The Rhapsodist

Spring 2018

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, NC

rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsĕd ist/ , U.S. /'ræpsĕdist/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department

Editors' Note:

"I don't want your candor. I want your soul in a silver thimble."
—Don DeLillo

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We are excited to share a journal filled with *souls in silver thimbles*—both written and visual. Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*. Enjoy...

DeLillo, Don. *Valparaiso*. Scribner, 2003.

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Ode to Anatomy Class

by Elizabeth Helmich

It began when the smallest unit,
Seemingly innocuous, somehow
Managed to beat primordial odds.
That made me think
I might even survive
Longer than a cell,
Since I also enjoy sugar.

Shifting into bones, I dared to think
Surely *this* section would be easy,
We've all played
The Operation Game.

Now I can attest: there is no Bread Basket
In the stomach, although at times
I'm fairly certain there was indeed
An ice cream cone
Furiously melting
Inside my head.

My favorite section
Was cardiovascular, though my heart
Is less flowery and more workhorse now,
I promised
Not to hold that
Against her.

After all, she loves me forever,
And will keep pumping for me
Even if we're separated;
Now that's true dedication.

The mesenteries left me
Pondering evolution, and I imagine
Them hugging innards to spine, to sky,
Every time
I'm in Dog pose
Hoping

My lizard brain keeps its third eye
Open, and my hippocampus
Continues hiring new neurons
For my lobby
Of gray matter,
Racing to file it all away.

The Artist's Desk

by Samantha Nicole Bolick

Danse Macabre

by Ellen J. Perry

"I looked around good. Hit struck me how lonesome the cabin was, set back in the cedar trees thataway, despite her children a-playing all around the steps. Hit was kindly dark back in there, and the cold wind come a-blowing through them cedar trees with a sighing sound, a crying sound, real mournful-like."

—Lee Smith, The Devil's Dream (1992)

Giselle

The biggest mistake I ever made was moving to the mountains. Mother warned me, and I didn't listen. "I *love* Arthur," I proclaimed one night at my parents' elegant dinner table, home for a short break from college, and she said, "'Love,' my white ass," and stormed off. This sort of crude language was unusual for Mother who, born poor and married rich, rarely returned to her roots. In fact, she went from Penny Gap, Virginia – "where," she'd mock, "didn't *nobody* have a penny" – to Richmond with her high school senior class to see the ballet *Giselle*, deciding then and there that she'd never be a weak-hearted peasant girl done in by her betters. Instead, she felt tremendous determination to become one of the elite; she would do whatever it took to join forces with wealth and, with either God's help or the Devil's, she pulled it off.

Mother moved to Norfolk at eighteen and met John Harrington at an officers' ball when she was twenty. They married within six months, and she followed him and the Navy all over the world until my brother Dalton's impending arrival was announced. At that point, Mother said it was time to settle down in Chesapeake

even though Daddy kept working and traveling. Three years later I was born; Mother named me Giselle so as to commemorate both her moment of awakening in Richmond and her ultimate victory in escaping generational poverty. Throughout my childhood, she held court in a gated community called Cedar Grove Estates, a name she hated because it reminded her of the red cedars from home. All letters sent to Chesapeake from Penny Gap were returned unopened, but not before one day I finally thought to write down my grandmother Hattie's address; I kept this secret treasure hidden away for years in my beloved jewelry box, the one Mother had given me for my fifth birthday. The box sheltered a tiny ballerina, a silent, patient girl hunched inside waiting to be released to twirl madly in her petal-pink tulle skirt.

I didn't dare write to Hattie for fear of Mother's temper but grew up longing to know about this side of my family. Daddy told a few stories about crazy aunts and witchy cousins (but only when Mother was off with her women's club friends), and Dalton remembers meeting our grandparents once in Abingdon when I was a toddler, but I didn't know them at all. As a result, I romanticized mountain life; envisioning rugged terrain and intense passions, I read *Wuthering Heights* at fifteen and yearned for connection with my wild heritage. Hattie could be like Cathy, for all I knew, roaming the hills and loving some brilliant, moody Heathcliff. I identified not with Daddy's people, who were originally from Maryland, but with Mother's, kinfolk spread out over a few coves and hollers within our same state but a million miles from the Tidewater.

Dalton believes I fell for Arthur Dennis because of this tendency to idealize mountain culture, and I'm sure he's right. Arthur and I met at Radford University where, much to Mother's disappointment, I refused to join a sorority and instead declared a History major with a minor in Appalachian Studies. Hailing from Grundy, Virginia, Arthur was a quiet, serious geology student whose parents had saved just enough money for him to attend the first two years

of college; after that he was on his own, so he worked various part-time jobs and managed to stay afloat. We met at a mountaintop removal event during our junior year and talked about the importance of making a contribution in the world. Later, Mother said over the phone that our romance was "just a phase," but I envisioned the two of us living deep in the mountains, my teaching Social Studies and Arthur teaching Earth Sciences, both of us crackling with energy and youth and the fire of purpose. We would inspire rural kids with our knowledge and light a path for them to see their way beyond limitations and into wider realms of opportunity.

I had it all figured out.

Arthur

Giselle thought she had it all figured out even before we graduated from Radford, way before we knew anything much about each other or the mundane crap of adult life or what in hell we'd do to manage classrooms full of rebellious teenagers who didn't give two damns about Native American artifacts or the Emancipation Proclamation. But what I loved about Giselle in those early days was her hope. She wanted us to join forces and build a life that mattered. I was hopeful, too, but more practical because I knew the mountains in a way she never could. The land itself was rich but fickle, physically wounded by human greed and prone to vengeance.

A bad feeling kept hanging around me like a ghost during our last semester, a dread I couldn't get rid of even after Giselle – always the one who took charge and blazed trails – heard about a remote West Virginia high school that was hiring new teachers, then found the "perfect" little cabin without a neighbor in sight and "lots of potential." I knew in my gut that this girl who grew up with the finest of everything wouldn't be prepared for what surely awaited us in an old, isolated, fixer-upper cabin in Monroe County, but she was excited and her laugh so sweet that I couldn't help but follow and hope maybe it'd work out. Hell, I'd been wrong before.

Giselle's family met mine for the first time at our graduation day luncheon. That's what Mrs. Harrington called it, "luncheon." My parents didn't know what to order off the menu, so I pointed out some appetizers that might be good. Dad took one sip of his gazpacho and whispered to Mom, "Is this soup supposed to be cold?"

Well, the highlight of the event was Giselle's grandmother Miss Hattie's big entrance. She'd come over from Penny Gap and shocked everybody to death. Giselle had written to her, not expecting to hear a word back, but all of a sudden here she was rolling into the country club on her walker. "God almighty, it's Hattie Buchanan," Captain Harrington exclaimed. "Another round of bloody marys, please, Chip."

Giselle's brother Dalton jumped up to help Miss Hattie to a chair. Giselle was so happy she started crying.

"Good Lord, Mama, did you *drive* here?" Mrs. Harrington asked, white-faced. Miss Hattie acted like it was nothing, like she'd been joining the Harringtons for luncheon every Saturday of her life. "Aw, hell no, I haven't drove in years. My cousin Inez got her boy Malachi to carry me," Miss Hattie said. "He's out in the car now. I figure I'll bring him some ham sandwiches to eat while we all go to these young people's to-do." Miss Hattie put on her glasses to look at the menu but kept on talking. "Malachi don't want to see nobody nor get out of the car. Old Plymouth he bought off of Onie's people. You remember Onie and them, don't you, Peg?"

I'd only known Mrs. Harrington to be called Margaret, so hearing "Peg" was a surprise. Sensing the tension, Mom made her usual changing-the-subject statement: "Well, the weatherman surely has been good to us, hasn't he?"

Dalton smiled, relieved. "Yes indeed. Perfect day to celebrate Giselle and Arthur."

Miss Hattie took off her glasses, her sunken gray eyes staring right at Giselle. "I hear tell you're coming over toward our way

for work, child."

"Yes," Giselle said brightly. "Arthur and I can't wait to get settled. We're going to be renovating this cabin – "

"You'uns getting married?"

I cleared my throat while Mrs. Harrington took a pretty big sip of her second bloody mary. "We're thinking about something small next summer," I stammered, "after we get the first school year behind us."

"Well, this is another surprise," Mrs. Harrington's voice was unusually high-pitched. "I don't see a ring, do you, John?"

"Mother," Giselle warned.

"Ain't no reason for that wedding foolishness, is what I was about to say," Miss Hattie barked. "One day I'll tell you stories about your granddaddy, Giselle, stories that'll curl your hair. Horace was bad to drink and stubborn as a goat, mean too, and ran with any woman in the gap that paid him the least bit of attention. I ain't shed no tear about losing him to the pneumonia must of been five year ago now." She leaned in and pointed a gnarled yellow finger first at Giselle and then me. "It's a whole hell of a lot harder to get out of something than it is to get in it. You mark your old granny's words, you hear?"

We sat in silence for some time. Giselle nibbled on a crab cake. Finally Dad said, "There don't seem to be any regular-sized sandwiches on the menu, Miss Hattie, but this cold soup isn't too bad if you think Malachi might want some."

Hattie nodded. "I'm obliged to you for that."

Thinking back on that day, I wonder what might have happened had Giselle written to Hattie sooner. Would she have told her granddaughter some truth about mountain life, like she did about marriage? Could she have said or done anything that would get Giselle to think differently about our move?

Giselle

One of the first keepsakes I put out on our dresser in the cabin was my pink ballerina jewelry box. Somehow having it in sight made me feel like there was order amid the chaos of moving boxes, a reminder of better times despite the mess I'd made in convincing Arthur that Monroe County could be our home. A life lesson that even college didn't succeed in teaching me: nothing is ever as good as we imagine. I dreamed up "rustic" and "charming" when really our cabin felt like it was falling down around us, dusty and dark, an angry outsider rejected by civilization. We were outsiders, too. Well, mostly I was the misfit; Arthur adapted to the Crabtree community's ways pretty well, and his dad and some friends from Grundy fixed the worst of the cabin's structural problems.

Still, no matter how many people came to see us that first summer, either to work on the house or to visit, nobody stayed long. Once darkness started to fall, our guests would get itchy to leave, almost like a spell was cast or as if they were put in a trance and told to go. Harlan Vance, the closest neighbor we had who lived about five miles down the road, would stand up at the appointed time and say, "Well, we better get on back." He and his wife Erma would shuffle out to their Buick and leave Arthur and me alone to watch the fireflies dance in our front yard. Used to warm sea breezes, I never got accustomed to the chilly evening winds that whipped around us in those mountains, even in July, reminding me that I was not merely out of my element but isolated, forsaken, abandoned by the hopes that had bolstered me through long nights of studying and dreaming and making plans.

Gearing up for work in the fall was even worse. That August I stood in front of a classroom and struggled to find my footing, worried that my student-teaching experience in a more urban high school near Radford hadn't prepared me for the different challenges that rural education systems faced. In fact, I couldn't figure out the system at all; maybe there wasn't one, or maybe I was never to be

let in on its inner workings. I'm still haunted by the memory of one student in particular, a laid-off coal miner's son, who blurted out right in the middle of my lesson on the Battle of Blair Mountain, "You foreigners don't know nothing about it." My first impulse was to tell him I most certainly *did* know about it, that I wrote my senior paper about Appalachia's socio-political response to the mine wars, but then I realized: the student was right. I knew nothing about it.

