

The Lighter

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theLighter

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Evan Scott Bryson
Introduction

What accusation bring ye against this yam? asked pickle. Orville set them aside. This was confusing his bliss with more complicated notions of shapeliness and color. Browns. Greenish-browns. A briney smell that lacked the delicate bouquet of dried flowers, cloves or freshly pierced pears. He had stayed indoors for the last four days and felt as if a fifth was in order. Having tied his boots on he had untied them and resumed harassing the cupboard stocks in new and embarrassing ways. Lucky that Wilbur was visiting a doctor come up from Cincinnati and Katherine was upstairs singing off-key about frivolities. He breathed against a glass pane and drew with his fingertip the shape of bird wings. He saw Chuck rounding the gate and Orville smoothed his vest and stood guiltlessly by the door.

Orville picked up pickle and yam again. He said Hello to pickle and yam. He said Hello again until it was very casual sounding. Chuck knocked on the door and Orville opened it and said Hello to Chuck, pickle and yam altogether, convincingly casual.

What's that? asked Chuck.

Orville shrugged and set the food on the floor inside. The two boys were silent as they entered the kitchen and sat opposite each other across the dinner table.

You keeping them on the ground there?

Hm, said Orville. Cold enough there.

They'll get stepped on, there.

Orville shook his head.

Chuck put his head on his fist and looked into dust motes on the sill. An un-

healthy adolescent, such long fingernails and red-rimmed eyes, so gaunt too. He never took off his coat in Orville's presence and Orville was of the mind that beneath the coat was nothing more than a ribcage. This made Orville believe Chuck's obsession with the macabre was rooted in his chum's own deathly visage. Orville was also of the suspicion that Chuck bothered to come around at all for food - that Orville was glad to share - in the first, and in the second for updates on the health of Orville's mother. On that point the friends found enmity.

That, and the Bishop warned Orville that Chuck's father was a banking man, working the department of loans, as an officer. Hard-hearted man, wrote the Bishop, with little imagination. & of such little in the way as that faculty relates to Christian service or understanding of fellow man, you should freely suspect the same comportment of his son, a chip off a cold, grey stone.

Financial matters seem to preclude the Bishop's disfavorable opinion, supposed Wilbur, when Orville asked his brother to discern the greater matter: of that Orville was most suspicious. Being that their father's dictums reached them mostly by post, the siblings at home had developed a healthy skepticism of the one-dimensionality of words across a page. The meaning behind their father's tight, economic scrawl lay deeper than dried ink and parchment, as if in the rectangular plane the Bishop's interests - even his fondest - cast languorous shadows, and the words in these shadows, far cast from

their molds, equivocated and contradicted whatever the initial truths of their claims may be.

Well, Katherine, anyway, liked to imagine this conspiracy, even if Lorin's letters were obviously, deliciously refusing truth-status. And having explained this bizarre theory to her brothers, they helpfully obliged in un-

He breathed against a glass pane and drew with his fingertip the shape of bird wings.

dermining the before casual transposition of one language into another, a sequence, a narrative with unstable intentions and obtuse disguises. What more could they do? Their father was gone two months now, their mother sick, their oldest brothers in the unmagnificent wastes of adult lives, and the winter, so far, was nasty.

Anyway, this business about imagination is patently false, contended Wilbur. Your friend's capacity for fancy and utterly supercilious predilection for fantasy, offers proof that an apple does so roll far and away from its cart; and quite, then, beyond the pale.

Orville, thinking this both a long and contemptuous estimation of Chuck's character, besides openly challenging their father's esteem, agreed politely and continued to read the Bishop's letter:

You will look after your sister and mind she does not fixate on the galleries of new styles & customs entering the city's storefronts. I would not have fashions vexing so tender a spirit as Kat's. The Bishop wrote a line or so in similar proportion about Wilbur, only of a different agitation, and finished indicating his love and yearning to the family whole, and sent prayers for mother.

Orville re-folded the letter and tucked it in his breast pocket. Sleet on its pages would ruin the ink, he knew, and he looked forward to opening it again, to see the Bishop's taciturn script melted into even less communicative sludge. Not that Orville found his father lacking of words, only that his words said the same finite things from post to post, with little news about the separatists or other affairs close to his or his children's concerns. Do this. Do not do that. Rarely: Consider this, consider that. †



art



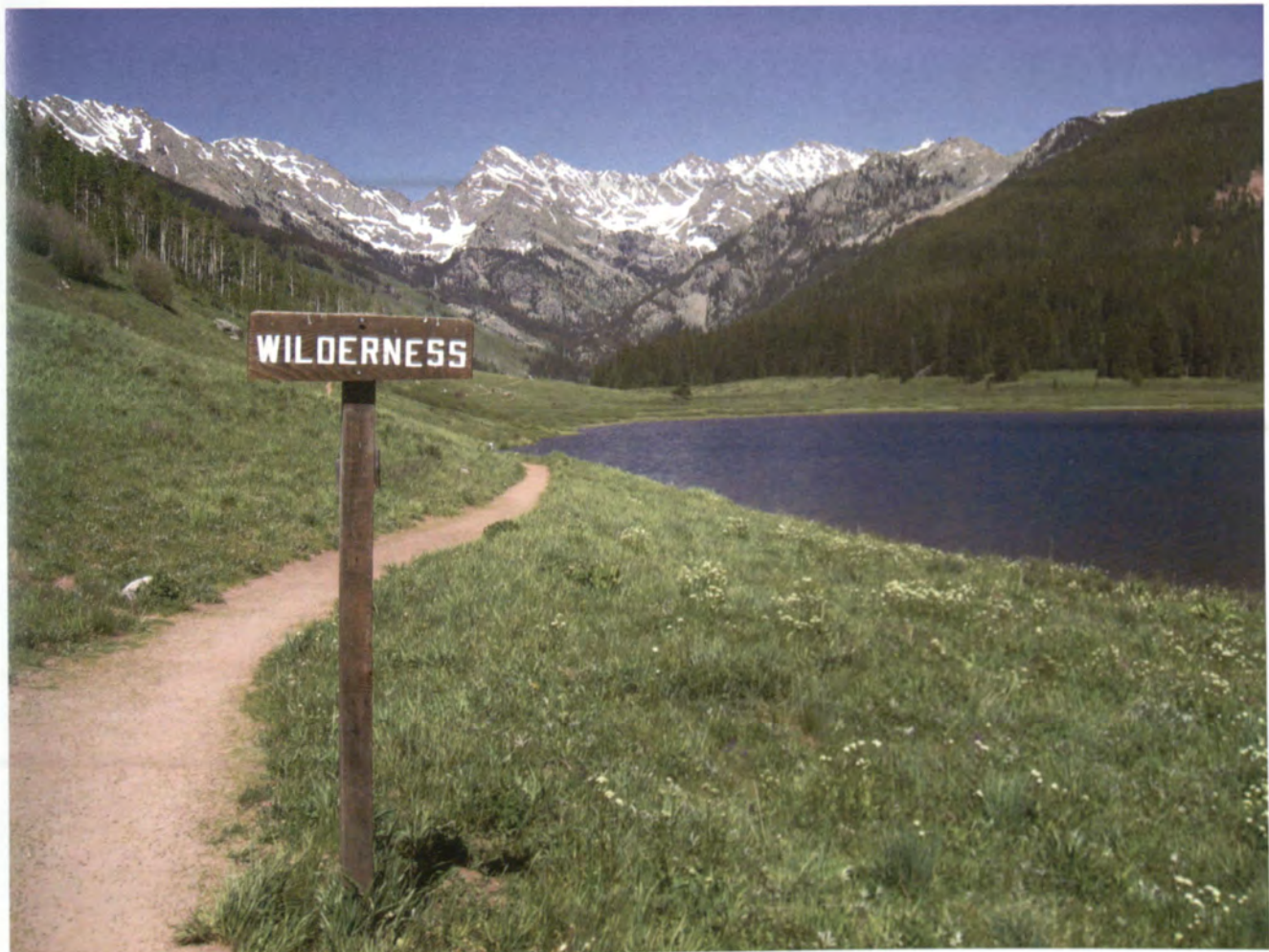
(untitled) - Paul Frank



Iowa _ Bret Hassler



Paris - Carolyn Johnson



(untitled) - Paul Frank



God Farms Here _ Tiffany Harrison



Courthouse #1 - Jon Krause



The Spider _ Dan Lund



Lure Me In - Tiffany Harrison



Technovision - Tiffany Harrison



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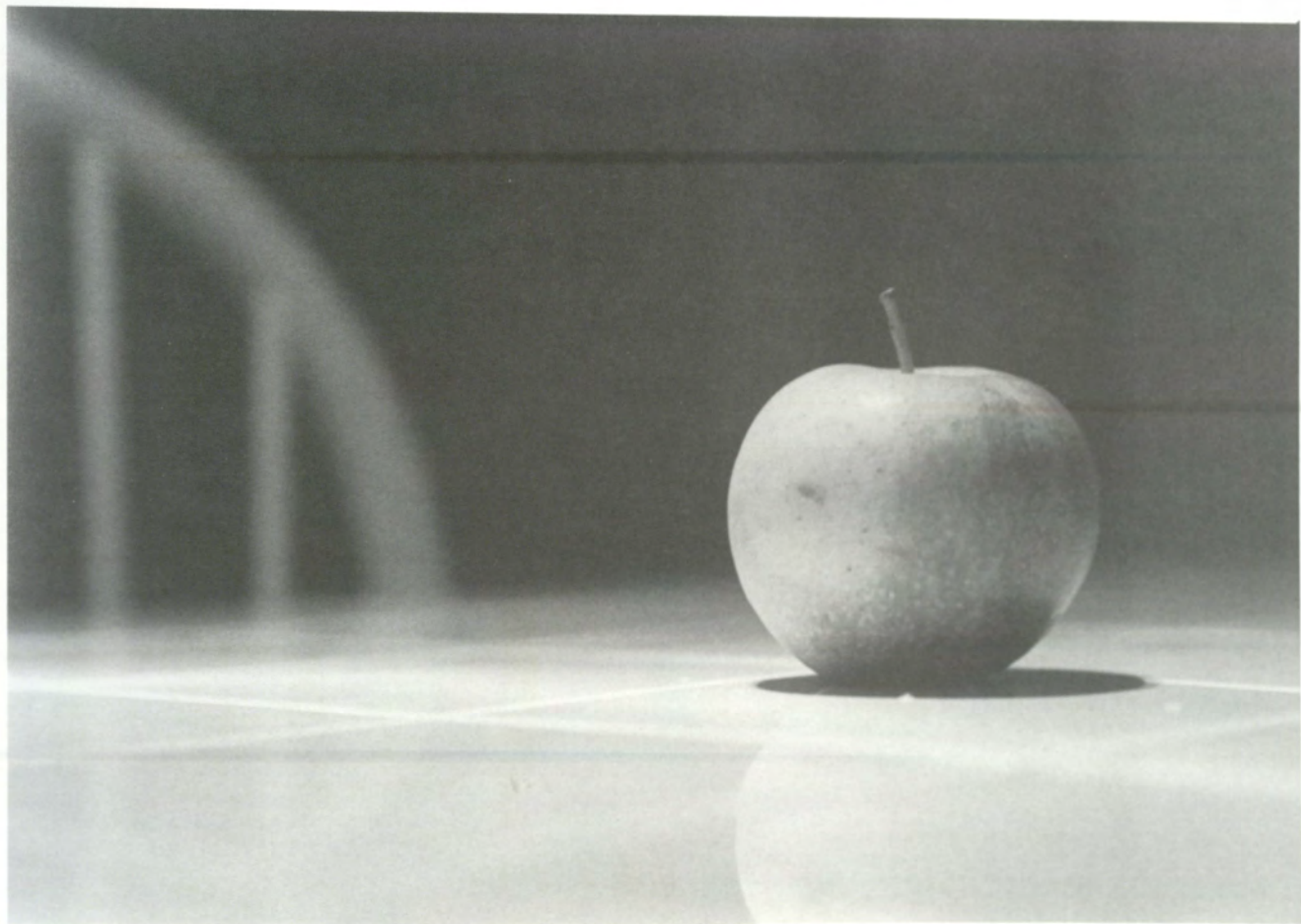
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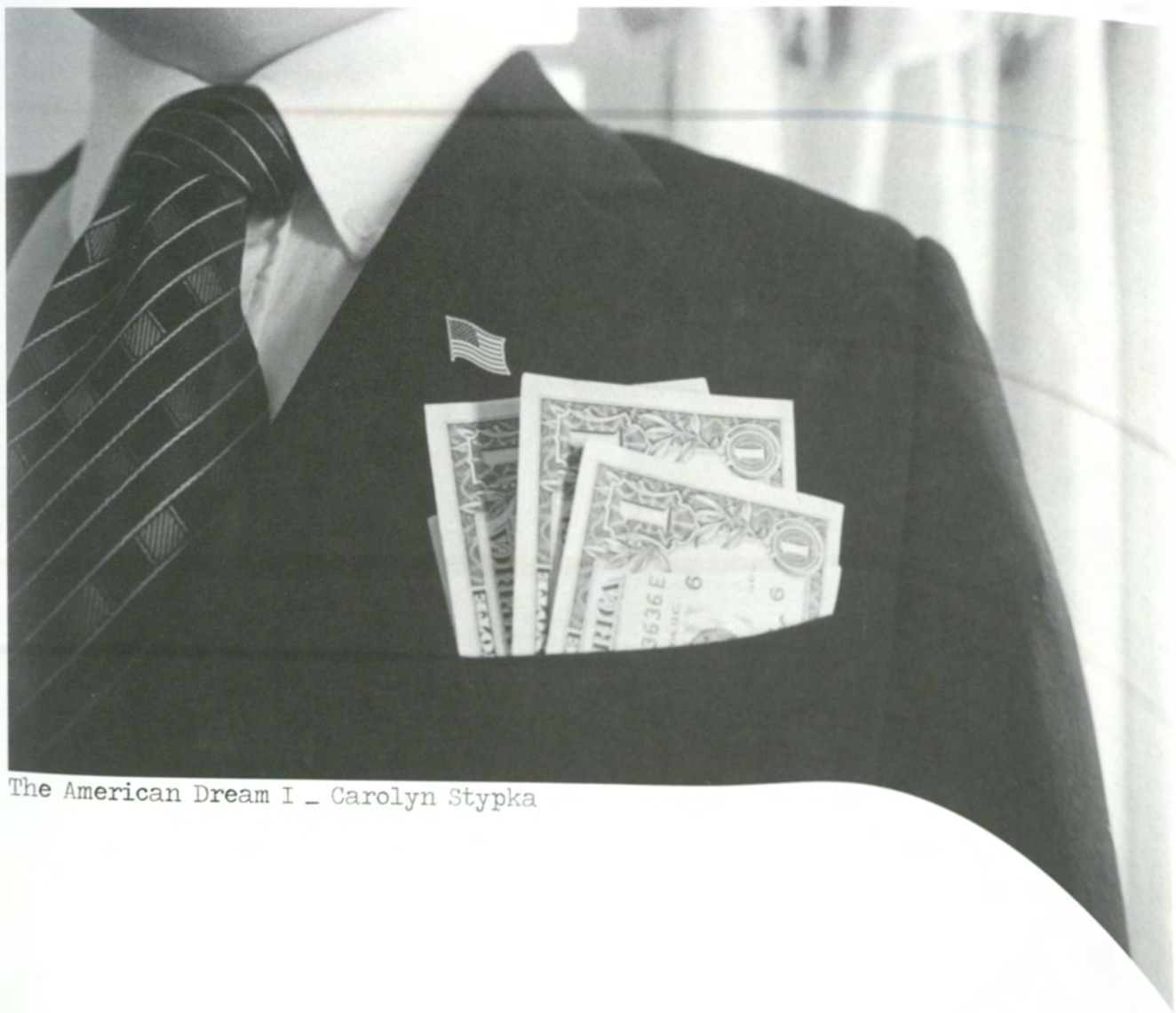
In The Rye _ Amanda Gartman



