

A stylized graphic of an eye, composed of a large white outer arc and a dark grey inner shape. The text 'EL PORTAL' is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font across the dark grey area.

EL PORTAL

EL PORTAL

Volume 70. Number 1. Winter 2014

The Waste of Space

Editor: Alexandra Itzi
Advisor: Stefan Kiesbye
Designer: Sanaz Kiesbye

Eastern New Mexico University's
Literature and Arts Journal

ABOUT EL PORTAL

El Portal is Eastern New Mexico University's Literature and Arts Journal. It is published biannually.

El Portal and El Portal awards are funded by a grant from the Jack Williamson Trust. The late Dr. Williamson was a science fiction master, author, ENMU professor emeritus of English, and friend to writers and readers everywhere. He served as the faculty sponsor of El Portal while he taught at ENMU.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Patrice Caldwell for advising past productions of El Portal. The current staff strives to emulate the excellence, integrity, and creative spirit of this literary journal in honor of the legacy of both El Portal and the late Jack Williamson.

We would also like to thank Ms. Holly Bayly for encouraging her students to explore creative writing. We are proud to present some of their efforts in this issue.

And finally, thank you to all readers and contributors of El Portal—past or present. Without your hard work, passion, and support this journal would be slightly less glorious than its current incarnation. We hope to continue providing a platform for creativity and expression.

* * *

Jeff Parker's fiction piece The Deportation of Evgeny Maximovich was first published in Ghost Town.

SUBMISSIONS

El Portal is open to submissions from all artists and writers; however, its awards are intended solely for the benefit of ENMU students. Submissions are published on the basis of talent, content, and publishing criteria.

El Portal serves as the creative forum for the students, faculty, and staff of the university as well as artists, writers and photographers worldwide; consequently, the views expressed in El Portal do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of ENMU as a whole.

GUIDELINES

- Flash Fiction (500-1500 words)
- Short Stories (up to 4000 words)
- Creative Nonfiction (up to 4000 words)
- Poetry (3-5 poems)
- Art & Photography (300 dpi JPEG)
- Please submit all written work in .doc, .docx, or .rtf formats.
- With the exception of poetry and art/photography, please limit entries to one story or essay.
- Prizes will be awarded to ENMU students only. Prizes awarded only in Short Story, Poetry, and Art/Photography categories.
- When entering a submission, please include a 20-50 word biography to be printed alongside your piece in the event that it is accepted for publication.

DEADLINES

Spring: March 1st, 2014 Fall: October 1st, 2014

E-MAIL

El.Portal@enmu.edu

WEBSITE

www.elportaljournal.com

WRITERS' RETREAT

JUNE 2-13, 2014

Portales is home to saddle makers, ranchers, cowboys, tumble weeds, quaint restaurants, a few rattlesnakes, and a lot of open space and brilliant skies. For two weeks you can write in the company of poets and writers while surrounded by little else. Let the hubbub and the clatter subside and focus on what you love.

The ENMU Writers' Retreat offers two-week long intensive workshops in poetry and fiction. Students will meet with their teachers daily to discuss their own work and learn about issues of craft. Participants can choose to enroll in either one or both genres. Workshops will be held from 10am-12:30pm, and from 1:30pm-4:00pm. Join us in the evenings for concerts, readings, field trips and great food.

HOW TO APPLY

If you'd like to study poetry and/or fiction during the ENMU Writers' Retreat, please submit a sample of your work.

Samples should adhere to the following:

Eight (8) Pages of Poetry or

Ten (10) Pages of Prose

Please visit www.enmuwritersretreat.com/howtoapply to submit your writing sample and learn more about pricing.

For further information regarding accommodations, events, the teachers and staff please visit:
www.enmuwritersretreat.com

FACULTY



JEFF PARKER is the author of the novel *Ovenman* (Tin House) and the story collection *The Taste of Penny* (Dzanc). He is the co-editor of the anthologies *Rasskazy: New Fiction from a New Russia* (Tin House) and *Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States* (Dalkey Archive). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *n+1*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, and other pubs. His nonfiction book *Igor in Crisis: A Russian Journal* is forthcoming from HarperCollins. He co-founded DISQUIET: The Dzanc Books International Literary Program in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2011, and for many years he was the program director of the Summer Literary Seminars in St. Petersburg, Russia. He spent 2010-2011 in Moscow, Russia, on a Fulbright Research Fellowship teaching creative writing, a subject that does not exist there, at the Russian State University for the Humanities.



