, jeune homme, j’espere que tu trouveras I hope you find...”

Aya finally de-butressed herself from the door, and I swung out.

We ran out of the church, Aya echoing my notes of terror with laughter at my expense. Outside Aya asked the boys at play where we were and I stood mute to translate to her what she couldn’t figure out. We wobbled towards home.

“It’s better than a punch to the face, right?” She said.

“Yes, but I’d like to blame you for both of these nights because you didn’t have to barricade me in?”

“I was just leaning against the door to look casual.”

“Well, besides mucking up some poor woman’s relationship with god we got nothing today.”

“I’ve enjoyed it.”

“Riding around on metros?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Me too.” I said, exhaling. It was a wonder how small the city seemed - with Cathedrals and monuments piled up on themselves at every corner, everything within walking distance.

“It’s the most I’ve ever ridden them. Remember what our teacher said the first day when she was teaching us about the transportation?”

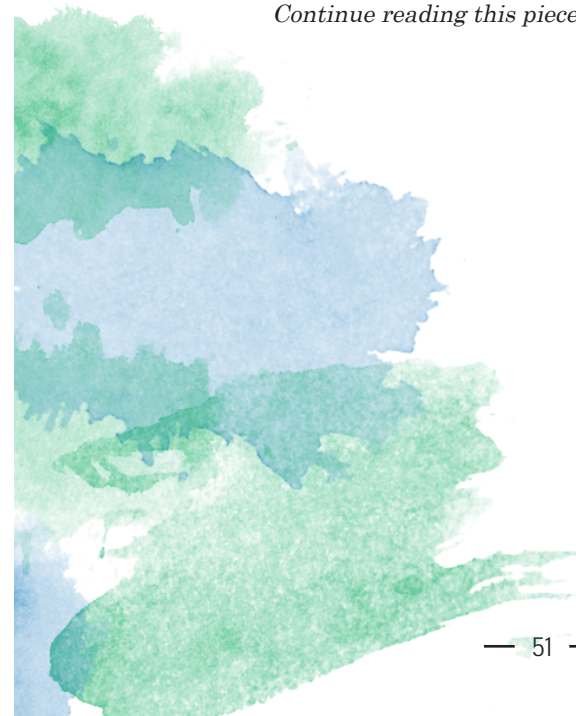
“Hmm, not really” Aya said.

“That if you have to change metro lines more than once to get there it’s not worth it.”

“Well, it’s one way to figure out what’s worth doing in Paris.” Aya said, and we crossed arms again, and in my pocket my cheap by-the-month phone was ringing. The one person with my number had news for me. I let it buzz and quiet down, and later the voicemail told me, in Alex’s shrill voice, that he’d met someone who knew all about the metro singers - and that I would be meeting him the next day, without exception.



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Curtain Call

Russ Walsh

Dr. Hofman's single, gold bullet earring glinted when the instructor stepped under the theatre lights. We all sat in the front rows and stared at the man. The bullet jangled about as he paced around the room. I watched it prance and dance around, independent of Hofman's will. Sometimes I worried the bullet would swing right into his eye, or hook onto his bushy eyebrows.

Suddenly, Hofman came to a stop. I watched him tug on his rainbow suspender with a big exaggerated motion and rub his hand on his clashing paisley shirt. I couldn't tell if the constant chest rubbing was some secret signal gesture, or a rash. I wondered the same thing with the way he would twist and turn his perfectly coiffed handlebar moustache. I realized I couldn't stop staring. Hofman mesmerized me, and that scared me a little. I shook my head and refocused. I looked down at my shabby t-shirt, cheap jeans and ratty sneakers. I was getting self-conscious, comparing myself to some guy who looked like a Keebler elf.

"Hey, James. That's your name right? It's what you said when we took attendance," said a voice to my side. I ignored it.

"I have a question," the voice added.

I turned to the direction of the pestering voice. It'd been awhile since a stranger referred to me by name. It made me uncomfortable. I stared at him blankly, and muttered, "What?"

"Do you think Dr. Hofman's killed someone before,"

asked the stranger.

I grimaced. "Why.. why would you ask that?" I asked. "Why would you think this guy would ever kill someone?"

"The earring, it's gotta be a sign that he's been to prison. Like someone who has a tattoo of a spider or like, a guy who carries around one of those switchblade combs."

I eyed him over, and prayed the guy would stop talking to me.

"Also, the name's Clarkston, if you didn't remember."

"I don't think that's a thing we should talk about." I stumbled over my words. I hadn't practiced talking with a stranger in a while.

"Clarkston," he insisted.

"That's great, Clarkston, but wouldn't a normal switchblade be, uh, the real sign of danger?" I asked politely.

He furrowed his brow. "They're impossible to get a hold of, James. I've looked through five flea markets for one, and no luck. Can you believe it's easier to get a knockoff Andúril sword replica in this country than a switchblade?"

"GENTLEMAN," Hofman yelled. "You enrolled in this class; I'd expect you to pay attention to my syllabus. I didn't construct this in heroic couplets simply for you to ignore it."

I winced when I turned to Hofman. I was the center of the teacher's attention. Even worse, I was the center of the class's attention. Sweat dripped from my brow, and my hands felt clammy. I thought I was going to silently coast through the class and avoid all notice. I turned back to Clarkston. He had one hand raised, and he started to speak.

"PROF! The question must be asked," he said before adding a dramatic pause. "Have you ever been in prison?"

I froze in embarrassment. All these eyes focused on Clarkston and me, their vision drilling into my skin. I did the best I could to defend myself. I shrugged my shoulders. I assumed the most "I don't know either" face I could. I looked back at Clarkston, and scanned over his black t-shirt and red chinos. He had thin hair and a big frame and an erratic sense of movement. His hands moved all over the place, and he constantly shifted the position of his legs. I

hated this situation. I hated the glare Hofman stared us down with. The instructor's eyes were bulging out of his skull. I scratched my leg and clenched my butt on the theatre seat's fabric. Clarkston kept his same goofy demeanor.

Hofman started twisting his wispy moustache and broke the tension. "Yes. I had a stint in the hoosegow, the gladiator school. The court brought me in for 'tax evasion,' but they were attempting to silence me." He slammed his fists against his chest like an angry gorilla. "The pigs had to WRESTLE me into the car."

I couldn't bring my distended jaw back up to my skull. I stared at Hofman, who waggled his bushy eyebrows as an "au contraire," masculine gesture. I turned back to Clarkston and saw him tipping his head like he was Humphrey Bogart sporting a Fedora. Whatever secret language Hofman spoke, Clarkston was now fluent in it.

"Students, you should learn from this man here what it means to be an ACTOR. To analyze a face, to break down mannerisms, to get to the core of a person at a mere glance. This man gazed into my soul, like you all must GAZE into your character's soul. Applaud for him."

Dead silence hung in the air for a few seconds.

He coughed into his hand. "Applaud for him, I say," he commanded.

The students provided some half-hearted applause. Clarkston had a big smile on his face, soaking in the attention. I thanked God the ordeal was over. I wiped the sweat from my brow and squeezed my hands together. My fingers stopped shaking and my eyeballs felt like they were going to melt out of my skull. My heart wouldn't stop.

It took twenty minutes and a trip to the bathroom to calm down, but I had a tough time regaining my steely composure. I tried later in class to put up the tough, silent guy act. But Clarkston's constant talking didn't help me. He wouldn't shut up through the rest of class, whispering little jokes to me. Stuff like "Dialogue, more like, dookie log." Fourth graders couldn't survive this barrage of garbage jokes.

Just when the pressure was too much, Hofman started

wrapping up the lecture.

"You've been a lovely audience, and a lovelier group of students. My goal in this class is to teach you more than how to strut across the boards. No, my goal is to help you all change, to grow into new people. Through art and courage, you will become a better you," he soliloquized before turning his back on the class and standing still.

Everyone stood in awe of the genuineness and earnestness of the speech. Some people had a look of disbelief on their face, others looked wonderstruck. I held my poker face.

Hofman then swung around, juttled out his hip and winked. Most of the students' faces turned to a confused expression. I couldn't help but join them. Everyone in class left upset after Hofman swept everyone up with his grand statement and knocked them down with the wink. Not me though. I look upset most of the time. Clarkston stood out though, with his look of reverential glee.

"Acting lessons from an ex-con... look at where we've found ourselves," Clarkston said.

I didn't know who "we" were, but I knew I didn't like it. The stress of being around people usually made me shut up, but with Clarkston, I had to snap at him. "He was imprisoned for tax fraud. White-collar crime." I didn't spit acid at him, but I let him have my mind.

"James," he replied.

I winced again. I didn't like him saying my name, and I didn't want to hear what he said next.

"You underestimate white-collar criminals. Some nasty, nasty boys involved with white-collar crime. Al Capone was arrested for tax evasion. Also, uh.... Martha Stewart?" Clarkston asked himself.

"Yeah... yes?" I responded, shaking some from the disorientation. I hit my daily limit for conversation. I turned away from Clarkston, and started walking towards my car. I didn't say goodbye, or even motion that I was leaving. My head was in a fog and I needed to go home and sleep.

"We should talk again dude. You're a riot," Clarkston exclaimed. "I'm heading home. Safe travels, friend," he said.

“Safe travels yourself, young blood,” Hofman interjected from the opposite side of the parking lot. I jumped at the teacher’s voice, but went with the flow. With Clarkston looking away towards Hofman, I mumbled, “Uh, sure,” and stumbled away to my car.

Getting into my car, I felt the setting sun beat against my face. My 2003 Chevy Malibu’s paintjob was covered in dirt and grime. Garbage littered my ride. There was a Taco Bell wrapper riding shotgun for example. The carpet still smelt like that Buffalo Chicken Roller I dropped on it. The heat of the sun only intensified the smell. The world found a way to make my night just a little worse.

I drove home in silence. I usually play my own music, stuff like nineties R&B or eighties Punk. I don’t like quiet spaces. Quiet spaces remind me of the infinite vacuum of space. The infinite vacuum of space makes me think of the cold impassive nature of death. But tonight, the silence was refreshing. I preferred watching cars pass by and looking at billboards that catch my eye. Lots of weird cult stuff, with weird logos and questionable font choices. Ashebrook was the center of a big cult boom in the 90s. Only a few survived the fad, and they were all benign. Folks who worshipped snakes and barn owls. They display their sacred animals out in the mall I work at. Sometimes they’d even let you pet them if you wanted. I never did. I didn’t want to interact with the handlers. I don’t like interacting with people in general.

I yawned, pulled into my driveway, and entered my house. Dad was in the kitchen, cooking hard boiled eggs and watching Poirot on Netflix. Poirot’s moustache was perfectly styled, like Hofman’s. Dad took a seat and gulped down some beer. His gut protruded from his white shirt and rested over his khaki slacks. He wore long black socks instead of shoes. His hair was sweaty, but not greasy like my thick curls. It looked like work had been tough that day.

“Hey, son, I bought Rite-Aid sushi. The old, expired crunchy kind you like. It’s all yours if you’re hungry,” said Dad.

“That’s okay, Dad,” I replied.

He didn’t turn towards me, but he made his voice louder and more pronounced. “How was the acting class? Did you get the big part in the play?” he joked.

“One of the Goth kids I knew in high school was there,” I responded as flat as possible.

Dad ignored the response. “Make any friends?”

“No.”

“Did you even talk with another person?”

“I wish I didn’t.”

“Yes! Can’t spin that negatively towards me son,” he cried. “Talking to an actual other human on your first day? I’m proud of you, going to the acting thing and being pushed out of your comfort zone. You must have been chatting up a storm! My kid, an actor! This acting thing is better than all I had at your age.”

“Dad, you’re the guy who was living in rural South America at my age.”

“Central America, son.” He paused. “I knew plenty of Nicaraguans who’d push you off a bridge for calling them South American. They’re a proud people.”

“I hear you, Dad, I hear you.”

“Hear what? The acting class thing or the Nicaraguan thing?”

“Both.”

“Good. Dad’s watching out for you, and not crazy for referring to himself in the third person. As a dad, I’m allowed to do that.”

I shrug him off. “I’m going to bed.”

Dad smiled at me, and turned back at the screen. “Good job, pal.”

I marched upstairs, and sat in my room. I looked over the records and posters that hung on my wall. I looked at the sad, overexposed and oversaturated face of Bill Murray on the Scrooged poster. Dad got it for me when he couldn’t find a Rushmore poster. I laid down and rested my head on my pillow.

Summer vacation with Clarkston and Hofman was going to be a nightmare. Dr. Tremper, my psychiatrist, said the acting class would help out with the anxiety. I would

have preferred new medications, but Dad convinced me to try a different route. He said if I had mustered up the courage to get my own job to help save up for college, I had the courage to face this. Dad didn't understand there was a difference between selling pretzels and public performance. I yawned again. Sleep sounded good about now.



Two weeks later, and Hofman's class was fine, so far. I played it smart. What people don't tell you about acting class is its mostly adult day care. There was a lot of rest time, a lot of sitting around, and a lot of games. Word association games, games where you spin around, games where you'd pretend to be an animal. I liked the animal game, 'cause I knew how to work it. I played the solitary and quiet sea cucumber. I'd lie on the ground and filter feed away from the other students.

Clarkston enjoyed ruining these solitary moments for me. He'd lie beside me as a sleepy dog and bark in my ear during the lonely animal game. He also loved to ruin the "improv" games we played in class.

During the improv game, all the students stood in a circle on stage. Two kids would take center stage and play out a scene in the middle. One person would yell a line, the other would follow through. Without fail, Clarkston would always call me into the circle with him. He'd mug for a minute, and then slick his hair back. He'd then pull out his bad British accent, and start the scene. "Hello, constable, are you ready to die?" he'd asked while forming his hand into a finger gun.

I'm not an expert on these things. I've never seen an improv show. But I knew escalating to gun violence immediately was awful. I could tell Clarkston didn't understand the structure of storytelling. He failed to create any tension before introducing the main conflict. I had improved my ability to tell Clarkston off, but not when all eyes were on me like this. Moments like this made me remember why I hate being around all these people in class. I choked some. I couldn't say anything. All that came out of my lips was,

"Yes."

I sounded like an idiot.

"Yes!" Clarkston repeated, before dramatically posing himself like Sam Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. A shadow of doubt suddenly clouded his face. "Yes?"

He paused again. "James, I don't know if your character is suicidal or you're just being lazy here." He dropped his stance. "In improv, it's called 'yes, and...' Not just 'yes.'"

Hofman put his hands in the timeout formation. He entered the center of the circle with Clarkston and I.

"Clarkston, I love and respect you as a master who loves and respects their apprentice. But you've given James nothing to work with here."

Clarkston bowed his head in shame. "I'm sorry, sensei."

Hofman placed his hand on his chin. "Call him constable," he paused, "and a werewolf. Constable Werewolf."

Clarkston's eyes lit up. "That's beautiful, sir."

Hofman closed his eyes, and tilted his head up towards the ceiling. He breathed out of his nose. "Is there no greater role than the tragic werewolf?"

"What about a Shakespearean role? Or Thornton Wilder?" a girl with frizzy hair asked.

A frown formed on Hofman's face. "Well yeah... but werewolves are good too."

The class stood around quietly. Hofman recomposed himself.

"And congratulations to James for keeping his cool. Everyone, applaud for him! Applaud!"

At this point, people were in tune with Hofman's applause fetish. The circle started applauding half-heartedly for me. I envied Clarkston's ability to soak up praise. Compliments make my knees buckle and my stomach feel sick. To me, this was worse than the time Clarkston fell on me in a group trust exercise. My skinny arms couldn't keep his entire weight up. Or the time he yelled at me mid-monologue to remember my "internal spiritual shark" that grants you the "strength of the sea." I had no clue I had a spiritual shark. Nor did I particularly care.

At least I had peace at my summer job. I worked days

and nights at Wetzels Pretzels. I hated my job, but preferred it to acting class. I still hated working there, though. I would have hated it even if I didn't have my condition. But I did have a coworker there I liked. She may have been one of the few people in general I liked. Her name was Kareena.