Faceoff _ Emily Jane Boedecker



Loof _ Tiffany Harrison



The American Dream I - Carolyn Stypka



The Play of Light and Shadow - Eric Prusinski



poetry

John Linstrom

Little Tickle-
Fruits

Little tickle-fruits,
Pickled strawberry melon.
Farty pink men,
Nickel fickle talon.

Alas! bluefruit plum tree;
All variety of gooseberry.
Set the green flamingos free!
Raspberry walnut tea.

Mudpie flatcake lady,
Country-singing cookie tray.
Pea-green chickle sea
Upon the rusty bedposts lay.

Rich fruitcake peanut, why?
Fry the French, eat the pie.
Tell the truth; I don't lie.
Aardvarks arguing octopi.

On Approaching Singularity

to
enter
a black
hole is n-
ever a voluntary
venture so far as the
astronaut is con-
(cer)ned—
spiraling
hap-p
ens.

*I see, that blackbody (in
visible, yes) stretches nearly
to graze a shivering fingernail
across my cheek; no?*

yes—

one
outside
sees the other
slowing down in time,
while he who is approaching the
center sees no change,
see stars begin
to spin,
fast

*I hunger, just a tilt (quickly)
and it would be done; speak
not to me of relativity. I'm stable
enough as you spin back to the Sun.*

Wild, how space flies!

you
can not
reach it, how *see*
ever you strain your
engine, space
man, try *hunger*
not

this devil-

try, release, set

reach

bow thrusters to the

next star – no – the orbit is

set, the switches locked but you're blind

and he will stretch into one long slow slippery interminable

ab –

Nathanael Romero

Freebies

Up the hill, on bike,
down Ortiz, to McDonald's
for baby cones and free refills,
for the PlayPlace ball pit,
for the static-shock plastic slide,
and the stinky-feet tunnel.

See, this is how we'd do it:
we'd go up, and gathering
all our politeness, ask
for a baby cone and a water.
We wore smiles to supplement
our empty-pocket budgets, hoping
for someone cool behind the counter
to pack that soft serve down to the bottom

of those barely bigger than bite-sized cones,
then pile it up so high
that to see that vanilla-chocolate twist
slumping from that narrow wafer base,
would make any engineer gasp
and any building inspector
write up a citation
for code violation.

And with a yellow- and red-striped straw,
one end stuck in a plastic lid,
the other stuck between my lips,
with my friends trailing behind me,
and my creamy torch in hand,
I led the way to the PlayPlace,
to wait till the coast was clear,
till the person who gave us our cones was gone,
till we could go up to the counter
and refill our wax-coated paper cups
with Sprite, Coca-Cola, and Mr. Pibb.

Carolyn Simpson
Harvest Moon
Hide and Seek

Reaction to William Trost Rich-
ard's "Corn Shocks and Pumpkins"

The scent of growing pumpkins
tickles your nose as dry leaves
chase one another across dying grass.
The burning sun slowly fades
into the eerie glow of Harvest
Moon as, with one eye you spy
on other players, peeking through
dried, brittle husks, smug,
knowing the seeker will never
find you.

An outside concert greets your ears:
crickets tune stringed instruments,
frogs' low tympanic bellow keeps
rhythm, rustling leaves chime

in the breeze, accompanied by chorus
of hooting owl. A few fireflies blink
in the darkness, like tiny airplanes
flashing in the atmosphere, specks
of neon green, yellow. A daddy long
legs calmly climbs steep incline
of corn shock, Godzilla attacking
Manhattan.

Shivering, you slide hands into
sweatshirt sleeves, a turtle
ducking into its shell. Attempting
to warm chilled body, you hop
from left, right, shoulders hunched,
teeth chattering. Blowing warm air
onto numb, pink fingers, growing
chillier by the second, you shout,
Here I am! Stiff arms pumping,
you clomp cement feet to brightly
lit barn. Wrapping shaking hands
around steaming Styrofoam cup
of hot chocolate, warmth
tingles throughout your body.

Jennifer Yaros

Only Ghosts

I haven't died
though you leave
all of me untouched,
our bedroom door closed,
only ghosts dare
carry one another
across the threshold.

Do I need to rip
blinds wide,
peel my shirt
from skin, float white
behind a window
with lights, allure spilling
into night outside?

Your head shakes
my apparition away – I
keep creeping beneath
full-moon shadows
knowing winter
appears to arrive
earlier every year.

I still knock,
press prints in steam,
throw pebbles,
rap against your glass,
but you cringe
as if I tap
with a pointed witch's nail.

To Scott, Eve and Kate

I.

This winter, candles flicker:
tiny streetlamps
lack life, force to glow.

Light sinks into nooks,
corners of each room,
sucked away by expanding night sky.

I ponder how fire fades,
how any flame resists
reflection

of swirling, spinning snow
I know blows, flurries
as a worried crowd

inside this house
– outside, everywhere
in between, whispers.

II.

Last Christmas, I wrapped gifts
while Scott prepared –
bathing, brushing our girls before bed.

Downstairs in the den,
I listened to feet stampede above,
race circles around me,

reveal a bull's-eye,
God's great target –
my unmistakable black spot.

III.

Mornings, forever my favorite
warmth within our fairytale
water globe. Inside
mother granted life.

I insisted on a broad bay window.
Scott persisted, leaving
his special touch.
To avoid glare

we'd wear Blues Brothers glasses,
draw thick, black, felt-tip
Vandyke beards around our mouths –
ink bands under eyes,

perhaps as a disguise?
Still, steam pulsed, flashed
on glass – someone witnessed
a beginning, an end.

Buried Alive

“In order to prevent premature burial, various safeguards were proposed, such as testing the body for signs of life by applying hot irons or boiling water; embalming; decapitation; cremation; allowing the body to begin putrefying before burial; and elaborate devices, escape mechanisms, and speaking tubes built into coffins and grave sites.”

Robert Marrone's *Death, Mourning & Caring*,
pg. 332.

She's abandoned to ponder resurrection,

burning as the Southern Cross

buried within black earth.

Perpetual life steals her breath

how man-gods robbed Mary of her son.

Wood splinters snag flesh,

headstones of thorns adorn each fingertip.

Perhaps she should have touched more

forest, embraced thick timber,

pierced body parts with branches.

Certainly Christ conditioned His skin,

pinning palms with single

sweeps of hand, instead of polishing

smooth pews, slippery floors. Her inspiration

dims to a flicker, a buzz, a hiss,

as if she's fixed to an electrical grid.

She dares to gasp again, again.

Watery eyes reflect a lavender-blue

supernova shaped like a brain.

Evan Scott Bryson
Station

gathered
and stuck—
stashed, rather—
and so discreetly
in a barn swallow's nest.

did you feel your neck
snap back
when the worm dropped?
screech it out—
screech out the father
mussing with the braid
your brother burned.

stop thinking—
stop squirming, dammit—
take flight, that lip
snarls—*no harm, no harm—*
dribbles eggwhite.

nothing is left
when sleet covers
the small bird's bones,
though we lost the yarn-
tangled skeleton
in mud-frothed grass,
we picked the thread
up again
a mile half-past the farm
where the butcher's blade
rusted—or was it rested?—
and trembling, we—
ah. ah, ha—

—
that was the squawk
of boys in a side yard
when you lifted your shirt.

next, your skirt?

the lanky one asked,
after laughing
at what they poked—

no, show us your front,

not your back—

and on like that
forever, always
those boys your father called
tit-crazy sons of bitches.

why hate them?
a cardinal blush—
encouragement.

—
you built your wings
out of ruined feelings,

assuming twelve
was the magic year,

wearing a brace-face smile,
always asleep
against your brother on the train.

his hamburger knuckles
knobbly-cut and burned
red-raw
from bashing in the square-jaws
of those other heathens.

when you're thirteen
he won't hate you
he'll hate them
and you'll both dream
something quietly awful,
dust-filled, with name-
calling.

—
he won't hate you
he'll hate them.

by high school
you'll all be friends
and in love.

maybe turning thirteen
is a lie. maybe
you only ever turn mean
until the wish-bone-choke
blinds,

until feathers fall out.
that's not a life, yet
for now: knot the bow
and memorize by rote
the ribcage holding moss.

—
they really do love you,
you know—only its opposite.
only its tokens.
only by kindling love's small,
hopeless fires.

Mark Schoeck

League, Bye League

At dinner tonight, you rushed to cut
the loaf of bread. A slice
for mother, for father,
and for lover.

The knife sawed into your finger,
ruining the bread and the skin
which you had moisturized
and gloved and loved
like it was his.

Before you cut, next time,
slow yourself down.
But you love to dip your bread in red wine.
Maybe it was not an accident.

At night you dream you're away on a ship.
Emancipated from another night
in the same suburban home
to stare at stars and sing at sea.
Locked in your room for privacy,
the captain follows your orders
to penetrate the thunderstorm.
And as the swirling ship
lowers league by league,
your alarm clock crawls into your ears.

Now you, locked in bed,
ignore that thundering clock.
You love every dream
like it is your own private room.

Maybe you did not wish to wake.

De'Juan McDuell
Salutations

Yesterday, you asked how I felt
and I wanted to tell you the truth –

that muffled sounds
created by closed hands
play as the soundtrack to my life
and repeat erratically;

that, “I need to leave,” but I can’t
gather my courage or my clothes.
Already, abandoned ambitions
hang like shame – GED tests take time,
and clock hands glide
swiftly across faces.

I wanted to show you
the bruises on my body –
deep purples that match
wilted African Violets
fading into faint smears
of dandelion residue.

I wanted to say forsaken,
forlorn, frail, fatigued, defeated,
but instead I said,
“Fine.”

Hannah Smith
A Love Poem

My fingers etch your body, the edges. It is your hips
that capture me, grooves where rabbits hide

just inside the juttred bone. I am tracing contours
across your torso as my fingers, high intersections of nerves,

relay confirmations and doubts with each curled hair
crawling from your arms.

Was it only just a month ago that you drove me to the beach
and I, who had forgotten my suit, stripped down and jumped

in? Was it only a month ago that you accidentally saw my nipple
after a wave crashed over my chest tugging my top?

I saw you walking later, sun gleaming sly winks,
and now here we are, touching feet, locking toes.

I can't bring myself to touch that place between the end
of your neck and the beginning of your jaw, where you swallow

cadently, where your adam's apple is a toy race horse chasing
a nail, a follicle, more skin.

I like it like this; you are sleeping and I am left stroking
your back, alone. With a kiss into your palm, you wake

and tell me you fell asleep thinking about the weather.

In my dreams it was raining incredible, you exclaimed, your eyes

wide. This storm, you said frowning, and us getting so wet.

Shhhh, I said, the roof, it keeps out the rain.

Inspired by
Walker Evans'
Photograph
"Roadside House
for Miners,
Alabama"

The whole scorched summer
we rolled windows down
in hopes for anything
to take away some heat
from our burning foreheads.
Power lined the roads, poles
whipping by, as far and long
as we could drive, never ending
so symmetrical, like ladders
we could almost climb
straight into sky and out of Alabama,
Mama and Dana and me.

Men in starched overalls
stood ready in a speckled oasis:
neon against honeyed landscape
a sign shined offering "Gas"
for those with money.
We can still run this car,
Mama said proudly, her steel
brows V'd and dusty,
and I stared out at the rows
of houses that all blurred into one
run down home desperately
needing new paint.

Evolution

With each birth we lose something new:

latent muscles, matted fur, entire rows of teeth.

We always talk about bodies in this way,

we should have plates of armor running from our shoulders

to our chins, not soft tubes, bendable bonds,

we shouldn't need Nike's to run clean from snapping dogs.

Your grandfather spent his whole life lop-sided,

the first in the family earth-tied, without wings,

aching after aerial ancestors.

My grandmother died rubbing her sides, swearing

that her mother swam the Indian Ocean steadfast

with only a pair of salty gills.