KEVIN COVAL is the author of *Schtick*, described by the Chicago Tribune as “a sensational collection, alternately heartfelt, humorous and provocatively political.” His other books include *L-vis Lives: Racemusic Poems*, *Everyday People*, and the American Library Association Book of the Year Finalist *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica*. Coval is the founder of Louder than a Bomb: the Chicago Youth Poetry Festival, Artistic Director at Young Chicago Authors and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

10	Frontier and Identity, CHRISTY CZERWIEN
15	A World of Sand, GREGORY RAPP
24	The Deportation of Evgeny Maximovich, JEFF PARKER
33	Justice, Left on Emerald Road, TOM LORD
42	Listening for god, San Juan Village, Portales, NM
43	50% of all jewelry at Beall's, Portales, NM, ERICA DAWSON
44	Something Else
46	Campfire, KATIE BICKLEY
47	The Wangmu Thieves, MATT ESPINOZA
59	Daddy's Girl, GIGI GUAJARDO
62	Portales Light
63	The Grasses of Grulla, RUTH THOMPSON
64	Long Lost Friend, BARRY GRAHAM
79	Unsatisfiable, ANGELICA FLORES
80	Portfolio
	Taiban Views
	Misty Mountain, JOSHUA LUCERO
	Pass With Care
	Encouragement, LAURA STEELE
	Head On, BLAKE MOON
	Brother
	Moon
	Star Gazer, GEOVANNY LUJAN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

88	Rename the Sky
89	Quiet Patrol, MARCUS BOBESICH
90	Next Generation, ALEX NEELY
100	Adrift, AMETHYST COLLINS
102	Untitled, DAVID KRAUSE
110	Lost Thoughts, CHRISTOPHER BRUNSEN
112	Unsaid, MYLES JOHNSON
114	Eternally Yours, W. TYLER PATERSON
123	Undisturbed (Another One Bites the Dust), BLAKE MOON
127	The Toy Library, BRIDGET RICHARDSON
137	The Bowl, KIRK LEE DAVIS
142	Windfarm, SOPHIE JO MILLER
148	Mabies, TRISTAN ACKER
150	Just Another Night in East Texas, WENDEL SLOAN
152	How We Spoke Beyond Hanaupah Creek, Death Valley
153	Angelina's Flower Shop on February 14th, JEFFREY ALFIER
154	Acceptance Speech, WAYNE LEE
157	Silence, KAYLEEN BURDINE

Frontier and Identity

Christy Czerwien

MIST SHROUDED HILLS RISING IN THE DISTANCE...ferocious gales of wind blowing unchecked across open prairie, causing an army of ragged tumbleweeds to barrel by...the fiery explosion of a spaceship's afterburners light up the grey sky of a distance moon...

The frontier fascinates us with its rugged beauty and inspires awe because of its unknown possibilities. It dwarfs us with its larger-than-life persona. The images above are a few that come to mind when we think of the word "frontier." The word itself is applied to many different places and scenarios: the American West, the Canadian frontier, space, the frontiers of science, medicine, and technology. Most often, the word is associated with something or someplace on the edge of the known. It is the borderland between the known and unknown, the controlled and the uncontrollable. We bandy about this term, but never really stop to think about how we define it or why it is important to us. For example, what distinguishes a wasteland from a frontier? Or, who gets to decide what is and isn't a frontier and when that frontier is closed? Why is the frontier important to us, at least here in North America? These are just a few questions.

It is these questions that I present not to provide definite answers for, but for contemplation. The word "frontier" is itself meaningless. It is just eight letters that symbolizes something of value. The question to ask ourselves is: "What gives it that value and what is that value?" For example, an intellectual field of study is only considered a frontier because we call it so. We talk about the "frontier of science" and the "frontier of technology," but never really about the "frontier of art" or the "frontier of music". Is all music and art really knowable? The lack of a "frontier of art" assumes that there is nothing else to discover and nothing new to be created. One might ask if this is really so or if it is that society has decided that the exploration of art is inconsequential

compared to the exploration of science.

The truth is that numerous cultural forces are involved in the designation of “frontier” and “not frontier.” Let us start with the two questions posed earlier: “what distinguishes a wasteland from a frontier?” and “who gets to decide what is and isn’t a frontier and when that frontier is closed?” Mainstream North American culture often envisions the frontier as an essential part of the creation of our nation, whether it is the United States or Canada. This was the central theme of Frederick Jackson Turner’s *Frontier Thesis*. He argued that the American frontier formed the shape of United States democracy and thus, American identity. On the Canadian side, historians Harold Adams Innis and J.M.S. Careless also had their own version of the frontier thesis that was tied to the creation of a Canadian nation and Canadian national identity. In our corner of the world, then, the notion of the frontier is tied to nation and national identity.

Did, however, the indigenous people of the Americas call their homelands the “frontier” before the Europeans came? We would say “no”. Most of us would find it odd if an alien race were to suddenly appear and call our homeland “frontier”. By its nature, the term is laden with the expectations of the dominating culture, who calls an unknown place the “frontier”. For the new, incoming group, the previously unknown territory is a blank slate...a place unhampered by the value systems where the new group originated from. They often view (at least in the North American experience) the new frontier as a place to be tested, where the strong survive, where they can be independent from the politics or religion of their place of origin. It is a place where they can impose their cultural values and perhaps create new ones. It is a place of possibility and new creation. The very implication of the term “frontier”, then, is the result of a cultural war of sorts.

