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the
lighter

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All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process. The Lighter is an award-winning university journal of literature and art that welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation. The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this publication. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University. ❖



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TABLE OF CONTENTS



PAGE	CATEGORY	TITLE	AUTHOR
6		Interview with S.L. Wisenberg	Ellen Orner
12	poetry	New Crop	Ellen Orner
13	art	Nest	Ashley Roll
14	art	Sentinals	Adam Jackson
15	poetry	Making Strawberry Preserves	Stephanie Burch
16	prose	A Study in Gray	Ethan Grant
18	art	Momentary Place	Ashley Roll
19	art	Untitled	Caleb Kortokrax
20	poetry	Hands	Jeremy Reed
21	art	Bird on a Stick	Adam Jackson
22	art	Yellowstone Untitled #156	William Graff
23	art	Urban Constitutional	Dan Lund
24	prose	The Death of a Tree	Eric Hilmer
28	poetry	Once Upon the Klostersgosse	Ethan Grant
29	art	Taking a Moment	Emily Royer
30	prose	Hazel, Crissey, Lucy, and Kate	Ellen Orner
33	art	Espoir	Ali DeVries
34	art	Eyes on Me	Adam Jackson
35	art	Dancing Feet	Timothy Campos
36	poetry	Mountain Landscape	Eric Hilmer
37	art	Untitled	Caleb Kortokrax
38	prose	A Better Question	Jeremy Reed
44	art	Home-made Rocket	Tim Staub
45	poetry	In the Basement of the Lake	R. James Onofrey
46	art	Escape	Janelle Ramsel



PAGE	CATEGORY	TITLE	AUTHOR
47	art	San Marco	Emily Bahr
48	prose	Just Fine	Ethan Grant
54	poetry	Bienvenidos, Dinner Guest	Amy Rohwer
55	art	The Visitors	Karl Strasen
56	poetry	Antiphon	Ethan Grant
57	art	Resting Place	Emily Royer
58	prose	At Market with My Mother	Stephanie Burch
60	art	Orchestra Illuminated	Dan Lund
61	art	Gilded Recital	Dan Lund
62	prose	This Side of the Highway	R. James Onofrey
64	art	Night Transit	Dan Lund
65	poetry	From the Porch	Ellen Orner
66	art	Untitled	Caleb Kortokrax
67	art	Glimpse	Emily Royer
68	prose	Angry Colors	William Milhans
72	art	Elly With Kite	Karl Strasen
73	art	The Garden	Abbey Houx
74	art	Untitled	Anna DeLuna
75	poetry	Enrobing	Ellen Orner
76	prose	Crissey Dreams a Long Dream	Ellen Orner
78	art	Whiskers	Jeannie Halvorsen
79	art	Bridger Bowl Ridge Hike	Tim Staub
80	poetry	Albaicin	Amy Rowher
81	art	Z	Adam Jackson
82		Contributors' Notes	

INTERVIEW WITH S.L. WISENBERG

 Ellen Orner

Wordfest's last visiting writer of 2011, S. L. Wisenberg, grew up in Houston, Texas, received her B.S. from The Medill School of Journalism, and her MFA in Creative Writing from the Iowa Writer's Workshop. She has published poetry and prose in The New Yorker, Ploughshares, and Tikkun, among others. Her books include The Sweetheart is In (Stories) (Northwestern University Press, 2001), Holocaust Girls: History, Memory, and Other Obsessions (University of Nebraska Press, 2002), and most recently, Cancer Bitch (University of Iowa Press, 2010), based on her blog. She has received a Pushcart Prize and fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Wisenberg co-directs the M.A./M.F.A. in Creative Writing program at Northwestern University, and lives in Chicago.

..... APRIL 4, 2011, MUELLER COMMONS

Ellen Orner: I read on your blog that you were a substitute portrait artist for a little bit at Astroworld, the amusement park. Was that in Houston?

Sandi Wisenberg: Oh. Yeah.

EO: Could you say a little bit about that experience?

SW: Um . . . let's see. I had this friend named Kathy, when we were in junior high, and she had all these ideas for things

to do. I think she ran for student council and so I ran for student council . . . and then in high school, I guess we ran for student council again, and then at one point she said, you know let's apply for jobs at Astroworld . . . It was one of my first real summer jobs. You just apply, and I don't know how they decided what division to put you in but I was an artist helper. There were artists who did profiles, as well as caricatures and silhouettes. And I couldn't do caricatures or silhouettes cause that was too hard, but I was pretty good at drawing, and so sometimes I did the profiles.

EO: Did you enjoy it?

SW: Yeah!

EO: It sounds like fun to me.

SW: Yeah, yeah, it was good. It was a weird place to work, because we wore costumes, and sometimes you'd be in the alpine village, and sometimes you'd be in the Chinese section. And then, we were in high school, we'd go to parties that you know, started at midnight at the college kids' apartments, and so that was very exciting.

EO: After you got out of work?

SW: Mm-hmm.

EO: Thanks. I just had to satisfy that curiosity.

SW: Oh, okay.

EO: You have a B.S. in journalism

SW: Yes.

EO: And you taught the Cherubs journalism program at Northwestern for three years. How were you influenced by studying and teaching journalism first?

SW: They teach you in journalism school—at least they taught us—that you could find out enough about anything, really quickly. And so, I just sort of have that attitude. There are ways of finding out about something, and of making it understandable to yourself and other people. So, I can be put off by certain kinds of jargon, but I do assume that I can figure things out. I can figure things out about history, maybe about illness, or about . . . I mean, if I can figure out about zoning and taxation, I can figure out about other stuff. And I think that some people don't have that experience. Even though when you're in college you have that experience, but I guess someone's guiding you through, from step to step. And I also . . . I do believe that when you're writing something that you call nonfiction, it should be nonfiction. Being in journalism made that feeling stronger. You're not supposed to make up quotes. And you can interview people to add to whatever you're writing. I think some people don't think about it because they just don't have that experience. Maybe it made me a better observer . . . possibly.

EO: You've written poetry and prose, as well as nonfiction. Do you have a favorite?

SW: I consider myself more of a nonfiction writer, but it's mostly because I've read more in it, I think? And I think the genre is smaller. Contemporary nonfiction writers, they're much fewer than fiction writers. And I think I like reading nonfiction better. But, I'm in the middle of writing two books right now; one's fiction, the other is nonfiction, so . . . I wouldn't want to choose.

EO: In the Creative Writing Senior Seminar that Allison Schuette teaches, we read the book *Cancer Bitch* first, and then we read the blog. The purpose was to think about process. Not just to see what we could discover about revision, but also to think about how the book was affected by the original format you used—the medium—which is a new one. I mean, maybe not . . . it's not a hypertext or anything, but it has this immediacy to it. Are you interested in new media? Was that something you were thinking about in writing the blog first and then the book from it?

SW: No. I'm sort of . . . scared of anything new. I didn't read blogs, I knew that journalists were having to write blogs to supplement what they were already doing in their jobs. I knew at the *Chicago Reader*, which is an alternative weekly, that they were starting to have to write blogs. And when I was going through biopsies and getting results, I thought to myself, okay, if I have cancer I'm gonna make a blog. And I think it was just because I wanted an outlet. I knew it was go-

ing to be this big deal in my life and I wanted to write about it. I suppose I learned early on about making links. I learned way, way later that a lot of people's blogs are just about commenting on a link. But I was writing it more like a journal. I guess now because there's less going on in my life having to do with cancer, I do more responses to news, and about health. I spent a lot of time revising each piece. Working on it, and then working and working and working to shape it, like, that day.

EO: Before you posted it.

SW: Yeah.

EO: And then you worked some more before putting it in the book.

SW: Mm-hmm.

EO: Can you talk a little bit about what revising was like, for this book?

SW: For this book . . . my writing group said the first part was not interesting because it was too much of a process, like, there was a lump, and then there was this appointment, this appointment, this appointment . . . so I got rid of that and made a new beginning. And they also said I was talking about these friends of mine and not really introducing them, so I introduced them at the beginning. I put in one piece that wasn't there in the middle, and the last piece that I'd already written but hadn't put in the blog because I wanted to publish it sometime. That's the only reason it wasn't on the blog. And then I took out a lot of stuff. Just because I had a word count. I had too many words.

EO: We noticed little things, because we looked pretty closely, like a date changing, that we figured . . . mattered in that it probably made the book better from your point of view, but didn't matter in that it wasn't a transgression of the nonfiction idea—

SW: Ooh, did I have a different date?

EO: There—there was an instance—

SW: Really? Oh God. That's terrible!

EO: Well, it was just a reordering.

SW: You'll have to point that out to me, because I didn't mean to do that. I mean, I didn't write about the Farewell to My Breast party because I was afraid people might feel bad if they weren't invited . . . so I wrote that in retrospect.

(laughter)

EO: What are your thoughts—this is a more general question—on narrative? Some writers say things like, to have a story, you know, something must happen. I read a couple of the stories in *The Sweetheart Is In* collection, and I really enjoyed them, and I didn't, um, feel that . . . push.

SW: No. I never . . . I think, I mean, you know, obviously, I went to school, and I have an MFA, but sometimes I feel like I'm a naïve artist or . . . a peasant, in a way, because I somehow ended up at Iowa in this MFA program, and I had never taken a short story class. There were all these things everybody else knew about, like, that you should have suspense at the beginning. And it's like, *why?! And they said, 'cause it's more interesting. And I said, oh, okay. And there's*

all these things like, Freytag's pyramid or something, and I don't know if I should—I probably should know about them. But, I just think, all you want is for your reader to keep reading the next sentence. And so if you can just keep them doing that, and then for them to feel something at the end, like, okay, that's a complete . . . something or other.

But I do think about narrative because I'm not so interested in it in a traditional story. But I'm a hypocrite because I know it's easier to remember a story you've read if it has that structure, so . . . I don't know. There are a couple books I really like that don't have that narrative, but I can just tell you about little pieces of them, because I don't remember the whole.

And the thing is, I've been writing this novel—I probably started it when you were a couple years old. Parts of it have been published but . . . it's sort of a mystery, but I want it to be read in any order, and so that's really hard. I've worked on it so many different ways, so many different structures, and nothing feels right except just to have little pieces, you know? And the nonfiction book I'm writing now is little pieces. I work as a freelance editor, helping people write their traditional novels, but God forbid, I don't know if I could write a traditional novel.

EO: Well, I definitely enjoy reading the little pieces of things, too.

SW: Oh, good.

EO: I enjoy the economy of language that I've noticed in anything that I've read of yours.

SW: Thank you.

EO: There's this terseness, sometimes. You do have this hu-

mor, and honesty, and you call yourself out on things pretty consistently, but not so consistently as to seem systematic about, you're just sort of . . . being human. But do you think that your concision has anything to do with your having written poetry first?

SW: Yeah, probably. When I was applying to grad school I think I applied, I think everywhere, for both. But I only got into one poetry program and the rest were all fiction. And then, at least at Iowa, it was like, "I am a fiction writer." And you met on a different day than the poets. We were different. So I just had that identity. And then, there was one summer after grad school that I wrote a lot of poetry. I like poetry; I'd feel very insecure teaching it, but rhythm is really important to me. The rhythm of a sentence. And I can't really tell you, okay, this is because it's iambic, or it's this or that. But certain rhythm just feels right to me.

In journalism school we'd do this exercise where you'd cut out as many words as you could, or your teacher would cut out words on your paper, and you know, I cut out words on my students' papers, and I assume . . . either they like it or they don't. Sometimes they don't like it because I can see when they revise it . . .

EO: It's back in.

SW: (laughs) Yeah. I've done that, too. But yeah, I really like terse, condensed language. I'm just thinking of Dickens. I just read over a page of it the other day. I don't think he wastes words. He writes long sentences but he doesn't waste words. I'm doing a workshop on voice for some highschool teachers, so I made a comparison of the first parts of *David Copperfield* and *Catcher in the Rye*, because he makes a reference, and just comparing the tones, and all that. And you know, it's pretty funny, from the beginning.

EO: *David Copperfield*?

SW: Yeah, *David Copperfield*.

EO: Do you think *Catcher in the Rye* is funny, too?

SW: Uh . . . (long pause) I'm sure I thought it was at the time. The first part didn't seem very funny.

EO: I want to ask you about the humor thing, too . . . because that seems to be pretty pervasive in what you write. How do I ask this? Is it just . . . the way that you are? Or is it something that you set out to do?

SW: I think so, yeah.

EO: Both?

SW: No. I mean, I . . . I think I'm pretty funny. I don't think, okay, I'm gonna write something and it's gonna be funny. I guess I write something and it happens to strike me funny, or I make a joke of it, or, my thinking is doing something humorous, but I don't think I'm that conscious. I mean, sometimes I might be. Like, I might use a word in two different ways . . .

EO: To make a pun . . .

SW: Yeah, yeah.

EO: But sometimes there might be a little slap at the end. Like, you're laughing along with the joke and then you feel *SLAP.* This—matters.

SW: Yeah. I mean, I think you can joke about most things

. . . you just have to kinda . . . be aware of your surroundings. (laughter) I have this friend who just thought I was not taking everything seriously enough, by having the [Farewell to My Breast] party. And then there are some people who . . . There has been some criticism from the breast cancer community for people who make too much light of breast cancer and have too many cute tee-shirts, but, I don't know . . . I think it's okay. There are some things people say that make me cringe, like, there's this one group called "Save the Tatas," and I just think it's too silly . . . and there's this woman that paints with her breasts, but . . . why not?

EO: You said you have two books in the works. Do you want to tell us anything about them?