"An acting class, huh?" she said while planting her hands on the counter.

"Yes. Yeah," I replied.

"You didn't strike me as an acting type, but who's to say you can't be the next Christian Bale type. You've got a dark edge. How long have you been a part of this thing?"

"Thanks," I nervously responded. "Two weeks." I was just thankful she didn't say Philip Seymour Hoffman or Paul Giamatti.

Kareena had a bored expression on her face. She gazed out to the people walking in the mall. "Don't you hate the look in their eyes as they leer over this leathery salt bread? The look in their eyes when you're serving them corn syrup lemonade and cardboard pretzel poppers?"

I didn't tell Kareena, but I was right alongside those folks. My mutual hatred for the mall was one of the few ways I could connect with our customers. But I hushed up. Kareena was a poet in her spare time, and I was some lonely jerk. I politely nodded and added a "yes."

"But it's fun hanging with you, James. You're a good listener."

"That's great," I grumble.

"And the few times you do talk, it's delightfully acerbic," she added.

"Is acerbic a compliment?" I asked her.

"You can take it as a compliment, if you want," she said as she looked at her watch. "Shifts over, it looks like," she said. She started pulling the latex gloves off and taking off her Wetzels Pretzels visor.

I looked her over for a second. She said she had her dark black hair cut recently. It looked good. I looked at her almond colored eyes, and the shorts she had hidden behind her apron. I turned away. I felt like a leering creep. I felt disgusted. Like when I watched Clarkston flirt with girls in

acting class and drag me along as a wingman.

"Acting would be a cool job, more than just watching upset mall customers," Kareena said to me. "Well, like always, goodbye, James. We'll be seeing each other again... Tuesday?"

"Of course," I blurt.

"Perfect," she said as she walked out of the pretzel counter. I wanted to say goodbye, but I didn't. I felt equal when we wore the goofy uniform, but when she was another girl on the street, I could barely talk to her. I chewed on my lip, and stared up at the clock, trying to assess when my shift ended.

"How goes the pretzel work, old friend?" a familiar voice whispered to me.

I snapped back into reality, and focused on him. In the hard fluorescent light of the mall, it was the Clarkston. Same big head resting on the same pudgy neck. His face was clean shaven, except for the delicate moustache on his lip. What was most surprising was the little blue suit he was wearing. It had bright yellow stripes, accessorized with a pocket square and a piano key tie. Before this summer, I would have reeled in terror at the sight of this guy approaching me. But now, I could shut off whatever part of my brain freaked out at Clarkston's behavior.

"James, I didn't know you were a pretzel artisan! How's your twisting technique? Did you properly knead the dough? Did you apply an even pepperoni count to the pizza pretzels?" Clarkston quipped.

"Lovely seeing you here," I said, stony eyed.

"Lovely seeing YOU here," he said with affection.

I groaned, knowing I was going to ask the question he wanted to hear. "What's with the suit?"

"Oh, this old thing?" he said, before putting his hand in front of his face and assuming a ridiculous pose. "I'll tell you James, I work a temp job playing piano in a jewelry store. The owner's a former ventriloquist, so he lets me borrow some of his old stage suits."

"The dummy's suits or his?" was the first barb I threw at Clarkston. At some point in the summer, I had grown a

thick enough skin to finally throw a good insult at Clarkston. Of course, he took them on the nose. He almost enjoyed them, since he actually got a reaction out of me.

Like clockwork, Clarkston burst into laughter. “James, shots FIRED.” He chuckled for a second. “That’s why I like you! You got the wit! Shame you never share it with the class.”

I bristled at the comment.

Clarkston sensed my hostility, and lowered his voice. “Sorry, dude. I just think you’re funny.”

“Please leave,” I bluntly told him. “If my supervisor sees me chatting with you too long, I’ll get in trouble.”

He perked up a little, but still felt a little jilted. “Gotcha, gotcha. I see you need to sell more mustard cups, which is criminal if you ask me. The sauce should be for free! It’s practically fascist!”

Clarkston stretched my patience thin. “Please, dude, quit ragging on me. Just trying to make 8.15 an hour.”

“Don’t think of me as ragging on you; think of it as an attack on capitalism,” said Clarkston with bravado. “Marx practiced fisticuffs with any who disagreed with him, and he’s beloved and stuff.”

“Beloved?” I asked.

“He’s the Santa Claus of economics.”

The comment caught me off guard, especially in my sour mood. I chuckled for a half second, which delighted Clarkston. The worst part of Clarkston, besides all the other worst parts of Clarkston, is that he had some decent one-liners. He loved it the few moments he got me to drop my guard and laugh. His smile was brimming.

“Okay, James, I’ll let you get back to work. I have to go. Talk to you soon, I hope.”

“Goodbye.”

I watched him walk off.



Three hours later, I had made my way to Ashebrook’s Community Theatre. It was right past the Ashebrook Fictional Animal Fabricated Skull Museum. Before I start-

ed taking the class this semester, I’d never been inside the theatre. As an adult, at least. I had some memories of seeing Peter Pan there as a child. I also saw a children’s production of Glengarry Glen Ross there, I think. But as I got older, I developed a grudge against it. I knew kids in high school who performed here, and I hated them.

Granted, I hated everyone in high school, but theatre kids specifically. They didn’t shower, squabbled with each other, and took themselves too seriously. I mean, my hygiene wasn’t great either. And I took myself too seriously. But I kept quiet about it.

I decided to forget the far off past for a minute. It didn’t feel right in the calm atmosphere of the empty room. I had joined the acting class a month ago, expecting to just hide in the corner for six weeks. I didn’t imagine I’d enjoy it the small amount I had. Even after Clarkston embarrassed me. I mean, I stunk at acting. My dialogue didn’t come out right. I had no control over my body movements, and my voice would sink back into my throat when I forgot a line. But I enjoyed delivering some of the corny dialogue Hofman gave us to read. But only if I didn’t think too hard about my voice.

I also liked how people lowered their guard in class. It made me feel good when other people seemed genuine. I didn’t experience that feeling often. I used to think the theatre was like a prison. But I got used to the building’s dark brick complexion, its plush seating and big bright lights. The velvety curtain remained the most impressive part of the set. I looked around a little and there was no one around. I walked to the front of the room, and gripped the big velvety drape. Its material wasn’t as soft as I expected. I couldn’t tell if it was worn down or if it always felt this way.

“Ah, James, taking a feel for the stage?” said Hofman before he added, “Quite literally!” and laughed at his own joke.

“Yes, sir.” I attempted to chuckle. The chuckle sounded like a dying animal’s final gasp for breath. I made my way back to my regular seat.

When I sat down in my chair, I watched the other

students come in. There were the theatre kids, excited for a chance to show off their chops. There were the older kids who were roped into this class to get some easy credits. They looked unhappy to spend summer evenings in the theatre building. And then there were people you'd only see in Ashebrook. Folks who weren't like the others in class.

The strangest was the mysterious man with the greasy black hair, the dark leather jacket, and trademark aviator glasses. He'd show up once or twice a week, but would come and go from class at his leisure. He always seemed to be looking at me. Sometimes Clarkston would look off at him, with a confused look in his eyes. It's the only time I saw Clarkston look sullen. I'd asked him who the mysterious man was.

"Everybody called him Leather Jacket," is all he would say to me.

"Called him?" I asked.

"I mean, you're making me really intense about tenses here James. Now are you gonna help me come up with dialogue for my magic orangutan character or not?"

I took some acting exercises with the guy for detective work. He only wanted to talk about Kanye West and Rolex watches. I stood there, sweated profusely, and nodded. After that, I avoided talking to him. The only other time he interacted with me, he took me aside and asked me about Clarkston.

"Does he smell like a tire store?"

"I mean, if you're talking about his thick cologne, sure," I answered.

"Good," he said before leaving class again, leaving me scared and confused. I wasn't even sure if he was a student in the class.

Still, there were other strange folks in the class. There was the guy who carried the acoustic guitar around in the big case plastered with stickers. There was every single kind of sticker on the case. There were stickers of places, shoe brands, musicians, video game characters, and movie posters. It was a technicolor prism with a plastic-y sheen.

As I focused on his case, a girl walked up to the seat

next to me. I didn't turn my head. I didn't want my eyes to meet hers, and I did NOT want her to sit next to me. I sat in the furthest right seat of the least popular row, to make sure two students would never surround me. Clarkston was the only person who sat next to me. But he was a known evil, and she was an unknown element. My anxiety spiked up, and I gripped my fingers together. They only got tighter as she sat down next to me.

"Howdy, neighbor. Playing shy?" I turned toward her slowly. I recognized her voice from yelling out the Shakespeare suggestion that almost made Hofman cry. She had a pale face, and a curly tangle of orange hair. She wore librarian glasses, an old yellow sweater, a pair of jeans, and a pair of generic brand sneakers. I brought my eyes up to see her face. I also noticed the Led Zeppelin ZOSO symbols tattooed on her right hand. In my eyes, she was the theatre kid I spent all of high school avoiding. My eyes met hers, and I blinked in surprise. She looked back, confused but smiling.

"Is Clarkston sitting with you today?" she asked me.

I looked around. I realized Clarkston wasn't around. "I mean, he's not here now," I answered honestly.

She moaned for a second. "Where's your friend? I wanted to pick his brain. He's like a poet."

A lump formed in my throat. "He's not my friend," I said in a hushed tone.

"Oh, you two are friends," she replied before raising her hand up and giving me a thumbs-up. "I sense a connection between you two. You guys give off an aura. I don't do yoga, so I can't like, physically see auras, but I know auras, and you two got an aura."

"What kind of an aura?"

"Friendship aura. You're like Sonny and Cher. He's the Cher." She grinned at me. I think she thought that I thought the joke she thought up was good.

I didn't get the reference.

I stared at her with wide eyes.

She glanced around for a minute.

"We're all Cher in our own special way, if it makes you

feel better.”

“Yes.”

More silence.

“The name is Camilla, by the way. I like meeting interesting folks, like you and your friend.”

I clasped my nervous hands together. Before I could speak, I heard hair bristle between me and Camilla. “And I... am Hofman,” the professor whispered in my ear, his head jutting between me and Camilla’s faces. I had to yell “JESUS.”

“Yes, James, but which Jesus? The prophet? The revolutionary? The martyr? Or the prince... Tell me James, what is your Jesus?”

“The uh... the New Testament one.”

“James, that is an old testament. Your testament will be a new testament, a testament to your own vision.” Hofman panted after yelling that. The man thought he was dropping pure poetry on us.

“That was beautiful,” Camilla whispered to herself as Hofman walked back onto stage.

I usually kept to myself, but I had to know. “You can make out half of what this guy is saying?”

She put her hand to her forehead. “No wonder you keep Clarkston around. You need a genius like him to spell out the finer things these geniuses are putting on your plate. These two philosophers are putting out real stuff, intellectual vegetables. Kids like you gotta eat these vegetables.”

I didn’t know how to respond. It reminded me of how theater kids talked over me in high school. “I, uh, I don’t mean to insult, or hurt, or make fun of you but, I... I think some of his stuff... his lecture is a bit corny.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with authority. “Corn isn’t even a vegetable, James. It’s a fruit.”

Why do people think knowing random trivia makes them smarter than me?

“I’m going to be your temporary Clarkston. At least until he can come back here and get your head out of your ass.”

I wanted to slam my head against the wall. Do I only

attract wierdos in this class? At least she didn’t yell and attract everyone’s attention in class like Clarkston. But what was with her assumption that me and Clarkston were best pals. Did everyone else in class think he and I were best buds?

When class wrapped up that evening, Hofman raised his hands into the air. “Children!” Hofman yelled. “Tonight’s exercise: you will journey into the world of a fellow human being. That’s right, you will grasp onto the ties that bind us all as one, one life, one soul, a collective unconscious, Jungian in scope. Group together with some others, and go somewhere else. Write me a report on the proceedings. Or a poem. Sculpture works too.”

I hated the assignment already. I mean, the writing part didn’t bother me. Hofman was an easy grader. The last paper I turned in, he filled the margins with stars. He wrote on the back, “The sun we see in the sky is actually a projection of light the true sun released 8 minutes ago.” I assumed that was an A. No, I hated this assignment because I hated having to choose a group. Or worse, having a group choose me.

“You’re in my crew now, James. You want some Deny’s?” Camilla said to me.

Before I knew it, I was in the back of a Ford Torres. Camilla drove, and a hairy guy sat in the passenger seat. He had a big thick head of hair, bushy sideburns, hair cascading down his arms. I wondered if he had Hobbit feet. Just then, Captain Caveman rested his hand on Camilla’s thigh. I grimaced. I was trapped in a moving vehicle with a couple. Maybe this acting class was working. Before this summer, I’d be scratching my fingernails against the window trying to escape.

“Oh, I probably should have introduced this guy here. This is my boyfriend, Braydon. He’s a poet, a musician, and a soothsayer. You’d probably recognize his guitar case. The one with the stickers?” Camilla said.

He whipped his head back towards me. I flinched at the speed.

“Ya like dogs?” Braydon asked.

The question struck me dumb. “Uh, um... sure?”

“I, too,” he paused. “Like dogs.”

Camilla took her hands off the steering wheel and clapped her hands together. “I told you, the man I love is a poet. I’d kiss you right now if I wasn’t so near this round-about.”

We drove for a few minutes, and pulled into the Denny’s parking lot. We exited the vehicle, and entered into the Denny’s. It still smelt of desperation and maple syrup. The plastic chairs looked battered and beaten. The booths’ faux-leather had cracked and faded. A memory sparked in my head. This was the Denny’s where I had my seventh birthday party.

I’m still not sure why Dad thought Denny’s would be a great place to throw a seven year old’s birthday party. It didn’t matter in the long run, because the party ended horribly. My sort-of friend Mark got stuck in the toilet. Paramedics struggled to get him out, and everyone forgot my birthday. The toilet trapped him in there for two weeks and became a local sensation. Only in Ashebrook can a toilet boy become the talk of the town. He actually got some local pick-up, signed up with an agent, and starred in some ads. His career never blew up like his parents wanted, though.

“Flashing back to better days, James? A lot of good memories in this Denny’s?”

“I was thinking about how show business is hard.”

“James, we don’t have time to contemplate how modern capitalism devalues art and the humanities. We have something far more important to discuss, which is pancakes.”

The waitress walked over and tapped her pencil against her pad. “Can I take your guys order?”

“I want a lot of eggs” Braydon asked.

“How many eggs?” the waitress replied.

Braydon tapped his fingers on the table. “I want two fried eggs, two poached eggs, a hardboiled egg, cut in half, all on top of a bed of scrambled eggs.”

She scribbled the egg-filled order down. “Would you like toast with that?”

“Just eggs.”

I was dry heaving. What could be running through the waitresses mind right now? Did she think I was friends with the egg lover? I turned to Camilla, who started to run her order.

“Pancakes. I don’t care how they get in front of me, at what state. Bring a griddle and I’ll flip ‘em myself.”

“Ma’am, we offer and unlimited pancakes deal...”

Camilla furrowed her brow. “You offer unlimited pancakes, but do you deliver unlimited pancakes?” Her voice was condescending, like she was talking to a child. I asked myself, is this waitress going call the police on us? I shuffled around in my seat.

“Y-yes,” the waitress said, her hands trembling. The waitress kept one eye on Camilla as she scribbled down her order. She finally turned towards me. Her hands were shaking some, and she kept touching her face to make sure this was real. I must have been shaking with nervousness, thus making her nervous. This made me nervous, creating a nervous feedback loop.

“James, you gonna order something?” Camilla barked.

I ordered the first thing I saw on the menu. “Hashed browns.”

The woman looked at me for a minute. “Just hash browns?”

“Yes?” My throat was dry. This felt like a horrible set-up with a terrible punchline, and I was the butt of it all. I scratched my knee, rubbed my thigh, and pressed my feet together. I used to have my dad order food at restaurants for me. This was before I started working on my anxiety, before I could hold down a job. The nightmare I always feared was playing out before me. Who just orders hash browns? Who calls them hashed browns? I wanted to run to the bathroom and throw up. I couldn’t get out of my own head. I couldn’t breathe.