However, is every unexplored place on the edge of “civilization” an automatic candidate for “frontier”? Or is it only a frontier if it interests us? The important aspect of a frontier is that someone wants to go there. Otherwise, it is not really a frontier. Instead, it is something

we might term “wasteland” or “empty space”. If it doesn’t interest us and doesn’t appear to have any potential for some kind of growth, we ignore it.

Perhaps most importantly, it is the position of the frontier in our stories: in our fiction, our legends, our folklore, and our mythology. In the modern fictional realm, it is where Luke Skywalker and his friends triumphed over evil, where Frodo and the Fellowship journeyed in their quest to destroy the One Ring, and where the heroes of *Star Trek* are tested physically and morally. In the realm of mythology, folklore, and legends, the frontier is where we find Odysseus, Paul Bunyan, and Joaquin Murrietta. In the realm of popular history, the frontier is a place for celebrated explorers like Zheng He, Leif Ericson, and Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Why does the frontier figure so prominently in our favorite stories?

Similar to the “frontier shapes our national identity” theses, the frontier also has its place in shaping our cultural identity as well. So often, the hero’s journey or quest in the most beloved stories takes place in a physical frontier—such as in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Why is that? Perhaps the reason is that the frontier is exciting to us because it is unknown and it reflects the unknown potential of the human condition. What better setting could you ask for in a story? One could say that each created universe in a story is a frontier, because it is unknown to us and we get the pleasure of exploring it with each page of a book. The frontier is often used to shape the plot of a story and the development of a character. Perhaps even more important than the “physical” frontier of the story is the one that we cannot immediately see. It is the driving force behind the search for a frontier.

Often, in the end, the hero finds the answer not in the physical frontier, but in the previously unknown and hidden inner frontier of his or her self. Is the need to find a physical frontier a reflection of the need to explain the unknowable inner frontier? While there are outer conflicts in *The Lord of the Rings* which had to be resolved, they sparked the exploration of the inner frontier. Frodo in the end needed to resist

the One Ring's inner influence more than he did any external force. Samwise Gamgee had to call upon previously unknown reserves of strength to carry Frodo the rest of his journey. One could say that the quest through the external frontier of Middle-earth is in fact reflective of the journey through the inner realms of Frodo, Samwise, and the rest of Tolkien's heroes.

Perhaps, then, it is this interior frontier that fuels the quest for an outer frontier. It drives us to create new frontiers when we decide that the previous ones are closed. There seems to be an unspoken human need for a separate, creative space that is divided from the main "homeland". If there is not a physical frontier, we will create one. Countries will expand their borders in warfare to create a new frontier, with the goal of enriching their nation state. Or, we will create non-physical frontiers, such as "the frontier of medicine", or the "frontier of science". We use frontiers as a backdrop for many of our stories because of their importance to the plot and character building. This is true both in the realm of fiction, as well as in the real world. For example, popular U.S. history views the pioneers of the American West as tough individuals who helped to build our nation. In essence, according to the stories we tell, the American West helped to build the pioneers and the pioneers helped to build the United States. There is a dynamic interplay between the American "frontier" and the people who lived there.

What is left at the end then, after we have moved from one created frontier to another? That there is nothing left to explore or discover; that it is all knowable, definable, and can be categorized in neat little boxes? What is at the root of the need for a frontier? I would posit that it is the frontier most neglected, but the one that is always left at the end of the day—the frontier of the mind. The frontier of existence. It is this inner frontier that seems to be the driving force behind the search for new territory that will give us answers. I would argue that there is a need to play out the hidden, internal ocean of rippling energy. Usually we don't know it is there. We are too absorbed in the past, in

distractions, or in an imagined future to pay attention to what is really driving us. Few are able or willing to pause and seek out the spaces between thought, to sit still long enough for the silence of the inner unknown to penetrate, to seek out the frontier behind the frontier. Why?

Because that frontier tends to scare us the most.

It is easier to look at others than it is to look at ourselves. We are more frightened by the inner mystery than the outer. We are more curious about the outer than the inner, but it is the inner unknown that drives the relentless search for the exterior frontier. And when that frontier is closed, we create another...and another. We may be content without a frontier for a short time, but restlessness will grow and eventually someone will be driven to ask: "Is that all there really is? I'm bored".

Perhaps that is why the frontier so intrigues us and is so central to the stories we create to define ourselves. It helps us to direct our creative, internal energies into a way that we find more controllable. At times this can have disastrous consequences, as in the wars that empires wage. Other times, it is the basis for discovering ourselves and each other. That, perhaps, is the greatest possibility of the unknown frontiers—both the one inside us and the ones yet to be created. At least in North America, we use the idea of the frontier to construct our identities, our history, our ideology, and our stories. One might argue that the created frontier is a mirror to see ourselves as we would like to be.