SW: The nonfiction one is about the South, and it's really different for me because I have been always seeing myself as part of this Jewish Diaspora, and part of this Jewish-European history, and I've never paid that much attention to American history, even though there are certain parts of it I've felt close to, like women's history. I'm writing about my southern history and about my family, going back a few generations—how they came from Eastern Europe and landed in the southern U.S., and looking at how they lived and, then what happened in the cities they lived in, that maybe had nothing to do with them. But it's just a way of writing about southern history because I have like, some connection. Like, my grandfather settled in Selma, Alabama, which is a really big civil rights place . . . By writing about just a few slices of things, I think it's possible to get a lot of history and attitude across . . . It's gonna have personal stories about my grandmother in Alabama, growing up, but then I'll also have a story about how Houston was integrated, which is sort of told as a parable. So it's going to have a mix of a whole bunch of different writing.

EO: Now I have to ask you another question, sorry. I read . . . I read somewhere that you read St. Augustine as a freshman in college,

SW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EO: And I have to ask you what, if any, influence religion has had on you as a writer.

SW: Yeah, yeah, you know, I had this big book about King Solomon when I was a kid. It was really interesting—I sort of remember the stories. The Queen of Sheba came and they matched wits. There are a lot of Bible stories that I know, and remember. When you say parables you're talking about the New Testament, and then, I had my students read some parables and they were Kafka parables. So there are all kind of different parables. I've made up parables before.

EO: I like that idea.

SW: So you can do that. In my class we were reading a piece in *Creative Nonfiction Magazine* from their Mexico issue, and it was about La Llarona, who was the weeping woman. She's this character in Mexican folklore. The writer was connecting her story with the story of the woman—was it Susan Smith?—who drowned her children in, I think it was South Carolina. And so I telling the students how they could write in parable, how you could write about your life as once upon a time. You know, it sort of gives you some distance . . . I just think it's an interesting way of defamiliarizing stories.

EO: I'm gonna have to try that.

SW: Yeah yeah yeah yeah. And read Eduardo Galeano—G-A-L-E-A-N-O—he's Uruguayan, and he's written a lot of

books that have little short pieces, and some are parables and some are . . . some are just so . . . he'll make a story out of something and then you'll realize where he got it from. Like he'll make a story out of dream. But he manages to defamiliarize things, so it's really interesting.

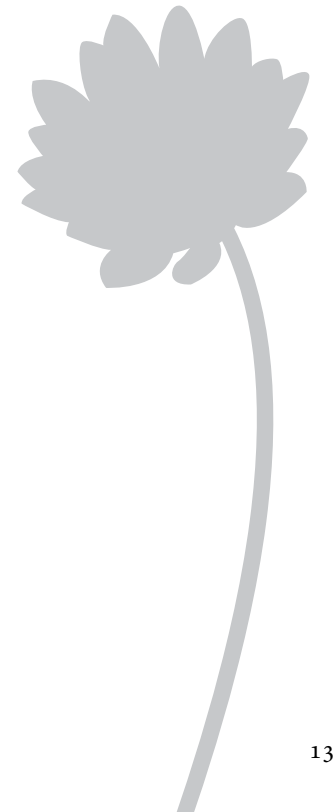
EO: And La Llarona?—how do you spell that one?

SW: L-L . . . A-R-O-N-A

EO: Ohhh yeah, that' how you get that y sound. Llama.

SW: Mm-hmm.

EO: Thank you. ❖



New Crop

🌿 *Ellen Orner*

I wander in to Art-Psych every winter
to see the new crop of apples
ripening in black and white,
some gray, some flat, some wizened
as old lovers, huddled
together to sleep.




Nest | Ashley Roll



Sentinels | Adam Jackson

Making Strawberry Preserves

 *Stephanie Burch*

I am told I have my grandmother's hands,
hers soft, worn, wrinkled along the ridges.
I watch her rinse plump, red strawberries
(picked by my grandfather's hands)
under the cold cascade of water dropping
from the faucet. She shakes the strainer,
turning her head as the water splashes
onto her shirt and cheek. She hands me
a rag, and I work, drying the empty jars
pulled from the dishwasher. "My mother
and I used to wash those by hand." I nod,
but can only remember her mother sitting,
always sitting. I watch her pour the berries
into a food mill, a Foley, "a wedding gift,"
she explains, and turns the handle briskly.
The metal plate presses the garden fruit,
and scrapes the edges of the stainless steel.
In a saucepan she brings the berries to a boil,
then reduces the heat, and busies herself
at the stove, adding sugar, stirring, boiling
the gummy mix again until the sweet
dissolves, and sets. She sticks a spoon
into the pot, raises it, and lets the jelly
drip. "See this, see how it pulls?" And
I do see. She spreads the warm preserves
on whole wheat toast; again, I watch her
hands, soft, steady, and passing on.

A Study in Gray

 *Ethan Grant*

I know at least the lake was gray. The mists that settled on the lake were also gray. Sheets of rain slashed down like blind fury as the flinty waters swirled and churned in the tumult, sweeping in waves over the cratered surface. Funny how rain spreads out like that, moving first in one direction, then another, sweeping, always sweeping. Pure physics, I suppose. The play of the pressure, the uneven heating which drives up the wind in certain ways, pushing and pulling the rains about. Still, I liked the look of it, the way the waters danced, all gray and muddy and electric. But we drove on.

.....

Gray is the color of dynamics, of change. Nothing dead is gray. The graying clouds mean the coming of rain. The grayed clouds mean the coming of blue. The sky is white in winter, gray in spring. The gray brings in the marsh, the lilacs, the rain. The sleeping black sky in the hours before dawn turns a pale ethereal gray as sunlight breaks in. The planet rolls on into the gray and the gray dissolves the stars. The ash from a campfire is gray at night, still heavy with heat, but by morning will be bleached bone-white and cold, with all life fled from it. Bones are white and are dead. A lifeless body is gray, but will not long be gray. It moves ever onward, back to the stuff of the earth and sea and stars. Just the white bones remain, and white bones are dead.

.....

We drove on, up to the building which to me looked like a castle, the kind that stand stark and grave on green Highland plains, keeping vigil over wide, misty lochs, where the distant

hills are vague gray shadows in the drooping atmosphere. My grandparents were there, I remember. We were in the Taurus, the one that smelled forever of new-car and newsprint and synthetic upholstery, whose radio was always tuned to classical music. We moved quickly inside with our black umbrellas spread and glistening as the lake winds strove to wrench them from our hands. I can still see the gray car sitting squat on the gravel driveway, it too shimmering, the rainwater running in rivulets down the windshield and trickling down the wheel-wells. The rains cascaded in glossy mirrors off the castle parapets, the stones all darkened with wet. It poured down in waves, pounding into the green lawn with dull, percussive thumps. Stare too long into the raining spring sky and it ceases to be gray. The gray breaks and moves away, and you see water falling from nowhere. The sky becomes hollow and white and rings like a Tibetan bowl with the tireless particles of clouds, the perpetual drive of physics. But I could not stare long. We moved quickly inside. The water had clouded over my eyes, and I knew nothing, I knew absolutely nothing.

.....

And the body in the coffin could not have heard the rain, though it fell loudly and pounded loudly upon the cedarwood, but it had to have been loud because I've heard wood like that in the rain before, though sheetmetal is louder, always a racket, so maybe the wood would have been quiet, not that it mattered to the body inside or to the granite gravestones making no sound, just silently guiding the falling streams down softly to the earth, and it meant nothing to those

standing around confused and quiet with no prayer but for the sister, my grandma, who offered what she could of Our Father who art in heaven hallow'd be thy name . . . for thine is the kingdom, the power, the glory forever, and how at the word forever she cried, my great aunt that windy day in the April rain with the coffin on the brow of the hill, not noticing how the rain fell on the cedarwood, or the lake, or how our shoes sank in the stirs of mud, or the matted mounds of grass beneath us, but we saw in it the spirits around us all, the spirits suspended in the grayness, the impenetrable grayness which is not a transition from light to dark, from life to death, but a whole unto itself, wholly unbreakable and immutable from then and forever on, and I wanted to cry, but I didn't, and they wanted to cry, but they didn't, just great aunt Cotty, a tired old woman, weeping so bitterly into her handkerchief for the body in the coffin which had once seen the sky, the blue, the sun, the black, the moon, the white, the gray, the glory forever, the body that had once had eyes to look up through the falling rain and fall forever asleep, baptized in the waves of watery gray that forever cleansed it, that cleansed us all. ❖



Momentary Place | Ashley Roll



Untitled | Caleb Kortokrax

Hands

 *Jeremy Reed*

Ripples echo out
Across the lake
While birds on either edge
Peck at the ground, pretending
Not to see each other.

I have calluses
On my hands.

Through the trees,
The leafless branches,
The open window,
Sunlight waxes to full
On the wooden floor
Beneath my feet.

I am defined by my limits,
These edges of shadows,
Bound by familiar cracks and cuts.

“Where have you come from
And where are you going?”
The angel said to the girl
In the book by my bed.

I write in the language
Of the people I've known.

My window's ice crystals are clacking
From the bodies moving out and up
And waking to each other, the stove,
The smell of yesterday's buttered toast.

My hand is not the hand
Of my grandfather,
I say mostly to convince myself.

Sometimes a ripple appears
Because of a fish
Below the water.
Sometimes the wind
Makes itself known.
Sometimes there are ripples
When you can't feel the wind.

I have wrinkles forming
In the cracks of my hands.

A bird,
One of many,
Leaves its edge
And flies across
The middle of the lake,
The knuckle
Of its lowered leg
Barely skimming the surface
Of the water.

The idea that if I want
To move my hand
It moves
Can still astound me.

My hand rests on the window frame
Forming wrinkles,
Passing time.
Knuckle up,
Knuckle down,
Making ripples echo out.



Bird on a Stick | Adam Jackson




Yellowstone Untitled #156 | William Graff



Urban Constitutional | Dan Lund

The Death of a Tree

 *Eric Hilmer*

It was after dinner, but still plenty warm and bright outside. We always ate dinners out there early. Catherine's grandparents were old. Her grandmother did crossword puzzles, but the language had changed since she was younger and she rarely finished them. When she exhausted the puzzles, or herself doing them, she would knit. She was a nice quiet old woman with white curly hair and pink coloring around her eyes. She wore little glasses to correct her sight, but still squinted through them when she looked at you. Catherine's grandfather used to farm and landscape. This had been his farm for sixty years. It wasn't much of a farm anymore. Just a house and land. When he was eighteen he had an accident with a machine and lost the index and middle finger and some of his thumb on his right hand. The fingers left, his ring finger and pinky, and half of his thumb, had developed to substitute for the missing two, and his handshake was still firm and full. He had grown old since his farming days, and I only ever knew him as an old man. He was dealing with failing kidneys and was going through dialysis everyday. Since he started dialysis he had been different. Every time Catherine and I made it out to the old farm house, his wrinkles had grown deeper and the haze in his eyes darker. Once we came by and he couldn't keep any food down and said he thought he might just "fade out" if it didn't cut out. Catherine cried the whole drive home. He still smoked a pipe out in his workshop and to this day when I smell pipe tobacco, I think of Catherine's grandpa, of my Grandpa. There was only one brand he smoked, and every year, for every holiday, that's all he got. A big tin of Carter Hall tobacco. He didn't mind. That's all he wanted.

Jim, Catherine's dad, used to give Grandpa a hard time about smoking. He used to tell him how it was bad for him. I don't remember exactly what Grandpa used to say back. Something like, "Well I think I'll let the tobacco try and catch up to my kidneys. I'll let it try and catch up to you, too, Jim." I always thought it was a good comeback at Jim. Looking back, I think it was a sad one. Jim didn't ever like it. I don't know if Jim ever liked Grandpa, or if he ever liked anyone else, really, besides himself. Grandpa was free from Jim. Jim always had to control everything. He didn't like anything that he couldn't control. So back then I always had to act under his spell, about to become a new member of the family and his son, and all that. Jim was about five-foot-ten and probably weighed a lazy two-thirty. He had a big gut that he wasn't at all ashamed of, and wore glasses on his round face. He had gray hair on his head everywhere but the shining pinnacle, and back then he had a thick goatee that hadn't gone all gray yet. Jim went to mass. Well, Christian services. He helped out with a lot of the church stuff and sometimes went on missions trips. I think he might have been trying to buy his way up to God. Sometimes he did that pretty well. I wonder where he went last Fall. I know beating your wife sure isn't in the good book, but I've heard God's all right with repenters.

Catherine's Uncle and Jim stood out in front of a dying tree talking to each other and studying it. I was watching them with Grandpa from the white porch that wrapped around the aging country home. The white paint started to flake off around that time. Since then we've stained and painted it again. Grandpa was sitting in a wooden chair he had made

with younger, craftier hands. Inside, Catherine was helping her mom, aunt, and grandma with the dishes in the kitchen. I could see them through the window next to me, and it was fun to watch Catherine work with the others. I looked at the three generations of them, washing and picking up the dishes and clearing the table, speaking pleasantly about their recent lives, and they were beautiful. I was gazing into the foundations of the word "family" through an old country home window as the late summer sun began to set, saying a farewell to the last day of July.

Catherine glanced out the window and saw me looking in and blew a kiss to me, then went back to talking with her mom. Dorie was sweet. When she was younger, she looked just like Catherine, little and pretty. I saw a picture of her from a long time ago once. In the picture she had long wavy brown hair and deep brown eyes to match. She had a cute little nose and a tiny chin with the smallest dimple that you might still call a dimple. Since then, she's had two kids and a bad husband, then a rough divorce, then another bad husband, then three more kids, then colon cancer, then breast cancer. Her life had been a challenge and had taken its toll on her body. This night her hair was thin and short and dyed brown, and she had a quite different body. I don't know how she got stuck with Jim, but I'm sure I know where she went when the cancer came back too strong.