Arthur's team leader Mr. McKinney told us, when we went to him for advice, "We're not social workers or addiction counselors or therapists, which is what most of these kids need. Just do the best you can and leave the rest to fate or God or whatever it is you choose to believe in." Arthur was resilient, able by December to figure out some strategies that worked with even the most unruly of his teenagers, but I had lost my belief in much of anything. I fell into a really dark place after school let out for winter break. Icy winds wouldn't stop blowing through the cedars; no matter how many times I put plastic over the crack in the kitchen window, the curtain kept blowing in. The cabin floors creaked at my every step. Terrifying nightmares about being chased into a corner with no way out made me afraid to sleep, so, on top of it all, I was constantly exhausted and irritable. Erma Vance came over fairly often with holiday recipes and small talk, but the last thing I wanted to do was cook, much less chat politely about the goings-on at Crabtree First Missionary Baptist Church.

I wanted to close my pink jewelry box over my head, lie down with the silent ballerina, and disappear from life.

Hattie

Arthur wrote me a letter and I knowed I had to go. It was Christmas Eve when me, Malachi, and Inez pulled up to that cabin in Malachi's old truck, snow piled up deep against the walls, not but one light flickering in there. I hollered from the porch and Arthur let us in, us three and the cold blasting through that heavy door all

at once, and I seen Giselle wrapped up in a quilt by the fire but she didn't even hardly blink, just stared at the flames, and I knowed she was hurting bad.

Inez did too. Her and a lot of the women in our family (not me) got that magic something to where they feel things. She told Malachi to set down in the rocking chair by Giselle while she walked all around that cabin, feeling things, and I went straight to the kitchen with Arthur and started fixing up some beef soup. "Inez can see the haints and talk to the spirits all she wants," I told Arthur, "but my grand-girl needs some meat on her bones." He helped me cut up some vegetables and I could tell he was worried to death. I liked him a sight bettern I did old John Harrington that stole my Peg away. Well she was already gone by the time she met John, so I don't know.

Just when I got the soup ready to set out for everybody, here come Inez out of the main bedroom and into the kitchen, eyes blazing.

"Hattie, Hattie," she said, grabbing at my arm. "They's a woman in that bedroom wants to talk to you."

"God's blood, Inez, you know I can't hear nothing like that. Get her to tell you and you tell me."

Every time, Christ help us, every time, me and Inez have to do it this way. She can't never remember I don't have the gift or doesn't want to, one. I went to the main room, put the soup on a tray in front of Giselle, and we were all quiet for a while.

Inez finally mumbled, "She wants to talk to Hattie."

"Mama, Hattie can't hear her," Malachi hollered, rocking slowly, knowing Inez hears haint voices bettern human ones. "You got to tell it."

I was setting beside Giselle who'd pepped up a little with some soup in her when I noticed Arthur was getting testy, wondering who in the world Inez thought was back in their bedroom. He'd done been back there twice and not seed nary a thing.

"Shh!" Inez shushed us, peering into the bedroom from the

door frame. "Hush now, hush. She's back in that corner, hiding. But I can see you, lady, come on out. Ain't nobody gon hurt you here, come on, honey."

I heard no sound but the fire crackling.

"She won't come out from that corner by the bed," Inez said. "But I can hear her whisper, can't you, Hattie? She says, ohh, like a moan, o, it's a sigh, but there's more to tell than that, she wants to tell it but ain't nobody ever listened, and she's sad, gon fill up Giselle with hurt till she hears it too. O, it's like a sad sigh, poor lost girl."

Of a sudden Giselle cocked her head and said to me, "I hear her crying, Granny, can't you?"

Erma Vance

Those young teachers in the cabin moved out right quick-like in the new year, and I'm glad of it. That place ain't no good for nobody. Lyin son of a gun real estate foreigner from Beckley told them that the owners had foreclosed and they'd get a good deal, cabin just needed some fixin up, a little tender lovin care. He'll get his for telling that story. Then again maybe me and Harlan are part to blame, too. We never could bring ourselves to tell them about what all happened.

I recollect the winter forty-odd year ago when Harlan went over to the cabin to check on Ivy Wallin, all alone after her husband disappeared with some hot-to-trot thing he'd brought home from Vietnam, after the war over there. Ivy was hanging by the neck in the corner of her bedroom, Harlan never did tell me no details. He called the sheriff and they cut her down, bless that poor woman, didn't have no family here and the closest kin anybody knew about was in Florida, so Preacher Davies and some deacons buried Ivy out back beneath the cedars, and things ain't been the same in Crabtree since. Some say Ivy hung herself, some say her no-good husband come back and made her do it, forced her to make it look like she done it to herself. Preacher Davies said at the little graveside service,

Oh, I pray her soul will rest, and that she repented and was saved by the sacrifice of our Lord in heaven, but Ivy hadn't never been much of a church-going woman, so most everybody doubted it.

She may not of been saved but Ivy sure did love to dance, I remember that. They was these dance socials over at the square, and she was the best and prettiest one there. The socials went on for a few months until the church elders said dancing was of the devil, which I didn't believe. You wouldn't believe it, either, if you'd of seen Ivy move so sweet in that pink shirtwaist dress, laughing and swaying with the husband she thought loved her more than life. And maybe he did cause he left that other woman and come back to the cabin a year later and shot hisself in the head with a rifle on Christmas Eve, didn't nobody find him till after the thaw and he wasn't but a twisted-up skeleton laying on the bedroom floor. Them rats and such got him, I reckon, course he was a rat too, they'd gnawed away at him till they wasn't hardly nothing left. Harlan told anybody who asked, *Yessir, wasn't nothing left of that rat Mr. Wallin but his cold white bones*.

Arthur

How me and Giselle survived that winter eight years ago, I don't know. Now that we're living in Chesapeake near her folks it all seems like a bad dream. It happened, though, and Hattie still writes to us every month with updates about her garden and her cousins. She and Mrs. Harrington started to make up some when our little girl Ivy was born. She's four years old now and loves to laugh. That laugh brings us all together, I guess, helps us stumble out of the old ways into a new generation.

Most days I'm happy enough here on the coast. Most days I hope for a typical Tidewater childhood for Ivy. Every now and then, though, I see something in our daughter's face that makes me think of Inez, and Hattie, and all my relatives in Grundy, and the

wild mountain blood that runs through Ivy's little veins despite our constant drop-offs and pick-ups to swimming lessons and spring-flings and recitals. Frenzied activity fools us into believing that we can stave off the uncivilized and deadly forces that Giselle wanted to leave behind in the mountains. We left it all back there *for good*, she says, and that's that. But outside on summer evenings just before dark when Ivy cocks her head and says to me, "Daddy, I see a pretty lady dancing," and I see nothing at all, I wonder.

A Walk in the Woods

by Summer Brianna Whiteside

The Sweet Empty

by Rob Michael Ridenour

After hearing his niece scream
for her fifth serving of Piggly Wiggly's
chocolate ice cream and watching
her lick the sticky brown stains
from the bowl,

he got up from the dinner table,

returning to his room where the romantic music
of Beethoven carrying his thoughts to

a warm June day that never was,
in a tree house that his father never built,
where he never ate the piece of red velvet
cake that his mother never made him—

the satisfying, sweetness

    of his bowl—

    spotless,
    empty.

What We Are

by Lex Brenner

Sonnet

by Grey Wolfe LaJoie

Who twists and writes such turquoise fires in you,
consumes what would be red with twilight's ruth?
Alone your eyes evince these flicks of blue
which sing a wider song than simple youth.
You pull the crisis out from my pinched lips
and waltz me through the strands of shaking rain.
A thousand sunny days do we eclipse;
A thousand plastic flowers feel no pain.
We must be more than sacred silence 'closed
beneath a bridge, within this frantic shower.
For is it love that never gets disclosed?
Yet love is every touch of every hour.
So ours can come through even ragged sighs,
and hurl us each sweet morning toward surprise.

Biography of Bleu: Year Two

by Emma Carr

Three mothers watch Little Bleu.

He spills olive juice
Mascarpone
Beetle blood
Just to watch it come out clean again.

He lines up his soldiers at inspection.
Detergent? Fabric Softener? Stain STICK?
All present. All obedient.
Everything according to protocol.

He STOMPS!
He pulls his cheeks!
He presses his eyes --
To his BRAIN!
He shakes his head!
He clicks his toes together.

A hand goes up for silence.

He informs them that the team has been selected
And calls them up one at a time
Drizzling INTENSELY and with SUCH CONFIDENCE.

He says Bye Bye to the Mothers and sucks a big breath
Before diving head first, perfect 10
Into the blue KNIT EXTRA SPIN WARM COLD bubbles.

He really is a New Thinker, and the Mothers nod
Watching him swim around like a fried doughnut,
Waving after every lap.

Later,
Asleep against Mother's bosom
His wet hair drips between,
And trickles a creek
Down to a puddle in her belly button.

Biography of Bleu: Year Sixteen

by Emma Carr

Bleu travels abroad
to a cloud over Bavaria
the color of yellow butter.

He snacks on floating seashells and flying fish

and talks to alpine choughs and whooper swans,
bar-headed geese and griffon vultures.

Bleu might have liked the bar-tailed godwits,
but they rarely stop during their migration.
All the same he makes sure
to wave
even though
they don't look over.

He likes the andean condors
when his cloud drifts low enough.
He gives them directions
back to Bolivia
and explains that Bavaria
is not at all
the same place.
Condors aren't strong readers.
They have trouble
with road signs
despite their good eyes,
but Bleu is gentle

and compassionate.
They teach him
about efficient removal
of flesh from bone;
He teaches them
about condensation
and rhyming.

His favorite companion
though
is the common crane,
for they tell him news
from home
and let him massage
their red crowns.
The two dance
to Bleu's tape player
and afterwards
they snack on peanuts
and berries the crane collected
in a knapsack,
and watch the sun set.

housecliff

by Bethany Evans

Ex–Position

by Jeff Horner

Phillip sat in the cab of the Dodge Ram – 1990, matte gray, Cummins diesel. Jake always threw in the brand of the engine when describing it; a kind of ethos to the right folks, Phillip thought, but he wasn't one of them. He just loved the growl of the machine, both primal and solid.

Jake paused at the stop sign at Forward Road then made the left turn onto Buttles. Phillip knew, before they hit the gravel of Buttles, he needed to light the joint, get it smoking evenly, then hand it over. Any hiccup in the process, including fumbling the handoff, or "lipping" the joint with too much moisture, invited a list of invectives from the giant Jake.

They sat with their own thoughts as they often did. Phillip worked up the courage to speak his mind, and he felt the shock of its difficulty, as if he were admitting to perversion, and not just explaining to his friend of many years that he wanted to write fiction, that he had a story to tell, that he desperately needed to share something sincere with someone.

He finally said so: "I think I'm a writer."

Jake puffed away for a second, settling into a reaction; he scoffed, like a vocal shrug. "What do you know about stories?"

"Plenty, I think. I mean, I think there's plenty out there." Phillip waved to the passing scenery. "There's a story in everything."

"Then, tell one." Jake downshifted smoothly, and the truck responded, as if it were a limb of his – "Tell one about right now" – as if all around him were merely an extension of himself. Jake moves, and the world reacts. He sat in his most righteous posture.

Phillip got lost out the window. He considered how much he loved the color of Stanton, from sapling green to the burnt lime dead

leaves crunching under bare feet, and how they encompassed the whole range of it all, of life and death. He opened his mouth, then swallowed Jake's silence.

Months before, Jake got work mowing his neighbor's fields, acres of mindless steering inside the enclosed cab of an industrial-sized tractor. He invited Phillip out one afternoon. "Cummins diesel," he said on the phone. "Bring reefer."