A World of Sand

Gregory Rapp

ALEXANDER PUUSEPP FEELS THE HOT RAYS of sunshine wash over his pale and stubble covered face. He forces his eyes open only to see blurs and shadows. His head aches and sticky blood seeps from an open gash on his forehead. He made it to the place or that is what he hopes. He leans his head back against the headrest of the pilot's chair for a few moments, taking in deep breaths. His eyesight become sharper and clear with each passing moment, until he can see through the shattered observation ports located directly above the control console.

The sky above is a majestic hue of blue with a few specks of white puffy clouds lingering in the atmosphere. The bright sun is warm and almost welcome, at first. However, as Alexander sits in his seat, clad in a heavy insulated spacesuit, the sun beings to slowly work at him. He feels stinging sweat make its way down his neck and forehead. He squints up at the sky, looking for any sign that might indicate he made it back to Earth, possibly reassuring him that the whole thing is just a horrible dream caused by the trauma of crashing nose-first into a desolate gypsum desert.

It takes a few minutes for the idea to sink into Alexander's head. He is not on Earth like he should be. No, he knew that part already. Alexander knew that when he entered the mysterious solar system days before. He knew that when he entered the planet's atmosphere, hoping that whoever was sending the cobalt, neon-green light into space would find him way out in the boonies. He hoped that the light was being sent by the Progenitors. They were often willing to send humans back to where they came from; the others amongst the stars were less willing to do a favor for a species that barely left their own solar system.

Alexander feels panic setting in. His chest tightens up. His breathing is sharper with each passing inhale and exhale. He looks at the shattered and beaten remains of his control console. The mechanical

clock in the upper right hand corner of the console tells him he has been out for nearly twenty-three hours. Not exactly reassuring, but it's a start. He tries coaxing the different instruments online, but only manages to get the emergency radio working. Even that is not very promising. Nothing but static filters through the tiny speakers built into the overhead panels.

"Chert voz'mi," Alexander mutters, switching the radio off to save whatever power still remains in the spacecraft's energy cells.

He loosens the black straps and unclips the brass clasps of his safety harness. The tension in Alexander's shoulders and chest lessen, making his heart rate slow some. His lungs start taking in deeper breaths, and the feeling of panic begins to subside almost immediately.

Tovarishch Puusepp, what are you so worried?

Alexander sits back in his chair, starting at the control console instruments with tired and sore eyes.

"I don't know," Alexander replies.

Do you think they are here?

"If they are," Alexander begins to say, "they haven't made the first move yet."

Enemies like ours stand around, watching the prey. They rarely commit to first moves or don't resort to direct action, tovarishch. They are like the wolves in the Urals; they wait for the opportune time to strike. A wolf never takes risks, neither can you.

"I know, *tovarishch*," Alexander says. He looks over his shoulder only to see a blur of a man he thought to be long dead.

Alexander rubs his tired eyes and jumps from his seat. His booted feet make a soft thud as they come in contact with the titanium and steel wall of the spacecraft. He walks over to the different items haphazardly strewn in the empty space between the cockpit and the workspace of the small craft. He kneels down, picking up the cloth sack that contains his survival supplies and tools—in case of some emergency. He collects the items scattered across the cylindrical craft's smooth walls. Then, without much hesitation, Alexander leans up

against the curved wall of the spacecraft and falls asleep.

A COLD WIND FORCES ALEXANDER AWAKE. Sitting next to him is the same man he saw earlier that day. This time, the man is smoking one of the *Belomorkanals* from Puusepp's survival pack.

Did you sleep well, tovarishch?

"*Niet*," Alexander manages to reply. "*Chto vy zdes' delayete, tovarishch Volkov?*"

I am here for the same reasons you are. Remember, we're on the same side, tovarishch Puusepp.

Alexander rests his head against the cool metal wall of the spacecraft. After a few moments, he looks at the spot where Volkov was sitting, smoking a cigarette like the old days. The smoldering end of a spent cigarette sits there, whiffs of white-grey smoke emanating from its yellowed paper. Alexander does not remember when he last smoked. It must have been before he left Earth. He could not have one inside the spacecraft's enriched oxygen environment—not unless he had some kind of death wish. He cannot remember having one now, but there it is, next to him. One end is smoldering, slowing burning off the excess paper into grey and black powdery ash. He knows that Volkov died many years before. He remembers watching his old friend and mentor being crushed by two massive blast doors of an abandoned Progenitor ship that was surveyed by the Consortium. There was barely enough of Volkov to have a funeral with full honors.