Catherine's uncle walked out of the workshop with the chainsaw. It looked to me like they had made up their minds about the tree. Grandpa gathered his breath like he was going to say something, then let it out with a big sigh and said to me, "I've always liked that tree. Planted 'er when we

first moved in out here in forty-two. She's in poor shape, but it'd be a damn shame to see 'er go after all these years." His voice was deep and raspy, and he spoke very slowly.

"What kind of tree is it?" I asked him to make conversation. I had always enjoyed talking with him.

She's a Soft Maple. Leaves more seeds all over the yard than anything. You kids would call 'em helicopters 'cause the way they fell. Hardly ever grows any leaves any more." He paused, and I saw sadness in his hazy dark eyes. Then his brow grew firm and he bit his bottom lip for a minute. The wrinkly coat of skin that his face wore moved as he looked up to the top of the tree, then he said, "But it'd still be a damn shame."

"Yeah." I shoved my hands deep into my jeans pockets and looked down at my boots. I didn't know if there was anything else that I could say. "Are you gonna take it down?" I shouted out to Jim and Catherine's uncle. They didn't hear me, and Jim went behind the big metal pole-shed at the far end of the red barn that Catherine's and her mom's horses stayed in. I think since Catherine and I had left for school, her mom's horse had been her only real friend around. The same horse that Jim had recently decided was costing them too much money and he was selling it. Then he bought a new truck. "Hey," I shouted to Catherine's uncle. He turned to me and I asked again, "Are you gonna take it down?"

He shrugged his shoulders and shouted back, "It's all about what Jim wants, I'll check with him." Then he looked at his father sitting next to me and said, "But I don't know, Dad." and turned around. Then I heard Grandpa's old Ford three-thirty-two tractor that served him for the last twenty-six

years fire up, and Jim came out from behind the shed driving it up the way towards the tree that Grandpa planted sixty years before.

“Could ya just leave ‘er for another year, Jim?” Grandpa yelled out to him.

“Grandpa, it’s going to be all dead soon, anyway. It just leaves seeds all over the yard and makes an awful mess.” Jim said with the tractor in neutral so Grandpa could hear him clearly, then put it back in high gear and drove up to the tree trunk. That made enough sense to him. Catherine’s uncle got in the basket and Jim pulled back a lever and lifted him up into the tree. Then Jim shouted over to me to come pass the chainsaw up to Catherine’s uncle. I jogged over and handed it up to him. I felt like Judas Iscariot. Then Grandpa’s only son began to trim away at the branches of the tree. He was a big logger out west, so it wasn’t much to him, the death of a tree.

Catherine came through the screen door and onto the porch next to where Grandpa was sitting. I looked at her as I walked back over and shrugged my shoulders. “Why?” She said to the wind. There came no answer. I walked up the old white wooden steps and put my arms around her. The chainsaw cut away at the branches, live or dead, and sent small flakes of the wood into the air and onto Catherine’s uncle and down to the ground. The setting sun caught them in a momentary embrace as they fell. In that moment they shined as I would imagine the crumbling splendor of Solomon’s Temple must have, golden dust left suspended in the air. Then the flakes were only wood once more, simply the dust produced from the chainsaw’s deep, quick cuts. A large branch fell and hit the ground with a deep thud, and Grandpa sighed and lit up his pipe. That must have been the last branch that they were going to take down, because Catherine’s uncle let the chainsaw rest. Grandpa started

to cough heavily, but that happened a lot, and no one paid attention anymore.

“Do you want the stump, Dad?” Catherine’s uncle shouted over.

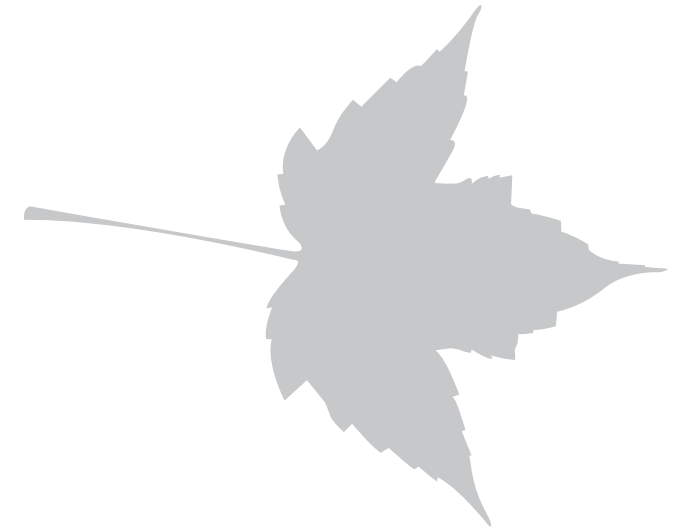
Grandpa looked down, then over at me and back out to Catherine’s uncle and said, “I don’t give a damn.” Catherine squeezed my hand on her belly. She cared for Grandpa and made him promise to stay alive for our wedding and for our children. Some promises are too hard to keep. No one holds those kind of promises against you, though. “I won’t say shit anymore,” the frustrated old man said. “Doesn’t matter what I say, anyway.” He wiped a tear away with his big half-thumb and matted down his wild white hair.

I put my hand on his shoulder, and I think he knew I really cared. He patted my hand, and I felt where his fingers were gone. It was smooth and tough. People live too short, and life is too short, especially when someone really means something. Then the chainsaw started back up and the old man’s son had begun to take a big wedge cut out of the trunk. Jim pulled the tractor back with a rope tied around the higher part of the naked, wounded tree so it wouldn’t fall towards the barn. It made no sense to me because I thought he’d just tear the barn down, too, in a year or so. The rope got tight and the tree began to lean. The brittle trunk started to groan, and Jim kept backing up the same. He was smiling. Soon the tree’s complaints filled our ears and the groans turned into little cracks like a car driving over loose gravel. All at once there was a thunderous crack that shook the ground all the way out to the porch, and the great old tree fell. Grandpa groaned. The look on his face pained me. Catherine put her face into my chest and whispered, “I wish they would have just left it for him.”

“Me too,” I said, leaning my face into her soft, sweet smelling brown hair, and held her little frame tight. Grandpa just sat there staring out at the tree. Then I realized that the

tree had not fallen from the wedge cut. The old, brittle trunk had held stubborn. The roots of the tree had come up. Jim must have backed up too fast. They tore apart the yard that they had lived cooperatively under for sixty years, and then the depths of a tree were known to us. I heard something in the kitchen and looked in through the window. When I turned, I saw Catherine’s mom and aunt holding her weeping grandmother. I looked back out at the tree and its roots, then at Jim, and Catherine’s uncle. Jim got off the tractor and stood looking down at the fallen tree in his red sweatshirt with his hands on his hips and his chest pushed out triumphantly, as if he could do no wrong.

It had grown dark, and the sun had just passed beyond the hills in the west, and only dark shades of red were left. Catherine’s uncle started to walk up towards us on the porch, and Jim stood alone down in all that red darkness. ❖



Once Upon the Klostergasse

 *Ethan Grant*

Did the Leipzig streets forget our going?
Did the lamplights flicker with regret,
The window-stones sigh?
So little returns with certainty.
The air-spring sky above us sighed,
Breathing up, between baroque façades,
Cobblestone lay beneath our feet,
Worn-round bricks beneath our feet
Offered what went for comfort.

Beneath canopies, beneath the sky,
We ate from tapas plates at midnight.
Fireworks blazed their Pentecost red,
Streetlights and torches burned overhead.
We sipped our wine and were lost
As liquid saxophone strains
Flowed down the wide stone streets,
As flowed from Saxony tongues
Sounds of distance and diaspora;
You cast your eyes across the glass
And with that glance I should have known
That though heedless, yes, we were not home,
And the streets, I fear, forgot our going.

But the spring night sky ever sighed along,
Sightless stars wheeled their way away,
When bordered by ancient, twisted streets
We gathered with tapas and wine,
Clinked our drinks to summer-spring,
We drank, and went our weary ways.
Wie schön der Abendhimmel . . .
Pentecost night in Leipzig
Drove us all away, drove us
To starless dreams of parallax,
Phantom tapas, porcelain plates.

The lampposts blaze like novae
Frozen now to all time's turning.
Beyond the filament's sterile buzz
The chilled and silent winter air
Is a void to timeless space.
Here in the leer of lamplights glowing
I live once more those fairytale nights,
These memories drawn from wells gone dry,
Empty and dry as the mid-May sky,
Where the streets, I fear, forgot our going.



Taking a Moment | Emily Royer

Hazel, Crissey, Lucy and Kate

 *Ellen Orner*

Names and events are borrowed from an article in the Berkshire Evening Eagle, March 12, 1904

..... KATE DRINKS A CUP OF TEA

The boy—eighteen, she'd guess—is tall and composed behind his glasses. He sits alone, one quarter profile to Kate, and makes precise little scratches with his pen. She'd bet anything he's got gorgeous handwriting. Over the rim of her tea cup, Kate checks on the trim blond back of his head. She considers an approach. Not hers, but his. There are ways of arranging these things, she knows.

A man enters the café. He is short, dark, and worry-wrinkled. He shuffles over to the boy's table, sits, and folds himself nearly in half, tucking his foot into a chair rung and his elbow into his knee and his wrinkled forehead into his hand. The boy sits up straight and looks mildly out on the world, which happens, for the moment, to include this little hunched man.

The boy lowers his head and takes his own cheek in his hand. His back stoops and his forehead wrinkles. He rests an elbow on his knee. Suddenly father and son, they regard each other with side-cocked faces.

After a mumbled conversation (about the mother, she guesses) the man shuffles out, leaving the boy looking only slightly less mild. Kate looks up, then, quick enough to catch his eye. He offers a slight grin, but she looks blankly back, uncomprehending. Her eyes drop to her book, and only then she smiles: a closed little smile that says, she hopes, that she knows—oh, she knows.

..... THE GIRLS GO FOR A RIDE

Manfred is coming, too—he promised—and he's going to want to drive but they aren't going to let him. Hazel isn't going to let him. She's fully capable of driving, and must prove it, not so much to Manfred as to the girls. It's good for them to have an example of a strong woman. There's more to life, Hazel says, than being driven around.

But Manfred must come, of course, or the ride will be quite dull. He's a friend of Kate's, mostly—she tends to find these strange fellows (thinks Crissey) places and strike up silly conversations (thinks Lucy) and bring them along to show them off (thinks Hazel). But no one minds, really, and anyway Manfred is wonderful. He doesn't play favorites, at least as far as Hazel can tell. He gets good marks and all of their mothers adore him. Except for Lucy's mother, who thinks he'll never make any money. Well I don't want to marry him, mother, says Lucy, and Lucy's mother raises her eyebrows several miles.

Manfred doesn't object, really, to being driven. He makes a small fuss for the sake of form. "You girls couldn't steer a wheelbarrow!" he'll say, but of course he knows they could.

He's approaching now, in handsome gray wool coat, taking big easy steps through the snow. He grins and waves.

Hazel isn't an obvious sort of girl. She'll wait for Manfred to commit himself to his assumptions before interrupting them. He'll take a step to the front and say, "Well, my darlings, are you ready to hold on tight?" He won't even announce that he's driving, he'll just expect they all want him to. And then Hazel will say, ladylike but with a hand firmly on her hip,

"What makes you our designated driver, Manfred?" And the other girls, though they've been expecting it, will giggle.

But Manfred isn't taking his step to the front. He's telling Kate her hat is jaunty, and admiring Crissey's blue scarf, and commenting, more quietly, that Lucy's cheeks are all rosy from the cold. Just when Hazel is getting impatient, he says, "Well, who's going to do the honors? Hazel?"

Hazel can't find words, for a moment. She considers that he might be teasing her, and hasn't any intention of letting her drive, or that he may conceivably be sincere, but that either way, everything is ruined. She crosses her arms.

Manfred and Hazel stare at each other across the sled, both pretending not to be surprised. Crissey and Lucy exchange glances. Kate, though she was expecting this, snickers, and Hazel, to avoid the risk of further embarrassment, anchors her boot heels and settles herself on the sled. She stops her voice from being shrill when she says, "Yes, Manfred, I am."

Manfred, Crissey, Lucy, and Kate stand frozen. "Well, my darlings," says Hazel, sitting alone at the front. "Are you ready to hold on tight?" The girls giggle, nervous, and pile on behind her. "Hazel—" says Manfred, still standing, but she turns a sharp eye on him, and Lucy, who hardly ever calls him by name, says, "Manny." And so he sits, wrapping his gray-gloved hands around Lucy's buttoned front.

..... LUCY BREAKS HER BONES

"Manny," she said, and he sat without hesitation. Hazel whooped and kicked up her heels, landing them with a thud on the sled's front plank. She steered well, and smoothly. They

were flying, runners re-carving grooves laid the day before. Lucy forgot to notice, after the second curve. A warmth was growing in her, despite the wind whipping at her ears. She unburied her face from Crissey's shoulder blade, and turned her head catch a glimpse of Manfred behind her. She found the edge of his chin against a blur of evergreens. His throat was taut and goosebumped, scarfless. His heart was beating very fast—she could feel it on her back, and see it in the thin, tender skin under his jaw. She wanted to touch her lips to the spot.

A chunk of snow flew up from the blades and hit Lucy in the face. It melted immediately, and dripped off her cheeks in warm rivulets, blown dry before it could reach into her collar.

Now she shares a room with a gray and beige old woman who sits propped up all day long, reading a hymnal. Except for her eyes, she is very still. Lucy can move her head with some effort, but lays as if her neck, as well as her left femur, were fractured. The old woman fills her view for the entire afternoon, while nurses poke this and rewrap that, and her mother taps her knitting needles, and Manfred paces the hallway, to which he has been exiled. Lucy memorizes the beat of the old woman's heart. Lucy watches the old woman's heartbeat, insistent, in the speckled folds under her jaw.