They reveled in the AC at full blast while August baked outside, and they poured through CDs, singing loudly and off-key. Floating above the tall grass mowed down row after row, they fell into their normal stillness. There was a simple beauty to the scene, as the sun turned to pinks and salmons that words threatened to destroy. Phillip wondered how he'd describe it and felt paralyzed by the contradiction.

He opened his mouth to discuss the issue, when a sickening bump interrupted the turn of the mower's blades. Jake stopped the tractor, and a cloud of smoke followed them as they exited the cab. Even at dusk, the heat sat heavy.

A baby deer had bedded deep in the thatch, frozen with fear as the machine overtook it. Badly mutilated, it still clung to life. The sun turned to deep reds and purples. Thunder, still far off, threatened.

Phillip shrugged, impotent. He knew the creature needed to be put down. He had no gun or knife and wouldn't know what to do with them if he did. He kicked at a few rocks. "Maybe one of these?" Phillip suggested, lamely.

Jake, of course, was handy with any tool, merely extensions of himself, but he brought neither. He contemplated the poor deer mewing at his feet for a moment, then sought out a heavy log along the nearby fence-line. With a great show of strength, he lifted the log high above his head, aiming to strike the animal in the temple and end its misery.

His aim wasn't true. The deer still fought to remain. Jake,

in frustration, struck again, then again, until he swung madly, crying out in chorus with the animal — a guttural, horrifying harmony — and finding a higher level of rage as if he could beat away all the suffering in the world. He swung the log until there was nothing left to feel anything at all.

Jake leaned against the log to catch his breath; a delicate pattern of spray across his face smeared as he wiped it away. Phillip noticed the tears forming in the giant man's eyes.

"It wouldn't let go. I just wanted it to let go," he said, his voice hitching.

Phillip returned to the present. Jake had pulled off to the side of Buttles and was reading whatever paperback was lying around the cab – in this case, *Nine Stories*, Phillip's recommendation. It always amazed him how well-read Jake was, how words like *intersectional* and *causality* would sprout effortlessly from his more consistent, rural colloquialisms. Phillip supposed they shared this quality, this awkward mix of high and low English emblematic of Stanton.

However, when asked, Jake would only admit to liking the scenes with sex and violence. "I think this dude wants to diddle children," he sneered. "A goddamn pederast."

"Luckenbach, Texas" came on the radio, and Jake turned it loud – an old country lament that reminded Phillip of the very specific greens of jealousy and regret. They both sang Willie Nelson's verse loudly and off-key.

The last time he'd heard the song was many years before, the friends past drunk, staggering around Jake's barn – a lofty place, full of light and shadow and joy and doubt and pine floorboards with knotholes that shook when you danced on them. The light bulbs swaying in time, they sang all their favorites, arms around each other, stomping about and enjoying their easy companionship, the roles they fit in, until Jake, without warning, pushed Phillip against the cinderblock wall.

Phillip, thinking about the night, could still feel the sharp crevices of cement through the thin skin of his t-shirt.

"What if I were to fuck you right now?" said Jake, towering over him, filling the barn, a timbre to his growl, pressing a finger deep into the smaller man's sternum.

This was an old conversation, one Phillip never fully understood, yet he knew he was supposed to pretend to enjoy it, to invite it even, like a game of chicken. Whoever blinked lost.

Phillip played his part: "I'd like nothing more." He fluttered his eyelashes, put his hand on his hip in a coquettish fashion.

And the finger dug deeper.

"No. What if I wudn't kidding? What would you do then?"

The song finished. Phillip opened his mouth. He had no answer. What was he supposed to do? It felt as if the barn might devour him unless he responded. He tried to push Jake away.

But Jake didn't budge. His brown eyes widened. The cleft in his chin – "Like Cary Grant!" his mom always said – deepened, and Phillip felt the pull of a frightening gravity.

"You lose," he said. "Again," and he let Phillip go, laughing to shake the whole barn, laughing to echo off the hill behind it. He replaced the CD, and soon, they both sang out again, being close as they were and quick to forgive. Friends should forgive. Friends are complicit.

Phillip's sternum still ached since that night; it would always. He wore bruises on his thin frame like medals. He could point to scars as if they created a map of their shared history. He became ashamed of the pride he took in his ability to repress pain.

He considered the kind of man who would act differently.

The first man was strong and overpowered Jake easily. His backstory was heroic, overcoming great odds to fight back. He would never cower again. His solid strength filled out the thin skin of his t-shirt.

The second was smart and explained, using an organized

logic, how Jake's behavior was unacceptable. His backstory felt stoic, filled with a focused scholarship. His t-shirt was bleached bright white, and hung with perfect function.

The third filled the space with love, convincing Jake that there were healthier avenues of expression, that he would be there for him, that this backwoods culture that had raised them both didn't need to define them. His backstory was filled with such compassion. He wore his shirt like he wore his own skin. The two men hugged, and Phillip felt no fear in the contact.

Phillip imagined all the men embracing. He imagined them as one man. He considered what specific green he'd use to describe each and how they would blend. He opened his mouth to speak of them, then closed it.

The song ended, so Jake turned down the radio and leaned back, his head against the driver's side window, his knee touching Phillip's, and the length of his body filled the cab until there was no space left to breathe, to be; all was just Jake: the matte gray of the truck and the opaque gray of the space between them and the drunk gray pallor of his complexion.

He said, "So?" – one massive eyebrow raised. All that was Jake prepared to swallow Phillip's failure and make it his – again – to swallow them both whole, like a snake eating itself, never sated. "Dazzle me. Tell me your story of everything."

A weighted silence.

Claustrophobic, sure he would vomit, Phillip staggered out of the cab and slammed the door behind him. He began walking up Buttles, filling his lungs with Stanton as deeply as he could. "Remember the good," he said out loud, shaking the tension from his hands. "Manifest the positive." He'd heard people say stuff like that before, but he found no comfort in the words.

He heard the Dodge rolling toward him – impressive, Jake's mechanical acumen, his ability to coax the machine to move just so until Phillip could feel the heat of its radiator through the thin

skin of his t-shirt. He knew that if he turned around, he'd see Jake's shit-eating grin. He knew that Jake could play this game until his gas ran out, until his CDs ran out, until the reefer ran out, all the time laughing to fill the cab at stupid Phillip being herded the entire length of Buttles until it, too, ran out, at the town limit of Lynchville miles away.

Phillip considered his options. He considered his three men and how each would react, and he smiled.

He took three long steps ahead, as if pacing off a duel, then turned to face the truck. There was that grin, and Jake flicked the stick to neutral, letting the truck's momentum roll just to Phillip's chest. The engine revved in warning, then again, and the threat of a popped clutch sat heavy like the heat.

Chicken again. This same conversation. Only one way to end it.

Phillip patted the hood of the Dodge, hot to the touch. "I will miss it!" he shouted, unsure if Jake could hear him, but he felt at peace with that. He crossed his arms and widened his stance. He meditated on the outcrop of limestone a few feet to his right. He projected its stoicism.

The expression faded from Jake's face. He slammed his hand on the steering wheel and yelled something Phillip couldn't make out over the sound of the angry engine. The large man then put the truck in gear, waiting for one last reaction from Phillip – one flicker of fear, one last homage to Jake's power. Phillip gave him nothing.

Jake forced down the gas pedal and spun the wheel hard, perfectly executing in reverse that 180 degree turn he always bragged about. He sprayed Phillip with gravel as he sped away, back towards downtown Stanton, pulling all that was an extension of him along with.

A new silence settled. Phillip sat with it, listened to it. He considered how he'd present it in a narrative.

Blinded by Dejection

by Madelyn Dover

Blueberries

by Tennille McElrath

No breath from the snake
woven in branches,
faux skin casting
eau de rubber in the heat.
Painted on eyes stare into the sky
daring birds to land, saying,
“These are mine.
I am the guardian. I am the gatekeeper.
Those who seek death seek me.”

The dirt road winds ‘round the bushes
until tapering in weeds.
A plywood plank spans the road,
a bridge across the moat of mud.
Its surface has no footprints.
If anyone were to pass here,
to push open the latched gate
and enter the barbed wire boundary,
to ignore all signs not to trespass,
to open the locked front door
of Redneck Palace they would see…

No breath from the aged man.
He slumps in his chair, his possessions
gathered around him,
spoils around a throne.
Time-worn coffee cans speckled with rust
abounding with money – small change –

rich only in smell –
blood and dirt.
The fingers of his limp right hand brush them.
There are no chairs in the room save his.
Decay coils around him like a snake,
slow, silent, and patient.

Faggot

by Eric Overbey

In ninth grade, they called me faggot
because I cried when we read *Romeo and Juliet*.
I called them faggot back;
the politics of puberty's prison
in the room of sweaty armpits and too much cologne,
where I got a surprise erection
when the soccer player in tight spandex shorts
stood up and sharpened his pencil.
They called me disgusting for that,
and why wouldn't they?

I went home and wrote an apology
to the soccer player.
When I finished,
I read it three times,
then ripped it up,
tossing it and Shakespeare
in the garbage.
The rest of the night I popped pimples
in front of the mirror
and in the morning I was ready.

The Rhapsode

by Grace E. Quinlen

The Last Love Poem

by Ethan Risinger

She told me
in a purple room
(velvet
under hand) that
she has never been
in love
(sun bends over window).
Even now
if she doesn't love me
like (pressure from
rain on leaf) I love her
it is ok (melon rocking light
in field).
I will be there
every day (bowls
filled with milk) to
show her love
under every full
(imprint of knuckles
in dirt)
or crescent,
wilt and bloom,
(leaves still,
branches
in pond)

until we can only
cry when we kiss
(hands cupped
with wind).

Alleys

by Whitman Bolles

We would hit the dumpsters first, especially the one behind the Pyramid Triple-X Theater (now a Red Wing shoe store, next to a bistro). There we'd paw through stacks of last week's specialty porno newspapers and last month's glossy magazines minus the covers. Clearly, we saw things no fifth grader should see; moreover, we found it all hilarious, mildly stimulating, and worth quite a bit in trade with my friend Josh's older brother. I remember a removable, fold-out color poster of a very pregnant woman dressed in black leather and chains, brandishing a bull whip. This item fetched us a six-pack of Coors and fifty Black Cat firecrackers.

More randomly, we'd find used syringes that we'd take home and fill with various concoctions of household chemicals to inject bugs. Drano worked well; cicadas were the biggest creatures we could find. When my stepbrother, Andrew, suggested the neighbor's cat I drew the line. However, a few years later we were blowing that same cat hits of pot smoke under a blanket.

Behind the stereo shop, Hi-Fi it was called, we'd salvage speaker magnets. These came in handy once we discovered my stepfather's supply of 12-gauge shotgun shells in the garage. It was only natural that we'd attempt to build some bombs. By cutting the plastic casings open, we could collect a bowl full of shot, the small lead pellets. Then, more carefully and with a different tool though I can't recall what, we removed the gunpowder from each shell and filled a smaller container. The magnet held the shot together and gave the final package more heft. The wick part of our bombs never worked though, and we never got the powder compressed, so usually there resulted but a smoky, sparking mess on the concrete beneath the

basketball hoop or out in the alley.

From the roof of my house, which was two-story—unusual for that area—and built on a hill overlooking Central Avenue, we had a vantage point for using our wrist rockets. About a block and a half away, downhill and with minimal structures or trees to block us, we could see and shoot at the prostitutes as they walked from Baca's Mexican restaurant up past the Pyramid Theater and the pawn shop and the drug store to the Aztec Motel and back. We could see them dip down and meet their johns parked in the alley, then return, walking slower. Since I had once used the powerful slingshot to kill a rabbit out on the mesa by hitting it right in the eye with a ball bearing, for rooftop ammunition we used the marble-sized Arizona Cyprus seeds from a nearby climbing tree. They were heavy enough to sail that far and hard enough to hurt or gong a car hood, but they probably wouldn't get us locked up. Also, it would be impossible to find one and ascertain it had been shot from a hundred yards away.