The weight of sleep makes Alexander's eyes burn with exhaustion. His head rests once more against the cold wall. His eyelids droop and flutter until his body finally gives away to sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, Alexander struggles to open the emergency hatch of the spacecraft. He slams his entire bodyweight behind the door comprised of steel, aluminum and titanium. The hatch's metal whines and groans as he continues pounding on it. After a few moments, he gives up, feeling the energy being drained from his body.

The planet's sun heats up the inside of the vessel. Alexander glances down at the temperature gauge stitched to his spacesuit's right sleeve. The gauge reads 53C. Alexander begins peeling away vital pieces of his tattered suit, which brings slight relief.

The wind outside the spacecraft howls and carries fine pale gypsum sand through the shattered observation windows. He doesn't know where he has landed, but it feels like he's landed on a world of sand. It's hotter than any place he has been. It is far hotter than any place in his native homeland of the Soviet Union. Alexander's legs collapse under the weight of his body. He pushes himself up against the emergency hatch. Sweat pours freely from the top of his shaven head and the back of his neck, soaking his clothes. Volkov plops down next to him, offering a sweating metal flask of water. Alexander accepts the flask and unscrews the lid before draining the precious liquid inside.

"Spasibo, drug," he gasps, before tossing the flask aside.

Niet problem, tovarishch.

Alexander rests his head against the emergency hatch, closing his eyes and listening to the dreadful howl of desert wind....

WHY ARE YOU HESITATING, tovarishch Puusepp? Is he not your enemy? Do not fear what this man has done or why he is here. All you need to know is that he is your enemy. He has collaborated with the capitalist swine. He would sell his own mother to those dogs and his countrymen to make a few rubles. That is the curse of capitalism. The capitalists will sell each other to make a profit, and they will bring about their own demise. That is what makes capitalism inferior to communism. Do you understand that, tovarishch Puusepp?

ALEXANDER WAKES UP, jerking his head forward. Muscles in his neck and shoulders throb with electric pain from the sudden movement forward. He notices the wind has died down, and it's completely dark within the confines of the spacecraft. It has grown considerably colder in the last few hours. His body shivers against the cold metal of the emergency hatch. He flips the map reading light attached to his suit's

chest plate. The tiny bulb illuminates the interior of the cramped vessel with a wash of yellow-white light. Alexander pushes himself up and heads over to the reentry vehicle's controls. He looks out of the broken observation windows, propping himself up with the pilot's chair. He spots a half dozen or so distinct stars, all forming constellations he is not familiar with, meaning he has not made it back to Earth, as he was supposed to. He drops down from the chair, landing with a soft thud.

ALEXANDER LOOKS AROUND THE INSIDE OF THE SPACECRAFT. He spots his emergency kit with a warped shovel attached to its cotton cloth. He walks over to it and picks the bag up, detaching the shovel and throwing it down. He rips open the cotton bag and sits down on the sand covered floor of the spacecraft. Alexander rummages through the bag's contents and finds something of use. He finds the *Belomorkanal* cigarettes in their blue, red, white and pink cardboard packaging. He grabs the cigarettes and a booklet of matches from the bag. He chucks the bag off to the side; it hits the side of the spacecraft's wall with a metallic clank. Alexander rips open the flimsy cardboard package with his thumb nail and takes one of the unfiltered cigarettes out. He pinches the end of the cigarette in two different directions, allowing him to smoke the tobacco inside the cardboard-paper tube without inhaling the smoldering tobacco and paper into his lungs. He wets his parched lips and stuffs the paper cylinder between them. Taking the booklet of matches, he lights the tip and inhales deeply. The harsh flavor of moist paper, cardboard and dry tobacco fills his mouth, and enters his lungs before Alexander exhales the thick smoke through his nostrils. A cloud of smoke fills the cramped interior of the spacecraft, forcing Alexander to move himself closer to the broken windows near the craft's cockpit. He finishes up the cigarette while leaning up against the wall of the spacecraft, watching the obsidian sky above. The warmth of the burning paper and cardboard near his face pulls him away from whatever he hoped to spot in the sky above. He tosses the spent butt to the side. He stoops down and snatches the bent shovel

and glances at the emergency hatch with a shrewd eye.

Alexander walks over to the hatch and slips the thin edge of the shovel into a small slit on the side. He begins prying the shovel back and forth. The hatch's door wiggles slightly but doesn't give. He puts more of his weight behind the shovel's rough wooden handle. He grips onto the wood handle with both hands, and puts all of his weight behind the shovel's blade until his knuckles turn ghost-white. He pushes forward, hearing the metal groan but nothing moves, as before. Alexander pulls backward on the shovel with all of his weight. The metal of the emergency hatch groans and creaks until he hears a load snap. Alexander feels himself fall backward onto the wall of the spacecraft.

"Yebat'!"