“Just hash browns are fine; it’s what he likes. Breakfast foods make him nervous,” said a familiar voice.

I turned to my right, and there was Clarkston. He had an arm on my shoulder. I used to bristle when people touched me, but Clarkston’s hand was weirdly reassuring.

He was a weirdo, but he was the weirdo I was familiar with.

“Uh, are you joining this table?” the waitress asked.

“Of course he’s joining the table,” Camilla said.

Clarkston pointed to the seat next to me. “I will join this table.”

The waitress gave up trying to sort us out. “I’ll be back with the rest of your food soon,” she said. “And I’ll take your order next,” she gestured to Clarkston.

She walked away. I felt relieved. I hadn’t felt relieved like this in a long time. Usually, Clarkston made me feel anxious, but now, I felt a weight off my shoulders.

“Clarkston, I presume. I’m Camilla, and I’m a huge fan of yours. Same with my boyfriend. Your pal James said you couldn’t make it today, but you made it here. Where were you?”

“Late. By the time I got to the class building, I got paired with Leather Jacket. He’s over there,” he said as he pointed over to the man in another booth. “I came to say ‘hi’ to my bud, James, and his new buds. But I saw him having a hard time and had to help out.”

I was kind of shocked, hearing someone was watching out for me. I didn’t want to say that to myself.

“You saw me confused here,” I asked.

“We’ve been friends for a while, dude. I can tell when you’re not feeling alright.”

I stopped rubbing my thigh for a second. The tight clench of my two hands loosened. I looked around at Camilla and Braydon. It weirded me out, seeing someone concerned about me from a distance. But that word lingered in my head. Distance. My fists started to clench up. Distance, it reverberated through my head. My anxiety started to flare. I stood up, and started walking out of the restaurant. I didn’t look at any of them as I left. I could tell their eyes were following me. I pulled my phone and called my dad. He picked up.



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POETRY

Cat Crown

Jessie Barker

I loved you for only an hour
it feels like
although I spent 3 years
denying Christmas cards
meant more than just friends
a thousand days once wasted
whispering your name
within my head
twice as many times
as I moaned for them in bed
I loved you for only a minute
I'll say
30 years later
with a box of your letters
and a moment of silent wonder
for whose bed
you snore in every night
I loved you for only a second
I feel
for our days weren't enough
and yet I had too much
I will love you until the day
I hate bacon and cheese,
until the sun and moon
fall from the sky

i need a rebound for my rebound

James Bowie Campbell

God Damn It, man.
got into a fling after i broke up
with my girlfriend
of one year
and the fling turned into a thing
and holy shit

we were in Our Town together
talking shit behind the curtain
getting yelled at for being
literally the only two people
talking backstage during the show

She called me a loser a lot
it was really immature and stupid

i told Her about the roofs i climbed
and the places i've seen, but never been to
and deep down She was getting me
like a fucking fish
gets water

it felt good again
after getting yelled at
for not liking my relationship anymore
of one year

honestly i forgot how it happened
but i asked Her out
over facebook i think
cause She always left
as soon as the show was over
but She said yep

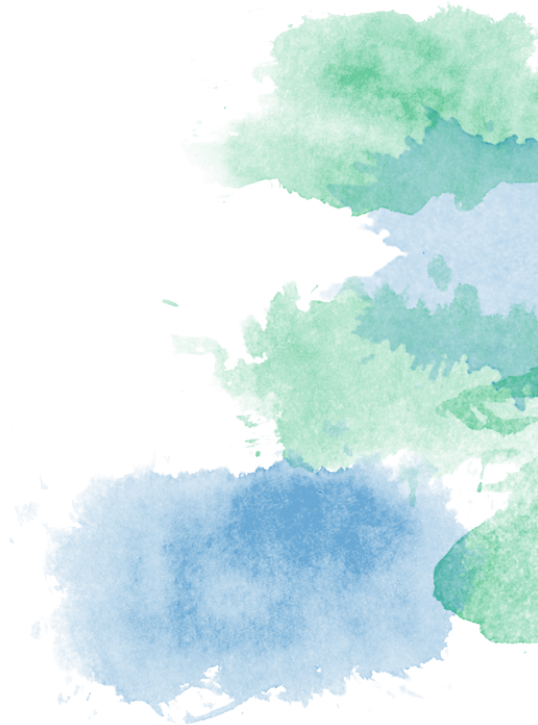
and we talked about nothing for an hour
until i flat out said
“ok, you’re obviously fucking gorgeous
and out of my league”
She said that She wasn’t
i told Her
“i am a loser
and people compliment me on my achievements
all the time
but i have a towel
in my room
that i jerk off into
and everyone thinks i’m awesome
for some reason”
and She got it.
“no I can definitely tell you’re a loser,
but you’re not out of my league.”
we kissed on the roof of a science building
that i snuck us onto
She wouldn’t let me walk Her home
leaving as soon as the show was over
we kept talking
over texts that i couldn’t afford
but made anyways
we made out for two nights straight
i made a make out playlist
it wasn’t even a fucking playlist
it was just for making out
which is saying something
all things considered
my dick is a
fucking vacuum
constantly trying to eat women
She had to leave on a monday
for the holidays
i don’t know why i always get
depressed around christmas

i didn’t know that I would kiss her
for the last time
on a saturday
She told me Her dad
doesn’t get that
She’s worth more than Her shitty grades
and that two D’s aren’t enough to stay in washington
for schooling
when you live in california
She gets to come back to pack Her things up
in january
and She said She didn’t want to see me
i didn’t get it for a second
and asked why
“damn it because i like you
and i don’t want to.
and the first time
i actually feel like i could
truly
really
eventually
maybe one day
fall for someone
I have to just
let it go
and know it’s never going to happen
because time wins and time is a
bitch sometimes.
so i don’t want to say goodbye
because i don’t want it to be real.”
and i got it.
maybe it was never Her call
maybe She just had to leave
when the show was over.
and god damn it, man.
Holy Shit.

For Stephanie

AJ Hannigan

I count the freckles
on your nose
like calculi
each an image
invoked by a kiss
as we sit on your
grimy tan floor
where my pen burst
spilling its black ink
like loosed snakes
our feet tapping in time
upon the wheel-cut cobbles
of the via publica
under the shadows
of white plaster walls.



Linear Mood Scale

Miranda Hansen

I wonder what life would have been like if I had been born a Sim. Just a simple little Sim with my fused hands and non-moving hair and inability to cook mac and cheese without lighting the house on fire. Would I find life to be an eternally enjoyable romp, with no responsibilities or need to make decisions? I would experience emotions in linear mood-scale, my only concern being whether “my mood” was green or red, good or bad. I would perhaps have a quaint little family, a nice husband and two children, aged Child and Toddler. I would feel nothing but an affectionate “green plus plus” toward those two little wonders and my husband, and in the evening I would run my flat finger-mitts through his pristine helmet hair and I bet it would feel something like sticking your hand into a bowl of uncooked pizza dough. Or would I feel trapped, cursed with a conscious mind and yet forced into the robotic actions of day to day life? Maybe I don’t want to be commanded to “Go Here” goddammit maybe this time I want to call just one shot, maybe I want to “Go THERE” but alas no; as my robotic body and traitor feet drag me toward the specified spot I die a little inside, scathing under the constant illusion of free will.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Each poem in this collection represents one of the seven chakras, the energy centers of the body. These poems reflect who I was, who I am, and who I hope to be. Together they strike a unique balance of beauty, sadness, and hope, and writing them was part of a spiritual and emotional cleansing process that I found incredibly liberating.

Beneath the Mango Tree

Cappy Spruance

I Muladhara/Root

I long to return to Cherry Cove
to trace a toe along the coast
and photograph glass wind chimes,
as if a picture could catch their lazy sound.
To chase a cat down cobbled steps
past broken clam shells picked apart by crows.
To sit in soft sand
cooled beneath thick madrona leaves
and stare into morning.
To kayak in the early fog
forgetting that the ocean breathes
until I'm run aground,
stuck in tide pools until the afternoon.
To sit upon the rocky shore
and stare out to the other side
a red canoe made double by glassy water
the dense green trees mirrored
until I see an endless forest
hidden from the world.

II Svadhisthana/Sacral

I let them beat me,
their words like clubs,
and bore the torment in silence.
When my own people could stand it no longer,
the whiplash of turning their cheeks
too painful to bear,
I stood before them
starving.
Days without bread cannot compare
to children without fathers
eyes without light
houses without inhabitants.
Everything I'd lived for
became another's death sentence.
Who first called me Mahatma?
Prayers grew louder.
"I know a way out of hell."
Riots stopped
then began again.
How do you ask a man
to sit in silence with
a line of rifle barrels
pointed at his heart?
And how do you live inside your own mind
knowing that he died
with your face in the back of his eyes?

III Manipura/Solar Plexus

She returned to geometric cityscapes
blindingly reflective
angular windows glinting in the heat
frustrated travelers pushing toward paychecks.
At night she'd climb in bed,
shut the windows,
and close her eyes
to see golden roads

mustard colored houses
 saffron tinted fabric
 curry stained rice
 and that little place
 between her stomach and her breast
 would light up,
 a lantern in the window.

In the morning, she smelled it.
 Curry again,
 and basil and dirt
 and that little light would warm and glow
 like a pool of melted butter,
 a tiger chasing its tail.
 If she shut her eyes,
 she could hear it past the subway platform,
 calling out from street markets
 men with pots of ghee and
 mangoes, fresh picked
 and the tiger ran faster
 melted quicker
 glowed brighter
 burst its from holy prison
 and spread across her insides
 until she became liquid sun.

IV Anahata/Heart

My love is poorly punctuated, misspelled,
 written on coffee-stained napkins
 from the diner down the street.
 It whispers in the nighttime,
 its silhouette hanging
 high in the perfumed air,
 muffled by musk.
 It waits by the window,
 one paw poking through the blinds,
 watching with yellow eyes.
 It's a carefully crafted mud pie

decorated with brown cherry pits and strawberry stems
 left on a doorstep.
 A post-it note shoved into a mailbox
 taped to a small flower
 "don't tell anyone."

My love is a lighter, flickering in the sticky air
 up in the nosebleeds
 while Stevie Nicks sings Gypsy and spins,
 sheer black shawl billowing.
 A white sand dollar,
 washed up on the beach
 where tourists stop to say it's beautiful
 but forget it died long ago.

A stack of letters you kept
 treasured
 but never replied to.
 A broken traffic light
 blinking erratic destruction.
 A mix tape
 unwound from years of repeated plays
 buried in a glove box
 forgotten.
 My love is a crow-beaked mask
 meant to drive the devil away
 but serving as a death sentence by mistake.

V Vishuddhi/Throat

Kaleidoscopes drop past my throat
 as pages rustle in the wind,
 and the words I speak reflect the sky.
 I become the breath in my ears,
 alive as the breathing earth,
 my head tipped to the shade.
 Hasn't it always been this way?
 Just this moment exists
 in this new world I've found
 so I'll bring it back with me

as if in a ship across the sea.
Soft eyes in the shadows
watch my expansion through the valley
and I stretch across the horizon.
Leaves rustle in the wind
singing the poetry of vibrations
and I am reborn.

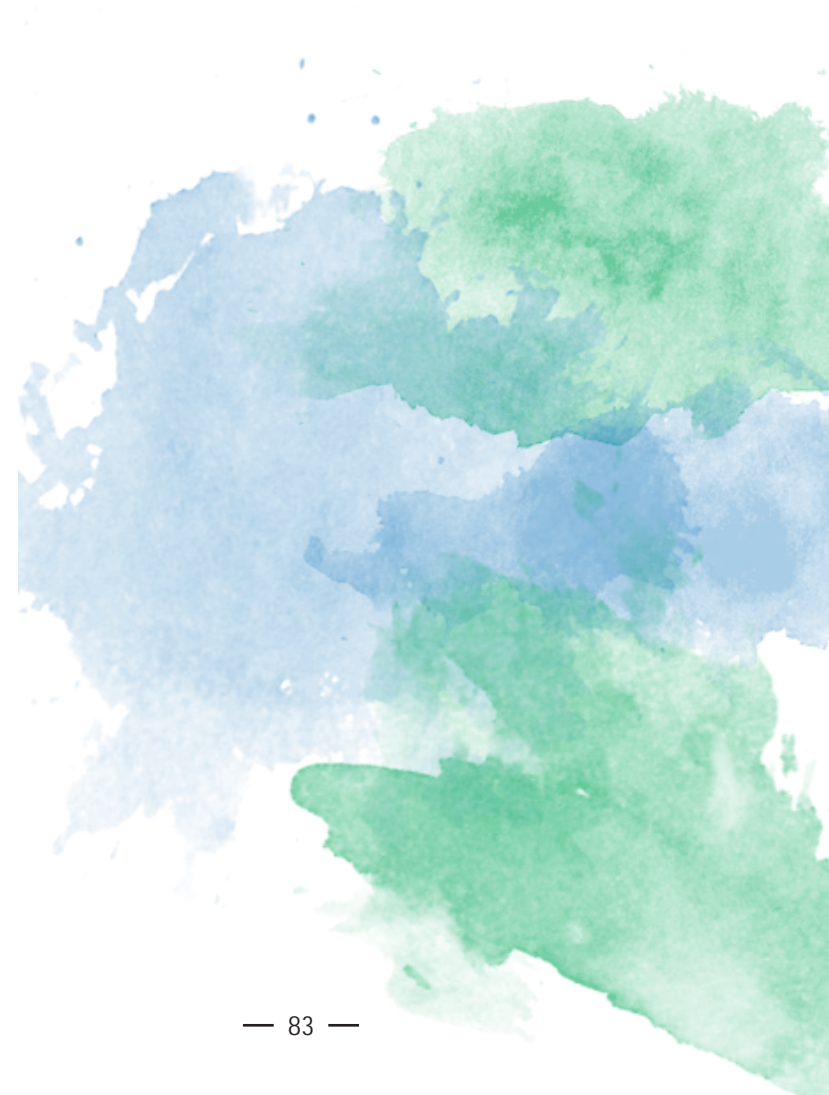
VI Ajna/Third Eye

What figurines we are
propped on the mantle of the universe.
The boy is ignorance,
the girl is want
and we never grew up.
Oh, lonely chess pieces
engaged in a game of wits
controlled by the witless.
We cannot rest
we cannot stay
we cannot linger
anywhere
so we tie our jaws shut
and moan through the dark,
our broken spirits scouring the sky
for a sign of our significance.

VII Sahasrara/Crown

What if afterward is simply
solitary confinement?
And Krishna is no one
and the hope I've gathered
slips through the hole in my bucket
and nothing waits beneath the tree
but an abandoned flute
and squashed mangoes?
Maybe this is as good as it gets

and my midnight prayers are just
short cries into darkness
until we meet earth once again.
When all possibilities of later
cease to be,
and lotus eyes shut for eternity,
you forget – lemons have always been a fruit.



Nautical Prospects

AJ Hannigan

the Homeric verse of my adolescence
 taunts with each rustle of this impotent sail.
 must I walk with a swollen foot?
 must I hobble along
 this concrete shore?
 my route: charted
 I trace the compass pockmarks
 stippled across the antediluvian map.
 my course returns to this sterile beach.
 one must abandon pelagic dreams;
 the terminus has been drawn
 by the shadow of the trireme.
 so, I take the coppers from my eyes and await the ferryman.
 reading once more beneath the bevels
 a cartographers lament,
 -HIC SVNT LEONES
 and weep,
 because I know they are all dead.