...

Lucy wakes. Her eyes land immediately on the old woman's throat. There is no more needle tapping, only the pulse.

beat beat, beat beat, beat beat,
beat pause, beat beat, pause

pause, pause! BEAT beat,
beat pause beat-beat pause pause, pause, pause, pause...

Lucy screams
and the old woman shoots straight up in bed, breathing hard.
The mother, who has fallen asleep in her chair, is standing in
an instant, and Lucy is squirming, searching for her hands,
her voice.

..... MANFRED FEELS HE IS TO BLAME

Manfred steps on a white-flecked brown tile, and then on a
brown-flecked white one, and then a foot lands on a half of
each, and then back to full solids for two paces—he stops.
Lucy's scream sends him (the tiles disappear in a brown- and
white-flecked blur) to the threshold of her room. Two things
keep him from crossing it: the old woman has put down her
hymnal, and the mother has let her knitting needles drop to
the floor. She is bent over Lucy, gripping both of her limp
hands. Her face becomes a mirror for Lucy's concentration.

“What have I *done*?”

Manfred, knowing his foolishness, cannot stop himself
from blurting it. He squeezes the nape of his own neck and
tells himself, hanging on to the door frame, to think about
lines—lines and curves, too, and planes and angles and colors.
He expects a form to build itself under his eyelids—beige
planks and blue beams rising vertically, squares shuffling up
to the red angle of an apex—but the form refuses to build.
Instead, he finds his eyes bobbing in a brown puddle.

Only the old woman has heard Manfred speak. She turns
and regards him deliberately, seems to recognize him.

“It's nothing to do with you,” she says, finally. Manfred
shuts his mouth, which has been hanging as if unhinged.

“Mother,” says Lucy, “You made me.”

Her mother's eyes, so close they almost cross, drink Lucy
in, childish and wondering, ready to brim. ❖



Espoir | Ali DeVries



Eyes on Me | Adam Jackson



Dancing Feet | Timothy Campos

Mountain Landscape

Eric Hilmer

Swimming through the oils
of a thousand vibrant hues,
I revel first in darkness;
light forgets the lowlands
as it tires and retires,
leaving no trace behind,

and in the distance water falls,
dancing down rocks
before meeting the body
of a dozing glassy lake
undisturbed by oar strokes
whose minute ripples

one miniature man creates
upon an endless journey
across the textured canvas,
his distinct location
below the center-point
marking his unimportance

in contrast to those proud
cloud-reaching cliffs,
ablaze with the fury
of final transcendence,
determined to become
peers of the astral bodies,


but the rock formation
is clearly a plateau,
and as we all know
there is no advancement
after one has topped out,
so what is it about?

I wonder, until the red
radiance burns my eyes
as it floods the sky
like the face of God,
and I must look away
in pain and penance.



Untitled | Caleb Kortokrax

A Better Question

 *Jeremy Reed*

“So why don’t we start by you telling me why we’re here?”

“Well, I grew up in a small town in Michigan. Nothing against that state, but I think the small town and the Midwest had something to do with it.”

“ . . . ”

“I mean, that makes sense, doesn’t it? As far as I can figure, I was just brought up somewhere in the middle and always had a pretty good grasp of that fact. I mean, it’s no New York, and no LA, but even if you’re somewhat close to Chicago, you’re not that either, and by being close to Chicago you know that it’s got it’s bad neighborhoods that as a white kid with a beat up car you bought for 500 bucks from your pastor you can’t go into. I suppose New York and LA have their neighborhoods too, actually I know they do, but when it all comes down to it they have their images. LA is just some airport gate to whatever lies beyond it, even if everybody knows about Rodney King and Watts riots and illegal immigration. At least it’s still a doorway to something else. And New York is New York, what can I say? I know it’s got its bad spots but at least it can still keep the wool pulled over your eyes for the most part, right? We never had anything like that where I come from. You just knew what was going on, with everybody, and everybody knew about you too. We kept each other accountable to what we knew as life even while we thought something more real was happening further down the road, or in the next county over, or at the edge of the ocean. You know, I’ve never even seen the ocean for real. I saw it from a plane once, but I figure that’s not really the same.”

“You seem to have a lot to say.”

“See, that’s the weird thing, I usually don’t talk much at all, I’m a pretty quiet person, it’s just there’s a bunch of thoughts running through my head right now and I’m trying to make sense of them. You ever experience that? It’s crazy.”

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean.”

“Well, it’s just throwing me for a loop right now. I’ve just got all these thoughts running through my head that I don’t know what to do with.”

“Like what?”

“Like this time last week. I was sitting outside the library on the lawn and everybody should have been out there because it was as sunny as can be and just beautiful outside and one of the first days like that of the whole year, you know? Usually when that happens, it’s like everybody comes out of hibernation or something, but this day, for some reason, I was the only person out on the lawn. I’m sitting out there with a book on my lap, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, you ever read it? . . . Well, it’s great. Just great. But anyways, I’m sitting out there and this group of robins comes up out of nowhere. I hadn’t seen them before and I’m just sitting out there by myself and all of a sudden five, six, maybe seven of them fly up and land by this big tree we’ve got out there on campus. Well, so I’m looking at them and they’re playing and flying one over the other and chirping away and it’s just this beautiful little scene that I can’t really see because I don’t have my glasses on. I don’t read with my glasses on because I usually end up looking over them anyway, so I could only see these little dots hovering around each other. Little dark dots hovering and hopping in circles around each other

and I could hear the chirping coming from over there by the tree too.”

“Well, what happened to the robins?”

“I don’t know what it was, I must have spooked them or something because I’d been sitting there pretty still but as soon as I put my glasses on to look over at them they all flew off.”

“What made that pop into your head?”

“Well I don’t know. That’s the thing. I’ve just got a bunch of little images like that one just floating around up in there right now, and I can’t seem to focus on any single one. For instance, while you were asking me about that one and I was answering you back, I was thinking about my sister opening up the last birthday gift I gave her. And I was thinking about how I didn’t like how my mom texts me, and I was thinking about why that is. And I was thinking about my Uncle who looks exactly like my Grandpa. And I was thinking about the memories I have of my Grandpa even though he died when I was just a little kid. There was other stuff too, but most of it wasn’t worth a whole lot. But that’s some of it.”

“What did you get your sister for her birthday?”

“A journal.”

“Do you have a journal?”

“Yeah, but I don’t really use it. I’ve started a couple times but can’t get anywhere with it. Some friends gave it to me for my birthday, and it’s a great journal, I mean just great, the one I would have picked if I could have picked it myself, but for some reason I just can’t seem to write anything of worth in it. I started to write this one thing once, but it was just bullshit. Then I wrote a letter that I wasn’t going to send.

Then I just kind of wrote random sentences and stuff, but it wasn’t really worth anything, didn’t show me anything.”

“What did you want it to show?”

“I don’t know, why I was writing stuff down in it, I guess.”

“Okay, well, all of this is very interesting, but you still haven’t answered my first question.”

“Sorry, what was it again?”

“My first question was, why don’t you tell me why we’re here today?”

“Oh, that question.”

“Yes, that one.”

“ . . . ”

“Well, do you have an answer?”

“I don’t know. I think I kind of gave one. Don’t you?”

“You might have started telling me what you were thinking at the time. It sounds to me like you had too many things going on at once in that brain of yours. But in terms of answering the question about why we’re here, I don’t think it was extremely satisfying.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. And that’s the thing, isn’t it?”

“What thing?”

“Well, that’s the problem with this whole conversation really, that thing – the problem. We’re talking about two different things when it comes down to it. You want to know what I did and how or why I did it. I want to know why I did it and why you didn’t.”

“And what do you see as the answer to that question?”

“Which question?”

“Well, both.”

“Well, I don’t know about the second one. And I think we both pretty well know about the first one.”

“All the same I think you better tell me just to have it out in the open, don’t you?”

“It seems to me as if it’s already out in the open. The more interesting question is why do you think it isn’t? We both know the answer to the question you’re asking. We both know that we both know the answer. Why do you keep pressing it?”

“Do you feel like I’m pressing it?”

“Oh, now don’t get into that double-backing kind of logic. That’s not going to get us anywhere.”

“Well, then just answer my question: why are we here tonight, Sam?”

“ . . . ”

“Okay. Well it says here that you lit a car on fire tonight, Sam. In a cul-de-sac just north of campus, and that it was your own car. You emptied the gas out of it, or at least we assume so because there wasn’t the kind of explosion we usually expect from something like this, and you waited there, seemingly, for us to show up.”

“Now you’re just drawing conclusions.”

“Well tell me where I went wrong.”

“First of all, I didn’t empty the gas tank intentionally. Second of all, I wasn’t waiting for you all to show up. That would just be stupid.”

“Well, at least we agree that this all seems a little odd.”

“A little odd? You just said I lit a car on fire in a cul-de-sac and did it to try to not harm anyone except to get myself brought here in order to talk the day away with you. Yeah, I would say that’s a little odd.”

“Well then, what really happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well we’re not going to get anywhere until you do.”

“I’m hoping that your last sentence doesn’t turn out to be true.”

“ . . . ”

“I’m hoping that, because I have no intention to explain myself right now. And also, don’t you think the more interesting question is why you think we won’t get anywhere until I explain it to you step-by-step?”

“I thought we agreed we wouldn’t do any doubling back with our logic?”

“Okay. Agreed. But I’ll hold you to it.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Well, just so you can see this won’t get us anywhere. The gas tank was just empty. From driving it. And I wasn’t waiting for you to show up, I was just watching the fire. You ever watch a fire? It’s kind of interesting to watch.”

“I’ve watched fires, but never my own car on a street in town.”

“Maybe you should try it.”

“That’s enough, Sam.”

“Tell you what. Now we both know what I did. You want to know the how?”

“Sure, if you want to tell me.”

“Well, I think we both know that I don’t actually want to tell you, but if it’ll get me out of here, then I guess I will.”

“No promises on that, but if you want to talk, talk.”

“Fine. Earlier in the day yesterday, I was feeling a little burnt out. Was doing homework in the library all afternoon. Went to dinner with some friends like I do every day. One of them was talking about how they didn’t know if they’d be able to come back the next year, and I was sitting there wondering why this was the biggest worry that we had. I mean, when you think about it, whether we’re going to have enough money to pay for college the next year is a little presumptuous of us, don’t you think? There are people just down the street who can’t even pay for food, and we’re sitting

there over practically a seven course meal compared to what they’re eating and we’re stressing over whether we’ll have an extra seven grand to throw at the university. You tell me if that doesn’t sound presumptuous.”

“ . . . ”

“Huh. Well, anyway, dinner’s over and everybody’s headed over to the library, or their apartment, or their mom and dad’s to probably eat all over again of all things and I just decide to go back to the dorm. The dorms suck, but they do isolate you. So I’m sitting in my dorm room, trying to write this paper about what I think literature does in the world, or some bullshit like that, just as presumptuous as the last conversation I’d come from, and I’m just pacing the carpet right into the floor, right? When I’m trying to come up with a good idea, and by good idea I just mean honest idea, I just pace and pace and pace ‘til it comes out on its own. But last night, for some reason, I’m just not getting anywhere.”

“So what do you do?”

“Well, I go for a drive is what I do. I don’t know where to go, so I just get in and start going. I drive this way and that way and just have no idea where I’m going to end up. I just keep going and going and eventually, all of a sudden, I start to recognize where I am. For some reason, it just feels like I did a complete loop even though I know I couldn’t have, but I realize that I’m just getting closer and closer to where I started. Somehow, I must have gotten turned around or something, but I just ended up right back in the city and with nowhere to go that I hadn’t already been. And that’s the worst feeling. When you pace and pace and you’re just trying to get somewhere by going where you’ve already been and that doesn’t work out, so then you finally get up the nerve to go somewhere you’ve never been before and when you get there you’re just right back where you started. God, that’s frustrating.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Yeah, no joke it sounds like it. ‘Cause it is. But anyway, I’m getting closer and closer to campus and I know I can’t get back. I can’t get back. If I get back, this whole thing’s over. No idea coming. No new place found. No nothing. So I see this street and pull off into it.”

“The cul-de-sac?”

“Yeah, the cul-de-sac. Anyway, I pull in there and just as I get to the middle of the circle it dies on me.”

“Out of gas.”

“Damn right, out of gas. So then what do I do? It’s three o’clock in the morning and I’m out of gas in the middle of a cul-de-sac with no desire whatsoever to go the one place I know how to get to, back to campus and the dorm.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“Well, I get out of the car and just start pacing around it. Not the most original idea but the only thing I can think of doing and the only thing I’m even close to wanting to do at this point. And as I’m walking around the car, I see this lighter on the ground. I pick it up, and I light the thing on fire.”

“Wait wait wait. It doesn’t just happen like that.”

“And why not?”

“ . . . ”

“No, you’re right. It doesn’t. When I saw the lighter on the ground I started thinking that I’d never seen a car on fire before. I don’t know why I thought it, but I did. But I thought to myself, that there are so many things that I haven’t actually seen, so many things that I’ve tried to put down on paper and so few things I’ve actually lived out. So as I’m thinking about that, I walk over to this garage that was wide open and I see there in front of me a can of gasoline. Just sitting there, out in the open. The cap was even off. I don’t know why things happen like that, but they do, and so I took it, poured a little bit of gasoline on the inside of the car and threw the lit lighter in there. Then I just watched it burn. And it did. I

can definitely tell you that a car can burn. I figure when the few explosions actually did finally happen, that's when you guys got your phone call. Took you a while to show up now that I think about it."

" . . . "

"But I still think there's a better question here."

"And what's that?"

"Why did I do it, and you didn't?"

"Well, I can't answer that question for you."