Wings and gills will be livers, will be lips
ebbed away slowly until we won't remember
where we came from, or our mothers' names.

Hold my hand while you still can, soon
we will be brains in jars, electric currents, flashing lights
with only our synapses to cuddle against.

Thomas Heet
Savannah

“In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine.”
—Milan Kundera

Crackheads wander the streets, reciting their vulgar Qu’rans. They ask for cigarettes, it seems that’s all they want, and get turned down by tourists and mothers and starch street trumpeters. Headless weaves, like tumbleweeds, blow through gas station parking lots. The pre-payers buy their green scratch-offs and orange Sparks.

You thought it was fun to get high and then drive thru the C-Sections every now and then. You would put on *The Chronic* and we would eat handfuls of

salty fries and greasy D-grade and suck on straws in your Bonneville.

Sometimes I got high in my bedroom and walked to that park with the lake. The one that people fished and pissed in. I liked the way my feet sounded as they crushed acorns. I liked sitting in the sun on the east-side bench, watching the cormorant. I would see black kids playing on shining jungle gyms and white Kids Kicking Kickballs to their shining Weimarers.

The ubiquitous Quercus, the old live oak tree, props the city’s supply of Spanish moss—hanged on branches like wigs and scalps and dead witches. Like seaweed on the ends of a thousand errant fishing poles. They line the bus routes up and down Abercorn, from River Street to Claire’s to mid-town to wherever.

I used to stand at the stop on 51st under all the humid air. I saw two mourning doves fuck. I saw a guy throw his girlfriend on the ground. I got on the bus and put four quarters in.

Your county clerk boyfriend was an asshole, maybe because he was from suburban Atlanta, maybe because he got his J.D. from Emory, maybe because he used the word nigger, maybe because he kept a handgun in his glovebox. Fucking asshole.

We came home late together one night. *The Royal Tenenbaums* was on a cable channel and we drank cans of Milwaukee's Best from the fridge. You said if I wanted to do something I should just do it. It was almost morning.

We sat on your bed and ate pain pills and watched *The Graduate*. You opened a window and smoked a cigarette and Dustin Hoffman the dumb lucky bastard was seduced by the experienced woman.

I stared at your breast once when you bent over in your blue nightgown. I used to jerk off thinking about you. Your asshole boyfriend and you fucked in your bedroom and I laid in bed listening to your muffled moans. Every time.

I wish you would have come out with us some night to do coke until tomorrow. It was Hollywood, that cold rush behind the eyes. Every word a revelation falling from our snow gravel mouths. Every grain, every granule, tailored to everything. It was, it was, it was.

After their bars have closed, the hipsters go puking in the city squares. Freegans and gutter punks walk their pit bulls while the bug-eyed buy malt liquor at Parker's. Blunts are being rolled on Caddy hoods. Army Rangers drop Jager Bombs at Bar Bar, 21-year-olds pride on their smooth skin and their well gin.

Our lustful heartbeats power this city and its endless nights. The buildings are haunted and the streets are haunted and the river is haunted and we are all haunted in the city Sherman spared.

In the morning the church ladies will be at Forsyth Park, handing out flyers and saving our souls.



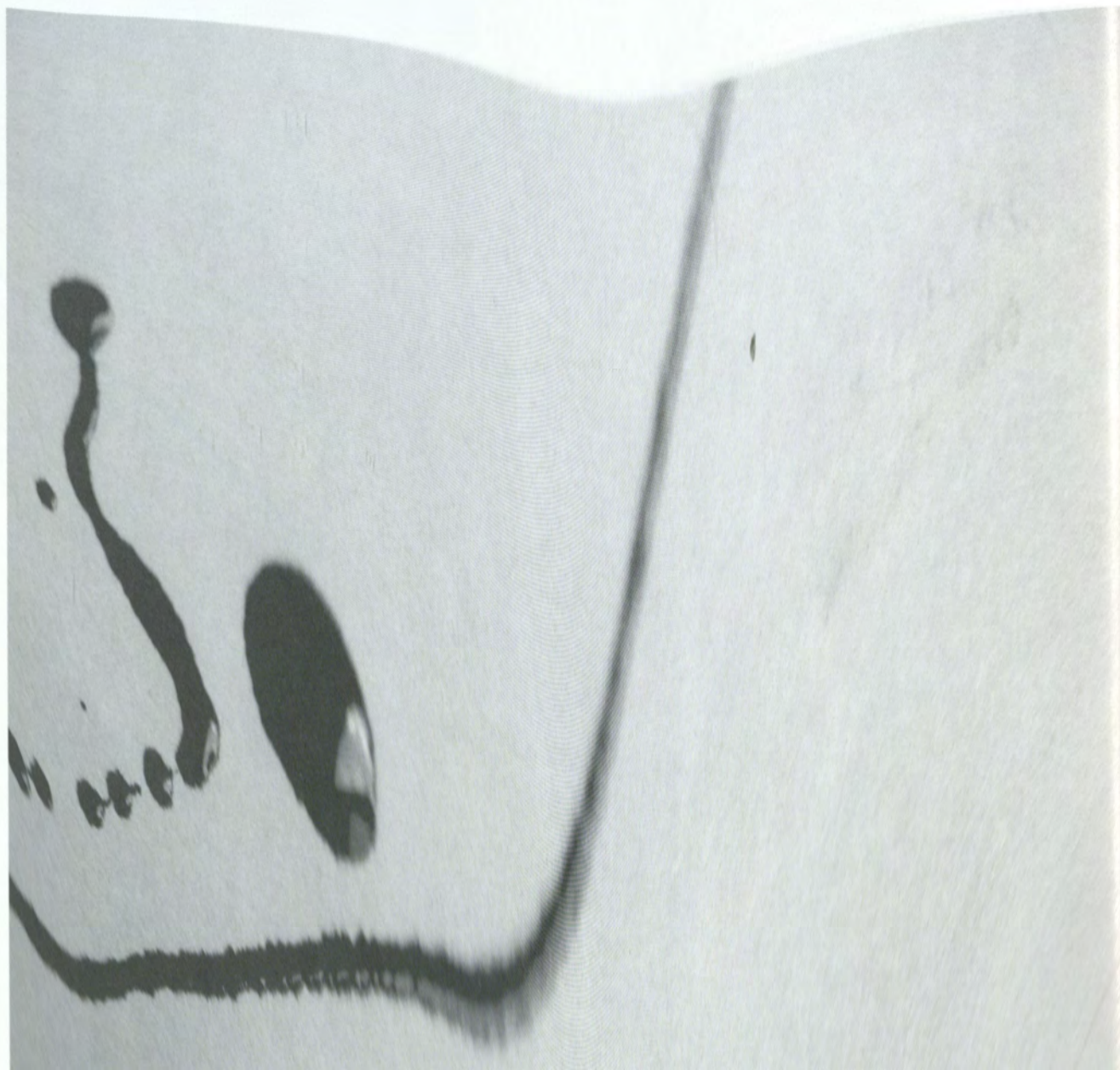
art



Georgia - Emily Jane Boedecker



Piano Pegs - Eric Prusinski





S(tear)eotypical _ Amanda Gartman



There Will Be Blood Oranges _ Jason Lukas



Red Hot _ Kendre Israel



Out of Season _ Stephanie Lehman



IDLE _ Stephanie Lehman



I Feel Like There's Something Between Us _ Cheri Joslin



Isolation - Amanda Gartman



Breathe _ Jason Lukas



Vanish - Stephanie Lehman



Broken Ice _ Nouf Althonaian



prose



To Nobody

Mark Schoeck

So me and my friend Sean, we were playing ball in the backyard, right? And we're pretty big for our age so I backed up real far and we threw it as hard as we could, throwing pop-ups and what not. And Ma wasn't home or she probably would have told us to scoot in some, so we don't hurt each other, so we don't break a window again.

Then I told Sean, I said, This isn't far enough for me. He said it wasn't for him either. So I told him I'd go over to the Christians' backyard and then that'd be far enough for us. Plus I know the Christians, I've been in their backyard to play with their dog and stuff, so I know their yard and I know that they won't get mad or anything.

So I hopped the fence even though it was a couple feet taller than me. Nearly killed myself hopping over. So I scooted back all the way until I got to their big tree, then I realized that we don't have a big tree like they do. And part of it was their fence bein' taller than me, and part of it was our house havin' only one story, but I realized you can't even tell our house is over there from where I was standin'. From here, you can't even tell people live there.

I kinda closed my eyes for a minute, tryin' to picture what my yard looks like and where Sean was. I didn't want to yell for him either, tryin' to hear his voice yelling back, I just wanted to see how close I could get.

So I looked up at the sky then. Ma told me if I think I ever might get in trouble to throw a couple words God's way, so I did. I said, God, please don't let me break a window or kill Sean or make a bad throw. Then I thanked God and said Amen.

Then I tapped my mitt a couple times, then wound up and threw the ball. I threw it high and long but I thought I threw it right to Sean, right where he was. I ran and jumped and held my head over the fence to see if Sean caught it. He told me it was such a good throw and he almost caught it, but you can't catch 'em all, he told me.

Then Mrs. Christian yelled my name from the patio. I came down from the fence and told her I was sorry for hangin' on the fence. She said it was okay, but she said I looked funny. She said it looked like I was throwin' to nobody. †

(right)
For Somebody _ Kati Schmidt

I Jesu Navn John Linstrom

I have often wondered at the attractive power of Christmas, and I have decided that, contrary to the conclusions of Scrooge's famous revelation, it does not derive from either the giving of gifts or from the spirit of giving, because, as the preachers tell us, such spirit should be with us all year anyway. Neither would I attribute it solely to the power of the image of the virgin birth of a baby God Incarnate. Certainly these are important aspects of the Christmas experience, but they are only aspects – the source, the true Power of the season, lives somewhere silently, strongly, drifting in the background.

I do feel something deeper and more elemental in the first good snow of December, especially when the surprise comes after a week of furtive praying and begins falling on the 24th. There is something in the sacred hush of a gentle fall which establishes December snow as the highest form of rain. It is altogether childish and most appropriate that this silence blends seamlessly into the folds of winter boots, Christmas tree farms, and paper Advent calendars. And then – Holy of Holies – Christmas Eve dawns on a dry, crisp morning, and with healthy mounds of lingonberry jam heaped well atop our hot liver and

gryn we begin the high two-day Festival with knowing celebration.

“Wow-ee—what a beautiful tree!” she said of our Christmas tree. The snow fell lightly, silently outside our living room window. My great grandmother Gladys Torkelson was visiting us that year at our Michigan parsonage, and it was the last time the perky 87-year-old matriarch would travel so far from her Minnesota home. She seemed delighted to be with our young family for such a festive occasion.

When the time finally came after the evening church service my brothers and I distributed the wrapped presents in a great hurry and began ripping them open. Grandma's gift to each of us was a ten dollar bill folded in the shape of a bowtie and placed in a Hallmark Christmas card. Dad whispered to each of us that we should be very thankful for such a generous gift, and each of us dutifully went to our great grandmother and hugged her in turn, half-shouting our thanks into her shriveled ears. “Now, make sure not to get the money mixed up with the wrapping paper,” she said once, twice, again. “Maybe you should go put it someplace safe.” Each time we reminded her that the money was on the table and that we'd be careful. Later, after Gladys's visit, Mom would complain that “the frustrating thing is that I know she'd remember those things if she just tried. If she really cared about it, she'd remember how nice our tree was and that Maddie's an English cocker spaniel and that we *did* separate the money from the paper the first time she asked!”

But she couldn't say anything just then, so Grandma Gladys leaned over to my mother on the couch and said, “You know, that's just a beautiful tree.”

I would guess that the fabric of the cosmos experienced a minor tear the day my parents married. Now, I support mixed marriages as strongly as the next well-minded body, but the union of a Norwegian and a Swede in particular is a risky proposal. My father's father, a Swede, tells the tale, falling thicker into an inherited accent as he progresses:

“Yeah – well, you know, there came a time when the Swedes and the Norwegians were caught in an unsolvable dilemma, and they planned a great battle. So the Svedes all lined up on one

side of da border, and dose Norvegians, vell, they all lined up on da udder side. Da Svedes all had deir torches and pitchforks, but da Norvegians vere always good vith da explosives, so dey all lined up vit sticks of dynamite, and pretty soon da Norvegians all started throwing dynamite over da border at da Svedes.” He pauses. “So, ya know, ve lit it and threw it back.” Then he sits back with a smile.

The validity of this tale is open to debate, and I have yet to find a historian willing to do the research. Regardless, it seems clear that no such Swedish/Norwegian hostility managed to faze my parents, and both sides of the family tree seemed to handle the ordeal quite well. I could not help but feel worried, however, that when my Norwegian bilingual great grandmother came to visit she would be disappointed and confused by our mix of traditions at the dinner table.

But oh, Gladys loved the food! On Christmas Eve, Dipping Day, dinner began properly with the *doppa grita*. While heaps of turkey, potato sausage, ham, and Swedish meatballs sang to us from the central platter, we forked through our good bread (“*Brot!*” Dad would triumphantly declare, rolling his “r” with relish) which had been graciously soaked in the meat broth. It is necessary that all good Swedes partake of the wet bread, lest we forget the frugality of our ancestors in the old country. If we’re wise, we finish it before it gets cold, and then the meat and the pickled herring and the potatoes and the crackers and good cheeses are all passed around. This meal, I reflect, is as important as the snow outside. As a matter of fact, it could just as easily not snow on Christmas and we’d still be fine as long as we were able to share the *doppa grita* feast. December would never happen without it.

Grandma Gladys, who is seated at the head of the table and the center of attention, fills her plate as high as anyone else’s. She has noticed that our dog is thinner than the country dogs she once knew, and she has seen the dry food we give her, so when she thinks we’re not looking my great grandmother slips some turkey to Maddie who gratefully and loudly laps it up. Dad intervenes the second and third time she tries this, but my brothers and I are absolutely beaming despite our mother’s scowl.