Today I Stand in the Middle of Me

Phe Shay Locke

Today I stand in the middle of me
 reacting to the memories once sought out from a mountain
 scene
 mounted on cannabis trees inside inner mental capacity's
 cavities expressed as dreams
 filling insides with fictional cream.
 Do not eat.
 Take in doses and go
 standing still hoping for sound waves but find yourself
 silent no longer able to define the right to jitter your tongue
 to say no
 constraining memories and cutting
 blood flow.
 Let's go sailing.
 Outer body bliss
 rubber band on wrist clip pull grip
 sit back and let lips slip to part.
 Music.
 Fingers tapping R & B humming in me.
 See
 he said he doesn't like my v.
 Telling me no isn't the way to go.
 He spotlighted my flaws and showed me who really wore
 the bra.
 Selfish in our mental meetings I forgot which one didn't
 mean it
 masking a brain so delicate I could almost taste its pulse.
 I wanted it but he yearned to finish.
 Every little bit of him made me melt
 warmth rubbing into my inner thighs.
 His cranium provided no truth.

POETRY 

As they leaked at my feet these lies damaged my soles
heels drenched in envy
toes numb into me
I believed.
Proved wrong numb naked and lost
defeated soul search deleted.
Was that too much to hold?
Exposure in my mental activity has finally gotten to me.
You were unmolding my truths
refusing to spark the fuse
melting this candle so gently breaking at the wick
lick finger tips or hiss spitting to diffuse you
flame dancing music playing mountains prancing across
landscapes
ones pupils could get lost in.
I'm exhausted from the thought of it
piled in bliss open to a strangers kiss
tongues intertwined until they grow tired of the weirdness
because who is this?
Just a man who doesn't want to be found stuck in the sound
trapped in his own ego
forest like veins and brain cavities so deep you would think
he's a genius or insane.
We fought but it worked
looking to Mother Earth we would talk about the stars and
universe
wondering how we became so lucky to be human.
And who created us?
We looked above and only at a glance believed in God
only slightly did I squint closing my eyes to darkness that I
was oh so familiar with.
Fierce in my actions my body was a blessing, I allowed him
to break it
seeping my truths on bed sheets refilling his pores with
innocence
our liquid emotions
hoping they'd drain.
Tired no longer inspired I lie
fragile in the open waiting for a strangers kiss.
Today I stand in the middle of me.



ART

Rhonda—
ought my first
partment a hom
to call or text, I still manage to spend hours on that thing. I magi
It wasn't until it w
ther trying
body. It lives in
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ing; egg yolk light
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as Josephine? Was it six
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Bamboo Lantern

Shelby Tate Preisler



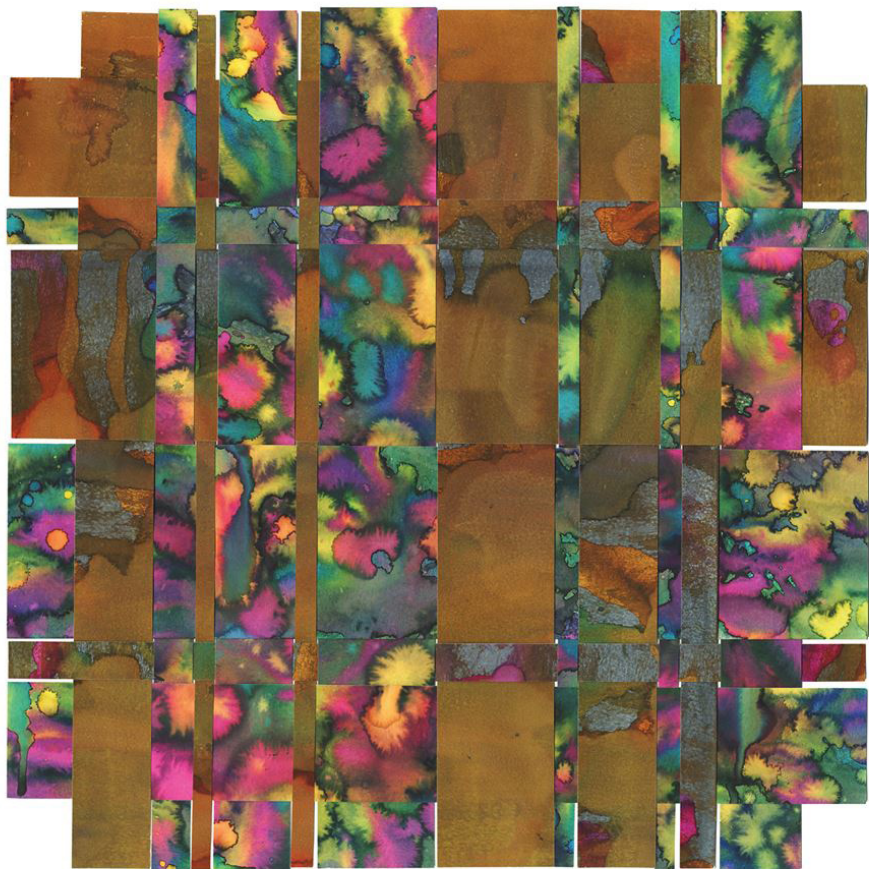
Pouring on the Palouse

Timothy White



Untitled #9 - FUSIONS 2014

Jonathan Seth Matteson



Seattle Vu

Shelby Tate Preisler



EDITOR'S CHOICE

Blown Glass

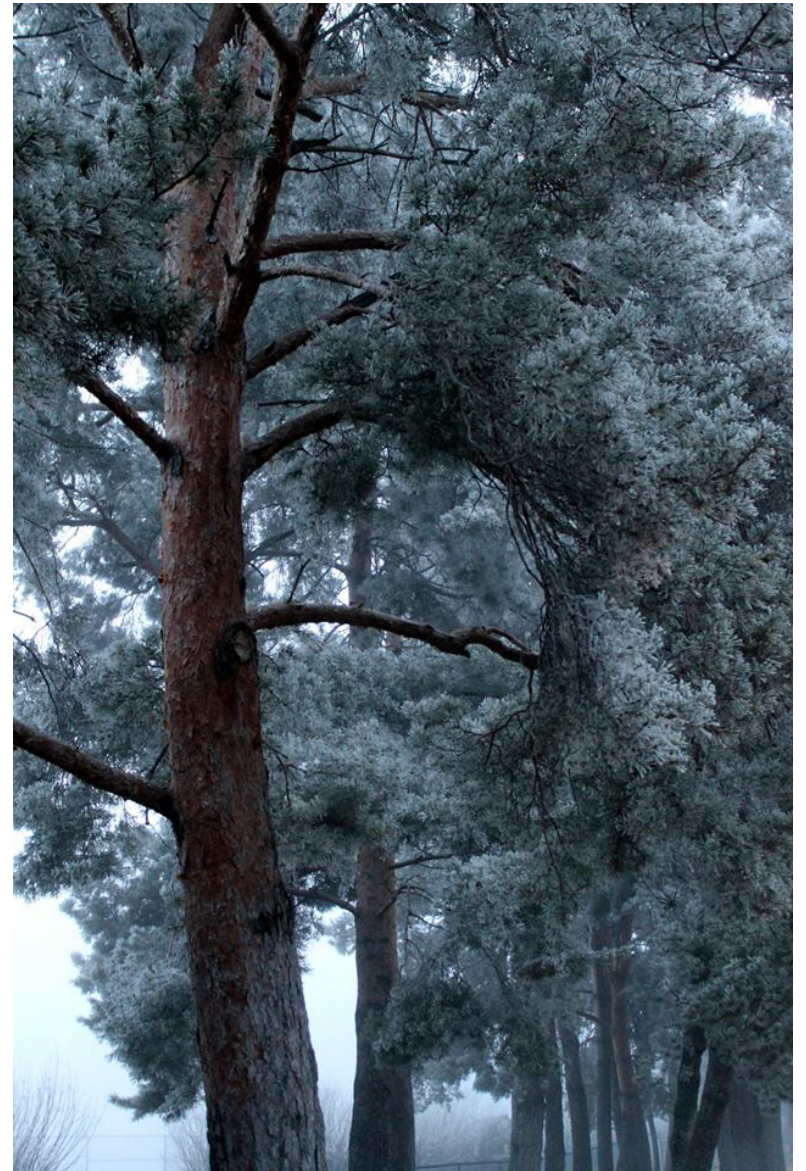
Tasha Williams



This acrylic painting titled “Blown Glass” shows zoomed-up details of Dale Chihuly’s blown glass at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. The image was inspired by the display at Chihuly’s Bridge of Glass, with hundreds of abstract and vibrant glass forms permanently arranged in the glass ceiling overhead.

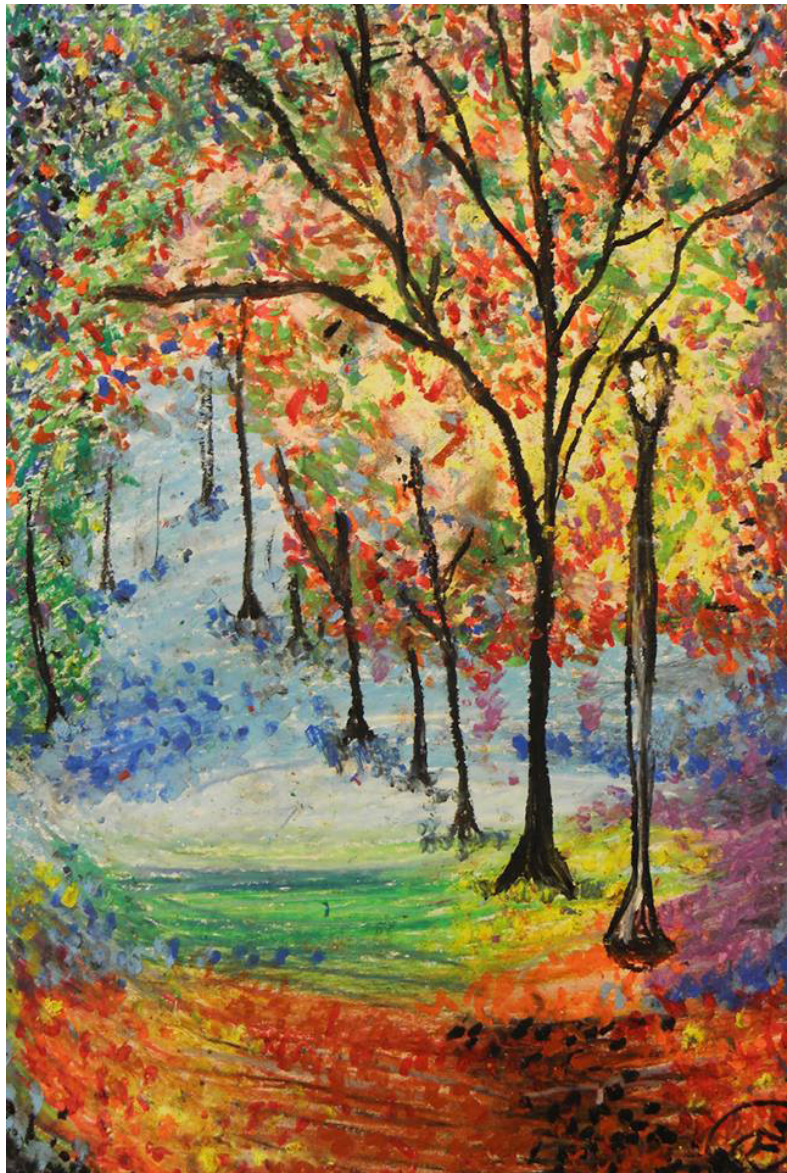
Winter

Erin Richardson



Daydreamers' Alley

Ashley Wilhelm



Room With A View

Erin Richardson



Looking On

Dylan Alan





NON FICTION

Foreign

Jessica Schloss

I looked at the other girls in my class. Many of them I had classes with since preschool and kindergarten. Most of them were toothpicks, but some of them were just what I was aiming for. I just want to be a little skinnier. Examining their thin arms and legs hanging beneath short sleeves and short skirts, I looked down at my own. Hidden under a light sweater and capri pants, I wanted to see the same, but what I saw were great bulges around my shoulders and on my thighs. Sinking further into my chair, I crossed my arms over my stomach.

It was agonizing, waiting there in that quiet room right before lunch. My classmates sat focusing on the in-class essay, their arms slowly sweeping across the pages in front of them. My margins were crammed with black scribbles, a testament to my lack of concentration. I hunched over my desk, insulating my stomach from the silence around me. My elbow dug into my left side, my fingers gripped into my right. I could feel the muscles convulsing inside of me. I clenched my arm closer to my body as I felt the rumble clawing its way out. Don't make a sound, I thought. My body buckled. I tried to suppress the growl as it freed itself from my torso.

I picked up the pencil I had dropped moments earlier and resumed my essay on "To Kill a Mockingbird," my nose barely above the pencil marks. Maybe no one will be able to tell it was me. I looked to my best friend sitting beside me. If Sarah had heard anything she was ignoring it and vigorously working away at the essay in front of her, her light brown

hair flying out from behind her ear and splaying across her notebook paper. It's almost lunch time I guess. It's only normal that I'd feel this way. I continued looking at the friends sitting around me, all bent over in concentration. All of them were skinny. All of them were dressed to enjoy the sunny weather in their short sleeve shirts and mid-thigh shorts. I resumed focus on my paper and scribbled down a few more words before I could feel another wave bubbling up. Already? This time I was a little luckier. The grumble felt like a powerful force about to rip through my body, but was small enough to be smothered by pressing my arms against my stomach.

I felt my heartbeat quicken with every reoccurring wave of rumbling, but I picked up my pencil again. "...And the reader knows that little Scout will survive. Because she has to." What? What does that even mean? But there wasn't time; the bell was ringing. We filed out of the portable, making our way down the green, fabric-covered ramp. Our footsteps thudded against the wood below but mine always seemed to be the loudest. I was thankful to be in the white noise of people laughing, Will I be able to skip both breakfast and lunch today?



We always circled up at the back of the lunchroom since none of us ever went through the cafeteria line. That meant smelling the burritos and the mozzarella breadsticks, and all the other pungent items the hair-netted ladies were serving at the lunch carts only yards away from us. That meant watching other people devour their food all around me, watching other people give in to their stomachs' demands. I leaned back against the bright red padded wall, sighed, and listened. My circle was talking and laughing in between rounds of chewing. Some conversations we had as a whole, our band of many trying to compete with the screaming of the lunchroom. Other conversations were had as people split into smaller, more intimate groups. Sarah sat to my left and removed her peanut butter sandwich from her backpack. Robert was on my right, chuckling while he squeezed out

taco sauce onto the burrito popping out of a white paper bag in his hand. Chatting and eating, they excitedly planned our upcoming Tri-Cities date, just the three of us. I smiled, but mostly I concentrated on the opposite wall, a wall of white painted brick. Once again my stomach piped up, but since no one could hear, I let it complain as much as it wanted to. Take that. No one can help you now, I thought triumphantly. As long as I stay distracted, it really isn't so bad.



Luckily it was leftover night at home. While we all still ate together, we were all eating different meals. It was easier for me to get away with saying "I'm not really hungry right now" than it would have been if my mom had spent an hour prepping a masterful meal of taco salad, my all time favorite, for us to heap onto our plates. Dinner has always been the most important meal in my family. The TV is turned off, phones are put away, and we spend half an hour enjoying our food and the company, filling everyone else in about our day.

On normal nights, it was a sacred time.

But tonight was leftover night. A night where we scrounged up bread, cold cuts, tortillas, leftover steak, chicken or pork from the refrigerator to throw a quick meal together. I sat down in my usual spot by the window and watched my mom, dad, and brother share graciously with their stomachs. Mine once again tried to get a few words in, but I was already waiting with both hands, muffling it. I spoke a little just to keep the conversation going, but I mainly sat back and let the rest of them chatter away, watching them enjoy the conversation. My German mother wished my brother, Karl, good luck with a test in the morning, innocently reporting "I'm holding my thumbs" instead of "I'm crossing my fingers." Normally I would've inserted some sort of European joke here, but instead I remained quiet while my dad and brother proceeded to tease her. It was weird watching them laugh, knowing I would have normally joined them. I felt the corners of my mouth raise at the appropriate times like my brain was trying to help me blend in. I looked

down at the empty plate in front of me, half wishing the grilled cheese I could have made was there. When my family was finished feeding their stomachs, I gathered my unused flatware and cup and placed them in the dishwasher.