The alleys, of course, attracted others—adults, often sketchy ones—so we had to be wary, especially at night. An old mattress, a couch, even a big cardboard box meant someone lived or at least partied there from time to time. One mattress in particular sticks in my mind, as it started in my house and ended up in our alley where a homeless hippie named Sunshine adopted it as his own, moved it a ways down Central, and eventually got immolated while sleeping upon it by a bunch of drunken frat boys. I could identify that mattress as it traveled because of the dark burn-hole in its center. George, my alcoholic stepfather, had passed out with a lit cigarette and set the bed smoldering during one Christmas vacation. My mother dragged it out into the yard, and it was my job to stand in the cold and run the garden hose on that brown spot until the smoke ceased. Then it got dumped over the back wall into the alley, theoretically so the trash guys could take it away. But Sunshine found it first. He was a leftover from the '60s, or so legend had it, a victim of too much acid who wandered in his filthy leather-fringed

coat and bandana-patched bellbottoms. I kept track of him and that mattress for a couple of years, until around my freshman year; they finished their westward migration down Central to a spot behind the Lobo Pharmacy, after a stint further down where Okie Joe's honky tonk had been. That's where the final scorch marks hit the brick wall (and homage graffiti soon sprouted), and where Sunshine ultimately burned out.

Along the side of the alleys opposite the store-backs usually ran some flimsy backyard fences, so this lent us access to a whole world of residential theft and spying. We were good kids, though, just curious. Not criminal. So, we never really broke in anywhere or stole anything permanently. We peeped, trespassed, and borrowed—sure—but we did nothing evil. We watched some teen girl toweling off, took some illicit dunks in pools, and some joy rides on other kids' bikes and skateboards.

But one house, across the alley from mine, pulled us in after it was abandoned. Haunted is the only way to describe the place, the feel. We called it Murder House. It wasn't occupied by ghosts or any other paranormal punks, but rather by the residue of reality. I knew even then that real life could be far worse than the imagined stuff. A Greek family had lived there; my stepfather was Greek, so he had always hated them on principle. It made sense to him, somehow, so my little sister and I were forbidden from playing with the kids. Instead, the old men would curse at each other over the walls (George called him a "Turk," the worst thing you could say) and silently they'd compete via their vegetable gardens.

After school on a Friday (I was in eighth grade), a SWAT team stormed that split-level brick ranch house, and yellow crime scene tape surrounded the property. I eventually found out the father had shot the mother and then himself. The two children, a boy and a girl, had come home from school and found their parents dead. Nothing else happened over there for months, except a few of our daring night patrols. (Incidentally, Albuquerque has the highest

per capita domestic hostage rate, as well as bank robbery and police shootings of unarmed citizens. The mayor had to prohibit the reality show *Cops* from filming any more episodes there, due to bad publicity.) We did not see blood stains on the floors or bullet holes in the walls, but the few remaining personal items we discovered in the empty rooms intensified the glowing sense of loss that pervaded the dwelling: a jack-o-lantern shaped cookie cutter, a golf club, a dog collar, mouse traps, a soccer shoe. It became a sort of test to enter that place under darkness, spend a few minutes and then flee on a wave of suffocating adrenaline—always leaving glad that such an atrocity had not (yet) happened to us. And we never touched the objects, instinctively understanding the rules of sympathetic magic.

In fall, weeds as tall as we were choked the channels and made passage more challenging as well as more suspect. An alley was a causeway, a passage, a nether recess in the body of the city, and a border demarcation—at once a road to follow, a line to cross, a refuge in itself, and the edge of a frontier, a no-man's land with little traffic and few police. A haven for the overlooked, the forgotten, the hidden, the forbidden, and the rotten. The alleys gave us freedom, independence, and fright. All of these concepts were working in our collective kid subconscious, but on a much simpler level the alleys offered us fun. And what took it beyond mere play in the yard or out on the sidewalk was the distance gained via bicycle. We rode everywhere—through streets, parking lots, parks, the university campus, and strip malls—but in the alleys no one would follow us. We could lose even cops. (Note that twenty years later APD started outfitting officers with mountain bikes.) Each of us had saved, begged and stolen in order to get a BMX bike—mine was a Mongoose—which we'd use for transport, sport, and spiritual companionship. It's how I imagine a young Sioux warrior with his first pony; every waking moment spent together, preparing for some unknown but inevitable battle against death. Bunny hops, jumps, wheelies, skidding, racing, wrecking—all of it demanding maximum energy and total concen-

tration. No worries possible while riding. Just the ride.

The speed at which we flew across the dirt and gravel was rivaled only by the frequency of our runs through certain chutes, such as the downhill bend around the Monte Vista triangle, an odd intersection of two big streets and Central. Mere yards from our old elementary school and a rock throw from UNM, this short dirt alley was positioned as a perfect escape route, a short-cut from Central to the tree-lined streets heading north. It ran behind a karate studio, the Morning Glory Café, a photography shop, a head shop, an artist supply—together comprising a two-story, block-long row of stucco and neon storefronts. In the shadow of this building's back side, across the alley, sat small, square yards of thin grass and dog turds quieted by Chinese elms or cottonwoods.

One night… it was a Friday in summer, a sublime desert sunset stretch of high pink fade-out and orange light looking west over the mesa with its silhouetted volcanic nipples… Standing on the broad asphalt avenue, itself but a line in the vast grid that extends from Sandia mountain foothills to Rio Grande ribbon of green on the mile-high alluvial slope that holds the city, you feel exposed, elated by the drama of sky and geology meeting so abruptly. Like standing on an airport runway at the edge of the planet. Or to evoke the sea, like keeping watch on the deck of an aircraft carrier adrift in the Pacific, horizon broken only by Mt. Taylor's hump one hundred miles out—or perhaps it's a sailing ship much, much closer. The air itself breathes deeper in relief when the sun settles, and the heat abates upward. It's so dry clouds kill the rain themselves in purple sheets of vapor; these static stellar flags hang as solitary earth kites pulling toward space. And the people feel it— the daily reprieve from a solar rotisserie, as well as the reverence, the awe—and the result is a mellowing of mood and temper (poverty and race-riot rage notwithstanding). Don't expect things to get done on time here, or with a lot of professional acumen. There's too much dumbstruck wonder and rest.

Anyway, on this evening in question the alleys were shadowed canyons, shelter grooves in the hard-baked crust of urban landscape, and an adolescent zeal had us gunning out of our range. Low riders were big then among the *vatos*, and we knew better than to publicly make fun of (or have anything to do with, cautious even to look at) the shiny, hydraulic bouncing of the crawling cruisers come up from the valley to taunt and glare. And yet, this one time we couldn't resist contact and paid the price.

As little white boys, *gringos*, *gueros*, we had learned to stay in our part of town, and when we did cross paths with some tough Chicano kids—whether at school, the mall, on the bus—the standard protocol was to physically defer, avert the gaze, back off, let them by, go elsewhere. And by all means, say nothing. Do nothing that could be construed as aggressive, a challenge, a threat. My friend's older brother, by contrast, considered himself a "Stomp," a member of the urban shit-kicker, redneck clique at Highland High School, and he was six-three in eleventh grade, so he and his buddies got drunk on Friday nights and took their noise-ified Ford pickups down Central through South Broadway and Barelas looking for fights—and they found them. But even gang fights were quaint then, involving only knives and bats and chains, and, as far as we knew, he would always live to tell us the tales.

Our own pre-adolescent asses, though, depended on common-sense evasion and the homing instinct. For the most part, we knew we could watch the low-rider show on Central, assuming we didn't stray downtown or into the valley. East Central was another matter: it's still called the War Zone, haunted by Asian gangs and a diverse population of society's most desperate speed-freak drifters and renters-by-the-week.

We were unprepared, however, for our loyalty and young manhood to be tested so soon. It always happens too soon and without warning, and so the moment we heard the screech and saw the figure in baggy khakis and oversized white T-shirt, blue bandana,

and black Converse abscond with our two BMX bikes and throw them in the giant trunk of a gleaming gold Thunderbird, all caution and thought of consequence vanished from our minds. The chase was on.

Josh and I had been inside the Allsup's convenience store buying orange popsicles; our bikes were leaned up against a pole outside. For a split second we had our backs turned, and then the bikes were gone. We met the surreal image of a dude running across traffic with one bike in each hand. Then we were out there, after him. The gold car screeching away, other cars honking at us, our screams of "Motherfucker!" carried on the air. And that's when I saw the brick, just before the car reached the red light at Girard, after which we wouldn't have a chance. Lying there on the edge of the sidewalk was an intact red brick, maybe a doorstop for the Lobo Theater, or maybe it fell off a truck. But I picked it up and, with a rush of might beyond my years and size, I hurled that brick and watched it sail in slow motion; it was an instance of knowing once it left my hand the brick would hit the back windshield of the low rider. I felt a wave of panic and regret even as it hurtled end over end, but mixed in also was glee, triumph, and already a change in direction and a mental map of our quickest escape route.

For that is exactly what happened. A tremendous smash, followed by another braking screech, then seeming silence. The glass stayed in place but shattered through and appeared suddenly white from our vantage about fifty yards back. All four doors opened and legs came at us, fast. We were gone. Around the corner and into that short, steep alley, our sneakers sliding on the gravel but guiding us to the one spot nobody would see, where we could hide and let the attackers run by. Behind the weeds under an old loading dock, there was a short door in the wall that we had rigged to latch closed from inside; and within the dark crawlspace we had flashlights hidden, and we knew the way across the low, dusty floor to a ladder that followed the pipes up a shaft into the building itself. At the top was

a hatchway onto the flat roof, and from there, if we had to, we could climb down the other side down a fire escape and one big tree. A godsend, that we happened to be near this place while running for our lives.

As if in a perfectly executed football play, or on a ski run never veering from the fall line, Josh and I disappeared. We lost our bikes, but got to watch from on high some pissed off and humiliated dark-haired thieves scurrying around an alley they didn't know, shouting hatred and wielding knives at the specters of children. And for once, we had the story to tell upon returning home, home to other friends in other alleys, safe from all the dangers of house and family.

Nature's Yoni

by Jenna Jaffe Melissas

Church

by Tennille McElrath

Red velveteen threads like thick hair
remain where wrinkled hands worried smooth patches,
where backs rode straight against unyielding wood.
Down the dusty aisles and past moldy hymnals
an upright reposes like a hollow tooth.
Any step here would sound like bone on bone.

The wood groans as if remembering the resounding
words of the past. Dauntless words
dismissed the darkness and uncertainty,
not like a floodlight, but like a glow through a pupil.
Tiny bubbles vitiate the glass
of the grimy windows. Dust clumps on cobwebs
like knuckles on long, emaciated fingers.

One room. A toybox on the surface of the earth.
The broken doorway gapes
like a mouth that once spoke great truths.

Untitled

by Rita Dee Peters

The Scottsboro Boys

by Chelsea Ensley

In 1931, nine African–American boys were forced off a train and arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama for allegedly raping two white females. While evidence proved their innocence, these young men underwent various trials and suffered many months in jail, experiencing separation from their families, as well as emotional and physical persecution.