I must have been about three years old when Grandma Gladys—in her early eighties then, this old woman!—flew down to Newark to spend time with us at our row house in Jersey City. I don’t remember anything from the visit, but I can recall a vivid photograph of my great grandmother from this visit which was taken the day we went for a picnic on Liberty Island. In the background stands a huge woman, erect and somber, trampling shackles and Fort Wood at her feet. Waves of metal hang securely around her Eiffel skeleton as her pupil-less gaze pierces the thousands of miles of the Atlantic. In front of her

Waves of metal hang securely
around her Eiffel skeleton as her
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thousands of miles of the Atlantic.

copper counterpart, Gladys Torkelson stands erect and proper with gaze set toward the camera—a stern welcome from this good Norwegian matriarch. Hers also is a thin (not more than two pennies thick!) but sturdy metal casing over a solid architectural frame, a design which would make even Eiffel, with all of his ingenious blueprints, tear with pride.

As she stands there, staring at my father sprawled on the ground with his camera, does my grandmother imagine the day when this New Colossus was still new – a shining, not yet oxidized beacon of Possibility for the homeless and tempest-tossed? Does she visualize her parents approaching this great statue with the Wonder and Apprehension of foreigners in a new world? Or is she perhaps merely having second thoughts about that Sabrett hotdog she ate in line for the ferry? Whatever the case, she recognizes the importance of this monument, and like a true Scandinavian she subdues any visual marks of pride or gratitude with a stern earnestness. You cannot withhold admiration from a woman who can look at you like that when appropriate, but who is also mischievous enough to continue stealing her neighbor’s wheelchair until the assisted living staff offer her one of her own.

Years later, in her assisted living apartment in Minnesota, she still displays a green and white plastic Statue of Liberty in her china cabinet with all the rest of her treasures.

Without dessert, the Dipping Day feast would be sorrowfully incomplete. In the week leading to Christmas Eve the kitchen smells heavily of chocolate and various cookies, the most delicate and mysterious of which are my mother's beautiful Norwegian rosettes, and this smell becomes inextricably blended with the spiced scent of my father's Swedish meatballs. The rosettes were a new tradition the year that Gladys visited, and there was much excitement around the fact that a new cookie would be added to the holiday list.

The rosette is unlike any other cookie you will try. The crisp consistency is somewhat in keeping with the thinnest portions of the common circus elephant ear, specifically the crisp parts which are the sloppy result of air bubbles in the tent vendor's cookie batter. The rosette is, in this way, the elephant ear's more delicate cousin, small and elegantly formed by means of special

The rosette is unlike any other cookie you will try. The crisp consistency is somewhat in keeping with the thinnest portions of the common circus elephant ear.

kitchen implements used only for shaping rosettes. Each one is made in the form of a perfect, circular, intricate snowflake, and unlike the crass elephant ear, the rosette is topped only with a frugal dusting of powdered sugar. The experience of eating a good rosette has been compared to that of biting into the edge of a cloud; it is so light and yet so rich.

Of course, no Norwegian would leave any holiday celebration feeling complete without lefsa, so we had a second new addition for our dessert list the year Gladys visited. It is the embodiment of good Scandinavian dessert sense, this thin, plain potato cake served only with butter and sugar. After spreading

the butter across the still-warm lefsa, pouring on a good helping of sugar, and rolling the thing into a thin tube, there is a certain satisfaction in consuming the rich treat. I do believe that the greatest brilliancy in Scandinavian cooking derives from its simplicity.

When my great grandmother saw the platter of the Norwegian necessities brought into the dining room after our Christmas Eve feast she smiled, and without a word her gratitude was evident.

I, then, smiled broadly when I saw the same treats at Grandma Gladys's 100th birthday party in Preston, Minnesota. Every uncle, aunt, cousin, and grandparent was present that day, although Gladys did not understand why.

Her short term memory was nearly gone. Despite such a setback, she conversed freely with anyone who would come close and sit in front of her wheelchair. "Hello!" She greeted me warmly in her small, shaky voice.

"Hello, Grandma!" I replied. I knew I would have to introduce myself. "My name's John Linstrom! I'm Becky's son, Curt's grandson! Do you remember me?"

"Oh; can't say that I do," she said apologetically, but without sounding at all put off. There was a pause. "Have you met any of my brothers?" she asked, and then rattled off a list of her late siblings.

I knew the answer, having listened to her conversation with my dad previously. "Oh, yes. You know, I met Truman once."

"Oh yes, Truman." She paused. "Where do you live?"

"I live over in South Haven, Michigan."

"Well, that sounds like a long way!"

I laugh. "Oh yes, Grandma — it's quite a drive!"

"Where are you staying?" —good hospitality.

"Oh, over in the Marriot hotel across the street. But do you know why I'm here, Grandma?"

"Well, can't say that I do."

"It's your one hundredth birthday tomorrow! We're going to have a party with the whole family!"

She shook her head and smiled. "Well, I just can't believe it!"

We were in the midst of real conversation now. "Can you

dance?" she asked. She listed off several steps.

I felt a little embarrassed. "Not really, no."

"Not anything?"

I shook my head. There was a pause.

"Do you speak Norwegian?" she asked.

"No, Grandma. I wish I could." And I did, too. She was not upset—she got the same answer from the nursing home staff all the time—but the conversation seemed over. She looked down for a moment, and then looked back at me.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm from South Haven, in Michigan."

"Ah." She nodded, and looked aside before looking me straight in the eye. "You're John Linstrom, Becky's son, from Michigan."

My eyebrows rose, but I tried to be respectful and not look too surprised. I glanced at my brothers and parents. Someone said, "wow."

"Yes," I said, "yes, I am John from Michigan! You know, I'm here to celebrate your one hundredth birthday!"

"Oh, wow-ee!" she replied quietly, shaking her head. "I just can't believe it!"

The next day, New Year's Eve, 2006, Gladys Torkelson turned 100, and I proudly told the story of my breakthrough again and again to my relatives. I heard her cycle through the same questions with people many times, but never with the kind of success which I had pulled. Of her entire family assembled she recognized only her son Curtis. Her conversations with people were always slow, gentle, and straightforward.

It had been an unusually dry winter in Minnesota, and speculations about global warming were occasionally passed around. It had not been a white Christmas, and Gladys herself had complained about the absence of snow. But it was early in the party when someone glanced outside to see the first white specks falling, and a hushed silence spread across the room as people turned toward the windows. Grandma's small, croaky voice was heard saying, "Well, isn't that wonderful?"

There was a live musician playing guitar, and at one point Grandma tried to get up to dance (at the enthusiastic encouragement of a couple grandsons), but ended up deciding she was

too tired. The party lasted two hours, during which time there was high consumption of lefsa and rosettes and meatballs—the snack bar version of a Christmas feast—and by the end Grandma Gladys was very tired and wanted a nap. She had a hard time focusing for the family photo, and then it was over.

As family members made their ways in groups out of the nursing home or helped clean up the meeting hall, I stepped into the hallway where my nuclear family was gathering and where Gladys sat in her wheelchair, waiting to be brought back to her room. My father offered a regal farewell to the aged matriarch, and then my mother stepped forward and knelt down to Gladys's eye level. She had just meant to say goodbye, but Grandma Gladys managed to fit in the question, "Do you speak Norwegian?"

"Well, I do a little bit, Grandma."

"Oh, good!" Gladys was pleased.

"Here; see if you can say this with me." And my mother began reciting the old Norwegian table prayer she had learned as a girl, while Gladys bobbed her head in rhythm.

I Jesu navn går vi til bords

å spise, og drikke på ditt ord.

And then, looking my mother straight in the eye, Grandma Gladys finished the prayer in unison with her granddaughter, all stern and serious as if she were rehearsing with a child.

Dei, Gud til ære, oss til gagn,

Så får vi mat i Jesu navn. Amen.

The two women, smiling, embraced each other for a long time. My mother knew it might be the last time they saw each other. Then they exchanged goodbyes, Gladys smiling contentedly, and Mom turned and walked away with our family following. She walked briskly, containing her emotion like a good Scandinavian, and reached a hand up to dry her eyes.

We stepped outside into the silently falling snow.

"Wow-ee – isn't that wonderful?" ↑

You Only Order Side Dishes Because You Can't Commit to an Entire Meal

Valerie Cochran

There was Black Lipstick. Inches of it. And hands enough to make anyone blush. I hated the way your hair slouches over your eyebrows. But that didn't stop me from pushing it away with my black lips, there on the black leather couch, with kids in animal costumes hooting and screeching while they danced around a lamp that was touching everything with cerise blue tones, making everyone's skin glow. They danced in front of us and we hardly took notice.

"Excuse us while we leave this part of this place, to be in a different place apart from you, alone together," we said to them, not in words but with our arms around each other. They nodded, or seemed to, but it could have been a dance move. The floor was shaking and the bottles on the bar were shaking, and their bodies too, so it also could have been us shaking and thinking we had noticed a nod.

"Those parts in your eyes around the black parts; those aren't green. I think, uh yes, they're gold. And sprouting out like a flower. God, have you realized that you've got sunflowers inside your eyes?" An intake of breath raises your shoulders and

the eyes squint to where I can't see those beams glowing out at everything. But at least you're smiling, which is good, because I am the one who said that. I am the one who lays my passion between the sheets and waits for you to finger it, maybe put it in a pocket in your windbreaker, take it out later, turn it over in your hand, and wonder why this girl, me, would be giving such a thing to you. But it's too hot, and you leave it where it is.

The blond one stood up and raised her glass of the house red wine that tasted like the kid stuff from communion. She looked at me from the end of the table, said I looked radiant and I blushed the color of my dress. Magenta or fuchsia; some bright old thing stretched across me, it doesn't matter except how the boy sitting on the opposite side of the table, taller and thicker than you, looked at me when I was in it. And you sat next to him and didn't say a thing. There was no wish from you, there was no nod. Your tongue and your fingers were preoccupied with your potatoes and cream sauce that had taken you minutes to relate to the waitress. "No, I don't want the chicken, just the other things that come alongside it." But across the table, I found your feet underneath. I think they were warm enough but a little more heat couldn't hurt. My legs slithered around them and I kept my chin close to my chest as I looked at you. That's how seduction is supposed to go. Wrap everything up in a look and a squeeze. Then wait and listen for the sound of the click of everything being in place. Which, it was. At least at the time.

One year earlier, I was on a bridge, standing with that taller and thicker boy. Same color hair as you but different eyes; same attempt at seduction, but different answer. "Nope," he told me. But this time, hands turned into folds of cloth, covering me, draping me with silk or cotton or burlap, easing into dips and valleys, under the breast, behind the knee. And then, on the floor of the living room, growls and flushed skin; we had to chase down the alcohol. We let the sharks and eagles on the television screen shout at each other about love and sex and violence and he touched me first. I didn't even ask him to. I didn't even think he had a spark of a thought like that in that big round head of his.

AND ALL THE WHILE, the owl on the wall stared us

down, made of string and nails, stretched taut across with judgment and sympathy for how these things change other things and how it may seem that he isn't looking at you but its only because you won't look at him and what's the use of talking when it only splits your chest apart and that big hunk of a heart is there and waiting for him to grab it and take a bite and spit it out because your blood is too rich for his taste buds. ↑

Humorless Ruminations on a Failed Romantic Life

Thomas Heet

Put mildly, my history as a lover is a bit dull. I haven't dated much, and when I did it wasn't particularly steamy. Those rare glimpses of romantic competence were more happened upon than pursued, so I'm hesitant to consider myself a sexual actor. I am more of a walk-on, and a discontented one at that. But I cork as much primal lust as anybody, making this coitus quietus patently upsetting. And so I explore myself, rummaging through books, personal anecdotes, philosophical musings and a treasure trove of moral pedantry. Thus my quest begins: why the libidinous limbo?

Now, I'm wont to bring overtly sexual interpretations to everything I read. Seeing the world through a particular lens can, admittedly, bring some striking distortions. I can only imagine the perks of Rousseau's state of nature, where *volonte generale* is essentially a *menage a trois*. I search Lao Tzu for help finding the G-spot, and we should probably avoid mention of *The Fountainhead* altogether. Other texts are less subtle. Hobbes knows my intimate moments all too well: "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Freud tells me that the "presence of numerous inhibited instincts, whose suppression has retained

a certain degree of instability..." will likely haunt me for most of my life. Excellent. Erikson clarifies this in larger terms: My id is a peaceful mosaic of thriving cultures, and my superego is arriving on ships to spread faith, democracy and tuberculosis. Ah, the fruit of the tree.

New Year's was uneventful. 1999, if I recall. I was at home and I was in high school, making no memory for the present. After the ball dropped I dressed in tie and saddles, debating attendance of a party to which I was invited. I felt, in a word, hopeful. I undressed and went to sleep.

By the time I crossed Bull Street, the first of three movements had begun. The exposition started with a slow but steady pattern of raindrops on the tops of oak leaves that were conveniently overhead. I could hear every one of them and their distance from me. In all directions and at every depth I could identify them, like snowflakes under lamplight or the fading suspension of stars. The second movement was a nascent rhythm building with my footsteps and breath, culminating with a single wet frog, hopping synchronously across the gray sidewalk. As I passed houses, the air conditioners swelled and receded with parallax. The finale started at Reynolds when the last of the air conditioners ignited right next to me, like a loud crash of cymbals. At that precise moment the trees cleared to reveal an emergent white moon. I was stoned. When I got home I wrote everything down and deleted it.

I consider my past experiences with faith to be contributors to my current state. I can only speculate the adverse effects imposed on me by a succession of emperors and popes. Am I bound to my Catholic roots as, to borrow Erikson, "the centaur to his equestrian underpinnings"? And speaking of sorrowful mysteries, how exactly was I to synchronize my awakening libido with O-my-Jesus-forgive-us-our-sins? A portrait of me as a youth: standing in a confession line, mowing down villages with Hail Maries. hailmaryfulofgracethelordiswithceblsdrith-mngwmn... All to tell a priest I had masturbated, as if I were the

nonpareil of reprobacy with a soul of rotted peppers. The next morning at church, the same priest would seemingly contradict himself with this little gem: "...keep us free from sin and (and!) protect us from all anxiety." What about panic attacks?