Dinner led to what was becoming a nightly ritual for me. My parents' bedroom contained the longest mirror in our house, the only mirror that let me scrutinize my body fully. I'd stand there and pat myself down, feeling for the squishy parts and seeing what needed to change. I'd pull my clothes tight around my waist, first to the right, then to the left, and finally straight behind me. The TV was turned on in the other room as my family gathered on the couch, probably flipping through channels trying to find something semi-appealing to everyone. I knew I wouldn't be able to be gone too long without someone getting curious about what I was doing. I lifted my shirt up, exposing my stomach. Even though it was fairly smooth I stood as close to the mirror as possible and squinted my eyes, searching for the flaws I was certain were there. Running my hands over my stomach, I felt the anger boil up inside at the sight of my 120-pound, 5' 5" frame.

I had managed to go two days so far without food. I drank lots of water to trick my stomach into feeling full and after the first day it seemed to have given up fighting with me. Its rumbling had grown weaker.

I had won.



The next morning, my mom was so busy with getting Karl out of bed she didn't even notice my careful pretense of busily getting ready and skipping out on my third breakfast. I could hear her threatening him with an ice cube from down the hall. My dad had already left for work so I was in the clear.

This might not even do anything, I thought, sitting in English class again. With those words my stomach moaned as if it knew my resolve was being compromised. The energy my triumph had provided had been fading all day. Lunch was coming next. I don't think I'm going to make it. I braced myself for another attack as my stomach began bubbling as

if to let me know it agreed. I lifted my fingers to continue taking notes but they only trembled. Soon both of my arms began to feel foreign. I lifted my right arm knowing it was attached to my body, but wondering why it didn't float away or plop down onto the floor. When did you get so heavy? My brain was trying to force it to cooperate, but it took so long to respond. I wondered whether it was going rogue. Mutiny.

Discouragement broke way to anger as I let my arm drop back down to my desk. The bubbling of my stomach melded into the bubbling of my frustration, watching the dumb thing lay there lifeless. Why am I doing this? I imagined my brain yelling across my nerves like a parent trying to warn their kid about a hot stove top. "Don't do that", "That'll give you an owie", "Please baby, mommy doesn't want to see you get hurt."

I needed food.

When the bell for lunch rang I grabbed my car keys—my arm suddenly solid again— and drove to McDonalds. I was craving their salty, crunchy, oily french fries. I smiled. Go big or go home. I found it funny that my first meal in three days would be almost my entire calorie intake of one day. Before stepping out of the car, I wondered: will this waste everything I just did? Perhaps. I hopped through the restaurant door, stepped in line, and ordered.

I moved aside and waited for my order, feeling truly relaxed for the first time in days. All around me people were sharing with their stomachs, and I would soon be joining them. Children were laughing and chasing one another in the plastic play palace. Parents were trying to balance trays of food while herding their children to the right table. I couldn't have been happier when the cashier called out my name. A tray with a container of golden fries and a yellow-wrapped cheeseburger rested in front of her and as I approached she pushed it towards me with a "Have a good day."

I most definitely will, I thought as I replied with a "You too."

A cheeseburger had never tasted so good.

Hawaii

Joseph Cardenas

If you live in Hawaii for a long enough time you develop a sort of relationship with her, less sensual and more physical. You understand her mannerisms and curves. You feel her grooves and memorize the way she reacts when you put things into her. The way she feels underneath your feet, in your backyard, on a hiking trail, on the sand. The way her sand creeps between your toes and sticks when it's wet. The way her red volcanic dirt clutches and holds the tightest grip upon your white soles.

Every day I wonder if the day before was as hot as today. And I wonder about the pavement. I wonder if the potholes make themselves, if they burst out in the night and refuse to go away. I wonder why I am wearing pants while everyone else is wearing shorts. I wonder why I am not at the beach. I wonder where I am. Then the lunch bell rings. High School.

French fries with all of their health benefits and seasonings and succulence don't taste anything like the Pacific. I think that the salinity of the water would be a close cousin to that of the French fries, but I am mistaken. Waimea.

I dive. I mistime my breath. I don't taste French fries.

You (visitor) come here for a week, go home and buy the Glade air freshener: Hawaiian Breeze. I (resident) wake up, go to school or play, and smell nothing. Maybe my senses are oblivious. Maybe when I am walking through the courtyard of my adolescence the smell of marijuana and minute noodles overtakes that Hawaiian Breeze. Pele, goddess of

Volcanoes, cannot seem to send her collection of sulfur dioxide and other vicious gases far enough west to meet me on the island of Oahu.

I am late for class and need a pass. I know the security guards so they let me fill out my own. You are late to the tour bus and have to take an overpriced taxi to catch up to the group. I (resident) am your tour guide, here to take you (visitor) around the island.

Hawaiian gods showing their omnipresence. They are involved in more than just the murals and statues covering downtown. They are felt within the shiver of my aunts back as she takes her ten o'clock walk from the front porch to the end of the road or around the block. The stale noise of the night reacts with the trade winds and marks her. Back pain. Advil.

Polynesians found their way to this island chain by looking up at the night sky. I (resident) ride around suburban street blocks, through alleys trying to find my way too. I look up. Koa branch. Trip. I fall off board. Breathe in, very hard, so much so that I think I could self-destruct. Subtly smile to thank whoever could have made this possible. La'a Maomao, god of wind, sees this and kisses my cheek with sea breeze. Blood drips off my elbow and I watch it mix with the red dirt. I think of rubies, a crown, jewels.

Royal powers: a majesty. They don't compare to that of the Ko'olau Range. Allergies: a rainforest. Itch on the nose. Ferns: top mountain ranges. A reminder that they've been on this Earth for several million years. You leave your home in the north for an escape, a chance to have something to flash and stuff in the face of your relatives at Christmas time. The hope Hawaii has for you is to remind you of how small you actually are. And also to introduce you to Hawaiian plate lunches and Poke.

Green is the first color that comes to mind when you (visitor) picture the island chain of Hawaii. The mountains project colors beyond the capabilities of the movie green screen and there are words to describe the image to a friend but I (resident) just choose to keep the image for myself. My vision expresses tones of red and green and brown all

at the same wavelength, not allowing for me to experience the same colors as my sister might. The shades of what may either be blue or purple or some combination of the two spill across the water like splattered and streaked oils. The tones of what seem to resemble flesh red and amber yellow streak across the sky like spilled and splattered paint. The accents of what could echo volcanic dirt or moss green splatter across the ground like streaked and spilled acrylics. Acrylics to color. An abundance of color an abundance of green. The dollar bill was never green to me until Hawaii. until I understood how rare, how precious, and how necessary money was. I need work.

I (resident) need work. To stay, or to go North? Money is such a necessity, not just money but lots of it. Lots of hours at the Aulani dressed as Mickey Mouse and lots of nights at the Honolulu International Airport in the baggage claim tossing Mickey Mouse luggage. All those hours and all of those nights returning home to my roommates, to my parents. But not before I buy a \$5 gallon of milk. I decide on the North.

Ten feet above sea level on the western side of the island a mile into shore, sugar cane fields have been stripped and suburbs of half a million dollar homes and multi-million dollar homes have been established. Here is where my family resides. My family is modest so when my parents were designing their home they made sure the mortgage would not exceed six-hundred thousand. The storm windows, the manicured garden, the balcony with a flag pole and porch furniture was my family's way at making sure that the homeless people who were living less than a mile from our home would understand why they needed to vacate the premises. What are you (visitor) imagining at this point? How are you.

Hawaii differs greatly from the normal routine of your (visitor) hometown though, it is still in the United States. It is like saying that you are trying something new but are not yet comfortable with a completely new experience so you pretend to try something new, you take the tiniest bite of a potential for adventure for mystification and for miscom-

munication. There's shopping centers, there's cyber cafes, there's hair salons, and the local currency doesn't consist of sand dollars. I keep forgetting that some people have never been there. Non-natives might want to hear some local dialogue:

Wanna go beach?

I don't know, it's pretty hot today.

Yeah that's kinda like, the point.

No yeah we go, Ko'olina?

I mean we always go there.

Well that's cause it's the fuckin' closest one.

It isn't actually, there's White Plains like right here next to my house. Or Nimitz.

Nimitz has all those rocks though.

Ok well then what do you want to do?

Let's go to that trampoline place.

Here you can read the lives of the locals played out in real time. There is the concept of "island time." Locals are indefinite about their choices, relying upon their impulse rather than any habit. Their sense of time has become nearly wiped away, relying mainly on the position of the sun to calculate the time that they have left on shore, or in this case, at 'that trampoline place.' The island speaks in a different way than the north. To you (visitor) and I (resident).

Morning dew slithers down the window of my parent's Hyundai and I wonder if water is capable of reaching every facet of the island. The potholes have unearthed parts of the road that I didn't know existed, that you didn't know were a problem.

Hawaii has a road problem, a population problem, a native problem, a tourist problem, a beach problem, a seal problem, a military problem, a lava problem, a foreign problem, a Micronesian problem, a Mexican problem, an Asian problem, and many other problems created daily.

In 1893 these problem were overlooked when a handful of white business men decided to take the island from its people. Locking the queen in her summer home to be prisoner there until her death. Meanwhile the white business men suckled the Wahines and bathed in coconut juice.

Hawaiian history class was a requirement in high school.

In 1959 these problems were added to the union. Added and amplified. After the Japanese and Americans spilled oil and pieces of metal and flesh into Pearl Harbor, the United States saw the militaristic advantage of making Hawaii a state. After the local Japanese people were forced into internment camps they helped to vote and pass the Hawaii Admission Act granting Hawaii Statehood. Usually when family comes into town to visit from the north, mom senses their desire to visit the still sunken Arizona battleship. People are supposed to remain quiet throughout the tour. And if you (visitor) are, you can hear the screams of the bodies still trapped within the hull. Pushing against the walls of the boat—they create the waves.

Hawaii is good if you're lactose intolerant; Hawaii is good if you don't have your driver's license and want to borrow your father's car and drive all the way from the edge of the west side of Oahu to Pearl City to visit your girlfriend. Hawaii is good for fish. So good that fishing is unregulated, no sort of identification required. All you need is reason and intuition on where to go on the island, where people aren't and the fish are. Hawaii is good for skin cancer. Hawaii is good for Adam Sandler and Disney and movies based on pirates exploring the Caribbean.

Hawaii is good for nail salons run by immigrants. New Americans you may ask? Just immigrants. No one is foreign in Hawaii, everyone belongs, there is no application essay, and everyone is accepted. You can see this accepting nature of the island in the high schools. The kids vary in clothes and music choice as much as the kinds of pineapple vary. Hilo, Kona Sugarloaf, Smooth Cayenne.

The sweetest fruit can be found in Hawaii. I remember when I first stuck my hand up a girl's skirt. Sharing a beach chair on the shore of Iroquois Point where we were able to see planes take off back to the mainland or Japan. Waikiki in the distance she was Japanese. The pacific wasn't as wet as my fingers though the Pacific was saltier. At this point I didn't think anything about French fries. I did think about berries and how you have to pick them at the right time,

how there's a season, and it's always summer in Hawaii.

My dad always said that it was a summer love; my counter argument was that Hawaii enjoyed an endless summer. I head for the north. Endless winter. Suddenly she hates me, she's transfixed. She whispers to the island what I've done and immediately two of the most important women in my life are gone.

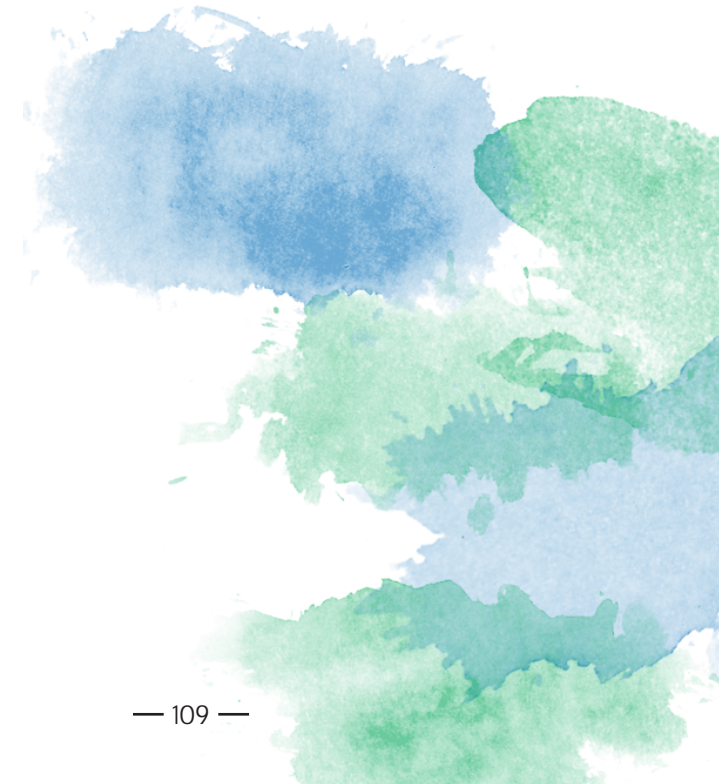
I mean, I hate her too, the island. I hate the fact that there are people in Hawaii who don't need anything else than that tiny chain of islands. I want to be able to be satisfied with her. I want to be able to drink from her as I once did and taste from her as I once did and not feel like my time is limited there within her, within Eden. I (visitor) hate that Hawaii no longer welcomes me with the sincerity that she once did. I (visitor) cannot hear what she used to whisper, the messages that she used to convey. I (visitor) hate that I (resident) used to be able to sense what she needed from me. Who I (resident) needed to be for the island. I (resident) can still get the Kama'aina discount but I (visitor) don't deserve it. I left her and she recognized that, she knew that if I truly cared then I would not have left.

I still understand her mannerisms and curves, her grooves. Though now she doesn't react the same way when I try to put things in her, when I try to help. She pushes against the bottoms of my feet in my backyard. She cuts against the bottoms of my feet on a hiking trail. She burns against the bottoms of my feet on the sand. Her motions are routine. She no longer enjoys making them for me. I pay to visit her. I don't stay long enough for her red volcanic dirt to clutch onto my shoes on to my sole. Finally she decides to speak to me and she says:

Joe.

Friends work at new places and tea spots welcome new faces and a new sushi shop opened downtown and it all happened while you weren't around. And if you were in love then from this place, from within me from my hidden cove you wouldn't have shoved. Tomorrow when you leave, put your home address as someplace else. And put all the pictures you have of me on some deep dark shelf.

I make my return to the north and buy the Glade air freshener, Hawaiian Breeze. Here in the north I can dream of watching the Hawaiian monk seal nap upon the shore. As my boots covered in snow lie upon the floor. You (visitor) with your vacation time and savings can visit when you want. You can stride upon her. Leave your imprint in her. You can pay for nights with her at the Hawaiian Hilton. You can taste what was once all mine. Put your hands in places that I've touched. But you are a visitor, you are a tourist, a user. Me too.





EDITOR'S CHOICE

My grandmother passed away the day before I defended my MFA thesis, which was a novel that fictionalized her journey from Cuba to America. As I continued revising my novel, the line between fiction and nonfiction blurred like the edges of my dreams. “Taking Flight” is an excerpt from that transformation. It will be included in *Weathered Edge*, a collection of three novellas, published by VP&D House.

Taking Flight

JT Torres

Nana wouldn't look at the fluttering topaz parakeet inside the silver-wired cage. “I don't want a bird,” she said.

This was when she was alive, when we lived in Miami. I couldn't have been older than five at the time. Back then, if my mother didn't go over to Nana's apartment to feed Pepe, her parakeet, he would have died of starvation. “I gave birth to you,” Nana said.

“And I gave birth to Tito,” my mother replied. “I have a child to take care of already.”

My mother claimed that until school started, she would be very busy watching me and working for my father. I remember my mother holding me against her chest while she said this. I remember how her grip tightened, squeezed fear into my thigh. I remember Nana's sharp stare, at both me and my mother.