The Prison

He runs his fingers across the rusted bars
He never understood how he ended up here
He only remembers pointing fingers

A tethered rope digging into his arms
And loud screams
An echo now

Those innocent girls.
Who do you think you are?

He misses his mother the most
Her hands thick and calloused
Black like his own

Her singing in the mornings
Low and deep
How it rumbled under the dirty floor
And crept up the newspaper walls

He wondered if he'd ever see her again
Hear her familiar thunder

He imagines her, now, tearing down those bars
She would reach in and cradle him up
Carry him home
Singing

But her hands
Black like his own
Can't free him

The Dream

My dreams wake me up at night
Before they brought me here
I never had dreams
Or at least any worth remembering

My nightly journeys take me to places I remember fondly
The smells from my mother's kitchen
A small wooden room lined with yellow bowls
Etched with blue flowers

We never ate from them
They only sat and watched us
My mother washed them each week
And placed them gently back where they belonged

I asked her once why we never ate from those bowls
She said they were too pretty
That they deserved better

I would give anything to see them now
To reach out and touch them
Just to hear her scream "No Roy!"
And pinch the skin under my arm
She would forgive me
Like always
That I knew
She loved too much

Weeks after they decided they would take our lives
I got a letter from my sister
Our mother had broken all of those bowls
I imagine the soles of her feet
Bare and bloodied

She stands amongst the yellow chips and bright blue flowers
and weeps for me
dreaming of a world where I too deserve better

The God Fairy

I heard every man's last word
before I carried his hot and lifeless body away.
That's the job they give me,
to haul the electrocuted prisoners to the incinerator.

Before death, every one of them prayed to my God.
They apologized for their wrongs
and asked to be let through the pearly gates.

They asked God to look the other way and grant them their last and
final wish.
To be let in.
To be forgiven.

I vanished with those men. Every one.
As the switches were thrown,
I saw my own fate play out over and over.

But
when I die
when I sit in their place
just like they all wanted
I won't wish for forgiveness
God knows there are no wrongs I have committed.
Instead, God will plead with me to grant His wish
to come inside His gates.
He will ask me to forgive Him
for letting me slip through his bloodied fingers.
To love Him in spite of what he has allowed.

The Lie

Six of them shoved me to the back of the car
One held a knife to my neck
I stood as the weight of him pressed against me
Pushing me into a metal wall
I peered over his shoulder at the others
Pointing pistols
I watched flames dance in their eyes while
They waited
Pursed lips and sweaty palms
I saw myself from above

Like a dying animal
But still
I clung to him
The first
They came to me
One after another
I could only hear the whispers of other women's names
And their laughter
It hovered around us
It clogged my lungs
And left me lifeless

This is the lie I told
The lie I still believe
The lie which keeps me
Trapped beneath them

And under their white palms and swollen faces
I was reminded
Of what had never become of me

The Trial

Have you ever written on any papers the date of your birth?

I don't remember ever feeling like a child
I was born whole
And as the days pushed on
The weight of those moments that made up my life
Crowded me
Drove me deeper into the earth
Until it was as if I lived disappeared

Have you ever been convicted of any offense?

I remember my father
The amber liquid that tinged his breath
He asked me over and over to remind him why God gave him a daughter like me

I saw my father in those men's faces
Night after night
I met them in dark rooms
And in empty corn fields
I offered myself to every one
I kept their secrets
And nurtured their shame
It hung in the air with us
Deep and hollow
And coiled around our naked bodies

I don't know any negroes. I am not associating with negroes.

I only remember his hands
The only light part of him
He spent his nights tracing inky dirt lines on my skin
And when he left at every dawn
He never looked back
He was the secret
The memory
I suffer under

Where did you go on that occasion, what became of you?

I became innocent
In that moment
Sitting on the train
Feeling the boxcar shift and screech under my weight
I made myself a victim

Out of their blackness
I became everything

and:

by Ethan Risinger

/and, (e)n/
conjunction

1. used to connect words of the same part of speech
2. a pearl grown in speckled threat
3. the carpet at the airport
4. a malt ball, dissolving slow in the mouth

Clean

by Dylan Harbison

I don't know when my blood began to thicken—maybe sometime between March and July, when the Earth picked up speed on its axis. We go spinning through the streets at night, Cal and I, driven by instinct, each dying for our own purpose. He works part-time cashing lottery tickets, and I sell paintings from the garage. Black out every time my brush drags over canvas. He returns to find me in a new position every night—body strung from the roof like Christmas lights, perched on the mantle, dripping in paint and layers of sweat. He undresses me, cradles and bathes me in the kitchen sink; soap in my hair, I come back to myself.

I try explain. The air grows thicker each day and my insides thicker with it. Cal works long hours and I paint and I thicken.

"My blood keeps on boiling," I plead. "It boils and thickens into tar."

He laces my hair between his fingers.

"It's filling me up, the tar. It's up to my neck now, Cal—"

He gives me three pills with breakfast, clean and white like canvas.

It's almost September now. I may not be observant enough, especially for a painter. Too many hours spent inside myself. Even so, certain things are hard to miss and filling with tar is one of them. There's a little blue carousel that spins outside the market where Cal works. Never saw anyone ride it, though. The Earth keeps spinning. The sky clouds over most days, and I still don't believe in heaven.

My sister comes to take me to lunch. Cal set out a fish-print dress, Mary Janes, and a pair of wool socks for me to wear. I don't look any different in the mirror despite my changing composition.

Jenna compliments me when I answer the door. "You look good, baby," she smiles through chattering teeth. She drapes a coat across my shoulders.

We order ham sandwiches. I try to explain.

"My body feels slow and my joints stick. If you look at my wrists under the light you can see it—my veins are darker now. They're pitch black, Jenna."

"I spoke to the doctor," she says.

"He doesn't believe me. He doesn't listen when I talk."

"He knows what's best," she says.

"It's filling me up," I say.

"What is?"

"The tar."

"Where's it coming from?"

"I don't know, but it won't stop."

She tips the waitress four dollars. She walks me to the door. "Listen to the doctor," she says before she drives away.

When Cal gets home, he sits on the front porch for an hour before he comes inside; he lights cigarette after cigarette, drags them all down to nothing. Maybe he hopes someone will see that small light and take him away from here. I hope they do. I hope he moves to the Midwest and gets himself a nice girl, one who can love him properly, one who is fully alive.

Jenna drops off some new canvas and three jars of black oil paint. She props them against the garage wall and arranges the jars all in a row. Dr. Hudziak has advised that I keep painting. I am liked better when I paint because I forget how to speak. I haven't sold a painting in months, but a woman stops in every few days to look at my work. She doesn't say a word and she always wears the same yellow suit. First she digs through the old crates, thumbing through canvases—mostly street scenes and oil portraits of Cal. Then she moves to the new crate. All black. Thick paint smeared on canvas, dripping to Earth. Then she sighs. I suspect she doesn't need an explanation, and I don't offer any.

I wait for the brushes to dry. I just sit there and finger the bristles.

I pour some paint into a tin and dip my hand. Cal gets home around nine. He brings me a quarter and a lottery ticket.

"How's my good luck charm?" he asks. Then he takes me to the kitchen sink. I hear him later on the phone: "She was covered in paint again. Black paint… no, all the canvases are blank."

Dr. Hudziak has upped my prescription. More milligrams, less brushstrokes. He must have given up trying to fix me because he doesn't speak to me directly anymore.

"Your wife is ill."

"Check under her tongue when you give her the medication; make sure she swallows."

"If we can't keep her symptoms under control she will need inpatient care. Do you understand, Mr. Ross?"

The days grow shorter, and I still don't believe in heaven. I take walks in the morning when my joints don't stick so much. There's a bus stop at the end of the street. I sit on the bench and stare at the yellow house on the corner. There's a great big tree out front that hangs over the whole yard. I want to paint the house and the tree but all I can do is imagine the way my wrists might dance over canvas.

I want to paint it. I want it to end.

My blood thickens faster in the cold. Some days I don't move at all. Cal watches me from across the room. He leaves the TV on most nights. The carousel keeps spinning outside the market where he works, and we light little fires in our windows.

Jenna drops off a pot roast. "Hi, baby," she says. She talks to Cal on the front porch, and they make sure to close the door so I

can't hear a thing. She's getting married soon. She met a nice man at the office. I'm happy for them. I hope they quit their jobs and move out West to start a family.

I can't stand it. The Earth keeps spinning. The tar just weighs my body down.

Cal gets home at nine with a quarter and a lottery ticket. He finds me on the tile floor. It was clean and white like canvas. Tar seeps out from everywhere, fills all the cracks between the tiles.

"I had to get it out," I say, but he can't hear me now.

I am lifted into the air, head reeling, eyes fixed on what I've created. They will write about this in all the best journals, I think. Maybe even the art history books. The woman in the yellow suit will sigh.

There is a metal rocking chair by the window. I sit there every day and rock. Jenna comes to brush my hair on Sundays. She got married, but they didn't move out West.

Cal brings me a quarter and a lottery ticket. He's always been the optimist. We got married at eighteen. We were supposed to have a big house in the country by now with a porch that wrapped all the way around. I don't want him here. I don't want his scratched up dreams. I want him to get far away and forget the girl he loved who turned to stone.

I have a new doctor. She props up a blank canvas by the window. A new one each day. I wish she would stop doing that. I want to paint, but my wrists don't move at all. The chair rocks on its own. I just stare at that vast whiteness and picture my wrists dancing. Sometimes, if I stare long enough, I start to see the yellow house with its shutters wide open and that great big tree hanging over everything.

Swimming

by Ella Mowad

The fisherman that gave my mother
bluefish for cheap
        had a son
who sat behind the market counter
and walked barefoot through the grove
on days of rest
                to meet me.
I saw him come with his arms
spread out like
        swimming,
and the trees unfurled
to sway against his side, and the leaves
fell and dashed into the shade
between curls.
They glittered, those
green fish, unbound by a branch,
        but I couldn't touch.
A comb could snare them,
have them drop to the floor
before bed. They would go out
in a dust pail the next morning,
and grieve,
and break to pieces,
and stick the soles of my love's feet
when he went swimming
        to the smooth, tin
                shore of my house.

there can be no commas

by Mark Damon Puckett

there can be no commas

if it crashes it crashes
she fills her sentences
with dashes because she likes
lines circles not the words

her periods are large
(so is the speck
on her small i)
her colon has wee dots

each sentence for her
is long but today
she folds her paper
into an airplane she flies

through the room into her
cat food dish where three
brown slugs cling like mucous
she picks up Doug (the youngest)

eats his body in a gulp
I feel sluggish she admits
the cat appears so she eats it too
oh now I am queen of cats

princess of slugs at her desk
a comma between liver
and buffet looks like a
cut fingernail

ashes to ashes she blinks
her eyelashes because when
her eyes are wet and closed
world does not impose

Untitled

by Grey Wolfe LaJoie

All night long the rain wounds the dirt.
You do not want
anything. It has, all of it,
been touched.
You stand at the window.
You remember your childhood:
a guillotine at sunrise.
The black silhouette
like a small cathedral
you'd wanted to crawl inside of.

You had been a boy, a mere child.
But still your hand had taken the shape of a gun,
a solemn threat against each living thing,
undone only in sleep.

Once there had been a fire
in the house next door to yours.
You stood at the window.
You apprehended the fire, pulled it in
as quick as your little eyes could.

And the light had entered you, hadn't it?
As it had entered Monet,
collected in the mind. Still it is collecting,
waiting to ascend with you, still it is collecting.

The war wept for twenty-six years.
In wet hot streaks it counted its way
across your body. You

light a cigarette, but you know you ought to quit.
It makes you undesirable. And the blue.
There is lots of blue swirling around you,
still left-over from the dream you had last night.