"Yeah, I know you can't."

"Sam, I've got a question for you."

"Huh. Sure, shoot."

"When you think of how you'd actually like to feel on a normal afternoon, not doing homework or anything like that, do you know what that'd feel like?"

" . . . "

"Sam?"

"Yeah. I think I do know actually. But I don't know if I can get you to understand. That's the thing, you know. But I guess I'll give it a try anyway. It's kind of like when you're sitting in a field of grass and the wind comes down and blows through all of it, but it still looks like it's blowing over each one individually. And then, instead of sitting, you lay down in the grass and the wind blows over you too. It hits the bottom of your feet, but that doesn't stop it, and it flows up over your body, the little hairs on your arms, and pushes the hair back off your forehead. And you can close your eyes and still know it's there and blowing across you and every other blade of grass too. It's kind of like that."

"You want to be a blade of grass?"

"Well, not really, but to feel like one right then is kind of what that feels like, or at least how I can express it to you."

"Well, how do you know a blade of grass feels what you want to feel?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not like you can talk to it. Maybe it feels something different."

"I suppose so."

"So what was the paper you were having such a hard time with last night?"

"It was about something that didn't even really matter. The thing is that for me it came down to what literature does for me, for you, for people. That's what it came down to. It's so ridiculous when I think about it now. Like I could speak for everybody, right? Hey, do you read?"

"Yeah."

"And you enjoy it, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then what does literature do for you?"

"Why, Sam?"

"Well, I've just been trying to figure out the difference between you and me. And I was thinking maybe that's the difference. I mean, I can't tell what reading a book does for a person like you versus a person like me, not really, because we can't really talk about things like that and have us understand each other. But shoot, I figured let's just do it for the hell of it."

"Well, I mean I guess I enjoy books for letting me experience something new. Something I wouldn't know in real life, or haven't yet."

"Then it's your burning car. That's what I was thinking. I don't have that. Sometimes I wish I did."

"That's an interesting idea, I suppose. But then what does it do for you?"

"What does what do for me?"

"Literature, reading, that sort of thing."

"Oh, well it just gives me someone to talk to. But that's still something, you know?" ❖





Home-made Rocket | Tim Staub

In the Basement of the Lake

 *R. James Onofrey*

driftwood powder sprinkles
the folding waves
and treasoned air.
have you ever seen such a lie?
such a backhanded sermon?

your wooden bowls are
buried in the sand
with shoestrings
and copies of hemingway.

ribbons drip down
your swollen face
and stop at your lips
to disintegrate.

yell on top of the dunes
“can you see
my scars yet?”
and tumble down to the brush.

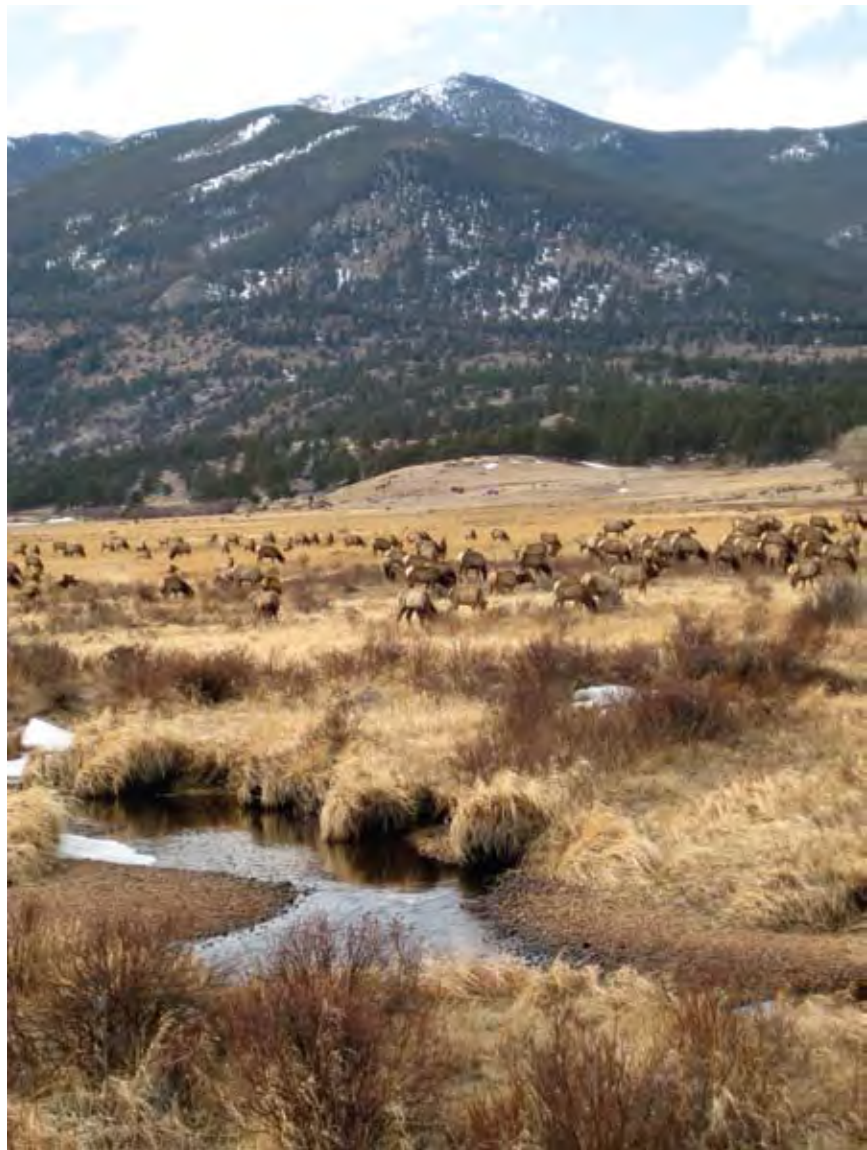
you’re the lipstick
stained on a cigarette butt,
on my streaked windshield
next to a whispering crack.

you watch the clouds
from the moonroof,
i watch the powerlines
waver in their dips.

we saw the rain
make dimples in the lake
while we fished for
laughter and leaf stems.

let’s go casket shopping
in the basement of a dry cleaner
in the basement of a library
in the basement of the lake.

have you ever seen such a lie?
such a backhanded sermon?



Escape | Janelle Ramsel



San Marco | Emily Bahr

Just Fine

 *Ethan Grant*

..... I

The living room curtains were drawn tight. Outside it was still daylight, and only a thin dusting of light slipped through, casting the room in a melancholic pallor. Throughout the past four months, Jamie's mother had been drawing the curtains earlier and earlier. She did it out of fear. She said so herself. She was afraid of living at the top of a hill, isolated, surrounded on all sides by woods—she was afraid of what might be looking in at them from the outside darkness, watching them with a predatory fascination as they went about their lives. So she closed the curtains. And Jamie could see it in her eyes, the way they stared as she tugged the curtain cord, watching for a face to appear in the glass, ghastly and white, its sightless black eyes meeting her own.

Jamie sat on a sofa in the flinty gray darkness, a bluish tint from the television dancing on his face. He was watching the summer Olympics with a sort of detached fascination. The men's four hundred relay would soon commence. He had only seen the Olympics once before, and this was the event that had excited him the most. He was ready for a win this time.

His mother sat on the sofa next to him. "Jamie, please, you need to go see your father." Her hand touched his forearm. He didn't move. He fought hard to keep his eyes fixed on the television screen. His aunt stood in the doorway to the kitchen, sipping tea out of a sizable mug.

"You promised me you would. Don't you remember? You promised." A twisted strand of faded auburn hair hung in front of his mother's left eye. She had been home for several

hours, but she still wore her nurse's scrubs. An ID tag was snapped carelessly over her breast. His aunt wore nothing out of the ordinary. She didn't live there, but she hadn't left the house at all that day.

"You love your father, don't you?"

"Mom," Jamie said, turning his face to her, then glancing back to the screen quickly, trying to recover from his error.

"Well, don't you? I mean, you haven't given him the time of day in more than a year, but surely you still love—"

"I'll *go later*, Mom."

"Ang, if he doesn't want to go, don't force him," his aunt mediated, "you can't force things like this."

"You'll *go later*?" his mother said, ignoring her sister-in-law completely. "What later do you think there'll be? Do you think you can just sit here and forget about it—"

"Angie."

"—and it will disappear? Well, I've got news for you: That's not how life works."

"Angie."

His mother snapped her head up, "Oh for Christ's sake, Ruth, will you let me take care of this?" She turned back to Jamie, a stony composure haunting her face. "Jamie, you're going to have to grow up at some point. You're fourteen. You'd be a man in a Jewish family. And guess what, you *are* going to be the man of the house. Very soon. *Very* soon, Jamie."

She paused, the vestige of composure wholly vanished from her face.

"No," she began again, her voice suddenly jagged, strained. "No, there's not going to be any *later*. You're going

in there right now. I want you to go in and talk to your father. I want you to show him you still give a damn. It's the least you can do for the man who's devoted fourteen years of *his life* to giving you what you have today. If you care about him—about *me*—at all, you'll go."

Jamie sat still in the sofa, feeling rigid and hot. He wished it would snow. He wanted to see snow smother the summer leaves, sizzling and melting on the lawn. He wanted to see a frozen rose.

"And turn this off," his mother said as she pressed the power button on the remote. With a faint click, the television went blank. They were gone, all of them, every swimmer, spectator, deckhand and judge disappeared, leaving the living room to darkness and silence.

The silence was stifling, smothering. The outside heat was not kept at bay by the floor register's incessant supply of cool, vitalized air. Heat seemed to have settled over every inch of the room, and in Jamie's chest, a heat was growing, a white-hot ball was welling up, wet and precipitous, threatening to break.

Jamie stood up. "He doesn't want to see me. He doesn't know who I am anymore."

"What did you say?"

"I've heard him, Mom. He doesn't know anything anymore." Beneath the veil of silence was the sound of the clock on the mantelpiece ticking off its dry, corky seconds. There was a faint rumbling of the furnace in the basement. And Jamie could hear his mother's breathing.

..... II

With a time-hardened grip, James Stratton wrung the cap off a bottle of beer and set it on the workbench. He knelt down by the small refrigerator on the cement garage floor and took another beer out, beheaded it in the same manner, and handed it to his son. The thick brown bottle felt solid and heavy, like manliness incarnate in Jamie's hands.

"Is this for me?" he ventured.

"You bet."

"Dad, I'm only twelve."

James closed the fridge door with the toe of his work boot. He was a tall man, a hefty man. A heavy patch of gray-brown five o'clock shadow spread across his ample jaw. He wore a checked red flannel shirt, tucked in, with the sleeves rolled up, revealing his hairy arms glazed over with sweat and wood-chips. The knees of his jeans were a mire of dirt.

He took a sip of his beer. "Jamie, there's two things I want you to learn tonight. Life lessons. First off, if someone hands you a beer, don't ask questions. Got that? Good. Secondly—and this is important, so listen up—secondly, always remember that there is no better way to end a day of hard work than to sit back with a cold beer and admire the fruit of your labor. There's no greater joy in life than that. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise."

Flies and moths threw themselves into the overhead fluorescents. The evening air was filled with the incessant clicks of their bodies hitting the bulbs again and again. Jamie and his father walked out into the newly-trimmed front yard. Their shadows were cast long across the green-

gold grass. They sat down in a couple of lawn chairs facing an ornately-carved wooden bird-feeder, a complex of many feeders and troughs full of seeds. Already a couple of robins and goldfinches dug their beaks into the feast.

“This is what I’m talking about, Jamie. We did this. This is the work of our hands. Doesn’t that feel nice? Makes it all worth it, huh?”

“I didn’t really do too much.”

James snorted. “Okay, lesson three: no false modesty. Take credit for your work. You were an asset to me. Without your help, I couldn’t have done all this in a day.”

Jamie smiled. “Thanks . . . I guess I did help with a lot of it.”

“Damn right. You were an excellent worker. It’s that Stratton blood in you. You don’t do things half-assed. You worked hard, and now Mom’s going have the best Mother’s Day of her life.”

Jamie’s smile widened. “Yeah, it’ll be a good morning. I can’t wait to see her face.” He felt content, perceptive. He was aware of the steady, reedy hum of cicadas wafting out from the woods. He heard an owl calling from somewhere down in the trees.

“Damn shame she had to work nights on a Saturday though. They work her like a dog over at that hospital.” James Stratton, however, always worked days. For five days a week, from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon, he was over at the plant. He never missed a day. And yet, in the summer he always came home, changed clothes, and eagerly walked out to the garden with Jamie, where they would plant corn or weed the roses or trim back the undergrowth at the edge of the woods.

Jamie found it all endlessly intimidating. Even at the age of twelve, he had thought about this, how unlikely it seemed that he would ever be capable of emulating such a work ethic. He grew exhausted from one afternoon’s work in the garden

after spending all morning watching TV from the couch. To think that his father could come home weary, coated with grease and God knows what else, and still have the sheer will to wash up and go to work once more was stupefying.

But he wanted, *needed* to devote himself this way. He loved his father and what he stood for, and as he sat there in the waning spring daylight, he felt overcome by a warm love of life, a philanthropic love for the world. He had to have it in him. He had Stratton blood, didn’t he?

“You both work really hard,” Jamie observed, staring down at the neck of his bottle.

His father turned toward him. His face was leathery, looking at once worn and aged, and yet spry and youthful. He smiled knowingly. “And we both do it for you, you know. Take that as a fourth lesson: nothing can be achieved but with hard work. And there is nothing more worthy of your hard work than your family.”

Jamie said nothing. His throat was clenched. No—he didn’t think he had it in him.