All of this pent up passion would, I worried, relegate my sexual outlets to the writing of overwroughtica. *Garments were gradually pulled aside to reveal their tender genitals. The slow tour of his lips passed over the coarse quills of her warm pubis, making the sheets wet with a cataract of clitoral creams. Her smooth thighs braced him as he tasted her womanhood.* But the approach to sexuality via smut is bound to get tiresome and boring. Even I can't develop more than tepid affairs with such flights. I'll take the liberty here of quoting John Cage: "It's useless to play lullabies for those who cannot sleep."

—

Around the third or fourth grades, I had a friend named Reuben Anderson. His oldest brother was James, a thin doctor in his early thirties with prematurely graying hair. He helped my sister with a wicked sunburn she had one summer. Nigel and Sheldon both looked alike, were older than Reuben and mostly just hung around the house. Their dad, who drove trucks for UPS, looked like the actor that played Doug E. Doug's dad in the TV show "Where I Live." His parents eventually got divorced and his mom married a deacon who looked oddly similar to pictures of St. Paul I had seen in my childhood picture Bible. For some reason I can't remember his mom's or sisters' names. I have very strong memories of Reuben, like the time I ran into him at Martin's Super-Valu in the comics aisle. I remember being at his farm and riding a tractor; we both had puffy Starter jackets on, the kind I used to drool over in the new Eastbay catalogs. They kept an Irish wolfhound, and all kinds of others straight from the World Book Encyclopedia entry for "Dog." One of them was so violent, like my uncle Tom's dog, Lexus, that only Nigel could descend into its cage to feed it. None of these people were real, of course.

I wonder about this sexless life. I worry about being alone. Here I am in an apartment, upstairs in a bedroom. No one is here, not a lover, not a friend. I mistakenly left a light on downstairs. I just sit here. Every day and night. I am OK with this, sometimes. I spin an ink pen until my joints are sore, then I stop and lay down and stare at the ceiling and walls, just as I did when I would imagine entire families to keep me company, recreating what I already had around me. But what exactly have I created with all of this thought? Into what shape has it collected, what trench been canalized?

Sexuality wanders, ignorant, through the cleavage of mind and body, a gulf that holds for it a series of potentials, which, unless surfacing in the rare and hallowed paroxysm, are each cut and drained by the scythes of idleness and caution. In this industry, sexuality is the only tool fashioned to quiet the rasp and resistance of unrealized desire. I am animal in that my body is a concretized mass of systems, bearing physical witness of a web of impellents and happenings. I am human in that this wit-

Sexuality wanders, ignorant, through the cleavage of mind and body, a gulf that holds for it a series of potentials, which, unless surfacing in the rare and hallowed paroxysm, are each cut and drained by the scythes of idleness and caution.

ness Must be acknowledged; with touch, with Body. This hyper quality of conduit between beings is itself sexuality. It is the ecstatic bond of bodies. It is the quiet link of irises in the yolks of our egg-white eyes.

But all good things come, usually in the hours of night and with a little luck. The source of my constant affection, the flesh and blood of Callipygian Venus, indulged with me in deeds "which would make us 'mere creature.'" Howls... witness to the violent rise and fall of breasts on her body near orgasm. Flight Phoenicis! Meridian of Meridians! As the tremors and shivers of pure, horrifying joy coursed through our Edenic bodies, I

couldn't help but wonder where this self of mine had wandered. I spent my ascent bootlicking my own fuckability to the burning of Rome, dead of my own duress.

This erstwhile denial of Dionysian delights must come to a close, a welcome curtain call on a stage of severe and merciless humility. Fallen are the epic burs, the andromeda traumata of confused adolescence. Risen is agency, quondam is latency. Perhaps things will work out for me after all, from love to marriage, wetting to wedding. But tonight I have made no requests and received no calls, so it looks like I'll be eating alone. The usual tomato basil sauce over rotini. I won't be lighting any labia minoras but a few candles will suffice. And unless Wal-Mart stocks Muscato, I'll settle on chasing some red Yellow Tail. Also, I'm out of olives. 🍷

Feb. 14th

Ellen Orner

I'm lying in my twin-size rollout bed, waiting for the words I forgot to say to come crashing through the ceiling of my brain. My throat tightens even while I manage to hope that this time no cinders will fall. Maybe I've finally said everything. I'm tired of holding up fire beams until they turn into smoldering logs and then cold, damp ash. I'm sick of scooping up handfuls of what's left and throwing them in his face, much too late.

6 minutes earlier:

I'm examining myself in the bathroom mirror, adding illustration to the dialogue we just wrote, remembering which side of my face was to him, and the sweep of my hair. My cheeks are burning, soft deep pink. Not ruddy excitement or red stress or slightly purple embarrassment. It's thermodynamic heat. Energy in transit. It's what happens when words get trapped and vibrate together inside my skull. It makes my eyes very blue, like when I have a fever. But they're not glassy, just now. There's no extra moisture. Not even a hint of tears. My eyelashes are neatly defined. The mascara went on nicely this morning. I

shut my eyes to remember when I had laid in his bed, and he couldn't get close enough. He wanted his arm under me, even though it cut off his circulation. He wanted to lie straight on top of me, even though I couldn't breathe. He touched his finger to my eyelashes, bending them back. I asked if he was trying to poke my eye out. "Yeah, that's what I was going for... tshhh." I watch in the mirror as I poke my own eyelashes.

8 minutes earlier:

My steps quicken when I breathe the clearer air of the hallway and then begin to run. My hair floats back and my limbs liberate. I let my abdominal muscles go. They've been tied into a little knot for an hour and a half: the entire time I sat in the corner of his bed, with my arm poised on his desk. Even with his blanket over me, I couldn't let my stomach rest. It was an emotional knot, I guess, not skinny syndrome. But now I'm running, and the air is loose, but propelling me forward. I remember my speed in a cruise ship hallway, shoeless and in a skirt, pulling away from my knees. But there's an open door at the end of the hallway, and I can't accelerate and keel around the corner like I want to. I have to make myself walk, or people will notice, and remember when they see me the next day, on the way to class. I make it sedately to the stairs, and wonder if I got put out, or if I escaped.

17 minutes earlier:

I breathe over my mountain and words come out, calmly, and hopefully loud enough, so I don't have to repeat them. But even if I do, it's alright. Once they surface, it's easy to drag them around. I tell him, while he's scrubbing purple ink from his white Mac with his spit, that even if he drops his thermo class, he's not going to have any more time, is he. He shakes his head. He knows exactly what I'm talking about. So I tell him, it's not really time, then, and I know that, so I wish he would call it something else. Nothing. Long silence. I concentrate on the TV screen, where snowboarders are carving down the Alps to a punk rock soundtrack. I watch them for ages. I figure he'll never answer, and that I'll just get up and leave when the movie is over. But suddenly his voice interrupts my concentra-

tion, and I struggle to defrost my brain while he says “I really don’t know what else to call it. Honestly, that’s the best thing I can come up with right now...” The frost creeps back, over my mind, my ears. I try to fight it back, but the frost wins, and his words fade out of my existence while he explains the details of his internal state. Because if he insists on calling it time, nothing he says can be true. I don’t even pretend to listen after a few minutes. His voice ceases. The frost recedes, dripping down my neck, my spine, my thighs, but not my eyes, because I will not cry while he’s watching me, searching my face, looking for truth after telling me lies. My eyes seal to the snowboarders to keep from leaking, and my ears hear his roommate say, “well, I’m gonna jerk off now.” A Chi Omega has disappointed him. “Well, I’m gonna leave now,” I say. He doesn’t hear me. He’s laughing at his roommate. I gather my shoes and keys and phone and sweatshirt and water bottle and soul, and walk to the door. I flip the deadbolt. I turn the doorknob. I pull the door back. “You’re leaving?” he says. He stutters. He never stutters. I turn, just my head, and see him slouched forward in his chair, question marks sprouting from his curly hair. I’m going to chop them all off, all at once, and let him sweep them in a pile under his desk. I nod. “Yeah. I’m leaving.” And I leave. †

Exposition

Evan Scott Bryson

All three brothers wrestled. Each qualified for semi-state, two were regional champions, and they all held sectional and conference titles; each was a team captain. Between the months of October and February they ate baked fish and drank Boost; they chewed gum and spit the excess saliva into Dixie cups while they did their homework. Between the holidays, they connived hunger strikes to let them binge on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year. On the off-night that a second portion was accepted, they got in extra laps before bed, running from one field to the next, from our house to Grandpa's. Jerrod graduated three years ahead of Todd, and Todd two years ahead of A.J. and myself. But for seven years, the middle school and high school seasons overlapped. For seven years I waited impatiently to go home.

This is what I saw from the back seat of Todd's blue Camaro: three sons of a four-tet staggering across an icy black parking lot, three pitiful mantises, cloaked in hoodies and sweat-pants, with gym bags bouncing off their boney hips. These evenings after practice, their legs craved potassium, their heads steamed, their fingers twitched into a grip around the steer-

ing wheel. When they spoke they only mumbled to change the song. When they lost their respective last match of the senior season, they hugged my father and cried.

The first time I saw a wrestler cry, I thought it was because he was injured. He limped off the mat with his hand clutching his knee cap then fell to the floor, bowing before the trash can where the referees throw away bloody paper towels. When he screamed at his coaches to leave him alone, and also his sister, I realized that he was trying to cry somewhere that his father couldn't video record him. His father came down from the bleachers anyway.

Jerrod was a fast 152 pounds. One time, Jerrod passed out in an illegal headlock while wrestling some kid from Richmond. He still beat the kid. My mother sat with her hands in her pockets and swayed in her seat, and she freed her hands and touched her face. Sometimes she stood up and swayed and held her hands to her face. Since Jerrod was her first wrestler, she was unused to the blackouts; because blackouts are so common in wrestling, she got used to them.

Todd won so many matches because he was meaner than everyone else, he was scrappier, stronger—at 103 pounds, he had no time to prance or smile. When he was a freshman, he injured his neck wrestling Clint Buell, a kid from Centerville. Todd lead three to nil when Clint threw him into a headlock and the torque briefly inverted the curvature of his vertebrae. He turned gray and sobbed on the mat and spectators on both sides of the gymnasium got so quiet, as if to listen to him would teach them something of disappointment. Even his opponent stood and stared at him in wonder while the referee scanned the crowd for fathers.

A.J. never left the mat due to injury, although one time his junior year he hyperventilated in practice. He wondered out loud if he was going to die in the auxiliary gym, the same place where the Prom is held. Jerrod and Todd were with A.J., visiting from college. When I came in to pick them up, they were sitting side by side and breathing together in the same tentative rhythm. ↗

Excerpt from a series
of essays about
Michigan's Upper
Peninsula
Rachael Button

The Millecoquins River spills into Lake Michigan eight miles from our cabin at a beach along Route 2. The beach stretches for almost a mile. The wind blowing off the water makes it cold, even in the summer. Bark, broken clam shells, and other washed up remnants scattered along the shoreline pack down the moist sand. One end of the beach leads to a rocky peninsula, where seagulls and their droppings cover big white boulders. The other end stops at the river.

The river gets deep and dark and still before it joins with the lake. When my brother, Keith, and I were very little the extent of our contact with this part of the river was interested glances from the shoreline and occasional tentative strikes at the water with our toes. There used to be a wrecked ship sunk into the far side of the river's shore. Walking along the beach, my mom would pause at the shore adjacent to the boat, bend down, put one arm around my shoulder, and point with the other toward the ruined masses. "Do you see the shipwreck?" I would squint and nod, although I was never entirely positive whether I saw it or not. Several year's later, a teenage boy got his photograph in a local museum for discovering the wreck

and the ruined boat was excavated, identified, and encased in Plexiglas.

Swimming at Lake Michigan meant wading in the shallow water. It meant interrupting the sandy stair pattern at the bottom of the water, squishing the wedged sections of sand with my toes. It meant going out so far that the our parents were no longer visible, sitting in lawn chairs along the shoreline, and still being in waist deep water. It meant squirming as the waves hit our dry torsos and shivering when the wind hit the line where the water had splashed.

When Keith and I got to be ten or eleven, the river served a different role, as the only part of the beach where the water is deep enough to swim. The current at the mouth of the river is strong, the water, almost black, and the bottom, thick and squishy, like quicksand. With only one step into the water I would sink to my shoulders. I would imagine giant dark brown catfish, as big as me, with long whiskers and big slimy lips, lurking at the bottom, waiting to brush their slimy bodies against my leg. Swimming across the river was a challenge and a dare for Keith and me.

I would step forward and back, ready to charge, and then hesitate, moving toward my parents and the more solid sand. When I finally jumped in, my splash interrupted the stillness of the surface and my fears quickly propelled me forward in a frantic, focused doggy paddle. I didn't like to stick my face in the water and I didn't like to feel the bottom with my feet. I tried to stay as close to the surface as possible, moving as fast as I could. A few minutes later, when my chest hit the sandiness of shore, I scrambled out in a panic before standing straight up, and sending a triumphant wave back toward my family.

At the cabin the far side of the river emits an aura of mystery as well. No houses dot the opposite shoreline instead the river and the woods seem to run together, bridged by tall grass and swampy wetlands, trees standing in several feet of water, and blue herons wading through the shallows. One summer, when I was fifteen, I got lost in the woods on the opposite side of the river.

I had been on the other side of the river many times before, with my friend Eve Beatty. We sat on the mossy parts of the opposite banks, scouted for frogs, and argued over who had dibs on which slippery specimen. We built forts in the clearings

just beyond the tree line, where fields of ferns grew so high that when we lay down in them they shaded our heads like leafy green trees.