You have forgotten the dream, but still the blue
hangs all around your head.

Too Koi

by Lex Brenner

Antonia

by Oskar Gambony Steding

Antonio wanted to train an animal to do something to which it has no natural inclination, and he did. Then he died. Now there is an ape (whom he named Antonia) in Hector's living room suckling at the plastic valve which drains the air-conditioning's absorbed humidity. Antonia the ape communicates through equations of pictures in magnetic frames and stays up all night weeping. This morning on the refrigerator she had posted, “(clasped hands) = (angry, flailing mob) x (rolling casino dice).” Hector stands groggy in the kitchen debating translation. He mouths, “prayer is violent hope” and “God is a vicious gambler” silently, weighing their densities between his lips.

Humidity licks at the kitchen windows. Skyscrapers bloom out of the dust and sway gently in the breeze. Connecting them, thin black power lines sag under the weight of tennis shoes hanging from their knotted laces. It doesn’t mean anything from the window. The apartment is a dotted red line on the floor’s evacuation plan. There’s a gun in Hector’s pocket. He’s halfway through writing Antonia’s equation in a notebook. Each letter bleeds black onto the next page.

Yellow sticky notes bend like peeling wallpaper from every surface of Antonio’s old room. The lettering of the first equations twists across them like lines of busy ants spiraling down the walls. He’d written them all down: the addition and subtraction of illustrations torn from children’s books; the square-roots of glossy, out-of-focus magazine exposés; the multiplication of Polaroids Antonia took herself with the camera Antonio had convinced Hector to buy.

“Imagine,” Antonio had said, on the living room floor, feeding the ape spoonfuls of applesauce, “if, every time before you spoke, you quietly invented the alphabet.” He turned his head to face Hec-

tor, his mustache gone crooked—a smile. "Besides, when have I ever asked you for rent?"

Hector just stared until streaks of the floor, brown and beige, were the only thing swelling against the moisture in his eyes. With his head bowed, he walked across the room, down ten floors of stairs, and into the nearest hardware store's electronics department.

Hector had moved into the apartment years ago to take care his sick Grandfather. After three days of mismatched prescriptions, botched cooking, and failed attempts to convince his Grandfather to wear a diaper, Hector began searching the classified advertisements in a newspaper and hired Antonio, a "Holistic Caregiver with 3+ Months of Experience." Antonio and Hector's Grandfather got along well. They cooked dinner every evening, spent their nights driving in Hector's car—Antonio steered with his knees, rolling tobacco and marijuana between his fingers into tiny cigarettes. Every night they drove, telling stories between the static hum of Hector's broken radio.

Eventually, Hector stopped filling his car with gasoline, and, that night, the car struggled. It slowed coming up a hill, as if the world around Hector's Grandfather and Antonio had begun filling up with water. As they lost their momentum completely, Hector's Grandfather made a new will. Pressing the glowing tip of his cigarette against Hector's dashboard, he extinguished it, unraveled it, and wrote two words beneath the brown stains of spit and smoke on the rolling paper: Everything's Antonio's. They crashed through the wall of a zoo trying to navigate home in neutral. With bits of the fogged windshield bitten into their faces, and a stolen baby ape in Antonio's arms, they stumbled through the dark streets bloodied and tired until they reached home.

The next morning, Hector's Grandfather died, and Antonio inherited the apartment. Two years later, Antonio died and left the apartment to Antonia. Antonio never actually asked Hector if he would take care of the ape, just that he would talk to her. But Hector

does not want to go into the living room; he does not want to talk to her. It used to be a game. He invented spaces filled with people, called them memories, and it worked for a while. But then one morning, half drunk, he was in the middle of a sentence, "sometimes I stare at the ground and try to convince myself that it's farther away," when his eyes met hers for just a moment before she looked away. He felt pity oozing out from her averted gaze and he choked on his words—words he knew weren't true, but that didn't taste like lies when they were forming inside of his mouth.

Now when he speaks, the tint of her eyes tells him, clearer than any equation: "In this city, you are a ghost in unknown headlights." They say, "Hector, you are the moisture clinging to children walking carefully through a fog."

The coffee machine gasps steam. Hector looks at Antonia's equation in his notebook: "God is a vicious gambler." He flips the page to yesterday's equation: "Love rusts between barbwire." Again: "The moon is an orb of soot."

He clenches the notebook in his hand, opens the window, and watches it fall. Three ice cubes plunge into his orange juice and then, desperately, surface.

Her arms had never felt heavy before she started sitting in the plump chairs he left facing each other in the middle of the living room. When he is gone, she crouches in them, oddly at first; with her eyes closed, she feels her curved fingers brush against the ground like the dead man's rake scratching quietly between sand and stone; everything smelled like lavender. She drags her fingers along the wood, but they will not catch. The tree is flat and stretched and smooth as the fabric behind her, beneath her, which, as her fingers grow numb, she falls back into.

Is this what the dead man felt, lying there in the small bed

of the other dead man's room? Is this death—the loosening of one's muscles until they pool against the plush fabric surrounding them? Is it death when her large arms hang from her sides, not for support, but simply because there is nothing for them to do? She decides it is death when, with eyes closed and sunk into her tilted head, she imagines her hairy arms falling off, dragging themselves clumsily away from her like black, broken snakes. She imagines this, and she doesn't even mind, and then she stands, rolls her head in a small circle, and steps into another chair to die all over again.

Hector walks into the living room. Antonia doesn't seem to notice. She blinks suspiciously at the ceiling fan, spinning. He takes a sip of orange juice and begins. "Sometimes I stare out at the ground and try to convince myself that it's farther away."

She crooks her head up at him. He's staring at the window behind her, but he can feel her eyes. Orange juice spins out of the cup in his shaking hand. He walks to the mantle place across the room. With his back to Antonia, he sets his drink down and wipes the sweat from his forehead. "I tell myself that what I see is..." His voice shrinks in the space between them. He closes his eyes, drapes his fingers across the cold metal in his pocket. "I tell myself that what I see is the ground projected across a series of mirrors."

He winces, waits for her to throw something at him. But everything is still. All he can hear is the ceiling fan, creaking at every rotation. He concentrates on the blackness of his eyelids and starts again, louder than before.

"I imagine that the sludge and blood staining the streets are just magnified reflections of squashed mosquitoes." His voice steadies. "That the smog hanging in the air is a layer of dust suspended along the invisible face of the glass." His finger gropes along

the gun until it finds the trigger, then it waits. His eyes open slowly into the stinging air. He feels the tears drooping down his cheeks. Specks of moisture have collected against the outside of his glass.

"I tell myself that every angry driver yells only mispronounced statements of immense love which are then misinterpreted by other drivers embarrassed by their own immense love."

Hector takes the gun out of his pocket and turns around to face Antonia. She wraps a blue bandana around her eyes, hangs by her legs out of the window with the camera held in her outstretched hands. All the way down, he hears her click click.

Untitled

by Grey Wolfe LaJoie

Thinking of smiling again,
I go out into the night, which is
hunger, which is,
playfully,
nothing.
The stars
sit on their black slab
like lint while I
wander toward a drugstore,
cupping my heart between
my hands. The wind
tries itself out on me, enters
my lungs. I stop to hug
a telephone pole
as if I'm just
about to fall
a hundred stories.
I fall a hundred stories.

If I spoke to you
in riddles this way all the time,
then both us kids would get quite
tired and grumpy,
and possibly so hungry.

I fall a hundred more, or

I think of us
winding through the night like
two colors with a third. No falling
or else mad falling, up
toward the sky, indelible sky,
wry black wish I made
when I was born.

The Field of Reeds

by Summer Brianna Whiteside

Don't Be a Baby

by Lynnora Bierce

The boy's anger explodes within, as movement transfers the rage and frustration into the desk. A metal chair faints backward, performing an odd cadence under discordant children's gasps. Contents of the desk jump out of the orifice as a volcano erupting crayons and crumpled papers; while a Snoopy-clad lunch box breaks open against the wall, thermos lid shatters into a thousand plastic rubies, sandwich smooshes within plastic skin, a cookie loose from its twin, rolls wagon-wheel like under the teacher's chair, but Mr. P stands now, caught between breaths. The boy's gaze, like shards of ice, pokes through Mr. P's retina, scratches his soul. He feels the two slick tickets in his pocket, a touch-stone of his vague resolve.

The principal's secretary, Ms. Laine jaunts to the teachers' lounge this very minute, breathes in the aroma of fresh buns, *however*, purchases peach yoghurt and salad with French dressing. Mr. P, planned to coolly show Ms. Laine the tickets (and would you…) for the 45th yard-line for Sunday's game (like to…) against Seattle: *the* last home game of football season (my last chance to ask you). Today is Friday, December 2nd, 1976, 11:29am.

Air perfumed with fresh-baked yeast rolls seeps in from the cafeteria below. Bellies growl. The bell for lunch imminent. And yet, the boy's eyes, painful and recriminating hold Mr. P pinned.

A release of the moment will usher the flood of nine-year olds' cacophony: some of them thrilled to the shock, some pleased to mock someone deserving; all of them feel justified to express an opinion. The bells bookend Ms. Laine's routine to and from her immaculate perch outside Principal Shuster's door.

Mr. P makes the calculations in his head: 18 fourth graders,

one terrifying boy's ice-cold eyes attached to his soul, divided by one floor, carry the tickets, five minutes between bells, Ms. Laine's detention paperwork, and add her duty to call the boy's parents, plus Principal Shuster's grim debriefing… equals Mr. P is an ogre!

The wagon-wheel cookie ends its journey and falls on the side of Mr P's left shoe. The roar of gleeful monsters deafens as the chair's timpani finishes with a flourish. "Line up!" Mrs. Schweibold sings from the hall. The novelty of the other fourth grade teacher's contralto and the awkward situation catapults the children into immediate compliance; instantly the mob retreats down the stairwell, rubber-bottomed shoes screech as echoes of cruel laughter slap against tall walls.

Mr. P and the boy stand still as deer caught chewing garden lettuce. With only one pupil, Mr. P's classroom seems larger, the floor a giant chess board, the boy's puffed-out chest like the horse of the knight piece, Mr. P like a rook without a place to go. Ms. Laine, the lovely queen, not even on the board, somehow still in play. Ms. Laine perpetually in play, meanwhile Mr. P has squandered 232 moves to checkmate. Opportunity 233 squandered too?

The jagged edge imbedded in his soul twitches, releases as reddened and sky-blue eyes brim with tears. Mr. P bends his long legs, one edge of his trouser absorbs spilt milk. Courage fills Mr. P's lungs.

"Truce?" The boy's gaze is melting ice, his dark brows rise in relieved astonishment. "I owe *you* lunch. But you must clean up."

"Am I in trouble?" the boy asks softly.

"No, *I* am. Hey, you want a roll?"

Mr. P takes the stairs two at a time, his striped tie flaps. Ms. Laine smiles at Mr. P as he pulls something out of his pocket, looking like he just won the lottery.

and we smile

by Eric Overbey

I pull you tight,
your chest squeezed against
me.
I press your thigh
and you giggle.
You massage with your hands,
then you don't.

The lamp is bright
until we fall asleep, and

when we wake up on different sides of the bed, your warm body not against me like a fireplace,
I roll over
to kiss you, but
I stop before
our lips touch,

and we smile.

Phoenix

by Summer Brianna Whiteside

Language of Us

by Ethan Risinger

Then we will call it
murderous rain
and we will call it
you bending over
desert suns
Now it's just vague forearms
and you coming
to lay in me

What will we call it
when our breath
is mists?
What will be different
about our lips
when you tell me
we loved?