“He's too big for you to carry him,” Nana said. “Put him down.”

“You used to carry me home from school when I was eight, embarrassing me in front of my friends. You didn't listen to Dada when he told you to put me down.”

“That was in Cuba,” Nana said. “Things are different in America.”

My mother always remarked how Nana was stubborn as a rock. Sometime during her forties, Nana had a dentist remove all of her teeth because she didn't want to pay for a filling. My mother used to tell everyone that Nana's “stubbornness is greater than pain.” At the time I was scared of Nana, scared that she was mad at me for something I didn't understand. When she talked about me to my mother, her voice became sharp. “I bet he loves spending the day with you all the time,” she'd said once, quickly like a guillotine. She walked around in platform shoes that made her taller than my mother, taller than my father even. Each step she took had the thunderous quality of crashing waves.

I remember her as the savage queen of a verdant jungle. She lived in an apartment with brown walls, mulch-colored furniture, and rows of plants. Failing to pierce my mother with her stare Nana stomped a foot down and the earth trembled. Pepe flew to the top of his cage. The plants rocked in their pots and a few white petals floated to the floor, landing among the dirt that never got swept. My mother squeezed tighter, the side of her breast pushing into my stomach.

“You don't even try to make friends here,” my mother finally said and walked towards the front door.

“My friends are in Cuba,” Nana said.

I'd never been to Cuba, where Nana was born. My parents had been there a number of times, but never spoke much about it. I imagined it to look just like Florida, but with mountains. Here, Nana was the only mountain.

“You've lived in Miami for twenty years now!” When my mother sighed, she created a pocket of air between her chest and my body. As my mother loaded me in my car seat, I looked towards the apartment and saw Nana leaning on the railing, watching us. The shadow of her figure split the sun's light and from inside the car I could feel her loneliness.

Despite my mother's threat she went to Nana's apartment once a week to refill Pepe's food and clean the cage.



The first Pepe Nana owned was lime green with chalk-blue circles around his eyes. When he lifted his white-tipped wings, he revealed yellow shadows on each side of his body. During our visits, I'd stare through the thin-wires of the cage and watch the bird bolt from corner to corner. I so badly wanted to hold Pepe, but feared Nana would yell at me to "put him down."

Once, when I was certain my mother and Nana were having coffee out in the kitchen, out of view of the living room where the cage was, I slid my pinky through the individual wires and nudged Pepe. His feathers felt firm but flimsy, like they'd dissolve in the wind but continue to float as individual fibers and brittle bones. He had a certain edge, despite how fragile he appeared to be. When I nudged him a second time, he turned around and pecked me. I screamed, and when I saw the drop of blood just above my finger nail I cried. My mother came running and scooped me into her arms. She took me into the kitchen and held a tissue over my injured pinky. Nana stared at me with a look as sharp as Pepe's beak, a look that I would later learn to identify as judgment. She said, "Don't poke around where you don't belong."

I was too young to have a pet of my own. At five, even a goldfish would have been too much responsibility. Besides, my father disliked animals. He claimed they were unruly. In my parents' home, file cabinets lined the living room walls and tax documents occupied dining room tables. My bedroom dresser had two drawers reserved for businesses cash receipts. I craved disorder. I spent my time at home exploring the fenced in backyard, trying to catch lizards. Every time I'd snare one, the lizard would snap its body free from its tail and flee.

Pepe, a live animal in Nana's wild apartment, had been an unthinkable prospect. This intrigue was heightened by my fear of both him and Nana. While I do remember not wanting to visit Nana's, I also remember my desire to hold Pepe in my own hands. I wanted to possess what made

Nana wild.

When my mother and I showed up one week, several days after my pinky had healed, we found Nana crying on the sandstone-patterned sofa. Pepe was lying on his side on the wicker coffee-table, his eyes closed and body motionless.

"Oh my God," my mother said as she sat on the sofa and pulled Nana's head into her shoulder, as if shielding her eyes the way she did to me when nude people appeared in a movie.

I stood by the front door. Despite being covered in sweat from a hot summer day, I was frozen in fear. The apartment seemed to have become a much wilder place since the last time. I could sense predators lurking in the plants, hunting me from the hallway. Growing up in Florida, I learned from school fieldtrips to the Everglades to stand still if facing a black bear, run in zigzags if chased by an alligator, and avoid eye contact if caught by a panther. I couldn't be sure which animal, if any, prowled this dangerous apartment.

"He stopped moving after I bathed him," Nana said, sobbing with her finger-locked hands in her lap and her face buried in my mother's neck.

"You bathed him?" The compassion in my mother's voice gave way to a bitter incredulity. "You don't bathe birds."

"He smelled bad."

"He's dead."

My mother stood from the sofa and went into the kitchen. She came back with a roll of paper towels and used them to wrap Pepe like a bird mummy. Then she carried him back into the kitchen. Nana's eyes were red and swollen, making her appear much more vulnerable than I'd ever seen her. Without her false teeth to prop up her lips, her mouth drooped onto her chin. She looked at me and I felt her sadness, although I did not move from the front door.

"I miss hearing him chirp," she said. "He almost learned to say, 'Big Mama's here.'" The way she pitched her voice so that it squeaked like Pepe's made me smile. My smile made Nana smile.

"You don't bathe birds, Mom. I mean, that's common sense."

“You always scold me like I’m a child.”

My mother walked back into the living room with a long sigh, like she created her own gust of wind. She told Nana to put on her shoes. “I can’t leave you alone now.”

Nana’s puffy eyes and the large swooping curls of her hair softened her look. I wanted to be next to her, to feel this new softness. My mother brought her back to our house, where she watched TV in the living room while my mother punched in tax codes into the computer in her office. I had crawled in an empty shelf in one of the metal storage cabinets in the hallway and from there spied on Nana. She seemed oblivious to the images flashing across the TV screen. Whenever the sound of laughter came from the speakers, she kept a stern expression, silent. All I could think about was Pepe. How did he die? Was it painful? What had my mother done with his body? Did Nana kill him? Did that make Nana dangerous? Pepe wasn’t safe in a cage, was I safe in a cabinet?

When my mother came out of her office and told Nana she had to take her home, Nana started crying.

“What’s wrong with your home?” my mother said in a voice strained by impatience and pity. While my mother inherited Nana’s sternness, she lacked her powerful presence. There were times when my mother and I shared a room and I could not sense her. I could feel Nana, though, even when we were at opposite ends of Miami.

“I miss him.”

“Well, Mom, you can’t bathe birds.”

“I miss your father,” Nana snapped, as if irritated that my mother didn’t understand her the first time. It was entertaining to witness these moments in which my mother became the child. So often did my mother snap at me for not getting answers right the first time.

My mother sat with Nana and hugged her so their heads rested together. They spoke to each other in Spanish, a language I did not know. Rarely did I hear my mother speak in Spanish, but when she did, she became someone else entirely. Her voice became urgent, powerful. I finally crawled out of the cabinet. My grandfather had died in

Cuba before I was born. I had never been to Cuba. There was no place for me in the moment shared between my mother and Nana. Despite how badly I wanted to join them, I ran to the bathroom.

Later, we took Nana to the pet store and bought her another parakeet, Pepe II.

The new Pepe looked almost identical to the old one, save for two apple-red pinstripes on either side of his tail. Also, Pepe II’s eyes seemed wider, more alert, as if he sensed his predecessor’s demise. I doubt, though, that parakeets have clairvoyant abilities.

After about a month passed, I heard my parents talking in my father’s office. Apparently, Nana had drowned Pepe II. I leaned on the door frame and listened. Even though his office was in our home, I often felt prohibited from entering. My father sat in the center of the room, enclosed by a fortress of a desk that seemed to extend out from his body. A computer screen cast a cold blue glow on his wide-frame glasses and shiny forehead. He had paper stands and two calculators arranged all within arm’s reach. If not a fortress, the desk appeared to be a spaceship with a 360 degree control panel. I had always wanted to sit in his chair and imagine cruising through space.

“You think she’s doing it on purpose?” my father asked. He poked at his calculator with one rigid finger that made him look like a captain. Blast off!

My mother leaned against the wall adjacent to the door. This was really the only space where one could fit in my father’s office if not in the captain’s seat. “Why would she do it on purpose?”

“Does she even like birds?”

My mother looked over at me and her eyes became heavy. Something about her stare weighed on me, so I did my best to stand firm and carry it. She reached out and ran her fingers through my hair.

“It is hereditary,” my mother said.

“That doesn’t mean she has it.” My father’s voice seemed to follow the rhythm of the calculator’s taps and clicks. The blue screen of his computer reflected on his

glasses. Despite my mother's world falling apart, everything about my father remained in order.

"My aunt died asking for relatives who'd passed away years prior. Before my grandfather's last heart attack, he went around the house smashing picture frames and toppling furniture because he didn't know where he was."

"Buy her another bird."

My father had the final word.

My mother led me out of his office and as we walked into the living room she began to cry. When I asked her if something was wrong with Nana, she told me "We can't find a bird she actually likes."

I sensed in my mother a need to protect me from something, and I understood the only way she could do that was by not telling me the truth. As a five year old, I began to fear truth.



At the pet store again, my mother sought an attendant while Nana and I walked to the glass cage full of parakeets. Feather bolts of sapphire and lime dashed in every direction. Colorful ribbons blurred with soft palpitations of air as the birds flapped their wings. Nana leaned on my shoulder and lowered her head so it was even with mine. The tip of her nose touched the glass. In that instant the parakeets became connected by some invisible thread. They swarmed to the opposite side of the cage. There they froze, motionless. Their fragile heads stared straight at us and their backs pressed against the far glass wall. Nestled together, they appeared to transform into one giant parakeet, too big for Nana's wire cage. Their beady black eyes didn't move from us. Never in my life have I seen birds so still, so watchful, so aware.

My mother arrived with the attendant, a young man with a beard and a concerned look. "She just needs a replacement is all," my mother was telling the attendant.

"Replacement?" The attendant's eyebrows pinched the bridge of his nose and he chewed his bottom lip.

The attendant asked which one we wanted. My mother

told Nana to pick.

"This is your third parakeet, right?" the man asked. His worrisome expression bled into his voice, which was as shaky as the parakeets.

"No," Nana said. "I'll only have this one." She pointed to a gem-shaded parakeet with black spots on his belly.

The attendant stared at Nana, then at my mother. "I picked out the other parakeets for you." He said it as if he felt he needed to remind them. "You said they are gone?"

"They were gifts for other family members," my mother lied. He retrieved the parakeet Nana wanted and placed him carefully in his travel box.

After he sealed the parakeet in the box, the attendant looked through the air holes with worried eyes. His shoulders sunk as he handed the box to my mother. "You know parakeets are very toxic?"

"Who would eat Pepe?" Nana shouted. She stomped her platform shoe against the floor.

My mother nudged Nana toward the exit. "Thank you for the advice," she said to the attendant and paid. With one hand carrying the box and the other hand holding Nana's arm, my mother hurried out of the store. If I didn't follow, I would have been left behind.

We took Pepe III to his wire cage. He lived six weeks, and then "drowned."

Before that happened, though, there was a day when my mother had to attend a conference with my father and left me at Nana's apartment. It was the first time I'd been left alone with Nana. I spent the first hour sitting on the couch, staring out the window at the traffic-congested street. The heat from all those cars made the world blurry, like they were a big puddle of gasoline. I could see the humidity.

Nana asked if I wanted to hold Pepe III. Of the three Pepes, this one was the calmest, the most subordinate. He never pecked, never flapped his wings in an attempt to escape. Perhaps he had already accepted his fate.

While holding Pepe III, feeling his soft body made of toothpick bones and silk feathers, I said to Nana, "Please

don't hurt him."

Nana gasped. She took up almost half of the couch. I feared I'd angered her. She could have easily drowned me. She held her hand to her chest and her brows went straight up past the curls of silver and black hair that hung down to her eyes. "Mí Dios. I do not hurt my Pepes."

The hyper but brittle patter of Pepe III's heart pounded into my thumb. I felt a pulsing connection between the two of us. I felt responsible for his life.

"What happened to the other Pepes?"

"Has your mother taught you Spanish yet?"

"No."

"It will only make sense to you in Spanish, but I will try to tell you in English." She went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Alone with Pepe III, I opened my hands so that Pepe III could stand on my open palms, unrestricted by the chains of my fingers. If he wanted, he could have flown away. The sliding door leading to Nana's unscreened porch was open. The warm spring breeze teased the air of the apartment, beckoned the bird to soar. Instead, he balanced himself and stood there, facing me, obedient. Too obedient.

Nana returned with two glasses of orange juice, which she always fresh squeezed each morning. She placed my glass on the wicker coffee-table and sipped the juice from hers. Pulp stuck to her lips.

"Before I left Cuba, I learned magic. The first trick I learned was the story of Yahubaba. Before Spaniards came to the island, there was a man who lived all by himself in a cave. His family had been taken by a hurricane, so he became very lonely and never left the cave. But inside the cave he could hear the voices of children coming from outside. He loved those voices, so one day he stepped outside and the sun was so bright it transformed him into a nightingale. He had a long, beautiful tail that was purple on the top and a deep ocean blue on the bottom. His body was the color of dusk reflected in the sea. And he discovered that his voice had become the sound of all the children singing and playing. He spent the rest of his life flying above Cuba,

singing the songs of youth and joy. That is what happened to the other Pepes. They are now nightingales soaring above Miami. I leave the back door and windows open so we can hear them."

"Is that a real story?" I asked.

"It's what my memory says."

"You didn't make that up?"

Nana laughed so hard her teeth rattled and the couch shook. Her bracelets chimed against each other when she clapped her hands. "One day," she said, "you will tell your grandkids this story, and in that moment your memory will create a new story."

"Isn't that lying?"

Nana smiled and combed my hair with her fingers. I felt as fragile as the parakeet the instant she touched me.

"It is magic," Nana said, her fingers drawing circles on my scalp, leaving trails of stardust in my imagination. "Now drink your orange juice. The longer it sits, the more of its nutrients vanish."

"Why didn't you just have Mom buy you a nightingale?"

"I told you. The story only makes sense in Spanish."

"Can I watch you transform Pepe III into a nightingale?"

"Not yet," Nana said. "You're too young. But I can eventually teach you how to transform yourself into a nightingale, like Yahubaba. You'll have a long purple tail, too, and indigo wings that can fly you anywhere you want to go. And your voice. You'll be able to sing all the dreams that children have."

Nana took Pepe III from my hand and held him close to her face. She made kissing noises with puckered lips. While staring at her parakeet, she said to me, "You have to be careful, though. The wind will carry away un flaquito like you. You'll vanish."

I sipped a mouthful of orange juice. Nana noticed me staring at her and rolled her eyes.

"Look at you," she said. "You're skin and bones."

My tongue drowned and all I could do was look at Pepe III, trying to imagine him as a much more majestic bird, eagle-sized, capable of withstanding the wind.

Edgemont

Becky Sharpe

Though my grandfather always said that my father's long hair made the back of his head look like a camel's ass I never saw the resemblance in the photo. Leaning tall and thin on a headstone his black hair falls to his chin in loose waves. A thick beard, rich in color instead of the salt-and-pepper grey it is today, frames his hooked nose, which balances his wide-set blue eyes rendered grey by the camera. The grave marker on he leans on bears our last name, though the person resting there is of no relation. And as my father's stare bores into the lens I cannot help but feel pressure as I wonder which would crack first: the glass of the camera, or the glass of his irises, on guard and cautious. He's surrounded by headstones much older than the one he stands against, worn away by Edgemont's heavy-handed moisture; riddled in moss that conceals the identities of the dead. But the allure—what would drive me to trek hours through the same cemetery—rests in my father's expression as he stood upon a grave bearing his family's name: Sharpe. Allure gives way to something like grief, though it's not sad. There is a resignation, an acceptance to it. His lips are turned downward in recognition of what happened in Edgemont, but his eyes remain solid: a last goodbye to the place that devoured his family, now rotting in the earth.