Alexander looks down at his hand. A three inch splinter from the wooden handle is wedged deep inside the palm of his right hand. Blood pours from his palm, down his forearm, and over the dirty white fabric of his clothing. He bits down on his lower lip, hoping to lessen the pain, but it doesn't.

"Chert voz'mi" he grunts, still biting down on his lip.

Alexander takes a hold of the splinter lodged into his palm with his teeth. He tastes the varnish of the wood and the salty copper of blood as he rips the splinter out of his hand. Warm tears stream down his face from the sudden explosion of pain that erupts from the injured hand. He reaches for the survival bag with his good hand. He finds a small medical kit inside and tears it open. He takes out a small roll of gauze and a square olive-green packet of sulfa powder.

He tears the top off the waxy paper of sulfa power packet and generously sprinkles the contents on his injured hand. The powder causes him to wince as it does not dull the pain but actually aggravates the wound. He unties the knot keeping the roll of gauze tight and wound and wraps his wounded hand. Blood still manages to seep through the gauze and thick layer of sulfa powder.

Alexander pushes himself up against the wall of the spacecraft. He

takes out another *Belomorkanal* and goes through the process of getting it ready to smoke. He sits there as a cold night breeze wafts through the broken windows. The breeze moves the thin layer of sand this way and that along the wall of the spacecraft. Alexander stares at the emergency hatch, seeing bends and buffs in the aluminum paneling and locking bars. He brings himself up and heads over to the hatch. He looks at it for a second and lights his cigarette. He steps back two paces and runs toward the door. His shoulder collides with the weakened titanium and steel. The hatch's door gives way, with a high-pitched screech, and Alexander feels himself land in the fine gypsum sand outside of the spacecraft. He accidentally breathes in the fine gypsum, causing him to cough and lose his cigarette in the process.

Alexander pushes himself up from the warm gypsum sand. He gazes up at the dark sky. He doesn't see satellites or even a moon of any kind in the sky, nor does he recognize the constellations from his survival training on Earth. He was hoping that maybe this was Earth, somewhere near the White Sands staging area but it's not.

"Damn it," he mutters to himself.

He begins working his way up to the lip of the impact crater. Once above the lip, Alexander sees more white gypsum sand. There's not much for shade or food from what he can see.

What are you going to do, tovarishch Puusepp?

Alexander shakes his head in disbelief and begins rubbing the bridge of his nose with his good hand.

"*Ya ne znayu,*" Alexander answers.

Why not, tovarishch?

"I don't even know where the fuck I am," Alexander exclaims.

Who cares where you are! You need to get somewhere safer, less exposed!

"This goddamned place isn't even where it's supposed to be!" Alexander feels himself yelling into the cool night air. "They told me nothing would go wrong! Look at where the hell I am!"

Alexander's body trembles and his knees buckle, causing him to fall to the ground. He feels himself sobbing, tears streaming from his

eyes. He feels a warm hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t know what else to do,” Alexander says, clearly defeated.

That is no way to be, tovarishch Puusepp!

Alexander tilts his head up. He recognizes a familiar face. An older man, one the Americans used to call the Russian Bear. The man offers Alexander his leathery rheumatic hand. Alexander accepts the hand and pulls himself up from the warm gypsum.

“What am I to do, *tovarishch* Volkov?”

Follow your training, Puusepp. You came here for a reason, just remember that.

“What reason was that?” Puusepp asks.

The old man points to the light source in the distance. The man smiles at Alexander before fading away. Alexander rubs his tired eyes, hoping that Volkov will reappear, only to be disappointed.

“*Tovarishch* Volkov,” Alexander calls, “where are you?”

ALEXANDER SHEDS THE REST OF HIS SPACESUIT, taking only the valuable, irreplaceable pieces of equipment still attached to its dirty fabric. He stuffs everything into the cotton emergency kit rucksack. He puts on the change of olive-drab fatigues and ties a cold weather jacket around his waist, putting the matching gloves and hat into the emergency kit’s sack. Once he is satisfied with his preparations, Alexander moves over to the control console of the spacecraft.

He coaxes the electronics on. He flips a series of switches that start transmitting an encoded SOS message. Something inside of him tells Alexander that such a move is useless and a waste of vital electricity, no one will find him out here. Another, somewhat hopeful side believes it is worth the extra effort, like a sort of message in the bottle being carried across the medium of interstellar space. He slings the pack over his shoulder and walks out into the pre-dawn morning.

With little effort, Alexander makes it to the top of the impact crater. He turns around, looking at the damaged cylindrical reentry vehicle. The spacecraft’s titanium and steel exterior is a dull grey with

a large crack forming down the side of the hull from the harsh reentry and hard impact. The crack looks like a gapping abyss in the pre-dawn light. Pale white sand has begun to fill the crack, and has moved closer around the vessel itself— a slow motion wave gobbling up an old shipwreck stuck on a coral reef. It will probably be completely buried by the sand in a matter of days or weeks if the winds keep up.