James slapped his forearm. “Well, mosquito season’s starting up. Probably breeding like crazy down at that pond. Guess there’s not much we can do about it now. Best get it next year.” He took a long draw from his bottle. “Go ahead and drink,” he said, nodding to Jamie’s beer, “I promise it’s okay. Mom’s not going to find out.”

A breeze blew coolly across the yard as the boy lifted the bottle to his mouth and took a hesitant sip of the liquid inside. It tasted bitter, foreign. He didn’t like it at all, but he swore to himself he would finish it. Of all things, he could at least do that.

..... III

The scent of polished mahogany furniture was the most pronounced. It was a familiar scent to Jamie, rich and

comforting. Below it lingered the clean scent of linens and his mother’s perfumes. He wondered if this is what he would remember. Or would he remember the other smells, the smells of sickness and sweat, of hospital plastics and chemicals? He could smell a plague in the air.

The hospital bed looked tumorous against the warm reddish backdrop of the mahogany furniture, like a fat white toadstool blooming on a fallen log. Jamie found himself thinking of toads and frogs as he stood in the bedroom. Before this had all happened, he would frequently find himself wandering down the hill to the pond in the woods. Idly he would circle the rim of the shoreline, watching as the frogs camped in the festering shallows hurled themselves in at his approach. In one circuit, he would watch as some twenty frogs fled from him. He always thought he would like to catch one, but he knew he would never be quick enough.

One spring evening, as he walked around the pond, he had heard a shriek from the trees. It sounded like two jungle fowl set loose upon one another, their bloody spurs lashing, feathers flying through the air. He followed the source of the sound to a clearing where his dog, Yankee, stood, wagging his tail, licking the blood smeared across his muzzle. A badger crawled pathetically through the leaves in front of him. It used only its front legs. Its hind legs were limp and dragging and its jaws were locked open in a furious, bestial scowl. Flecks of blood stained its hide and a coiled pink mass trailed behind it in the red leaves.

As Jamie now looked down upon his father, he could see something of that badger again. He could see that insane will to live in spite of utter destruction. The badger had wanted nothing more than to die alone in its burrow, but Jamie had ended its misery right there. Using the nearest branch he could find, he had bludgeoned the hissing creature till he felt the brains slosh in its skull, and its lower jaw jutted out

awkwardly beneath its muzzle, teeth shining like madness against the dirt.

“Marie! Come here, Marie!” his father cried as he writhed on the bed. It was directed to the closet door, to the ceiling, to nothing at all. His green pajamas were darkened with islands of sweat and his eyes darted madly in his bald skull at things he alone could see. Marie was his sister. She died when he was only ten years old. “He’s seeing her in heaven,” his mother had explained to Jamie the night before, her face red and swollen, “she’s waiting for him there. She’s calling him home.” But Jamie knew better than that. He saw it for what it was—his father’s mind was gone. *He* was gone. The voracious cancer was infused with the air, and he could smell it, beneath even the mahogany and linens and perfumes, the cancer. Cancer had beaten down the strong man who tended the corn and roses, whose arms were once coated with wood-dust, once commanding birdhouses.

“Don’t—don’t—don’t. Get. Get that one there. There. Get there,” his father choked out.

“Dad,” Jamie said, he could barely manage more than a harsh whisper.

“Marie! I’ll take you back tomorrow. Maybe, Marie. Tomorrow.”

The white-hot ball was growing again. Reality was crippled and left in a ditch somewhere, just as it was when they had first changed his father’s bedclothes. Jamie had seen how weightless and stringy his body had become, how the catheter jutted so hideously from his limp penis, how he should have seen none of this. He felt the guilt of the last year washing over him, threatening to drown him.

“Dad . . . I.” He could say no more. He had lost his bearings on the world. He felt dizzy.

“I’ll fix it—yes—I told you. I told you, Marie.” Then his father made a howling sound, like an infant’s cry, if the infant’s voice had been deepened, forged and tempered with

latent adulthood. Every tear, every laugh, every cigarette, every bottle could be heard in the childlike cry.

“*Dad,*” he choked out, suddenly furious, “Dad—what am I supposed to do now?”

His father abruptly ceased his cry. His head rolled toward him, a strange look of profound clarity shining in his eyes. His brows were knotted in focus. And his father said words that seemed no longer directed toward the closet, to the ceiling, to a sister long dead. They seemed to be for Jamie.

The white-hot ball bucked up violently in Jamie’s chest. His cheeks felt detached from his face, his gums runny, his eyes on fire. Jamie ran from the room, past his mother sitting at the kitchen table, her head lying on her folded hands. He ran to the door and out into the heavy August dusk, into the ragged humidity. He thought of a badger hissing and spitting and fighting for the right to die alone, far from the bite of its attacker. And he thought of the sounds his father made—they were like words—he had heard them: “You’re doing just fine, boy.” Those were the words he heard.

You’re doing just fine. He ran down the slope, down and away and far from the world, and the white-hot ball grew and grew and the white-hot ball exploded with the radiance of a supernova.

..... IV

A pair of frog eyes floated covertly on the surface of the water, cloaked in swirled clumps of algae and pond scum. From under a layer of mucous and membranes, they peered to the shore. A boy sat among the reeds. Relief, surprise: it was only a boy that had come up behind the eyes. It was only a boy that had driven them to leap into the pond, leaving the warm and cozy perch at the water’s edge where the gnats swarmed the thickest.

The eyes did not blink. They hardly seemed capable of motion or sight. But from their periscopal vantage, just breaking the water’s surface, they could see an entire world. In the gloaming day, the shore-grass grew up thick and dark, seemingly alive and pulsating with the various forms of life that skittered in and out of their sheltering canopy. The trees all but eclipsed the sky near the top of the slope. They too were dark and impossibly dense as they solemnly swayed in the breeze. The sky behind them was a dim, sticky orange. If the eyes could smell, they would notice the weight of the air, the damp odor of vegetation and sun-seared mud, the wafted blue odor of burning wood. The boy sat cross-legged, his chin resting in his hands. He seemed frail, almost fragile. The eyes knew he would be the first to go, the first thing to change in this scene. His presence was fleeting, and night was coming on. The eyes could at least reason that well. Best to wait it out.

The eyes were linked to ears, a sort of primitive tympanic membrane attached to the body below the surface. When the boy spoke aloud, the ears could not hear it. His voice was not strong enough to overcome the soundproofing of the water. “Summertime is over,” was all he said. It was no more than a sigh. “*Summertime is over,*” he repeated, as if these words grounded his wild thoughts. One last time he said it, a sort of resignation in his voice: “Summertime is over.” The ears and eyes heard nothing. Only when the boy rose and started back up the slope did they startle, then follow the frog underwater, down to the cooling depths to wallow away the night in the mud.

A great horned owl stood perched on a black-locust branch. With profound golden eyes, the owl watched as the boy trudged back up the hill, slapping at mosquitoes as he went. The boy moved up to the house, where a single bar of golden light from the window spilled out through the crack

in the closed curtains. And soon he was gone, soon things were back to the way they had been.

The owl stood still, watching for some time after the boy had gone. A runic August moon had risen up, golden over the treetops. It bewildered the eastern sky with its light. The owl watched this too, its eyes the color of the rising moon. The owl may have gone on watching had a field mouse not dashed out from the thick weeds under the bird-feeder. With a great explosion of feathers, the owl swooped down and seized the prey. Neither owl nor mouse ever made a sound.

..... V

“Mom?” Jamie asked as he entered the living room. His mother was not there. Aunt Ruth sat on the sofa reading. Every lamp in the room was on, as was the TV. She looked up, vaguely startled, as she brought the mug of tea to her lips.

“She’s taking care of your dad.” Then, perhaps too abruptly: “Aren’t the mosquitoes bad out there?”

Jamie affirmed with a nod. In the silence he was again aware of the corky drone of the clock-hands. The time was off by an hour. They had never rewound it after daylight savings.

“You should be careful. Mosquitoes carry disease, you know.”

“I know.”
After a pause: “Would you like some tea?”

“No, thanks.”
“Some water? You look dehydrated.”

“No, really—I’m just fine.”

Jamie sat down next to his aunt on the sofa. His face felt tender and spongy. His arms were hot and itchy, despite the steady cool air rising out of the floor register. On the

TV, they were cycling through Olympic highlight reels. The games had all ended.

“Did you watch any of this?” he asked, indicating toward the screen.

Aunt Ruth looked up from her book again. “A bit.”
“The swimming?”

“I watched a bit.”
“Did you see who won gold in the last relay?”

“The Russians, I think. Or the Chinese. I wasn’t watching too closely.”


“Did we get silver then?”
“I wasn’t watching too closely.”

Jamie was quiet, feeling hot and itchy and dry. He thought how he needed some water.

“But I don’t think it went well,” she continued after some moments had passed. “I think we did worse than last time.”

Jamie could only think of water. ❖

Bienvenidos, Dinner Guest

 Amy Rohwer

If you're sitting at the corner,
knees pressed uncomfortably against a metal leg,
quietly tucked away between folds of floral table cloths and tethered table runners,
watching between black, blue, black
eyes,
you're a guest.

If you're sitting behind an untouched wooden plate,
Arroz de pollo, tortilla de patatas,
a cold knife slicing through the tender crease in your pinky,
-Don't come to the table barefoot –
Blonde next to brown
next to brown,
you're a guest.

If you're sitting, head bowed,
praying palms and brow sweating a baptismal blessing on the meal,
You watch a frown dressed in a red apron
hand you a cup of water,
her fingers hugging the edge of the ceramic handle,
afraid to meet yours;
and without waiting for your eyes to rise,
She will say, "Well, aren't you going to eat?"

But if you're crying behind closed doors
After the table has been cleared,
(Too much olive oil on your salad?
Perhaps too much salt in your rice.)
If you're slashing and stinging behind turned backs,
Spicy tears in a gibberish language,
Blue lips and blue eyes
Swimming in a sea of black,

You are not welcome here.



The Visitors | Karl Strasen

Antiphon

 *Ethan Grant*

“The Spirits of the Dead” — E. A. Poe

Solitude is but illusory;
My thoughts, navigating a dreadful sea
Through black and splintering waves,
Have rudders guided by alien hands—
Some spectral presence consigned to me,
Shattering solitude with his company.

The night, its ancient ashen shore
Where above me, stars—
Like campfires on the astral plains—
Burn, though departed are the hunters;
I long to claim those barren acres
And once again know peace—
But my dark companions restrain me.

These fatal words of prophecy:
So rudely they accost my ear—
Let then the Hyades disappear
And the dog and hunter lie,
Let Wormwood even meet the sea—
For vacant earth and vacant sky
Wither the roots of misery.

All in time will pass—
The brightest summer star
Drops by October’s horizon red;
The purest winter snow
Dissolves in marshy bloom;
The brightest summer star
Will burn itself to ash—
For all in time must pass.

Counselor—my fate is resigned;
The stirring winds and moonlit fields—
Forever will this scenery
Hold me to its dark design
Till life no longer clouds my eyes—
When like my spirit, the mystery
Discloses itself to starless skies,
And concluding its weary, woeful stay,
In perfect silence, dies—
When at last I am alone.



Resting Place | Emily Royer

At Market with My Mother

 Stephanie Burch

I love to hold the peaches in my hands. As my mother starts to sort through the them, I pick one up. She teaches me how to tell if it is ripe enough. Pick up the red ones, with downy yellow skin. *Prunus perisca; self-pollinating blossoms.* Fleshy and fuzzy, the fruit of seduction; tender to bite, a peach is sweet to taste. Like soft velvet to touch, it is the fruit of ancient Chinese emperors, and is birthed from the tree of life. In the culture of the orient, it is called *tao*, and symbolizes immortality and unity. In China, wild peaches grow uncultivated, small and sour. *Pêche, pfirsich, pesca, melocotón, persik, momo, peach.*

At the fruit stands, oranges are shelved next to the red and black cherries, the ripe yellow lemons fall into the boxes of red apples, and the watermelon and cantaloupe are carved out to show the sweetness of their fruit. The air is infused with the aroma of fresh baked sourdough bread coming from the store front shops, and the scent of raw meat fills the refrigerated pavilion where busy buyers come and go.

I arrive with my mother a few hours before noon; we walk slowly, silently taking in all the booths. I stop in front of a lobster tank, their claws wrapped firmly with rubber bands. One begins to crawl up the side of the glass, but is trapped by another swimming overhead. For a minute I watch the battle, the first lobster drowning in defeat.

Buy peaches off the side of the country roads in Georgia; eat them fresh, and raw. Take them with you; buy a bushel. Peach: *selfless, compassionate, nurturing, and smothering, depressed, meddlesome.* When you bite into it, the juice will drip down your chin, leave it. Pick the peaches that are soft

to touch, fragrant, and blemish free. Look for perfection, a yellow peach should blush.

Findlay Market rests in the historic neighborhood on the shores of the Ohio River. On Saturdays, Race Street is a display the vegetation and life ignored in the crowded city. For a brief moment the race riots of 2001 caused by Timothy Thomas' murder are forgotten.

No one mentions how storefronts were looted late into the night; and televisions were thrown through glass windows; and residents destroyed their own neighborhoods; and the police didn't serve and protect; and the result was black versus white; and racial tensions ran high throughout the city. Now, mothers let their children snack on samples of fresh fruit and cool slices of cheese, a grandfather in a blue wind breaker and khaki pants reaches into his pocket for change to give his grandchildren so they can buy frozen lemonade from a booth nearby, and two twenty-somethings smoke cigarettes while they walk freely between the vendors looking for cheap deals and conversation inspiring paintings.

This particular Saturday, the air is warm but the shade of the tented shops offer relief from the heat. The white canvas tents are decorated with hand woven rugs the colors of desert landscapes and cactus plants. Some shops hold antique canary diamonds, silver spun pearls, and gaudy costume jewelry. Another sells bushels of enormous yellow sunflowers and plaited wooden baskets.