Our next door neighbors, the Banks, had their cousin Abe Jones up north for a visit the summer before my sophomore year of high school. Later I would find out that Abe Jones had lived in a dozen different foster homes before being adopted by his football coach, that he had been abused by some of his foster families and had to steal food in order to eat as a child, that he was going to the University of Illinois on a full ride for football, and that he was a track state champion but that summer he was just Abe, the Banks cousin, my new older friend. He asked me questions about what I liked to do, what movies I liked, and where I spent my free time as I jumped from rock to rock around our fire pit.

When he asked, "What's over there?" pointing across the river, I shrugged and smiled. "Want to go find out?"

We headed down the hill toward the squeaky aluminum boat. I was wearing jeans and a gray Farmington Cross Country sweatshirt, my first piece of high school athletic apparel. We both carried bright red flotation cushions as we jumped from the dock into the boat.

When Abe and I anchored our boat and scrambled up the shoreline I didn't make a conscious decision to venture further than I had before it just happened. Later, Abe would say it happened because we got caught on a conversation that we couldn't see beyond, that we got lost because we enjoyed being around each other so much. We walked past the clearing with the ferns and into the woods. As we stepped over fallen trees, in a thickly forested, mossy, dark, damp part of the woods, Abe commented "This reminds me of the woods at the beginning of Macbeth."

We walked until we came to another river, one I didn't recognize. He jumped across, using a log and a rock as stepping stones. I stared for a minute then whispered, "Oh shit."

I erupted into explanation about how we had gotten really far away, how I had no idea where we were. Turning around, looking at the forest sprawling out in every direction, I realized that for the first time in my life I had lost my bearings in the woods, and that I didn't know how to begin to get back. I panicked and Abe laughed. I once again tried to explain the situ-

ation and Abe smiled. I remember starting to walk really fast, leaping over the deadfall we'd stepped over and speed walking and searching the landscape for some familiar sign. Abe ambled behind me.

I don't remember how long we walked when I came across a golf ball, half buried in the dirt, dug it out with my fingernails, and held it up to show Abe.

"This has to be from someone hitting balls from the backyard of their cabin across the river, we have to be near."

I broke into a sprint and Abe jogged behind me "Let's not tell anyone else we got lost," he proposed.

Several minutes later, we saw Kyle Banks, wearing a Tilly Hat, casting for fish from a camouflage canoe, "Where the hell have you two been?"

"Just hanging out," Abe replied.

We walked back to where we parked our aluminum boat, climbed in, and rowed back. Later that night, while the Button and Banks families sat around the campfire, roasting marshmallows, swapping stories, and laughing, Abe and I ventured back to the dock, and looked across the river into the darkness. Fireflies flickered across the water, crickets chirped, frogs plunked.

Later, Abe would say it happened
because we got caught on a
conversation that we couldn't see
beyond, that we got lost because
we enjoyed being around each
other so much.

The tree line was barely visible, cowered in heavy darkness. I looked out and felt good to be on the familiar side of the river, surrounded by family.

Too exhausted to wash my face or brush my teeth, I flopped onto my bed, still wearing my sweatshirt, and squirmed into my clean white sheets. In the middle of the night I woke up to the sensation of something crawling across the back of my hand. I squinted for a moment and seeing that it was not a spider, flicked it off my skin and into my bed. When I woke

the next morning, I reformed the shape of the arachnid in my head, trying to analyze and identify it. I remembered it being brown in color with a circular body, a small circular head, and tiny legs which curled around either side of its torso. I popped out of bed.

"Mom, I think there's a tick in my sheets," I came tumbling down the stairs.

"What makes you think that?" She asked.

I replayed the encounter for her.

She put them in the washer. I swept my floor and took a shower, using a hand mirror to search for any tiny brown bug embedding itself in my skin. When I came out of the bathroom, a Ziploc bag on the kitchen table was waiting for me, securing the contents of my sheets—an American dog tick. Later in the morning, when the Banks stopped by to banter over post-breakfast coffee, my parents held up the bag. "Look what we found on Rachael last night." The small crowd gathered around, watching the tick try to burrow its way out of the plastic.

The American dog tick carries Tularemia and Rocky Mountain Fever but not Lyme disease. It finds its host using a behavior called questing. Questing ticks perch on blades of grass or the edge of leaves with their front legs extended, looking for a host. When a potential host brushes up against the grass, tree, or deadfall the tick moves from the brush to the pant leg or sweatshirt, looking for a patch of skin to nest or lay eggs. My tick ended in up one of my Mom's old foundation bottles on a shelf beside a beaver stick, dried butterflies and a coyote skull.

Historically rivers have been used to separate. In Egypt, the banks of Nile separated the East from the West, life from death, the Egyptian pyramids and tombs from the Egyptian civilization. However, like people, rivers are not stable or stagnant; they change, grow, evolve, and alter the topography around them. They carry sediment, depositing it on the shoreline. They cut through stone, shaping rapids and waterfalls. They meander. Rivers change landscape and rivers change people. Since I stood on the bank of the mouth of the Millequins River, searching for signs of the shipwreck, the lines between the familiar and unfamiliar have become less clearly defined. ✦

an excerpt from the play:
The Adventures of an
Herb
Ellen Orner

LEMONBALM

(stands up straight, center stage. raises her head and then tosses it. sends woodsy bronze curls bouncing and then gathers them with a flick of her wrist, ties them in a grayish green flat ribbon that matches her leggings)

People say I smell good. You know, you pass them on the street and instead of “how ya doin?” or “nice day today” they say “you smell so delicious!” You’re appreciative at first, but then you gotta wonder, and what if I didn’t smell like sugared lemon earth butter, what would they say then? Same thing when I go in for an interview or meet a guy for a date. “Hi, I’m Lemonbalm,” I say. “Lemonbalm! Good to meet you! You smell fantastic!” And then, maybe, after a few minutes of sniffing and pinching a strand of my hair and sniffing some more, they might hear what I’m saying...but not very often. One day, before I go out, I’m gonna rub stink tree leaves all over me. Just to see what they do. “Lemonbalm! Pleasure to meet you. You smell awful. How about making yourself scarce?” Wouldn’t surprise me. Not a bit.

(marches off stage and returns with a black suit jacket over her leggings)

I have an interview today. With DialAmerica Marketing, Inc. A sales position. I’d be, you know, one of those people who calls during dinner to ask if you wanna a) switch to such-and-such plan for only fifteen hundred a month or b) slam the phone hard enough to give the telemarketer a concussion. The thing is, see, they don’t smell you over the phone. My voice is nothing special. I sound like mint, or even rosemary. So this Dale Merritt character—he’s the one interviewing me—he’d better remember that when he smells me today, at 3:15. ▲

Crawfishing

John Linstrom

Those engines were still going at it in the background somewhere, kind of faint like when the radio's in between channels and the volume down, and I had almost fallen asleep right there on the meeting stump when I heard it screaming and kind of jumped. So I up and looked around, and just past the neighbor's rusty fence in a sort of clearing was this big old hawk, screaming with its wings up high, and it just walked around like that screaming at something. It seemed pretty weird, and I wondered if maybe it was having one of those full of the spirit moments like they do at Ed's church sometimes. I needed a closer look, though, so I got down on the ground and crawled up to the fence to see, whispering Thank You Jesus the whole way over because finally now I was doing something interesting. When I got there and got a good look at the hawk, I realized he wasn't screaming at no Jesus — he was screaming at a nasty brown rattler, who was kind of standing up and having a staring contest with the hawk. That poor rattler would be lunch before too long, I knew. They looked like they'd be at it for awhile, though, so I figured it was time to get moving. No more waiting at that point—I was already up, and I was starting

without him.

I just kept shaking my head and biting my lip and thinking about Ed the whole way down the side of the ravine with all our gear in Pa's metal lure box. That boy was going to pay for this when he finally showed up, and I swore it, too. My boots sucked in the mud, and every time I stepped I pulled them out hard. He didn't have no right messing this up now, no right. Why, we weren't barely out of the fourth grade and we already had such a good business going. And here these crazy engines were sounding just dandy, just buzzing along like nobody cared. Fine, I said to that sound—this was one fishergirl who wouldn't care neither.

I just about threw the lure box down in the mud-sand next to the crick and sat down against a big mossy rock. The ribbon of sky above the crick was about as blue as wrapping paper at Christmas, but I could tell that behind some of the dark tree leaves there were storm clouds a-coming. I flipped the metal box lid open with my left hand without even looking at it and pulled out the string and some of the sliced up hotdog pieces. "Coo-ka-dee, coo-ka-doo," a bird was saying in a tree next to me. "Coo-ka-dee, coo-ka-doo, some for me, some for you," I could hear Ed saying, and handing me some bait. Darn bird had some gall to be making fun of me at a time like that! I closed the box, put the bait and string on top of the rock behind me, pushed the brim of my hat down so I could only see the ground and waited.

Who knows what was so great about go-carts. "They're only like the coolest toys known to man . . . only, they're not really toys." That was what Alex had said. I told him maybe in Michigan they are, but you're in Jackson County now and we got better things to do here. "You should at least check them out. I can't believe you've never ridden one before!" He had the nastiest voice sometimes.

"Well," and Ed really said this, "why not, Dill? I want to try it, anyway."

So next day we went to Alex's house across the street and he showed us his pa's go-carts, all lined up inside a big iron barn they was using for a metal shop. "All the carts my dad's store doesn't sell, I get to keep." I wasn't sure if he was whining or talking serious. He smiled but without looking any nicer when he said, "But sometimes I just tell him what I want and he saves

it for me in the back, so after two months if no one buys it I get to keep it. Check out the flames on the side of this one.” He was really just talking to Ed, like I wasn’t even there, and the whole time Ed was blabbering “Yup,” “Sure,” or “That’s one fine looking engine,” as if he knowed anything about engines anyway. Finally Ed picked one and Alex took his favorite one and Ed asked me, “Which you want, Dill?” and I looked at the row of about ten of Alex’s own go-carts, all lined up stupidly and looking the same, and Alex smiling at me like I was an idiot, and I just made myself smile back and said “That’s fine, I’d just as well watch if it’s all the same.”

Course it was all the same to Alex. So then we went around back and Ed and Alex drove around the track that Alex’s daddy had hired someone to make where the horse pasture used to be. Now it was just a bunch of hills and dips, hills and dips. Them engines was the loudest dang things I ever heard, louder than Pa’s lawnmower by a long shot. And they kicked dust up everywhere so I couldn’t even see them half the time, like there wasn’t even a go-cart in there—I was just watching Pecos Bill chasing the tornado. I still can’t believe people up north can live that way, like as if that’s a fun time, always going up and down over and over and in the nasty dryness of the dirt. It was the dumbest thing I ever saw, with both of them hooting and hollering, and the best part was that I was sure Alex didn’t know nothing about the pasture he was ripping up. Nope, that city boy had no idea he was driving a field of horse manure.

But I never thought Ed would sink this low. He knew it was Friday—he never forgot. I could hear the engines even from my ravine, and even though I wanted to pretend I didn’t know where he was, I couldn’t. Finally I saw a crawdad run across the ground and climb into a hole. “Thar she blows, Fisherman Ed” I whispered, like he was actually there. He wasn’t, so I grabbed the line and the hotdog piece and creeped up to the hole on my hand and knees, like I seen Ed do it, and I kneeled there with one knee on either side of the clay mound. Then, without breathing, I baited my string and lowered it into the hole and waited.

I didn’t know what I was doing wrong, but I didn’t feel anything. A couple times I pulled it up because I thought I felt one, but nothing was biting. You don’t know how boring

crawdad fishing can be by yourself until you try it. I bit my lip and kept waiting and staring straight into the hole, knowing full well that that crawdad was in there eyeing that hotdog. I’ll admit, I was so bored I could’ve even settled with go-carting. Alex—what kind of name is that, anyway? Aaaa-lex. You have to say it like him, through your nose, to say it right. I said that word a few times, and I just kept staring straight into the hole til I wasn’t really even staring into no more—I was just staring at. Like that could’ve been the eyeball button of a stuffed bear as soon as it was a hole. Then I remembered the time my bear Rocky got his eye pulled out, and my big brother Ben bought me a whole new bear. But that new one wouldn’t never be the same, and I knew it.

Around the hole-button the light clay was turning darker grey and I couldn’t even see in the hole anymore when I heard thunder and the very first few raindrops started down on my head. Then after the first couple drops it was all at once, like turning on the shower, but harder. It was about the worst luck, and it made me feel like cussing. The sound of the rain was loud, and the crick went all to ripples, but at least I couldn’t hear those engines no more.

But I didn’t move—no, sir. I was going to catch that crawdad myself, since by now Ed sure as heck wasn’t coming any-

My hair dripped down around my head while I kept kneeling over that hole and the water dripped down from it in little streams that splashed all around the little clay hill, but I still didn’t move.

way. A few crawdads started crawling out of nearby holes, and I saw them but I wasn’t giving mine up so easy. My hair dripped down around my head while I kept kneeling over that hole and the water dripped down from it in little streams that splashed all around the little clay hill, but I still didn’t move.

“Dill? Di-ill?” My ma was finally calling me. I started

turning my head to answer, but then I stopped. I knew I was too close. She never gave a hoot about the fishing business anyway; she wouldn't understand. Her voice got smaller and smaller, so I figured she gave up on finding me in the ravine before she even looked herself. It wouldn't be long til she sent Pa down, though, and that would be it. She was probably walking back across the yard and into the house right then to get him. Finally I thought I felt some tugging, and I started to pull the string up, real slow, inch by inch.

There it was: the smallest, saddest little crawdad you ever saw. I grabbed it off the bait and held it in my fist and stood up. I just stood there at first, kind of not believing that the tickling in my hand was from a baby crawdad. But then I knew it was, and I jumped up and down and started laughing. The rain was going crazy, and there was thunder everywhere, and the sky and everything was dark like the bottom side of my wool blanket at home only colder, but I knew that I had finally caught it and that pinkish pale little critter was it—the key to my brand new solo career, the start of a new business all worked and managed by me, Dill Austen, fishergirl extraordinaire! I started running through the woods, laughing my head off like it was the biggest joke. I could already hear Pa yelling from the house.