Alexander looks at his surroundings. The morning air is refreshing and almost liberating but it sends chills up his spine. The cold feels less alien to him than the sweltering heat from the day before. In the distance, he sees a small mountain range peaking above the horizon. He remembers seeing mountains when entering the planet's atmosphere almost two days before. The mountains looked more like the mounds of dirt and sand he used to build with his brother in their backyard. From this new perspective, the mountains seem more menacing. In that same direction, Alexander spots the strange light source beaming up into the heavens in steady but predictable pulses.

Alexander begins walking in the light's direction. A familiar figure walks alongside him.

Tovarishch...

"Da," Alexander replies, not looking over at Volkov.

Do you mind if I come along?

"*Niet, tovarishch,*" he answers. "I need someone to talk to."

Alexander feels himself laughing, and he hears the deep, hearty laugh of Volkov as well. Alexander continues trudging through the fine gypsum, heading toward the light. He does not know whether he is going crazy, or if the heat has finally gotten to him. He no longer cares. He'd rather have a dead friend for company on an alien world than be by himself.

The Deportation of Evgeny Maximovich

Jeff Parker

THE UNOFFICIAL STORY of Evgeny Maximovich's deportation starts in a Vermont cemetery with the two of us and a dog named Dog standing in front of the grave of a four thousand-year-old Egyptian prince.

Etched on a plain slab of granite—similar in size and shape to other slabs but different in the shade and pattern and the hue of the stone itself—it read, *Ashes of Amun-Her-Khepesb-Ef. Aged 2 years. Son of Sen Woset 3rd, King of Egypt and his wife Hathor-Hotpe. 1883 BC.* There was a Christian cross and the Egyptian symbols for life and soul at the top.

I said to Evgeny Maximovich: “Something like 250 years ago, a gang of Arab grave robbers stole this little fucker from his tomb. The Arabs sold him to Spanish traders in Cairo. The Spanish traders took him to New York where a rich Vermont collector bought him.”

“How do you know this?” Evgeny Maximovich asked.

“Classified,” I said, though everything I knew about the mummy I'd read in the local history archives and a 1950 edition of the *Ford Times*, the once popular news magazine of the Ford Auto Company. “Mummies weren't made for Vermont air though. The resins and glues—”

“The what?” Evgeny Maximovich said. I was speaking his language and he didn't get it.

“The mummy wrap,” I said. “The humidity disintegrated the mummy wrap. The rich collector died, and the humidity disintegrated the mummy wrap for fifty years when some historical preservation people found him all ripe. They buried him here. There had to be a cross on the tombstone because it's a Christian cemetery.”

“It's terrible,” Evgeny Maximovich said. “It's a nightmare.”

Sobaka, which means “dog” and which was the German Shepherd's

actual name, sniffed and pawed at the base of the tombstone. Maybe he could smell the baby pharaoh, like some kind of ancient foreign biscuit. Evgeny Maximovich kicked Sobaka in the head. Sobaka didn't defer to anyone but he deferred to Evgeny Maximovich.

The whole business of the baby pharaoh rattled Evgeny Maximovich, which was kind of what I wanted to begin with. He deserved a rattling.

Evgeny Maximovich said he was skipping lunch and wanted to be by himself for a little while. He wandered back to the undergraduate dorm, where he, a sixty-five year old man, was staying with his wife, who was sixty-seven and taught Russian to the CIA and FBI agents and assorted undergrads and grad students of the Russian School. She was the one teaching my phonetics class designed to extirpate accents.

I WOULD HAVE HAD NO REASON TO RATTLE HIM and probably never would have shown him the grave if not for my thing with the Italian School girls.

Yes, Italian School girls. Yes, I jumped off the bridge with them into a river. Yes, I flirted in English with them. And, yes, on the way down, as we were hurtling through the air, I prayed to the good lord, in plain English, that their bikinis unyoked themselves on contact with the water, which, I give the good lord credit where credit is due, the bikinis unyoked on contact with the water.

Then the down side: Someone from the Russian School, surely another agent, saw me jumping off the bridge, detected no other Russian School students around, and reported me to the Director.

This constituted an official violation of the Language Pledge, the principle of immersion. It's why studying languages in a farm town in Vermont is better than going abroad, where everyone wants to practice their English on you.

I appreciate the concept of the Language Pledge, but then I'm also like, Immerse this.

They could have booted me. No fee refund to the government.

No certification. No placement. Instead, I got a kind of probation. Evgeny Maximovich was my punishment.

It was strange, to be in a small Vermont town where everyone spoke some other language under threat of expulsion or Evgeny Maximovich. The monolingual merchants of the city were urged by the language school deans to avoid conversing with students, who are obvious. We were the ones not spitting in dip cups and not riding four-wheelers.