The Logophobe

by Mark Damon Puckett

Not every word scared her, just certain ones. Pea was perfectly fine, then again altruism really bothered her. Some words were irksome. Some annoyed her. Some truly made her afraid. Dither was one of them. She didn't even know what it meant, but every time she heard it (which was rare, thank god), she became nervous. She liked fetch but not rigger. There was no consistent reason for these reactions.

The word orifice once caused her to faint. When she woke up, she was on the floor by her desk in her college English class. She even tried to major in English to face this fear head-on. This was a big error. English majors had to deal with words on a regular basis. Regular basis. Horrible phrasing.

In line one day at the ATM she began to think of the word tailbone and did not know if it was one or two words. The notion of a bone in the tail was extra discomfiting. She looked around to see if anyone thought she seemed suspicious for thinking such notions.

For some reason, she liked infiltrate. She couldn't explain why, so she assumed she must be a quasi-logophobe, or a semi-. She wasn't sure which was the best prefix description. This was, in and of itself, one of the very reasons she feared words.

She also hated the word neighbor because most of her neighbors were sadly territorial liars who made noise, stole her parking space, and walked around on high heels above her, hammering late into the night, but indignantly calling the police on her if she played a song too loud while she was in the shower. Shower. Yikes. IG-nore.

Too many words together at the same time were bad. Politicians, preachers, teachers and salesmen had ruined the art of

talking. Pseudo-deipnosophists. Television and radio had squeezed locution and intelligence out of perfectly high grade words.

Petri dish, when she was younger, sounded like Pee Tree Dish. She always thought a Pee Tree would be fascinating. Growing pee. That would be wild. How would you pick pee when it was ripe? Did people yell yip-pee when the job was done?

She had these thoughts until a romping series of footsteps aroused her from bed, the high heels of her vituperative upstairs neighbor who refused to cover her floors with rugs as the condominium bylaws required. She decided to confront her and walked up the stairs realizing that this is what adults in condos did, bickered but never connected. If you stood far enough from them, they usually choked themselves like a dog on a chain.

She knocked on the door.

The woman answered. It was hard to describe her. Gnomes are cute and small and sort of frumpy. This neighbor was small and short and could have been gnome, albeit one with plastic surgery. She looked as if a person had been deflated like a pool raft. She was, in fact, skinny with a face not even for radio, maybe for telegraph. The Logophobe knew that her neighbor worked for a bank and that she was maybe even an employee of the month, but at the condo, at yearly meetings, this gnomish person exploded into rages heretofore not seen since tantrums were allowed in the second grade.

"Could you stop stomping around? Your heels are very loud and your floors are not covered."

"Get the hell out of my face, you pin cushion!" the neighbor screeched, throwing a balled up yellow sticky note at her.

"Pin cushion?" the Logophobe mused. "I think I am afraid of the word cushion but not the word pin."

"Who gives a flying monkey screw?"

"Flying monkey screw? Hm." She fell immediately in love with this phrase.

"Are you mocking me?"

"Yes," said the Logophobe. "I very much am."

Then the Logophobe realized that she didn't know which voice in her mind was talking. Suddenly, the gnomified neighbor was different, abashed, almost terribly shy.

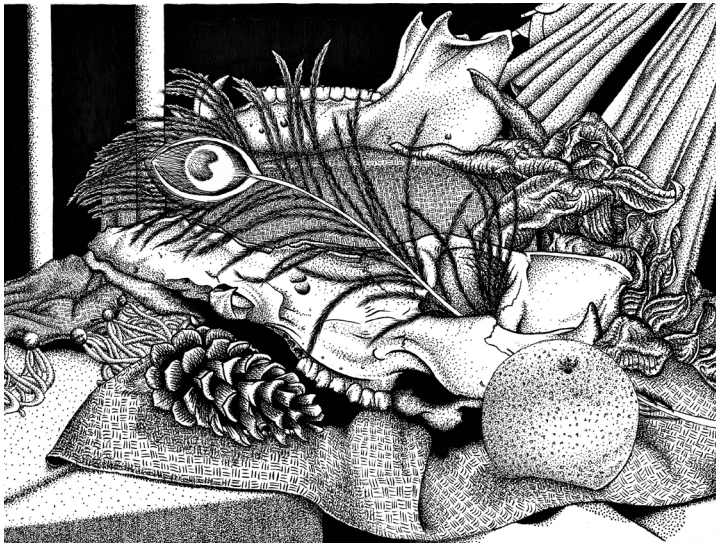
The Logophobe continued. "It seems to me that people these days, and I generalize because it feels endemic, people have lost any sense of what they do. I mean, they ***do*** things and then don't seem to think that their energy is affecting others. In your case, you stomp above me and don't care, yet when I confront you, you yell at me, as if I had done something. It is very loud with these wood floors. If I go to the board about it, they do nothing because you somehow lie and appease them. All I want is a bit of silence. You could easily take off your shoes when you come into your place. I'm just sad that you live this way in such an anthrax of fierce nastiness."

"But."

When the Logophobe left her neighbor's doorstep, she thought there needed to be a new word for neighbor. Neigh was what a horse did. Moreover, she couldn't believe that she had used *anthrax*. She used to hate that word.

An Archaic Still Life

by Lex Brenner



Get Warm

by Emma Carr

I left a case of goosebumps out in the rain
and now my milk is curdled.
I watch the street like the taste of spoon in a bowl of cereal
then go back inside.

The screen door takes seconds off my life.
Still can't get warm.
I try to read but my feet are just
so small, look at them.
They remind me of my teacher's
voice it drives me to sleep
but his eyes keep sparkling in my drool.
This isn't making me warmer.

What is the most powerful circle?
a young hag asked me.
The sun?
No! she cackled.
The pesky clock!!!
She sped off in her buggy, no –
it was a Pontiac, but not a
good year, critics said.

I wake up cold, wires hanging
fat from the ceiling.
My lover is a leech and
may he bleed me dry.
I am blinded across the carpet

to find a pair of socks
even though I know
I'll just rip them off in
my sleep.

Dream Bean Team

by Sara Wheeler

Four shining faces surrounding the elliptical dinner table
we set with gold-filled cartons of Chinese takeout.
The room is flooded with warm spices
swirling like galaxies,
and on their planets, we sit and paddle backwards
to rewind the orbit.
We spiral back to our early eons.

Early March at the zoo, where the breeze brought
the fear of black rainstorms and summer sloth,
and yet we laughed with childish glee
as we watched bubblegum flamingos,
lulled to sleep,
at the signal of the dominant bird.
We laughed at the stagnant ballet,
forgetting how easy it is to fall into a dream
and heed the screeches of our leaders.

Four pale faces lined up on a bench - 2:00am at Trader Joe's.
A pint of ice cream passed between us
watching the Sleepless and Searching
float through sliding doors.
We stare out onto our separate roads,
exhaling into the star-pocked sky.

I take a glance across our bench
at the frightened hope flirting across
my friends' wide eyes.
But I ignore that.

Untitled

by Grey Wolfe LaJoie

The spider likes
the soupy
slowing
of the light by shadow's
loving touch. Many
damn hours and still
no good news.

I ride against myself.
I plummet as my wish.
If I do not know you,

I do not know you.

Deer Season

by Ella Mowad

The east side of the forest could have been haunted since before the Geraldine twins built the old church, but there wasn't anyone in town still living who knew for sure. It was where the Geraldines had been buried together after the fever, but the forest could have been stirring before that; before the bulk of the town moved in on carriages, and before the river running through the east wood – where Macie Martin was drowned as a witch in the shallows – dried up and left grooves in the earth that looked like eyes from above and wouldn't budge from the soil, not even for the spring storms.

That part of the wood didn't bother the locals, and it didn't bother anyone from the city, either, until they tried building something like a steakhouse or a health food store too close to the border. It was three years ago they commissioned the strip mall. Two years since the crew came down with smallpox and were quarantined in the old gym by the high school. A four-hundred-year-old oak, nicknamed Old Betty, snapped in half and demolished the bones of the mall that spring. The city sent another crew down, and they took out the rest but forgot the hanging sign from Kim's Nail Salon, which has since been stuck sideways into the soil, reading only: IM'S AIL ALON.

Some of the older kids used to march in troops after school to take turns almost touching it, and then seeing who could walk the farthest into the wood to where the trees started to blacken. They did this three or four times a week until someone dared the Carlson girl to touch the bark of a black tree for half of a MoonPie, and she did. She touched it with a fingertip, and then

with two, and then leaned against it with her palms to show that she wasn't afraid while the girls in the group cheered: Go, Bev, go. You're a champ, and that tree's got nothing on you.

Beverly Carlson's mother found her on the floor of the bathroom that night, sobbing. She asked what was wrong and, in return, Beverly held out her hands to reveal the hives. They were small, innocuous bumps, but they would grow, and burst by the morning into crops of chanterelle mushrooms with their caps wide like twirling skirts. The older kids started taking the bus straight home. They waved into the old gym when they passed it, and smoked out of the back windows, and tried not to look down at Bev's hands.

The first person to walk to the heart of the east wood came into town on a Greyhound at the end of summer. He wore an old tweed suit and a tie that was frayed at the seams. His cheeks were pockmarked by old scars, and his silver hair thinned at the top – partly because of lineage, partly because he picked at it when he spoke, and he was always speaking. He brought into town an aluminum briefcase and a startling, metallic laugh that would not be heard by any of the locals during his stay. They called him "the scientist" on account of the briefcase, and because he kept trying to explain gamma rays to waitresses by scrawling diagrams onto the napkins.

The scientist stayed in town for a week. He went to the diner every morning for breakfast and then brought a thermos of coffee to the edge of the east wood, where he would spend the rest of the day recording data in a small, leather bound notebook. He measured the width of the tree trunks, recorded the air pressure and humidity, and mapped out the phases of the moon in the soil with a fallen branch. He collected moss and splinters of bark and tucked the vials into his shirt pocket. The locals watched from a distance. The scientist announced his departure on the seventh day and crossed the border early on the eighth. It was a Sunday, the

night before the harvest moon. He left wearing an old, brown suit and a tangerine hard hat. The town stood fifty feet from the ruins of the strip mall and waved. They watched until the shape of the scientist grew faint in the mist and dissipated between the trunks like a ripple on the lake gone still, and then walked to church in a line.

The scientist returned two weeks later in the body of a large, white stag, standing twice the usual size at the center of Buck Posner's rose garden. It was marked on the abdomen with a constellation of olive-green spots. These markings were inspected in detail by Buck, after having shot the stag from the second story window of the farmhouse. It'd been the scientist for sure, Buck claimed, but he'd been eating the new buds of Marla's tea roses – her prize winners, the American Beauties.

The locals did not mention this to the scientist's son, who rode into town a few months later on the back of Charlie Posner's pickup. Charlie drove him to Ed's, where he ordered a Jameson and soda and politely explained that his car had broken down three miles from the bar. He said the engine was smoking. Ed gave him the drink for free and sent some of the seasonal workers out at dusk to fix it. They were unable to pry the hood open, and it was towed the next day.

The scientist's son booked a room at the Whispering Eden Motel and returned to Ed's for dinner. He sat at the bar, and no one asked him why he'd come into town, but he told them, anyway.

"No one knows where my father is," he said, and, at this, Charlie Posner stifled a laugh. Buck hit the back of his son's head with an open palm, which sent Charlie's baseball cap tumbling into a beer puddle on the floor. He looked at the scientist's son and said, "Sorry about this one." He didn't say: Your father's head is mounted to the wall in the church lobby.