We bought peaches: ripe ones, delicate ones. And we stored them on our kitchen counter in a brown paper bag. Later, when I tasted one, it was soft and grainy, sweet and

juicy, and left a cold sensation on the tip of my tongue. And we bought three different kinds of cheese, one made from goat's milk, one fresh ball of mozzarella, and one meant to be grilled on a griddle. And we bought two rolls from a bakery whose open door lured us inside.

We sat on the curb of the sunlit street, and ate peaches, and rolls, and wedges of cheese. We bought two iced teas, one with lemon, one without, and sipped them until the bottom of our glasses were dry. Before we left, we bought five breasts of chicken for dinner. The butcher proudly told us that he had the best marinade, and soaked the raw meat in a broth of herbs and vegetables. He told my mother to cook it in a skillet, with a little olive oil.

Put a peach in your Bellini; purée it, blend it with sparkling Italian wine, it should be the color of St. Francis' robe in the painting by Giovanni Bellini. Poach the peach, use it as an ice cream topping, drizzle raspberry purée over it, enjoy the succulent flavor. Peel them, slice them, make a cobbler from them, and sprinkle the top with ground cinnamon and sugar.

Eat the skin, the juice, the membrane of fruit. Carve away slices and run your fingers over the seed's rough shell. *It's called a drupe, my mother once told me, it is the hard stone center. Don't eat it, she had advised, it's hydrocyanic acid.* The center of this luscious peach is poison. ❖



Orchestra Illuminated | Dan Lund



Gilded Recital | Dan Lund

This Side of the Highway

 *R. James Onofrey*

I wonder who they are. These people that walk down the sides of highways. These people wrapped in tight jackets. These people who have their heads under thin hair and thick hats. Everything dims when I pass these people in my car--the radio, the colors of other cars--and I try to think of who these people are.

I see her every week. I stop at a red light and see her on the sidewalk. She looks homeless, always wearing layers of faded clothing. Two articles are constant: a once-puffy, now deflated camouflage jacket that hangs below her knees. The other, a tall, grimy leopard-print hat. Her mouth is always moving, talking to the slabs of concrete below her. She speaks to them, her head bent, her hat threatening to fall off, to expose her scalp to the elements. I wonder what she's saying. She's probably making promises to the sidewalk. "Got to go, see you tomorrow."

She looks homeless, but I see her in a house. When she gets home, she throws her jacket on a stained couch and sits next to it. She doesn't have a television, but she has an antique radio; tall, wooden, with an analogue dial that illuminates while the speakers warm. It's tuned to an oldies station. She listens to Nancy Sinatra sing about footwear while she slips her own off and tosses them into a cobwebbed corner. She pinches the top of her hat and pulls it off, cautious not to let the pack of cigarettes she hides in the extra space to fall to the hardwood floor. She takes one out and sticks it in her mouth. She lights it. Takes a drag as Marvin Gaye starts "I Heard It Through The Grapevine." She taps her foot to the beat, breaking the ash to her lap. She brushes it off without looking. It leaves a whisper of gray on her black jeans.

It's time for dinner. She crushes out the cigarette, hobbles to the kitchen, and slides a frozen meal into a microwave, the kind with dials and a tray that doesn't spin. She cranks the dials and starts it. It's loud. She steps away from it, in case something were to happen. She waits, knocking her knuckles to the beat of The Supremes on the counter. The microwave buzzes; she turns the meal, cranks the dials, and starts it again. She pours herself a tall glass of milk. It smells funny, but she can't tell. The walls are yellow from nicotine. The microwave buzzes again. She takes out her dinner and sits down. She pokes at the food with her fork. The sauce burns her mouth, but the meat is still ice cold. A meal that injures and heals in one bite.

She finishes, throws the fork into the clogged sink behind her. She doesn't throw the plastic tray away, just stacks it on the others on the chair beside her. She lights another cigarette for dessert. Frank croons as she pours a little Jack in a can of warm Coke. The life of the feasibly homeless is a simple one. She doesn't know the time. The clocks she owns--the cuckoos and the grandfathers--haven't worked in years. She tries to ignore the disc jockey when he moans the time and temperature. Commercials have interrupted the music. She sings songs to herself, over the promises of car insurance, house insurance, and life insurance. She taps rhythms out on her belly, over the words of traffic conditions, weather conditions, and news conditions.

She's drifting to sleep when K.C. & The Sunshine Band start explaining how they like it. She hates the song. She doesn't tap her foot, her knuckles, her anything. She hates it even more now that it woke her. She lifts the can to her

lips and throws her head back, finishing the spiked soda--K.C. and his band shouldn't fuck with her. She considers calling her son; she has a phone, but she took the bell out. She makes calls, doesn't take them. She picks up the receiver and spins his number into the rotary dial. He answers on the eighth ring.

"Hello"

"Hi Johnny, it's Mom."

"Mom? Do you realize what time it--"

"You know the answer to that."

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to see what you're up to"

"Well, I was sleeping."

"So was I, then the fucking Sunshine Band woke me up."

"What?"

"Nevermind." She hangs up.

She stands and turns the radio's volume up a couple notches and wobbles to her bedroom. She groans as she sits down on a bare mattress on the ground. She slips her socks off, blisters polka-dot the bottom of her feet. She lies down. Nat King Cole begins telling her how unforgettable she is. She closes her eyes and falls asleep to his voice.

The light turns green, I step on the gas. Everything becomes vibrant again--the music, the reds and blues and greens of sedans and pickups and SUVs. I pass her, see her hobbling in my rearview mirror, getting smaller. Her hat becomes a brown blur that disappears altogether when she bends down to talk to the sidewalk. ❖



Night Transit | Dan Lund

From the Porch

 *Ellen Orner*

It's raining very hard and in the lot
behind the hospital, bins flow over
with wet linens. The wind-sock flaps.
The headlamps of two idling trucks
nick the humming edges of those strange
machines and glitter in the flowing street.
A signal on the roof is blinking blue-
orange-white, blue-orange-white,
and at our naked feet, a black puddle.



Untitled | Caleb Kortokrax



Glimpse | Emily Royer

Angry Colors

 William Milhans

“Tell us an Angry Yellow story.”

I don’t know how I came up with these characters. One day I just started telling stories to my nephews about Angry Colors. Today, I take a deep breath, and say:

.....

‘So I was walking down the street one day when I saw this Angry Yellow digging through a trash can. And I said:

“Hey, Angry Yellow – what’s the times, man?”

He just looked up at me, and then he took out this box, and I saw it was an empty Kleenex box, only it had a single Kleenex left. And I just happened to have a runny nose that day.’

.....

My nephews’ names are Jacob and Vincent. Jacob is 5; Vincent is 3. We’re in the van, my mom driving, going to church. I’ve twisted around in the passenger seat and am gesticulating wildly as I say the line, “What’s the times, man?”. My mom smirks and rolls her eyes, but the boys giggle and crave more. I know that, if I finish this Angry Yellow story before the ride ends, Vincent will say:

“Tell us an Angry *Green* story.”

And then Jacob will say:

“No! Tell us an Angry *Purple* story!”

There is in fact a rainbow of Angry Colors, and though I’ve never nailed down what any of them *are*, specifically, I’ve had ideas. The Angry Yellows come up in my mind as all quickness and edges; cat-people made of sharp yellow polygons. The Angry Blues look more like the Blue Meanies

from *Yellow Submarine*, crossed with blueberry-mode Violet from *Charlie and Chocolate Factory*. For some reason I think of the Angry Greens as crystal spiders, even though I love the color green and I’m terrified of spiders. And the Angry Purples . . .

I have no idea what the Angry Purples look like.

.....

“So I said, ‘Hey! Hey Angry Yellow. Hey, can I have that Kleenex? I - I kinda could use it.’

And he got this mean look on his face and he took the Kleenex, and I said,

‘Well, there’s no need to be mean,’

and he was about to go blow his nose on it all mean-like when this Angry Blue pulled a *Boondock Saints* and jumped from a rooftop and landed on him!

.....

The Angry Colors each have a distinct voice – or, at least, distinct sounds. Angry Yellows speak with these hiss/snarl/slobber sounds; like they’re the offspring of a pit bull and a lawnmower. Angry Blues, on the other hand, sound sort of round, bubbly and always bummed out – “*a-bloom blum bloo bloo*”. Since the other colors show up less, I change their voices every time I forget what they’re supposed to sound like, but at present the Angry Greens talk like heavy needles falling on a metal floor (“Ting tong PANG!”), and Angry Purples make noises like hitting a steel cable with little iron balls: “*GalAAng*” and “*GalUUUng*”.

I knew my nephews would crack up at this stuff, these

sounds, because they enjoy it in real life too. If I don my Outrageous British Voice and demand of Vincent “*WHERE ARE MY NOODLES!?!?*”, he’s gonna laugh no matter how involved he was in his Tinker Toys – and sometimes Jacob and I will trot all over the house, me padding ahead and flailing my arms in the air and making strange sounds (halfway between a cat’s meow and a deflating balloon), and him chasing after and laughing and shouting: “Lava bombs! *Bam! Bam!*”.

I think it makes sense. I too enjoy life the most when someone’s around around making cat-balloon noises.

.....

“The Angry Blue was all,

‘A-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo’

and the Angry Yellow was all

‘RAAAAGHHH’

and the Angry Blue grabbed the Kleenex, and I was all

‘Thank you Angry Blue for that Kleenex.’

So he bobbed over to me but he wouldn’t give it to me; he was all

‘A-bloo-ba-bloo bloo’

I said, ‘What’s that? You want me to undergo three tests to see if I’m worthy?’

And he shook his head and went, ‘A-bloo bloo bloo’

I said, ‘You want a steak sandwich?’

He shook his head and went, ‘A bloo-bloo-bloo’

I said, ‘Look, Angry Blue, I don’t know what you’re saying.’

.....

For reasons I don’t understand, the Angry Colors are strictly fantasies. They couldn’t possibly be real – they’re not even suitable for make-believe games. I don’t know if this will ever change.

It came to light one night when the boys were sleeping over at our house. My folks had refused to let Jacob make a fire in our fire pit and he’d started sulking in our tiny kitchen, scowling and pacing and grumbling at the floor. As Vincent built a leaning tower of Tinker Toys, I came over to Jacob and tried to tell him that this wasn’t the end of the world. He kept scowling, and my mom walked up.

“What’s that around the corner?” she said.

We both dutifully looked around the corner.

She drew out each syllable: “It’s an Angry Yellow!”

Then Jacob and I shared a look, without any hesitation and without us ever having talked about it before, and in that look we both said:

That’s stupid. Angry Yellows aren’t real; they’re for funny stories. She must have made a mistake.

The gambit stopped, and my mom promptly left us alone. Since she was only trying to help, I feel a bit bad about the stiff blank stare we leveled at her.

.....

“Just then the Angry Yellow came back and used his *crazy* pincer-like arms to puncture the Angry Blue. And the Angry Blue was all:

‘bloo-bloo-bloo!’

and it turned out that he was inflated, like a balloon, and he flew away.

And I was all, ‘Angry Yellow, this time you’ve gone too far.’

And I grabbed a fire-hydrant and with my *crazy superhuman strength* I ripped it out of the ground, and I was all:

‘I’m going to go Super Mutant Behemoth *all over your face!*’

.....

Sometimes I’ll say things in my stories that don’t make any sense. Things Jacob and Vincent can’t possibly get, like famous authors, diplomatic investigations, or thermodynamic principles. See, unlike Vincent – who likes to build things and watch people, which I am big fan of – Jacob has this kind of shallow, “lets knock down the sandcastle” mentality. I desperately want him to grow out of it – so I slip things from the adult world in-between all the “a bloo bloo bloos”. Not moral lessons, not sophisticated ideas – just things that take life experience to understand, things that have depth. I hope he’ll absorb some of them, even if he doesn’t think of them for years. And when he does think of them, I hope they interest him more than *Lava Bombs*.

Then again, maybe I won’t have to wait so long: two months ago, Jacob started telling me his own Angry Color stories. True, they’re not gripping – they contain nothing but one dude hitting a succession of other dudes into deep space, and occasionally someone exploding into flames. Plus, Jacob doesn’t have the rapid-fire delivery down, and the scenes are tied together loosely – but whatever, they’re still stories, and out of all the things I could pass on to my nephews, storytelling is the thing that’s given me the most enjoyment and the most enlightenment. So I hope Jacob keeps it up – and I hope Vincent starts too. I hope they both become far better at it than I am – though if they ever stop the stories

from being silly, I’ll have to use my influence as the Original Creator to overrule them.

.....

“And the Angry Yellow was all
‘BAA BRA BRIG - BRAAAAAA!!!’
and three of the buildings around me went all
‘Ka-twa twa twang’
and were like Transformers! And they jumped onto his arms and made him into this giant building-man!

And I said, ‘Two can play at that game. Sewer-man: TRANSFORM!’

.....

Our van pulls up to church, and my mom turns off the engine.

“All right, time to get out!” she says
“Awwwwww.” Jacob says
I slide open the side door and say:

.....