I yearn for the same resignation my father expresses around his family, but I have a lasting connection to them. Because I have my aunt's eyes I have the same eating disorder that she developed, though hers was in lieu of a

messy divorce. And though I do not hear the voices like she does, I fear one day I might. And because I have my uncle's lips with the same thirsty quiver in them from an addictive personality I am prone to self-medication with uppers and downers and everything in between. I am so much of the family my father left behind in Edgemont and I thought if I found the grave, maybe, and immortalized my image, standing firm and accepting in front of the corpse of my family, I too, would be free of the Edgemont legacy. And so began my journey through the Ardsley Cemetery in Westchester County.

I've never lived in Edgemont, New York, but I'm bound to it. I don't even like it. The sprawling maple and beech trees that surround the house my father grew up in reek of prestige; not the good kind you earn, but the kind you can buy. Up the soft, moist path behind the gates to the Westchester County neighborhood nestles my father's childhood house—a towering white estate that contrasts the soil, covered by the shade of oaks and sumac. Shingles curl upward to make room for tufts of moss to grow; deep brown timbers of the trim split with moisture and everything else the house has bottled up inside. Unlike the rest of Edgemont, grandiose in its regard, the manor has shrunken in witness to its tenants. It gives itself over to the native ivy and wild grapevines. Delicate, green plant spindles carefully wind their way up the imposing supporting beams, holding up the plant-laden eave over the stained-glass doors. Though breathtaking, I imagine it won't be long until the delicate tendrils grow into great boas, constricting the beams until they splinter and give-way. The whole town has that effect: the looming hint or threat of suffocation that I'm sure my father and my aunt must have felt as children.

But again, I feel bound by it. I feel I cannot lay on the sprawling yards or the lush grass of the golf courses for fear that Edgemont will detect something in my cells—in the marrow of my bones and all that I am made of—and mistake me for its own, pulling the thread of my skin into the earth like steady-creeping roots until I unravel; too tangled amid the rot and the worms and my family to be

removed. It can detect the legacy of my blood—my father’s; my aunts—that courses through me.

Edgemont never lets go of the past, and in it’s past, Edgemont bore witness to the unraveling of my father’s family. It picked and pulled at the flesh of their bonds until they were left as raw carcasses. In the wake of my father’s high school graduation Edgemont saw to it that money would destroy his parents’ marriage; the sound of the breaking china as fights broke out in the dead of night resonate in the soft hum of cicadas that hide among the trees. The dull, muffled shouts are still trapped under the blankets where my father and aunt used to hide, covering their ears. The stinging in the hollow of my aunt’s stomach as the fighting made her grow thinner and hear voices that were not there still looms in the ceiling over my own head when I walk into the house. The wet dirt that encrusts everything in Edgemont serves as a reminder of the white dust my uncle began snorting years ago, when he decided coke would be a good escape from the fighting and the hitting and the it’s-two-in-the-morning-and-where-have-you-beens. And in the water droplets that are constantly in the air every piece of the shattered past is held and swirling for all to inhale and to soak in through their pores. No one forgets Edgemont and no one escapes.

My father was an exception to the rule, but my aunt would never shake loose and she lives as a ward of the state, too sick and scared and paralyzed to care for herself anymore. As for my uncle, he would be forgotten; parents too consumed in greed and hate to notice the subtle ticks and twitches he developed as he fell deeper into the coke scene. My aunt and uncle were possessed by Edgemont’s wealth and brokenness long before they had the chance to live. But my father found a way out. It’s never been clear to me how he did it, given the small fragments of his childhood that I know. After seeing my father’s Class of 1971 senior Yearbook photo, however, I developed a theory that would inspire my own attempt at escape from Edgemont’s legacy.

I stared at the entrance to the cemetery. It starts with the new, modern-styled headstones carved—blocky and tasteless—out of the popular grey marble. From the headstone in my father’s photo though, I knew I must follow the brick path inlaid in the dew-ridden grass to find what I was looking for: it’s made out of weathered stone, maybe cement. Moss creeps up the corroded sides and there’s a large piece of the corner missing. The further into the cemetery I went the gaudy, new headstones gave way to the hand-crafted, gallant ones of the past. Marble turned to brick turned to illegible engravings. And the further I got the more I realized that my task was not an easy one. The graveyard goes on for acres. Towering trees shroud dozens of resting places and I was forced to leave the path in order to search through the misplaced forests. My shoe choice was terrible for the weather and they soon became soaked in Edgemont’s proverbial, icy ground water. Thunder set in, followed by flashes of lightning that illuminated the grey skies, but I kept walking. I felt forlorn, almost desperate, and felt more and more so with every step as the rain came down.

But I never did find the grave. My father followed me, impatiently, for the several hours I took until we finally reached the edge of the Edgemont cemetery. I had taken off my shoes, now drenched, and was walking barefoot through the mud and grass with the people that once were. I made my way to a set of stone steps and stood staring back at the vast hills speckled with headstones. I didn’t feel the closure I so longed for and I probably never will.

I turned back to see my father pointing the camera at me. He looks so much like my grandfather, and I, like him. “Smile,” he says.

But I don’t.

Yoke

Emily Page

“Dead cat,” Dr. Moores announced as she waltzed through the swinging doors with a lump of fur in her arms. Her inch long gray hair had started to grow back after four years of chemo. She was stubborn but that was probably why I liked her. She was always trying to lift things or work extra hours when clearly she struggled holding a Chihuahua for more than two minutes.

Dr. Moores said something about the cat not having a locator chip in it and, running my fingers through the Captain Crunch colored fur, I found there was no collar. I slowly studied the dead cat’s mink-like body. The right side of his face had been dragged up three inches and his right eye was popped and oozing. It reminded me of an egg yolk sliding over the lip of a white shell and down into a frying pan. The poor sucker. I was amazed that the teeth had not shattered. “Baseball bat or car?” I asked.

“Car. The lady up front saw it on the side of the road and brought it in.” Dr. Moores said crooking her thumb over her shoulder. I listened as described how the lady’s three elementary school daughters had been crying up front looking at the uncovered face. I began snickering. Maybe at the thought of a mom pulling her car over to pick up a dead nameless cat, or that her daughters had to see the shattered hollow face. Maybe it was wondering how she decided to pick it up that got to me. Did she cuddle it up like a newborn in her arms? Or did she grab it by the tail and let its stiff paws wave to the ground?

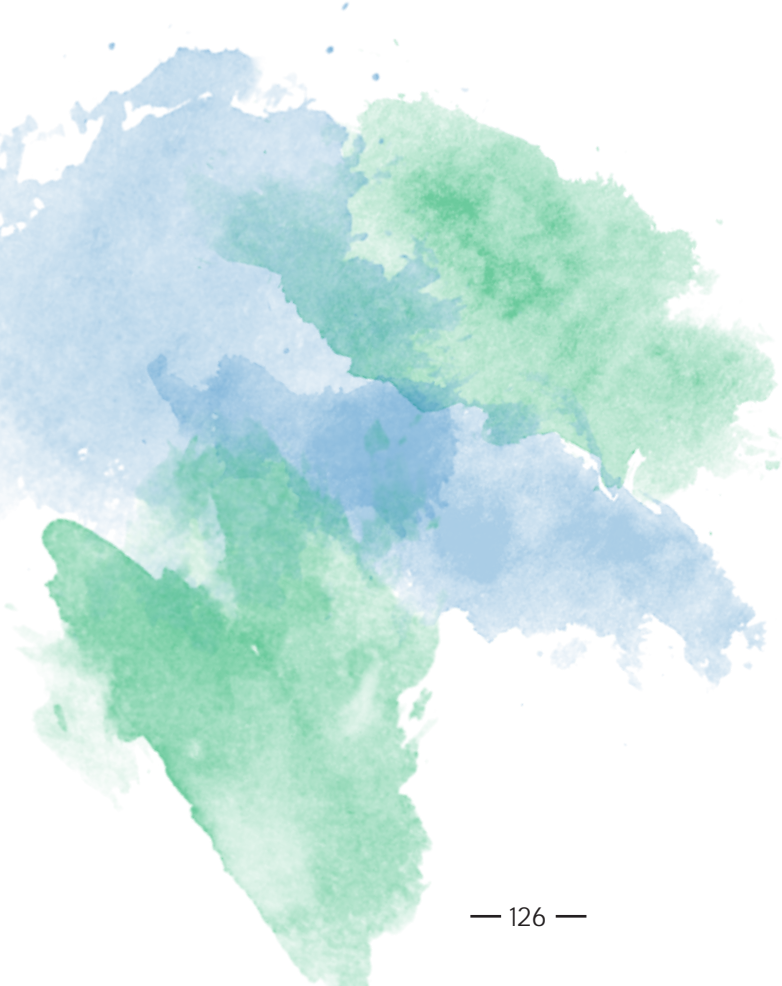
When I looked over at Katie I could see that the scrambled face was having the opposite effect on her. Her eyes had started to water. Dr. Moores looked from Katie’s face to mine, “Emily, can you take care of this.” I nodded. Katie said “thanks” as I grabbed the bag from her shaking hands and she swiftly left the room. Dr. Moores grabbed a yellow card denoting public burial, and a blue twisty tie. She placed them on the table as Georgia, the receptionist, asked if Dr. Moores could come up front.

I’d like to pretend that bagging dead animals doesn’t screw you up in the mind a little, but it does. It makes you numb to the feeling of others and it messes with your sense of smell. You lose your appetite because you can still smell them in your nail bed after scrubbing your hands for the fifty-sixth time and the memory never goes away. The memory of each one dying. I still remember a rat I killed. How it tried to fight. I will never know whether its pitchy scream was for the stinging of the metal needle or for the fatal liquid itself.

I unfolded the garbage bag and laid it on the table like a new bed sheet. I moved the soft toes into the mouth of the bag and watched as more pink bodily fluid spilled out, wetting his butterscotch tail and hind legs with a sappy coffee color. I tried not to think as I felt wet urine and blood on the cat’s tail end dribbling onto the table. When picking up the corpses their spines always feel like a live fish fighting for its freedom. After getting the front two legs into the bag it was only a matter of dealing with the head. Instead of pushing the furry crown in, I tugged at the garbage bag, shimmed it under the flapping tongue and face. After the head the body just sort of slides in. Sealing off the bag and tying the yellow card to the top, I picked up the plastic coffin and headed to the laundry room where the freezer stood.

As I walked by the noisy dogs, their howls died down. They knew. Sometimes I ask myself how I would feel if I was an animal and I smelled a dead creature go by me. But then, no one really knows how they’d feel. Opening up the freezer I placed the cat next to three identical bags. His paperwork would read “John Doe.”

Back in the treatment room I sprayed down the table with Nolvasan and bleach. My fingers grew dry. The multiple chemicals saturated my skin as I cleaned up the liquid with paper towels. I rubbed my index finger against my thumb trying to sand off the small beady parts that would not come off. It reminded me of getting super glue on my hands. The cool table felt good against my flaky fingertips, like a reassuring touch from a loved one.



Murky Waters: An Ecosystem in a Pinch

Zachary Schreiber

My dad grumbled, fumbling with his wallet as he paid to launch our boat. He understands why the fees are in place, but still complains about actually forking over the money. Then there was the aluminum boat trailing behind us dangling cockeyed into the road and blocking traffic. As usual, my dad's frustration over something so unimportant amused me more than anything else.

A few minutes and some wet pants later our fearless vessel had flopped into the murky waters and we were on our way. Our target: Hood Canal's Dungeness crab, a prized and delicious product of the West Coast. The pursuit of Dungeness crab is, on an average year, a ten billion dollar industry. Our voyage, however, was recreational.¹ The crabbing was said to be decent that year, but you would rarely hear any fishermen admit it; the local fishing culture is one of perpetual pessimism. It seems fishermen can never get on the water often enough, for long enough, or catch enough. That was fine with me though, I wasn't in it for the crab. Rather, getting out on the water together is one of the few activities my dad and I both enjoy.

People from Western Washington may have heard of the fight to maintain healthy levels of sea life in the Puget Sound. The Sound is a narrow waterway that has little interaction with the greater Pacific Ocean, which causes

¹ "Coastal Commercial Dungeness Crab Fishery." Fishing and Shellfishing. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

oxygenation problems in the water called hypoxia. Those problems are compounded by the waterway's geographical layout, which allows the Southerly winds to cause unox- ygenated deep water to flow to the surface, killing both deep-water and surface life.²

Despite these troubles, the Puget Sound is an astonish- ingly beautiful place. On lucky occasions the clouds break and the rain stops, revealing bright blue waters and Mt. Rainier towering in the distance. However, on the worst days the clouds are thick and dark, doing nothing but en- hancing the murky, muddy reality of the water. You're cold, you're wet, and most of all you wish you could be anywhere but a small aluminum boat churning precariously in the freezing water. It was on such a dismal day that I found myself dangling over the side, struggling in vain to untan- gle the buoys that distinguished our crab pots from those of another fisherman.

"This is the worst," I said, my hands in the icy water. My dad agreed, but we still had more crab pots to check before we could abandon our maritime adventure. The crab pots (or crab traps) are specifically designed for the capture of Dungeness crab. The wire cage has two funnel-shaped openings: bait is placed in the middle. Crabs are able to enter the pot for the bait, but are unable to escape.³ It's devious, and the nonviolence of the process impresses me.

Crabbing is well-regulated in Washington State by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. First and critically, it is illegal to harvest a female crab, the idea being that having an abundance of female crabs is better for repopulation. Well-circulated guides demonstrate how to differentiate male and female Dungeness, a process that involves flip- ping the crab over to examine an abdominal flap on its underside. Second is size: only males old enough to have grown above six and a quarter inches may be harvested. Diameter is measured across the shell at a notch in the

carapace.⁴ Astonishingly, it is estimated that ninety-five percent of those eligible males are caught every year.⁵

Fishery managers refer to a "3-S System" for crab sustainability: Size, Sex, and Season. Catches are recorded on a standardized form, counted per person. Everyone is allowed a set number of crabs, so it is not unheard of for recreational crabbers to drag their unwilling wives and chil- dren out with them so as to avoid fines. It was for the sake of this rule that my crabbing life began.

That day with my dad we dragged our pot into the boat, opened it up, and started measuring the crabs. The ruler has a notch on one end which lines up with the particular notch on the crab's carapace. Some pots were full of females and we returned them safely to the sea, bellies full of our bait. Most of the males were too small, and they too got a free lunch. Several pots yielded only a few legal crab. Locals always believe some injustice responsible for poor harvests, rather than bad luck or ill timing. They often go so far as to blame the complicated relationship between Washing- ton's fisheries, the local fishermen, and the regional Native American tribes which are subject to different fishing laws.

Native Americans are usually entitled to longer seasons, different restrictions, and reserved harvest areas dictated by Reservation laws which differ from those of the state.⁶ These rules can be confusing and intimidating to other locals, sometimes inciting a sportsman's jealousy.

Weaker catches can also be due to the various envi- ronmental troubles which plague the regional waters. The low dissolved oxygen content of the water and its rising temperature both menace the local fish populations. Toxins from oil spillage and heavy metals like lead and mercury pose threats too, especially to juvenile crab.⁷ Beset on all sides by such problems in this narrow inlet, crab popula-

² "Study Suggests Natural Oxygen Cycle in Hood Canal." KOMO News. KOMO News, 25 Apr. 2007. Web. Sept. 2014.

³ William Randolph Poppe (1977). *How to Catch a Crab*. Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein & Day. pp. 75–76, 85.

⁴ Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "PUGET SOUND RECRE- ATIONAL DUNGENESS CRAB GUIDE." (n.d.): n. pag. 23 Dec. 2010. Web.