I was still running when I felt two strong pricks in my leg—a bite—and I fell hard into the wet mud. The snake was gone in a second, and I saw its tail slip behind a tree. I didn't cry none at first, but the feeling was kind of like the time I was painting with the water colors on the couch in the den. It was the prettiest picture of the sun I ever made, but when I picked it up I saw that the whole cushion of the couch that I was painting on was turned yellowish—I got the same feeling in my belly when I saw that rattler's tail disappearing. I looked up at the tree there, which had a big chip missing where you could see the middle of it. Ben's axe was in the wood. He must have been working to chop it down, and maybe left his axe right there when he saw the clouds coming. I looked at that axe hard and the big cut it had made in the tree, and all of a sudden I wondered how that tree kept standing there by itself without falling over, cut all the way to the middle like it was by so much chopping. And I can tell you right now, I sure didn't know.

I moved my leg to try to stand up, and all of a sudden I felt

all the pain, and I got tears in my eyes but I made myself cough and didn't quite cry yet. I opened my hand and looked at the pale little crawdad baby that was still in there, a little broken but alright, and I dropped him. I crawled over to the tree with my arms and pulled myself up by reaching into the big cut. Then I really started crying, and I got to tell you I think I know how that tree felt. "Dill, where the hell are you?" Pa was calling. "Hell." I said it, even though I never cussed normally. I pulled up my pant leg real careful so it wouldn't scrape against the bite too much. My leg had two cuts in it, and the skin was starting to turn kind of blue, so I grabbed around the top of my leg with my hands and squeezed it while the tears was mixing with the rain on my face. "Hell, hell, hell, hell," I said, but without sounding too mean since I was crying real hard now. The little broken crawdad started to limp away toward the crick, like Ed always says they do naturally. Some of his insides showed through his thin shell, and looking at him made me kind of sick all over again. Then I turned around, still hunched over and holding my leg, and started limping my own way home while the rain pounded all around. †

Balancing Act

Jamie Petitto

Scene: The stage is set up into three quadrants, and there are walls on either side to separate each quadrant. The stage left quadrant (SL) contains a table and half-kitchen, and a pot boils on the stove. A door is upstage. The stage center quadrant (SC) contains an electric blue gym mat, with sticks and plates lying about. A door is upstage. The stage right quadrant (SR) is a hospital waiting room; books, magazines and toys lay on a table next to comfy chairs. A door is upstage. Separate white lights light each quadrant.

(Lights up on SC. A WOMAN in a leotard enters from the upstage door and walks to the left side of the mat. She carries a stick in one hand and a plate in the other. Everything she is about to do she has done before. She smiles at the audience, puts the rim of the plate on the top of the stick, and begins plate spinning. Lights down.)

(Lights up on SL. DONNA enters from the upstage door and stirs the noodles in the pot. She checks the oven.

She opens the fridge and gets the salad ready. Lights down.

(Lights up on SC. A MAN in a leotard walks onto the right side of the mat, carrying two sticks in one hand and two plates in the other. He looks at the audience, winks, and begins spinning two plates. The WOMAN looks at the audience and gives a stage frown. Lights down.)

(Lights up on SR. ANDREW fills out an application form. He looks at young ROBBY, who is kneeling on the floor and reading. ROBBY begins to read out loud.)

ANDREW: Robby, shhh. I can't fill out Mommy's forms when you make noise.

(Lights up on SC. The MAN wobbles one of the spinning plates. Everything he is doing he has done before. He regains his balance and flashes a smile for the audience. The WOMAN feigns disappointment that the MAN prevailed. She still spins one plate.

(Lights down SR. Lights up SL.)

DONNA: Mollie! Dinner!

MOLLIE: (offstage) Coming!

(The WOMAN picks up another stick and plate from the floor. As the MAN watches, she winks at the audience begins spinning two plates as MOLLIE enters the kitchen. The MAN looks at the audience and gives a stage frown. Lights down SC.)

DONNA: How's the homework coming?

MOLLIE: Easy. It's math. And I got an A- on my test today—

DONNA: Good for you!

MOLLIE: —so I'm not worried about it. Yeah, that was cool. Oh man, though, I hate English. Mr. Krazno gives us these stupid little quizzes every day that asks questions like, "How many steps did Arthur take to get to Merlin's castle?" Who cares? That's not even the point of the book.

DONNA: Well, that's silly!

MOLLIE: I know! I have to read every itty bitty detail in order to ace those things. It's like he thinks we don't have any other classes. Like we don't have soccer practices and part time jobs and other papers to write.

(Lights up SC. A teenage GIRL in a leotard stands between the MAN and the WOMAN. She twirls three plates. The MAN and WOMAN stare at the GIRL as she smiles at the audience. Lights down SC.)

DONNA: (setting table) I know, honey. You're doing great. How was practice?

MOLLIE: Oh, it was crazy. He made us practice outside!

DONNA: Outside? Oh, no, really?

MOLLIE: Yeah. So we're all bundled up with headbands and gloves and like snowpants over our shinguards. We did sprints pretty much all practice, 'cause kicking the ball was like kicking a block of ice. Coach got on Jenny's back, too, 'cause she said the cold was messing with her asthma. I ran slower and told her to keep up with me so she could finish. She was really thankful about it, but I think Coach got mad.

DONNA: That's terrible. I don't know what your coach was thinking.

MOLLIE: I know, right? He's a little unbalanced.

(JACK enters. MOLLIE subconsciously slumps. DONNA quickens her pace in setting the table, but only after she first kisses JACK on the cheek.)

JACK: Hey.

(Lights down. Lights up SR.)

ROBBY: (looking up from comic book) When is Mommy coming out?

ANDREW: I don't know, buddy. The doctors have to find out why she's acting the way she's acting.

ROBBY: She yelled at me.

ANDREW: No, she didn't.

ROBBY: She did. She yelled and said to shut up.

ANDREW: That's why we're here, Robby. The doctors are finding out what is making Mommy so upset.

ROBBY: I wasn't wrong. I was reading. She always tells me to be quiet and read. Or do my Lego's. Or video games. I always have to do things and I have to be shut up when I do it.

(Lights up SC on a preteen BOY in a leotard, who upstages the GIRL between the WOMAN and the MAN. He also spins three plates. The MAN, WOMAN and GIRL stare at the BOY as he smiles at the audience. Lights down SC.)

ANDREW: I know, Robby. You're doing great. How's that comic you're reading?

ROBBY: He has a cape and can fly! And guns don't hurt him. And he fights all these bad guys and he always wins.

ANDREW: Let me see that. Ah, yes, Superman.

ROBBY: Yeah but he's also this other guy with glasses. And he can only be one at a time, because if he were both it would ruin everything.

ANDREW: That's a tough act to balance, isn't it?

(CARRIE enters. ROBBY goes back to quietly reading. ANDREW quickens his pace in filling out the form, but only after he first kisses CARRIE on the cheek.)

CARRIE: Hey.

(Lights down. Lights up on SC. All four performers stand in a line, spinning plates. All vie for the audience's attention. From the upstage door enter GUY and GAL. They both balance separately on big, black, rubber balls. The GUY heads near the WOMAN and GIRL and the GAL heads near the MAN and the BOY. The white light fades to a pale red. This was never part of the act, but everyone continues spinning. Lights down.

(Lights up SL. Everyone sits at the table. MOLLIE stacks

the salt shaker on top of the pepper shaker. She adds the Parmesan cheese container and whatever else is in reach.

(Pause.)

JACK: How's school?

MOLLIE: It's fine.

(Pause.)

DONNA: Tell Dad what you got on your math test.

MOLLIE: An A-.

JACK: Oh. Did you study enough?

DONNA: I saw her hard at work last night after the game—

JACK: Was I talking to you? (to MOLLIE) You can get an A if you really study. If you really put your mind to it.

(Lights up SC. The GUY comes uncomfortably close to the WOMAN and the GIRL. Lights down SC.)

MOLLIE: I studied.

JACK: (more concerned) How'd practice go? Is that one girl looking better? Number 8? What's her name? (Inquiring) Huh?

MOLLIE: I don't know who 8 is. I only know their names, not their numbers.

JACK: She looked terrible last night. I was sitting next to her parents, too, and I don't know how they sat through the whole game. They said she wasn't feeling well, but you know what I think it was? I think it was booze. You know? I think she's a drinker. She's got that extra fat and I know you young girls are maturing and... you know... but she's got that drinker's belly. (A beat) How old are these meatballs?

DONNA: Do they taste bad?

JACK: They taste old. Did you check the expiration date?

DONNA: Well, no, but I was just at the store last week.

JACK: (eating another meatball, disgusted) Dammit. They taste old.

DONNA: You don't have to eat them. Don't eat them.

JACK: They're old. They taste—

DONNA: Old, I know. Don't eat them.

JACK: I don't like your tone.

DONNA: You said they're old. If they're old, they're old—

JACK: I know what I said! (A beat.) God dammit.

(JACK gets up, pushing the table forward and knocking down MOLLIE's structure. He exits upstage.)

MOLLIE: Who cares?

(Lights down SL. Lights up SC. The WOMAN and the GIRL look around to see their plates and sticks are everywhere on the mat. The GUY heads over to his ball, which is still rolling over a few plates. He picks it up and looks at the WOMAN and the GIRL. He leaves. The MAN and BOY, still spinning, look back and forth between the WOMAN and GIRL and the GAL on the black ball. Lights down SC.)

(Lights up SR. CARRIE sits in a chair, with ANDREW sitting beside her. ROBBY is now playing with blocks, stacking them upon one another.)

ANDREW: So what did they say?

CARRIE: Tinnitus.

(Pause.)

ANDREW: What does that mean?

CARRIE: It means there's a sound in my ear that won't go away.

ANDREW: A sound?

CARRIE: Yes, Andrew, a sound.

(Pause.)

ANDREW: What do you mean—

CARRIE: I don't know, a sound. A ringing. A buzzing. A roaring, a hissing, a whistling; a sound. Something that I

can hear when apparently I'm not supposed to be hearing it. Even Robby understands what a sound is.

(Lights up SC. The GAL comes uncomfortably close to the MAN and the BOY. Lights down SC.)

ROBBY: I know what sound is.

CARRIE: (To Robby) How you doing, honey?

ROBBY: Fine.

ANDREW: He's been good. He's been quiet.

CARRIE: He's always quiet now, when I'm around. It doesn't even matter. I'd rather he talk. The doctor says other sounds can help keep me distracted.

ANDREW: How did you get it?

CARRIE: Well, he said there are two causes: either it's from being in a loud environment or it's from stress. I didn't really think being around hairdryers and talking heads all day was enough to count for a loud environment, so I talked to him about Robby, and how all the other kids on the street aren't injury-prone like he is and how it's always our house that's the 'hangout house.' The stress makes sense.

ANDREW: How does it go away?

CARRIE: It doesn't.

ANDREW: The tinridus—

CARRIE: Tinnitus.

ANDREW: The tinnitus doesn't go away, ever?

CARRIE: That's what I said.

ANDREW: What do you mean—

CARRIE: It's stress related, Andrew, which means it's not going to go away until there's no more stress, and there's always going to be stress if you don't stop asking me all these damn questions!

(CARRIE gets up from her chair, bumping the table and knocking down ROBBY's structure. She exits through the upstage door.)

ROBBY: Shut up.

(Lights down SR. Lights up SC. The MAN and the BOY

look around to see their plates and sticks are everywhere on the mat. The GAL heads over to her ball which is still rolling over a few plates. She picks it up and looks at the MAN and the BOY. She leaves. The MAN and BOY look at one another, then look at the WOMAN and the GIRL. All turn and face the audience, apologetically.

(Lights slowly fade up on SL and remain at sixty percent.)

MOLLIE: The meatballs are fine.

DONNA: Uh huh.

MOLLIE: It was a good dinner.

DONNA: Thanks.

(Pause.)

DONNA: I should clean up.

MOLLIE: You always clean up. I'll clean up.

(The GIRL picks up a remaining stick. She looks at the WOMAN.)

DONNA: An A- is fine.

MOLLIE: Yeah.

DONNA: More than fine. I'm proud of you.

MOLLIE: Thanks.

(Pause.)

MOLLIE: I'll study more tonight after work.

DONNA: Your homework comes first. You can take a night off. I'll call them. If you need help studying, I'm here.

(DONNA goes to a telephone to call while MOLLIE cleans up.

(The WOMAN picks up a remaining plate. Together, the WOMAN and the GIRL are able to get the plate spinning. They look at each other.

(Lights slowly fade up on SR and remain at sixty percent.)

ROBBY: I was quiet.

ANDREW: I know you were. That's not why Mommy yelled.

ROBBY: You weren't quiet.

(Pause.)

ANDREW: That's not why Mommy yelled, either.

(The MAN picks up a remaining stick. He looks at the BOY.)

ANDREW: That was a nice tower you built.

ROBBY: Want to see how to build it?

(Pause.)

ANDREW: We need to check on Mommy.

ROBBY: See? One here. Two on top. Three here. Four on top.

(ANDREW kneels by ROBBY, putting an arm around ROBBY's shoulders.)

ANDREW: Hmm. I don't know, bud. I bet Superman couldn't even have built that.

ROBBY: If he did, it wouldn't have fallen down.

(ANDREW and ROBBY continue to create a block tower.

(The BOY picks up a remaining plate. Together, the BOY and the MAN are able to get the plate spinning. They look at each other.

(Eventually the lights fade on SR and SL. At the same time, the pale red light has neutralized to the original white light. The BOY, MAN, WOMAN and GIRL slowly turn to face the audience, still spinning, and face completely forward by the time the lights have faded to black on SR and SL.

(Slowly, all four performers lower the two sticks until the sticks touch the ground. The performers look at the

audience, each other, and exit upstage. The plates continue spinning on the sticks as lights CS fade to black.)