“And so we had a big battle, but in the end we realized we were just in a Miniature World inside of a glass snowglobe, and we spent the rest of our lives trying to put together a class-action lawsuit against the glassmaker who made the globe. We weren’t as successful as we had hoped.” ❖

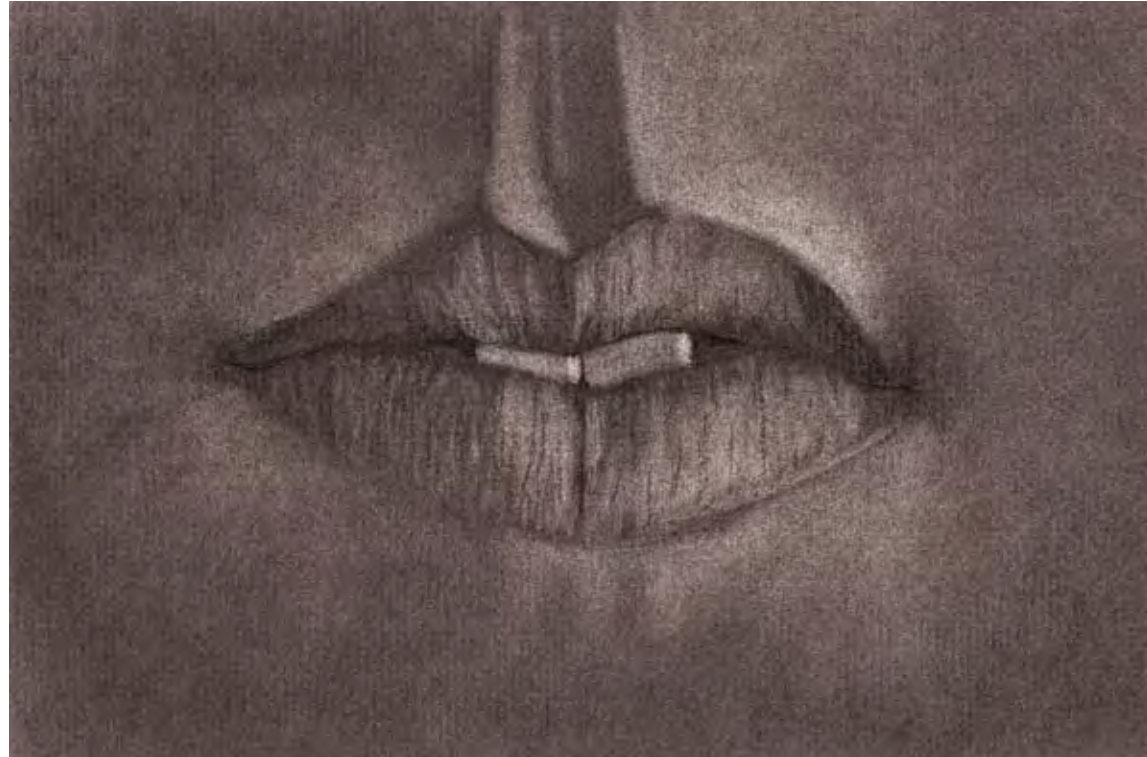




Elly With Kite | Karl Strasen



The Garden | Abbey Houx



Untitled | Anna DeLuna

Enrobing

 *Ellen Orner*

On my bedside table sits
A baby Black-eyed Susan
In a shot glass, picked and watered
By a friend who sees
Letters sticking out of mail
Slots in stone walls and takes
Their pictures. Bent and dry but yellow
Still, the Black-eyed Susan
Sits for weeks and up her stem
Grows a gauzy lace
Of fine white mold, gathering
A fiber's width each morning.

Crissey Dreams a Long Dream

 *Ellen Orner*

Crissey wakes and finds herself in the cool, dry grass beneath a tree. An oak tree, she thinks, but can't say for sure, because she has lost her glasses somehow, and the leaves and branches are a foamy substance that hovers in magnetic tension with itself. The tree sways, now; the foam shifts and dozen round, yellow lights twinkle through it, leaping from plane to plane, from gap to cavity, on a spontaneous circuit. She has heard of this vision before, among the recently sighted—this is the tree with the lights in it.

Crissey wakes to a face, a man's face with lovely, low-burning eyes. She sees her own face reflected in the glassy surface over his pupils. She studies her reflection, wondering if his eyes know that they're being used as mirrors. She wants to speak, but with her words on the brink of her mouth, finds she'd rather not. She speaks anyway.

"I saw the tree with the lights in it."

He nods.

"You've seen it?"

Instead of answering, he kisses her. She feels her lips warm and soften, and then she doesn't feel them at all, or rather, she forgets them. She feels elements instead—silver and sulfur and four oxygens, compounding. She sees electrons dance through intersecting orbits. She builds their bonds, one by one, and gives a name to each.

Crissey wakes, and sees the walls of a house rising, platinum white, sliding into joints and leafing into rooms, solid and transparent. Green velvet seat cushions sprout from the furniture. Warm rain falls and the chair legs sprout roots.

The lamps grow tall and straight. Their gold leaves fan and flatten to the ceiling.

The walls bloom.

Verses unfurl, line by line, across the white china tiles of the floor. Each tile is laid by a movement of his lips, each word is inscribed by the rhythm of his tongue behind her teeth.

Crissey wakes in a bed not her own, and fumbles with the window latch, shoves it open. The sidewalk below crawls with people bearing boxes. They're lining up at the door, and tramping up the stairs. They're wearing black hats with veils. Crissey jumps up, gathering armfuls of socks and underwear. As she reaches the door, it opens, and in sail two veiled women, their noses held high. She can see up their nostrils. Crissey pushes past them, trips down the stairs, which are under construction, precipitating bits of undergarments. She weaves between ascending boxes, gathering speed. At the front door, she finds her way blocked by the limp, naked body of a girl. Her legs extend across the threshold like a toll bar. She is unwakeable. More box movers are coming, marching up the sidewalk. Crissey grips the girl's heels and heaves.

At the curb, Crissey drops everything—slips, stockings, legs—and runs. Her bare feet gather sureness, her joints, buoyancy. Her eyes scan the pavement rushing below. She leaps through an alley leading out of the city proper. A chip of glass glitters out of the gravel, where her foot must land. She braces for a sting, but finds instead that in order to run, it is not necessary that her feet touch the ground. She dashes on, upward to the cliffs, propelled by precise and efficient strokes of her limbs.

At the edge Crissey halts, turning back to face the lights glittering on the edges of black city buildings. Her heels find the edge of empty space. She jumps, or slips—drops—and is falling.

Alert and accelerating, she reaches out and catches an orange piece of erosion fence that is staked to an outcropping in the cliff. The plastic stretches, lengthens, grows with the growing ambition of her fall. Thousands of feet later, ever-slowing to the nadir, she dips a toe in the surface of the sea. Up she springs. The cliff edge is coming, the verge approaches, then recedes. She is flung up past the canopies of trees, beyond the flat roofs of city buildings, up through an icy cloud, and here is the moon, and here are stars. Crissey does a graceful somersault and is still for an instant, neither rising nor falling.

Crissey dives, stretching her fingertips to the sea. Air whips over the dips between her ribs. She opens her mouth and lets in wind—more oxygen in a single gulp than she's had in all the rest of her life. The rising sun glints off every smooth surface—bird beaks, window panes, waxy leaves. Plunging through the canyon mouth, she feels nothing but the freedom. And control. When she wants to rise again, she'll have only to think of it.

When her head breaks the water surface, she inhales, and finds that her lungs accept oxygen from water as well as air, and her eyes do not sting. Her speed slackens only if she ceases to think about plunging, and so she concentrates on exhilaration. And yet, a sense of dissatisfaction seeps in as she deepens. She is neither trapped nor cold nor suffocating nor afraid—but there is not nearly enough light. Crissey stops

descending, and finds the waters are as heavily populated as a city. Down here in the murk are the old, the sick, the lost, and a few stray young. They drift down when no one is watching, and must be fetched back up to the lighted water. They have very little strength. Their companions have to grasp their wrists and ankles and heave them up, command them to paddle. When a body cannot make any effort to float near the surface anymore, they let her sink.

The surface of the water is crowded with the strongest ones, who scramble against each other, heads just above water, thrown back to the sun. Crissey finds an open spot and floats on her back next to a man whose eyes are squeezed shut with the strain of treading water while throwing elbows at his mates.

"You aren't stuck here, you know, on the surface," she says. "This is just the very top of the bottom."

The man grunts in response.

Crissey sighs, gathers herself like a spring, and launches into the dry, open sunlight.

Crissey wakes, and finds herself in a room with gray walls and a long window that looks out onto Main Street. She hears a car horn, hollow, and then another, higher pitched. She feels her fingers. Her thumbnail runs the tip of each, causing a buzzing sensation like panic. She stops, opens her eyes. The gray wall in front of her has not moved, nor has anything grown from its cracks. She feels the bottom of her hair, which she got bobbed on Saturday...still feels new. The edge of the door pushes forward, opposite the hinges. She braces against the mattress, squeezing the seams so the fabric swallows her knuckles. ❖



Whiskers | Jeannie Halvorsen



Bridger Bowl Ridge Hike | Tim Staub

Albaicin

🌿 *Amy Rohwer*

White houses call to me.
The hills, their home, remember
The rubber grooves lining
The bottom
Of these crusty sneakers.
I was here yesterday.
But now,
My feet are comfortably cleaved,
Like babies against a mother's breast,
To the sun-baked cement,
To a paved road trailing the savage desert,
To a train track stalking the foggy coastline.
A bearded beggar, blind and shirtless,
Blocks my view of the snowcapped mountains.
I will return to the hills another day.



Z | Adam Jackson

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Emily K. Bahr believes that Piazza San Marco in Venice is the perfect place to conquer any pigeon related fears. She is a junior English major from Bronxville, New York, who also believes that smiles can make anything better :)

Timothy Campos - "Dancing Feet" is a photograph of my daughter, Adrienne, dancing around our living room early one morning in 2010. I am a graduate student at Valparaiso University completing a Master of Arts in Arts and Entertainment Administration. I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography from Columbia College Chicago.

William Graff is a senior Meteorology major. In addition to various academic field studies, his participation in the Air Force ROTC program has allowed him to travel to numerous locations around the country and world. From chasing storms to hiking across active lava fields, William always keeps his camera close at hand. He plans to work in Germany following graduation and will continue to make photos there in his spare time.

Ethan Grant is a junior English major, creative writing minor. His favorite day of the year is September 4th. Not for any particular reason . . . it's just a nice-looking date.

Jeannie Halvorsen is a senior Psychology major from San Francisco, California. She loves the beach, horses, Cupcake Wars, and Starbucks chai lattes.

Eric Hilmer is not exactly sure of anything pertaining to who he is or what his interests may be from day to day, but he does a good amount of wondering, which often leads to the creation of semi-autobiographical fictions. The painting described in "Mountain Landscape" is by Frederick Edwin Church and may be found in the southwestern corner of the Brauer Art Museum.

Abbey Houx is a senior graduating this spring. She will miss Valpo immensely, especially her Art Department buddies. And though all things must pass away, she hopes everyone can stay in touch. Until then, we'll always have the VUCA and of course, our beloved Art/Psych. She would also like to randomly

mention the BSFA Student Show in the Brauer. You should go take a look (shameless, shameless plug). Enough of that. Much thanks to the Lighter and to you all.

Adam Jackson - Hello again, it is good to be joining you for another year here at good ol' Valpo U. I can't believe I managed to get FOUR photos inside your pages this semester. FOUR!!! Compared to my usual one I managed to impress even myself, but in saying that I must thank Dan Lund for reminding me to submit my photos because I spaced on it when the original deadline rolled around before break. So thanks Dan, and thank you to all that raised their hands in support of my work, I appreciate it more than you know as this may very well be my last contributors note and round of art in The Lighter. So here's to you Dan, the selection committee, and the wonderful pages of The Lighter filled with our amazing student artwork.

Caleb Kortokrax is drinking a bottle of wine with Nina Corazzo. Thanks to Maria Elena, Muffie, Karl, and my

iPhone for dealing with myprocrastination. - written by Jake and sent from his iPhone

Dan Lund is logging in as much time as possible at the tall tables of Grinders before graduation pushes him away from Valpo, but fortunately has the coffee shops of Ann Arbor to look forward to as he continues onward to graduate school.

R. James Onofrey is a Creative Writing and Journalism major. His work has appeared in *Colored Chalk*, *The Lighter*, *amphibi.us*, and *Stanley the Whale*. He likes typewriters, 8-bit games, and bebop.

Ellen Orner has finally graduated, yet refuses to leave. Thanks to Megan, Jake, and Jeremy Reed. (does this make it sound like all of your last names are Reed? i just want it to flow. and maybe rhyme a little, ha.)

Janelle Ramsel - "The details of my life are quite inconsequential. My father was a relentlessly self-improving boulangerie owner from Belgium with

low-grade narcolepsy and a penchant for buggery. My mother was a 15-year-old French prostitute named Chloe with webbed feet. My father would womanize; he would drink. He would make outrageous claims like he invented the question mark. Sometimes, he would accuse chestnuts of being lazy. My childhood was typical: summers in Rangoon, luge lessons... In the spring, we'd make meat helmets. When I was insolent I was placed in a burlap bag and beaten with reeds — pretty standard, really."

Jeremy Reed wants you to know the poem is new while the story is about a year old. He would also like to tell you to keep writing no matter what country you happen to find yourself in. Oh, and hogwash, just because it's a funny word.

Amy Rohwer is a junior English and Spanish double major. She loves indulging in the written word as well as the study of new cultures and languages. She just recently returned from a three month study abroad

experience in Granada, Spain: the source of her poetic inspiration

Emily Royer is spending the semester wandering through narrow side streets.

Tim Staub is a senior civil engineering major. He doesn't have an eloquent words about his inspiration for his photos, "Home-made Rocket" and "Bridger Bowl Ridge Hike." Sometimes you just get lucky.

Karl Strasen is a senior art major, and aspiring graphic designer. He enjoys being in nature, riding his bike, having philosophical discussions, and experiencing new things. He has enjoyed college immensely and will dearly miss Valpo as he enters the "real world." That being said, he is excited for what lies ahead. He would like to thank the 603, his parents, and his sister for their support and guidance. And Kjoller, here's your penguin . . . 