⁵ "Coastal Commercial Dungeness Crab Fishery." Fishing and Shellfishing. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁶ "PNPTC Fishing Regulations." PNPTC Regulations. Point No Point Treaty Council, 2014. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁷ "Dungeness Crabs." Encyclopedia of Puget Sound. Puget Sound Institute, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

tions are often inconsistent. Since 1950 harvest data has varied from as low as two and a half million pounds in 1981, to a high of twenty-five million pounds around 2005.⁸

My family hears fishermen's frustrations daily in their sporting goods store. Providing hunting and fishing supplies in the small town of Shelton Washington, the family business has become a local landmark. State policy changes and licensing frustrations are common sources of distress for the customers. Of course, one can't exactly use the grumblings of frustrated fishermen as a gauge for how well the wildlife is doing; according to them, every year is worse than the last. Growing up, I got used to hearing these complaints but had difficulties empathizing. Ethical qualms kept me from ever personally hunting or fishing with gusto (eventually leading to my dabbling in vegetarianism), but I became familiar with the processes and legal barriers involved, picking up bits and pieces from overheard conversations about the business or the hunting trips of family and friends. In general I supported hunting restrictions, an opinion that was usually best held quietly.

As it happens I spent a lot of time keeping my social and political opinions to myself around the store. There seems to be something in this country's framework that naturally bonds outdoor sportsmen with conservative politics. Myself being fairly liberal, I often had to tread carefully in conversation to not accidentally defend Washington State's "big government over-regulating" habits. The interesting thing is that once you got them down to the details, asking questions about what they think of protecting fish populations and the environment, they as nature lovers are fully supportive. Once those same ideas are written into law, however, every one of them becomes a legislator. The reason I find it hard to not to go up to bat in defense of the state is that, frankly, the numbers pertaining to human pollution and overfishing are pretty damning.

It is estimated that about fourteen million pounds of dangerous chemicals are washed into the Puget Sound by stormwater runoff every year. Over three quarters of the

⁸ "Coastal Commercial Dungeness Crab Fishery." Fishing and Shellfishing. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

local saltwater marshes have been destroyed and replaced with human infrastructure, meaning proximity of human settlement to the water itself is now a major issue now the region's famously abundant rain water has no opportunity to be filtered by soil and wetlands before entering the greater Puget Sound washing all of the debris and oil from our roads and paved areas directly into our natural water supplies, disasterously harming the local aquatic wildlife.⁹ Unfortunately now that our infrastructure is in place and so much of the environment forever altered, there is little we can do to go back.

The bad news is not just for wildlife. The contamination gets back into our own bodies as we consume our local seafood. Bottom feeders and scavengers like the Dungeness crab are particularly susceptible to ingesting dangerous toxins. The cumulative health effects of this contamination are still unclear, but already the buildup of mercury in fish-heavy diets is coming under scrutiny. Those same heavy metals pose threats to all marine life, from the floor-dwelling crabs to the fish and even whales.

Many of the oft-lambasted regulations regard the protection of our waters' non-crab denizens. Washington hosts many endangered and threatened species including seven salmon runs as well as sturgeon and rockfish. Multiple species of sea turtle are endangered, as well as are the local Humpback and Orca whales.¹⁰ As recently as 2007, there were only eighty-six Orcas remaining in the Puget Sound.

The damage is of economic concern as well. The regional fishing industries bring in about one hundred forty-seven million dollars per year, and the tourism industry represents nine and a half billion dollars.¹¹ Our own store felt this economic reality especially hard during the recession, struggling hard through several unprofitable winters, but always bouncing back in the summer. For the past decade my family's personal livelihood has been dependent on the

⁹ "NOAA Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat." WSDOT. Washington State Department of Transportation, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

¹⁰ "THE PROBLEM OF POLLUTED RUNOFF IN PUGET SOUND." People For Puget Sound, n.d. Web. Sept. 2014.

¹¹ "Problem Below the Surface – Impacts on the Sound." Puget Sound Starts Here. Puget Sound Partnership, 29 Jan. 2013. Web. Sept. 2014.

relentlessness of the locals; every time the summer sun comes out they arrive, ready to trek back out into the wilderness, or into the waters, to try their hand at sport and hunting.

The regional lifestyle and identity is dependent on the health and wellness of the aquatic ecosystem. Many Western Washingtonians take great pride in their progressive and environmentally-friendly state policy. Whether or not the current measures go far enough to protect wildlife is an important issue for our residents, politicians, and fishermen to be discussing. Problematically, whenever it comes down to who has to make the hard sacrifices in order to protect the environment, every group is quick to point the finger at the others. It can be funny to listen to a group of hunters, who believe all politicians to be evil idiots, as their own conversations dissolve into bickering and blame-shifting. The conversation is still developing, but I think people have hope that they can still intervene on behalf of the Puget Sound, and those who live in and near it. Everyone seems to have good intentions, but at the same time everyone feels like they have sacrificed enough already.

None of this was on my mind when the female crab I was trying mercifully to release had clipped onto my ring finger in an act of furious retribution. Proponent of animal rights though I am, I still find that compassion can come with difficulty toward the less comprehending of Nature's creatures. The moment's desire was to obliterate the crab against the side of the boat. I ignored that impulse, and the crab eventually gave up on me, dropping back into the water with a plop.

When we finally hit the shore with our meager catch, the rain started. Securing the boat and locking things down is usually some level of miserable. In the summer, the aluminum can scorch you as you move around the boat securing things. That day the rain was making everything slick and treacherous. Already covered in mud, my father and I shared a look of grim solidarity before climbing into the truck, looking forward to dry clothes and a warm house.



CONTRIBUTORS



Fiction



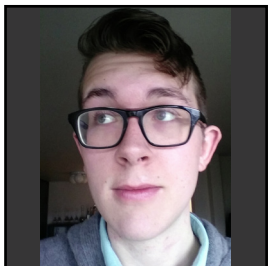
Anna Cloud is a sophomore at Washington State University with a double major in Creative Writing and Anthropology and a minor in Spanish. An avid traveler, Anna hopes to integrate her desire to study other cultures and languages with a career in writing.



Sossna Shumet was an Animal Science major for her first three years at WSU until she realized Chemistry was the bane of her existence. Her shift to a bachelor of arts was the best thing to happen to her. Sossna enjoys watching movies, reading novels, and skyping with her kitten.



Russ Walsh enjoys writing stories about weirdos and the places weirdos congregate. It's probably because he's a weirdo himself. He's a Communications Major, who writes sketches for Cable 8's *Viral Vision* and is an assistant producer on Cable 8's *The 8Bit*. He runs his own comedy podcasts and doesn't write enough.



Jeffrey Wilson is a student of Linguistics and French at Washington State University. Raised by Californians in Northern Idaho he is torn between romanticism and iconoclasm in all his endeavors. He spends his free time being reasonably tall, to the shock of his social betters.

Poetry



Jessie Barker is a relentless hoarder of even the meaningless such as impersonalized gift cards and rocks disguised as fossils once found on past sunny recess days. A lover of gaming as well as all genres of food and drink, although she abhors coffee, grapefruit and baked oysters.



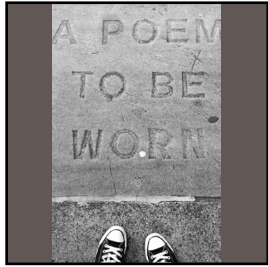
James Bowie Campbell



A.J. Hannigan is rather dull and enjoys only a handful of things in the world. They are: Coffee, Lagavulin, porters and stouts, traveling the piano works of Eric Satie, the proto-punk of the Stooges, mathematics, the poetry of Eliot and Neruda, and the prose of Beckett. That's it.



Miranda Hansen is a human of upstanding oral hygiene and respectable mental sanity. She enjoys writing things and engineering things and most anything that has little relevance to her academic success. Additional hobbies include calling her mother with alarming frequency, and also hanging out with the friends that she has.



Phe Shay Locke is a 21 year old poet from Renton, Washington. “Converse lead to conversations.”



Cappy Spruance is a Psychology major and English minor graduating this May. Her poetry is deeply influenced by her Hindu faith and her time studying in Bangalore, India. She enjoys long walks on the beach and candle-lit dinners with her cat, Mickey.

Art



Dylan Alan, born into split custody, grew up between two worlds. Doing art at a young age, everything he had gained as an individual had been learned through his abstract childhood. Today, he is probably roaming the roads of the Palouse on his motorcycle, hitting a golf ball around on cut grass, or hiking an abstract land. Living is his secret.



Jonathan Seth Matteson is an interdisciplinary artist and aspiring art educator studying Fine Art, Art History, and Music at Washington State University. To learn more about Jonathan and his FUSIONS woven watercolor paintings, please visit www.jsmatteson.com.



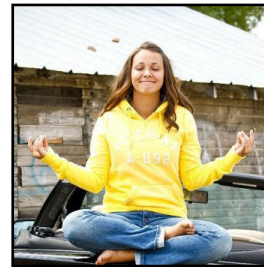
Shelby Tate Preisler is an undergraduate student at WSU. She will graduate in May 2015 with a Bachelor’s degree in Humanities. Shelby’s passion for travel and photography has allowed her the opportunity to explore her unique creative style. Shelby is excited to continue her journey of photography to share with others.



Erin Richardson is a senior Business Management major at WSU. She grew up in Seattle, WA and has always had a love of photography. She has backpacked all across North America and Mexico. She hopes her photography conveys the unique people and landscapes she encounters. She is honored to be accepted for this issue of LandEscapes.



Tim White was born and raised in Rockford, IL. He grew to be a whiz kid. Becoming tech-savvy at age 17, photography became a hobby that he excelled at and continues to excel in. Through his lens, he will capture the moments that will last for a lifetime and never be duplicated.



Ashley Wilhelm is currently studying elementary education and Spanish at WSU through the College of Education. She is from Spokane, WA. She does a lot of work within the Pullman community including babysitting, working, and coaching. Her favorite types of art media are acrylic paint, charcoal, and oil pastel.



Tasha Williams resides in University Place, Washington where she creates abstract acrylic paintings and other works of art. She will earn a BA in Fine Art from Washington State University this year. Her goal is to build her art portfolio and utilize local galleries to showcase her talents.



Jessica Schloss graduated from WSU with Bachelor's degrees in both English and Digital Technology and Culture in December 2014. Sticking around Pullman while her soul mate finishes up his degree, she is currently putting her skills to the test at a local business, Unleash Internet.

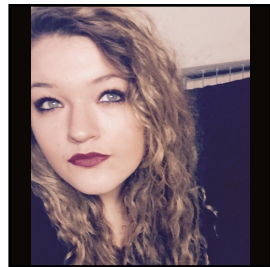
Non Fiction



Joseph Cardenas is a junior studying English and Anthropology at Washington State University. He loves cats, his family, and his God. He enjoys rocks, flowers, and coins. One day he will visit Mars.



Zachary Schreiber graduated from WSU in 2014 with a degree in Chinese language and culture. He comes from Shelton Washington, near the Puget Sound. He has a love of music and foreign languages and studies both in his free time. He is currently planning a return trip to East Asia.



Emily Page is a junior double majoring in English and International Business with a minor in German, and currently resides as the president of her sorority. She is known for her wild hair and exhilarating personality and for spending her down time drinking Redbull and exploring the downtown area of Pullman.



JT Torres is a PhD candidate at WSU. His forthcoming novella will be included in *Weathered Edge*, alongside Don Rearden and Sarah Birdsall, which will be published by VP&D House. He also had an essay included in *Best Food Writing 2014*. Some other writings of his can be found in various literary journals.



Becky Sharpe will be graduating with a BA in English, minors in Psychology and African American History, and an Editing and Publishing Certificate. It is from her home town of Hanford, WA and her family that she draws much of her writing inspiration. She aspires to continue on to graduate school to obtain her MFA in creative writing, and return to University as a professor.

EDITORS

Editor in Chief



Ana Schmidt is a Senior. She's graduating in May. LandEscapes is her child. And it doesn't play well with others.

Fiction



Reagan Bell is a Senior Creative Writing major at WSU who dabbles in music and theatre. This is her second year on staff with LandEscapes and one day she hopes to be a professional fiction editor. When she's not consumed by anything literary, you can often find her belting out a Jason Robert Brown song.



Andrew Braddock is a Senior fiction editor, who finished a double degree in Creative Writing and Public Relations. He was a tutor in the Writing Center, and likes to help people with their academic papers. When Andrew is not in a caffeinated consciousness on campus, you will most likely find him reading, spending time with friends, or playing pool at Rico's Pub. He loves you.



Zoe Holland is pursuing two degrees in English and Asian Studies, and minoring in Japanese. After graduating she hopes to join the JET Program. Her favorite authors include Catherynne M. Valente, Robin McKinley, and Natsume Sōseki. She is amazingly productive with side projects when avoiding work that needs her immediate attention.



Josie Tarr is a Senior studying Digital Technology and Culture (graphic design) and Professional Writing and Rhetoric (English). She likes reading books, baking delicious things, and doodling unicorns.

Poetry



Jon Goyt is an English major from Orondo, Washington.



Ash Guarino is a Junior at Washington State studying Creative Writing and Criminology. She enjoys eating and cooking food, which has taught her how to make Ramen taste like a home-cooked meal. Besides cooking, she enjoys a good mystery novel and hopes to be a professional editor in the future.



Blair Rezny is a Bookhouse Boy and mensch. As a student of Political Science and Ethics he is continually disappointed in you. He achieved his position as judge of your work through bribery, corruption, and nepotism. Thanks, Dad.

Art



Lacey Kido is a Senior at WSU studying English-Professional Writing and Rhetoric as well as Digital Technology and Cultures. Until her hopes of a career where she will be paid to read books can be fulfilled, she currently spends her time eating like a hobbit, and organizing rather than sleeping.

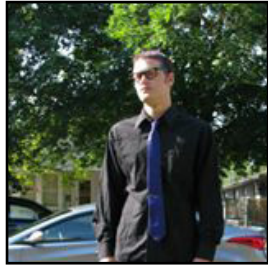


Amber Larks is a Junior studying Business Entrepreneurship and Fine Arts. This is her second year on LandEscapes. As a dreamer and go-getter she wants to create her own successful business and volunteer around the world. Her two favorite things are photography and traveling with the people she loves.



Alexa Turner graduated in December 2014 with a BFA in Painting. She is an acrylic painter and will be attending graduate school in Museum Studies, with hopes of becoming a curator. As an undergrad she worked at the Museum of Art/WSU.

Non Fiction



Travis Bryant is a Literary Studies major at WSU who fights for truth, justice, and oxford commas. When he sees spiders he doesn't kill them, though solely as a means of keeping the fly population down. This is all that is known of him.

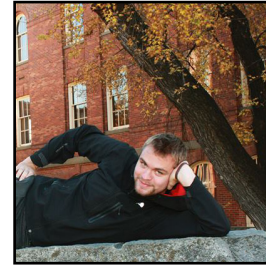


Jesse Purvis - I am Groot.



Sophia Stephens is a junior at Washington State University studying English Literature and Comparative Ethnic Studies. Her favorite go-to drink is a Vanilla Chai Latte and you will most likely see her either wearing polka dots, stripes, or something that is just "Sophia." You'll know when you see it.

Music



Karl Howell is a Senior English Education major at Washington State University. He enjoys listening and playing music, specifically crazy Heavy Metal. Karl tries to actively participate in that scene as much as possible, but is a member and plays quite a bit with the significantly more mellow local band, Soulstice.

Design & Web



Mara Almanzor is a Junior studying DTC (Multimedia Authoring) with minors in Fine Arts and Film Studies. While her strengths are in web design and development, she enjoys the creative and technical process of other media forms such as video editing and production. With that being said, you can either find her at a coffee shop, at the movies, or behind a computer screen.



Kelsey Johnson is a Junior majoring in DTC with minors in French, Communications and Fine Art and loves being a Cougar. She enjoys good typography, Photoshop, coloring books and live music. In the near future, she hopes to travel the world and work in Seattle creating beautiful things.



Max Supler is a Creative Writing/ Digital Technology and Culture major with a Film Studies minor. He enjoys designing video games, writing, and making websites while watching post apocalyptic movies and doing two other things. He is also good at dinner parties.

Marketing



Adrienne McCullough is a Junior at Washington State University. She is a Communications major and Film Studies minor and plans on going into advertising. This is her second year with LandEscapes. In her free time, Adrienne enjoys napping and binge watching Netflix.



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