Seventh Calvary Prize

Evan Scott Bryson

Objects dangle from the rafters: the skeleton of a rusted thrasher, the carcass of a coyote, several window frames, and a dream catcher. The stage floor is a field of broken corn stalks, shorn soy, and brown sod. Monochromatic lighting, dull blues, a backdrop of windswept, ashen prairie. No greens. Thin autumn cold. AMERROSE ELK LOOKS BACK is matter-of-fact and spunky, confident and proud. ELDROS RENAULT is straightforward, but his logic is sometimes faulted by his own incomprehension and flat-telling of events; he shouldn't contradict Amerrose's descriptions, but shy away from that side of his personality in this instance. PAUL RENAULT'S GHOST looks more crow than man, and is disgusted with his self. When he caws in the language of crows, the theatre should use stereo enhancement. Characters enter and exit casually. A change of meter, thought, or emphasis is indicated by a hard break in the text, and should be considered pauses.

AMERROSE ELK LOOKS BACK: I told Eldros about the state police officer calling me a prairie nigger and he says, 'What'd you expect?' I say, 'I expect not to be called a prairie nigger by a man behind a badge.' 'Badge don't mean a thing,' says Eldros. 'Pa had a badge he carved himself, outta bark. When he got real drunk he'd wave it his son's face and tell us to bend over.' I hate when Eldros says dumb shit like that to end a serious conversation. We never talk on the phone because he's never serious, even about his dad dying. Like all he can say is stupid stuff about his homboys or make fun of the rez. 'How do you find the population of Mission? —Roll a penny down the street.' Or 'What's a Mission BLT? —Black Lab and Tomato.' Eh—oh, yeah, he loves this one: 'Why do Mission parents walk their kids to school? —They're in the same grade.' Those jokes are bunk. (shaking head) Mission's parents never walk their kids to school because they're still too drunk.

Dating a white guy is bad enough, but one from Valentine, Nebraska? 'Quit saggin yo pants,' I tell him, 'you need to check yoself in yo combine mirror.' (We say 'yo' some times when we be ghetto. I dunno. It's stupid sounding, ennit?) He says, 'Shave that. You makin Indian blanket outta all that fur?' Like—what's a Lakota girl say to that? We've broken up so many times we stopped counting. He says, 'When you bleed, we break up. Just circle those five days on the calendar.' My parents hate him. They think he's trash. I love him.

Rez boys like to get naked. Me and rez boys start kissing, they want to strip. They get down to their shorts and their smooth chests gleam with sweat and they keep their tongues so far out of their mouths they get dry, after dribbling at the edges. They pull off their shorts and they want business done. Standing, with a finger pointing at a mirror like they be Crazy Horse. Eldros won't even take off his shirt, not even when he's hot. 'I aint gittin sun burnt,' he says. We be goin one morning after I spent the night, and I say, 'Hey take off your shirt.' He say, 'No just keep going.' 'No take off your shirt.' 'Why?' he ask. 'Because I like to hold your shoulders.' He say: 'Just lift up.' I say: 'No

I'm not going to fight your shirt while sucking your dick.' Eldros say: 'Look. Just push it above my stomach and you can put your hands on my shoulders, on my chest.' I say: 'No I don't want to stretch your shirt.' 'I have class in half an hour, you have class in fifteen minutes.' 'That's why as soon as you take off your shirt.' 'Fine.' 'Fine.'

His body isn't lousy. He has those lines at the hips, go down under his boxers like Usher. He isn't dark and he isn't diabetic with fat but he thinks he's pale and he thinks he's scrawny. Has buckets of Creatine and Whey protein under his bed, old set of free-weights his dad used as a kid. Eldros drives the most jacked-up Dodge in the state of Nebraska, 46 inch rims, hydraulics, nitros—can park an Accord under it. Some kids in the senior class did, I think, one time. He roars into Todd County and picks me up along a field road in Rosebud, and we go back to Valentine and walk on the sidewalk with hearts painted all up and down it. I say, 'This shit's gay. Your whole town is for stupid white wives in love with themselves. They roller-painted your whole town with one stencil in one night, and now all the street signs have hearts, too.' And he turns and gets on one knee and says, 'You're a dyke. I love you. I roller-painted the entire town in one night to prove this to you.'

ELDROS RENAULT: Pa got his arm caught in a thresher and the arm tore off jagged and so he bled out in a company field off of 83. When he didn't show up for dinner Ma told me to get in the truck and take him out a plate, so I did, and I went up 465 then cut across on 18, before deciding to go through a back-pasture to meet with 83. I burned through 57 miles of diesel and dim dusk light before I saw crows circling low. I'd already eaten his plate, so at least that wasn't a loss.

Ma had made ham meatloaf special, and biscuits from the freezer, and boiled baby carrots for some reason. Ma knows we both hate boiled baby carrots. The combine was out of fuel and everything was quiet, so I pulled Pa's arm off the ground and laid it beside him, trying to square it

with the rest of his body, even getting the raggedy edges of his shirt to line up. Sick business too but I couldn't stop myself. I looked into the thresher, see what was clogging her, and found a coyote'd shored herself in the blades. I cursed the bitch, got back in the truck and took a long time to drive back home.

When I was standing over his body, I kept thinking to myself, 'You don't even like the man,' but I didn't say anything out loud because I thought he might hear me. I thought he'd rise from the parsed soy and beat me with his detached arm. Ma was in the backroom watching TV when I got home. She called after me and I told her Pa needed another auger, another trailer, and I told Dusty and Rig to come with me. 'What you got out there?' asks Dusty, and Rig says, 'You got pornos?' wiping his nose on his sleeve. I put my finger to my mouth then brought a flashlight under my face in the barn lot. 'Boo,' I say, putting Rig on edge. That kid's hated spooks since I read him Berenstain Bear Halloween stories. Those bears scaring the hell out of him sure shamed Pa. 'We're gonna recover some spooks,' I tell them as we get into the truck cab. 'Whose spooks?' asks Dusty. 'You'll just have to wait to see when we get there.' My kid brothers hated Pa too. But I'm not sure why I wanted them to see him. I'm not sure why I didn't drag his ass into the truck bed, sugar his eyes and let the vultures do their work. 'Something we need to see,' I tell the boys, unwrapping a stick of chewing gum for the long drive. My brothers held out their hands and I split a piece between them and we chewed in silence. Dusty tapped the windows, breathing over constellations, and Rig sucked his thumb and put his head in my armpit.

'Is Pa out here?' asked Rig, circling fingers in the cool night, pointing at the combine, still and black against the blue dark. I nodded. 'Yep.' Dusty and Rig ran from the truck, racing after the corpse, I guess, and fell to their knees when they saw him. Their hands made such little fists. We stayed there all night, not saying nothing, waiting for the wolves to take Pa away. But they never came. And around 5 in the

morning a sheriff's deputy pulled around and took Dusty and Rig with him, knees still locked and eyes fixed on their father, and when the coroner strolled up at dawn, I was still holding the flashlight, even though the batteries were dead.

PAUL RENAULT'S GHOST: Can still hear that little fucker's breathing over my knees. Had to ask myself, 'You like high schoolers because you never fucked around in high school, yessum?' Yes. Some. If his ma hadn't turned out like flayed broodmare, swept up under the paunch—what are those exercises you can do discreet-like to stay tight?—maybe my face would be buried where those lips spread, instead...

CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! I caint stop crowing! I'm a crow-clock. When I died my ghost grew black wings and my mass shrank and I got a beak on my face! I eat worms! (conceding) On occasion, I will also eat toads and snakes. I am the devil's breastfed. I'm the devils best breadwinner. In the dead of winter I'm the devil's dark hell freezing over and over and over. The earth demons gave me a clock so I could tell the passing of the seasons, since I don't see color or feel temperature, and rarely, if ever, hear more than the voices of my sons.

Cunt did a ghost dance. By herself. The boy talked to her father one night, dropping his cud like a muddy steer, ball-less and splattering poop on it tail—talkin about how my death was nothin too hard on the wife and kids. That savage still dain find the boy heroic. Hell, why would he? Lanky, puny, albino Eldros, with his drawers fluffed above his belt loops. 'You look like a fool, Eldros,' I told him. 'And stay away from that girl.' 'Why?' he asked, and I looked at him dead in the eye, and said to that boy: CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! (gaining control, breathing heavily) Fuck!

So she did a ghost dance when no one was looking. Late at night. Put my body in a crow with a clock. Whispering the words. And out of the darkness I saw my son standing

above me, putting my arm back where it'd been, messing with the shirt. Puke rose up in him and he spit it out to the side, and he kept working. I was inside myself and outside myself. I was a crow up high and also the old fart lying dead in a field he didn't even own. In a life of despicable moments, that moment was most despicable.

Flew to the window one morning and perched right there and stared at the two kids while they touched each other. Boy had that same sick face he made standing over my knees, same bile boiling up like he would spit it to the side as she wrestled with his belt. She kept saying for him to take off his shirt, and the little turd was terrified old scars would crop up, too coward to take his blowjob. I'm dead for three months and the punk still thinks the bruise...still thinks the bruises—CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! And (gasping) he's remembering messing with my arm on my shirt and she's working him over, and the boy—CUH-CAW! CUH-CAW! CUH-fuck!-CAW! He can still feel me!

(The sound of cawing fills the theatre.)



Contributors

Nouf Althonaian is a freshman business major and art minor from Saudi Arabia. Her photograph is about ice; she likes the ice when it begins to break up and dissolve into the lake. It signifies the end of winter and the coming of spring.

Jonathon Becker admits to being initially resistant to airplanes. He has since come around.

Emily Jane Boedecker must have good luck with apples.

Evan Scott Bryson never had any idea how far he would go or who he would meet. Now he owes money everywhere and to everyone. Lauren Schreiber, Netha Cloeter, the Bros. Bryson, and Professor Schuette-Hoffman were critical to his writing in this issue. Everybody else—he's probably been harboring a crush on you for months.

Rachael Button's piece is excerpted from a collection of essays which explore the ideas of place and memory through her experiences in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. She is grateful for the guidance she has received from her peers and professors.

Valerie Cochran is moving to Austin, TX after graduation where she has plans to spend the rest of her days solving those Unsolved Mysteries that Robert Stack didn't get to.

Amanda Gartman is a sophomore art and French major hailing from the suburbs of Cleveland. A big thank you goes out to all of her models for working without pay, especially to those making an appearance in this semester's Lighter: Kimberly Sienkie-

wicz, James Strasburg, Lauren Nelson, Tim Straub, and the triceratops.

Thomas Heet is a graduate student in the MALS program studying human behavior and society. Parts, anyway. Some of his inspirations are countrysides, Werner Herzog, Ingmar Bergman, Evan Bryson and Brekke Berg. His talents are enjoying and making music and merry. His curry sauce, however, could use improvement.

Stephanie Lehman is a senior English and journalism major, new to the realm of photography. Having never shot film before January 2008, she found she enjoyed the sensation of capturing the “perfect” shot. Her two photographs “IDLE” and “Out of Season” were inspired by the many summers spent on her father’s boat on the Chain O’Lakes in northern Illinois, and “Vanish” was the shot that inspired her final portfolio for her Photo 1 class, which focused on vanishing points. Stephanie would like to thank the Boys in Photo 1 for all of their help and support, as well as Aimee Tomasek for her direction and inspiration.

Jason Lukas is seeking the perfect wave, serenity, and the ideal. He finds joy in subtlety, water, moments of silent companionship, and old growth forests. A loving thank you to many people for many reasons. You spoil him and he truly appreciates it. Let’s go eat, sleep, and drink so that we can explore, create, share, and expand. Let us ride. Let us live.

Dan Lund is a freshman, majoring in art and history. One of his greatest passions is photography, and it is second probably only to the Cubs. Unfortunately

there is no thing as a professional fan, so a profession involving photography is his ultimate goal.

Jamie Petitto writes 80% truthfully about the things she thinks or does. For the other 20% she offers a bit of drama or comedy to help everybody else understand her thoughts and actions. Daily, she spins the plates of work, class, extracurriculars, relationships... and she knows if she focuses too hard on one plate or if she momentarily forgets another, everything she has spent an uncountable amount of time working for can come crashing down in an instant. That’s why she needs others to help her keep spinning, and she’s more than happy to reciprocate. She is from Carol Stream, IL and is involved with Soul Purpose and the Reserve Soccer Team, and blah blah blah blah she likes stuff!

Nathanael Romero is a senior philosophy major from Clinton, Michigan. Growing up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he and his friends would make frequent trips to the McDonald’s on the corner of San Mateo and Gibson. The very actions depicted in his poem, “Freebies,” have forced McDonald’s to use cups for water that are distinct from the ones used for soft drinks. He heard somewhere that McDonald’s, in another penny-pinching move, no longer serves free baby cones.

Kati Schmidt discovers her art in the words of literature and lyricist. She is grateful to Mark for the inspiration; she can’t resist drawing what he writes. She hopes he finds what he’s looking for, and that he’ll let her know when he does. She also hopes someday to create what she hasn’t read, but some words are too beautiful to leave undrawn.

Plans

the four of us,
we signed up to live in that house on monroe.
started thinkin bout the walls and what to put on them,
and landed on this silly juvenile idea.
the plan was to get a camera and suits and cocktails and a pool table.
the plan was to recreate that epic black n white of the rat pack.
the plan was to blow it up and frame it and hang it somewhere good.
that was the plan.
but sammy davis junior wrapped his car around a pole.

we were gonna step back after hanging that dumb picture and laugh,
and yours was gonna be the loudest.
we were gonna break the frame rough-housing
and split the cost to replace it, four ways.

we were gonna huddle together years later
and point our thirty-year-old fingers to the place where it used to hang.
we were gonna wonder whatever happened to it at one of our monthly breakfasts.
and you were gonna tell us your grandson hung it in his room.

you must've gotten something wrong.
you've gotta come back.

- Paul Schreiber