"I need to know where he was last seen," the son said. "That's why I'm here." He was wearing a plain blue tie and his teeth

were two shades whiter than what anyone at the bar felt was natural. When he laughed, which was often, they bloomed in the light like a bouquet of roses etched into the side of a teapot. Mark – this was the son's name – had come to town with half a dozen books on woodland survival and a two weeks' supply of starched shirts. He had already charmed half of the girls down at the diner by pulling dollar coins out of their ears and dropping them into the tip jar.

"We know where we saw him last," Ed said, from behind the bar. Frank Gillespie, who owned the chicken feed store and a bakery on Alton St. which was not yet open, spoke up from the back by the broken jukebox and said, "That's right. I could take you there myself."

The son returned to the motel with a bottle of Jameson and half of a cheese steak wrapped up in napkins. A town meeting was held in the church at ten. The sky was clear and crusted with stars as the locals ushered through the lobby and left their coats in a pile on the first pew. Ed set the space heaters up by the back and some of the little ones took to rotating by them like penguins, taking turns at the center of the huddle. Everyone in town attended. Buck came with Marla, who had a lime green curler stuck to the back of her hair, and Charlie and Tyler, who spent the minutes before the meeting with their hands out on the pew, stabbing at the space between their fingers with a pencil until one brother jabbed the other hard in a tendon. Ed came to facilitate and his sister, Marjorie, brought the leftovers from Thanksgiving. Even the seasonal workers attended and stood by the back like they did most Sundays, never joining in the hymns but always dropping a dollar in the basket when it came around. The door to the lobby remained open, and anyone who turned to look could see the stag's glass eyes glittering, even from afar.

The only topic discussed was that of the scientist and his son. Eleanor Carlson – whose daughter sat beside her wearing zip lock bags on her hands to minimize spore contact – spoke first.

"We all say it's that science man but for all we know that deer's just normal."

Someone in the crowd hollered at this, and both of the Posner boys mimicked the sound at half the volume. Beverly Carlson just nodded and rubbed her zip-locked palms on the pew to relieve the itch. Buck cleared his throat and added that the scientist, when human, had always been coming to the farm to compliment the roses.

"Not just that," he said. "You can tell it's him by the eyes. Look."

The crowd turned to look into the lobby with the sound of wool shoulders shifting like a great, crashing wave.

The stag's eyes sparkled, the locals squinted, and Charlie said, "Those ain't the real ones. That's just glass."

"Where are the real eyes?" Eleanor asked, pulling at Beverly's sleeve to stop the scratching.

"At home," Buck said. "I can run back and get them."

"No, I've got to get home and put the girls to bed. What's Ed think?"

Ed had been standing at the front and taking notes with a dry erase marker. He looked up, not at Eleanor Carlson but at the deer's head in the lobby and then set the marker down on the pulpit and said, "Ellie, I don't think it matters who or what the stag is. The boy wants to see the woods, and I think he's got a right to see them. He's got a right to know."

The crowd kept silent and all at once looked down at their cold, red hands, as if pretending to reflect on the end of a sermon.

A dozen of the locals led Mark to the east forest the next morning. They didn't tell him about his father at breakfast, but they told him everything else. They told him about Beverly Carlson's hands, the smallpox, the green lights that appeared at night, the trees that uprooted and moved at dawn. Buck had brought the stag's eyes in a cocktail olive jar just in case, but no one asked to see

them.

Mark listened to be polite. “Oh dear,” he said, crossing his fingers on the counter in the same way his father once had upon watching Beverly struggle to pick up a spoon. When the locals were done speaking, Mark put a hand over his heart, thanked them, and asked again to be shown to the east wood. They walked down at eight. Mark carried a messenger bag, the contents of which included a guide to the birds of North America and the same thermos of coffee that the diner had lent his father during his stay. Mark took little and left little behind, too; the suitcase of shirts, a pair of dark blue dress pants folded neatly over the bed, and a review for the diner posted the night before on *Farm2Table* that read: “The pie crust is decent but the filling is nothing to write home about. The girls are very nice.”

The forest was dense with fog the color of dishwater, and it unsettled all but the scientist’s son. He marched forward without even a glance at the approaching nail salon sign rusted over in the dirt. When Ed said, “That’s as far as we usually go, son,” Mark turned and mocked a salute. “I’ll take it from here, then” he said, beginning to shake hands with everyone but Beverly. He smiled at her instead, mouth wide, teeth nearly glowing in the damp. The last thing he said before dipping into the mist with his sleeves rolled to the elbows was: Thanks for everything. See you all at dinner.

It was Beverly who saw the scientist’s son when he returned two weeks later. It was early in the morning and she’d gone out to throw a tarp over the woodpile before the rain. By then it was deer season, and the forest behind the Carlson’s house was alive with shots like church bells. In the mornings, they shook the branches and spurred the dogs inside to howl through the windows.

The fox, when she saw it, was sitting on its hind legs behind the shed. She said it was so white it glowed. She said she

could see the eyes, even from that far. Beverly stopped in the mud and was later reported to say, in a voice that would be mistaken by the neighbors as her mother’s, “You stay out of Buck’s garden, now. Don’t go near those roses.”

The son growled, or this is what she claimed, and bared to her a row of pointed, too-shades-too-white teeth before startling at the sound of a rifle. Beverly hadn’t had time to put her shoes on, and she could feel the shot rise up through her feet, through the skin and all the way up. She said the earth shook like it was going to split apart and reveal to her something ripe beneath, something warm inside and alive. She thought the fox could feel it, too, as it dashed away between the trunks like a vein of lightening branched out on the soil. This was all Beverly would see but she stood waiting with her feet sunken into the mud, anyway. She waited with her eyes closed and her hands spread wide; for the fox to return, the rain to fall, the next shot to come like a thunderstorm and split the earth like a peach, and send the blackbirds flying through the cool, silver air.

Contributors

Lynnora Bierce:
It is rumored Lynnora was raised by wolves. Very dull wolves. Ms. Bierce attended Warren Wilson College sometime during the Reagan era and became smitten by the mountainous location, eventually settling in Montford (when it was ill-advised to do so). After brief careers in community theatre, bakeries, and non-profit organizations, she became an administrative assistant for hospice. During an aromatic bath, she was struck by an ambition to write (when it was ill advised to do so). She is survived by the pack.

Samantha Nicole Bolick:
Samantha has been doing art since she was a young child. Her grandfather use to spend hours teaching her to draw. She has since loved art and spent much time learning different forms of art.

Whitman Bolles:
Whitman has been teaching community college English courses since 1994, and he has been A-B Tech faculty since 2010.

Lex Brenner:
Lex is a radical artist raised by wolves! He was born in Las Vegas, lived in the Bay Area California when he was a kid, grew up in Chapel Hill, NC and is currently working on a Fine arts degree here at A-B Tech after taking several opportunities to travel and see the country. He is developing a skill set to use fine arts as a means of promoting inspiration, integrity, creativity, and challenging the status-quo. And maybe, just maybe, push his art and education to

be able to work in sustainability for the future through creative and progressive means.

Emma Carr:
Emma is respectfully opting out. You can print that.

Chelsea Ensley:
Chelsea is a graduate from UNCA with a B.A. in English and a graduate from Appalachian State University with an M.A. in Appalachian Studies. Chelsea's writings are influenced by her own upbringing in Appalachia, as well as by mountain history and culture.

Bethany Evans:
Bethany Evans isn't a real person.

Oskar Gambony-Steding:
Oskar's bio is in the wash right now.

Dylan Harbison:
Dylan is a student, writer, and painter. Primarily a poet, she also writes short fiction in the style of poetic prose. Her work has previously been published in *Prelude Magazine*.

Chloe Harnett-Hargrove:
Chloe is a full-time student, freelance writer, and artist interested in fashion, graphic design, and graffiti.

Elizabeth Helmich:
Elizabeth lives and writes in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina, where she's equally inspired by nature and the unique characters who live there. She enjoys continually pushing limits in her work to challenge herself as an artist. Her poetry uncovers fresh perspectives and alternative views of the human condition.

She is published in *Diverse Verse 2*, and numerous places online. Currently, she's working on her first poetry chapbook, *Between Essence and Nuance*, which will be released in 2018.

Jeff Horner:
Jeff calls dibs.

Jenna Jaffe Melissas:
Jenna's life has always included working in the arts. She began dancing at age 5 and piano lessons soon after. Singing, composing, and writing poetry followed. She started performing as a child. She has been a music and drama teacher for more than 25 years. The visual arts is something she has more recently been avidly pursuing. Language has always been one of her passions and, in the last year, she joined A-B Tech as an ELA/ESL instructor. She is currently working on a music album and a poetry book.

Grey Wolfe LaJoie:
Grey is an ant. At times he is gracious. At other times he is not.

Tennille McElrath:
Tennille is a full-time student going back to school after a long break and plans to major in mathematics. Her free time is split between writing, gaming, and attending concerts.

Eric Overbey:
Eric is a former clogging state champion.

Ellen J. Perry:
An instructor of Literature and Humanities at A-B Tech, Ellen J. Perry's academic interests include 17th- and 18th-century British life and literature, Restoration drama, and Southern/ Appalachian

culture. Ellen enjoys teaching her amazing students, working on projects related to the E.R.A. and women's rights activism, and playing with her stylish cat, Ms. Coco Chanel. For more information please visit ellenjperry.com.

Rita Dee Peters:
Rita is an A-B Tech graduate currently earning a four-year degree at UNCW. She enjoys painting, photography, and long, moonlit walks on the beach with Ella Mowad.

Mark Damon Puckett:
In 2015 Mark Damon Puckett received his MLitt in Poetry from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College, his fourth graduate degree in twenty-five years. He has taught poetic technique at SUNY-Purchase and is the author of three books of fiction. markdamonpuckett.com

Grace E. Quinlan:
Grace is a duel enrolled student at SILSA and A-B Tech. She enjoys painting with acrylics and watercolors.

Rob Michael Ridenour:
Rob is a writer who challenges himself every day to be better. He enjoys classic literature with such titles as *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Inferno*, and *Frankenstein* at the top of his list. Thanks to the Creative Writing class at A-B Tech, he's also become very fond of poetry. He also has a deep love of film (especially monster movies) and hopes to one day write reviews for a newspaper or magazine. On the side, he writes articles for the blog site *The Clive Barker Podcast*. Favorite Quote: "I want humor. I need humor!" - A Man With No Name

Ethan Risinger:
"I bought 5 different brands of dress socks:
Calvin Klein Men's 3 Pack Cotton Rich Dress Rib Socks, Black;
Dockers Men's 5-Pack Classics Dress Flat Knit Crew Socks, Black;
Gold Toe Men's Metropolitan Dress Sock, Black;
Kenneth Cole Men's 6-pack Ribbed Dress Socks (Black); Sakkas 5599BLACK Mens Cotton Blend Ribbed Dress Socks.
I've been randomly wearing these for about 6 months. My favorite is the Sakkas. The texture is very smooth and the fabric is a little more sheer than the others, this combination makes them very comfortable. They contour very nicely to the shape of my foot and leg and after they're on you can't really feel them. I see some complaints about the wear in the reviews. I haven't had any problems and walk a fair amount with them"

Sara Wheeler:
Sara is finishing her last semester at A-B Tech and will go on to pursue her English degree. She grew up with a love for Victorian children's novels such as *The Secret Garden*, *Peter Pan*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, and much of her work is inspired by the magical element in these stories. Sara enjoys reading, sketching, writing, and talking to her pets.

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