As the husband of one of her best teachers, the Director wanted Evgeny Maximovich to feel useful. He'd retired a few years ago from ornithology, so he led birder walks for students. He also ran the chess program, which meant he sat in the café ordering two beers at a time and destroying all comers. He especially liked playing the agents. When they sat down, he removed one of his own rooks from the board and said, "Makes it more interesting for me."

She put him in charge of the Russian School mascot, Sobaka, who only understood Russian commands. And in a blatant abuse of power, Evgeny Maximovich immediately subcontracted out the care of the dog to me.

There's a bit of a time gap after Evgeny Maximovich left the cemetery. He said he walked around for a while. But certain somebodies consider the time gap revelatory. If he had gone straight to his room, say certain somebodies, why didn't what happened happen long before Sobaka and I came up the sidewalk?

In any event, after the gap he returned to his and Lyudmilla Nikolaevna's room on the fifth floor of the undergraduate dorm, where he found a starling trapped between the panes of the window. This would have been just about the time I was leaving the cafeteria with Sobaka.

Sobaka and I did not believe in skipping meals. We had gone direct from the cemetery to the cafeteria. One of the cooks thawed frozen balls of raw meat for Sobaka. I hit the pizza bar.

In the cafeteria, the teachers were arguing again over who ate all

the blueberries, which would invariably be Evgeny Maximovich's wife, my teacher, Lyudmilla Nikolaevna. The other teachers demanded the implementation of a blueberry quota limiting everyone to a single small cup. Lyudmilla Nikolaevna was against the proposed quota. She ate daily a full soup bowl of blueberries even if that meant there was none left for anyone else, and she believed this to be her right. Her main argument in her defence was that there was no point in discussing it. "You have your position, I have mine," she said to the other teachers who wanted blueberries. "We'll never solve it."

The other teachers were in a huff. Sobaka and I left after being there for only fifteen or twenty minutes. That put us, so you're clear on this, leaving the cafeteria and approaching the sidewalk that winds around the undergraduate dorm right about the time Evgeny Maximovich discovered the starling.

Evgeny Maximovich knew it to be the European Starling, *Strunus Vulgaris*, which does not hop but walks. He knew it was the most successful of the North American invaders. He identified it as a breeding adult because it was iridescent black, with green and purple reflecting. They forage mostly on the ground and some friends of his, fellow pensioneers near Murmansk, claimed that the birds hunt mushrooms, maybe to eat, maybe to use in nests. So what was it doing up this high trapped in his window? He knew that if it didn't stop freaking out, stop flapping and scratching against the panes, it could masterfully imitate the calls of other birds, the bobwhite, killdeer, wood pewee, meadowlark.

The window the starling was trapped in had the air conditioner unit in it. Evgeny Maximovich couldn't imagine how the bird got in there but he assumed it had something to do with that air conditioner. He had turned it on the first night they were here and it gave him an instant nose cold, which his wife tried to cure by pressing freshly boiled eggs to his sinuses. He kept the air conditioner off since then.

The thing to understand about Evgeny Maximovich is that he had a scientific mind but also a highly superstitious mind. If you put pillows

on the desk someone would die. If you whistled in the house you'd lose money. They had rearranged their room in the undergraduate dorm according to the geomantic principles of Feng Shui.

Evgeny Maximovich, in his scientific-superstitious mind correlated the trapped Starling with the baby pharaoh. It didn't make sense why the baby pharaoh was there, in a grave in a New England cemetery, between a Moody and a Mead (he didn't trust any of my information; he called me Agent Boy) like it didn't make sense how the bird got into the window, which seemed impossible. He understood only that he had to free it.

There was so much here in rural America that made perfect sense to him. Like the ever-present, earthy smell of cow shit in the wind. Then there was everything else that was inexplicable. His favorite example: the actual State law, which people enforce, prohibiting a person from carrying two drinks at a time.

And now there was this mummy. Evgeny Maximovich felt close to weeping. Evgeny Maximovich wished he had never seen it. And how would a boy—that would be me—who thought it cool to see a baby pharaoh, which he referred to as “this little fucker,” buried alone among Puritans half way around the world from its rightful resting place, how would that boy be CIA? What was Evgeny Maximovich doing, he thought, spending time with such a boy? What was his wife doing teaching him? He had always heard of spies, but a specimen like this, who could be handily beaten in chess by a two-rook handicap, he never imagined *that*.

Evgeny Maximovich knocked on the window glass and the bird flapped. Then he slammed his palms against the top of the window frame. But it didn't budge. He slammed harder. He felt an urgent need to free the Starling, an act which was to him essentially the equivalent of freeing the 4,000-year-old baby pharaoh's soul.

SOBAKA AND I ROUNDED THE CORNER of the undergraduate dorm. He pulled me behind him by this leather leash that cut into my

hands. He was massive. Each of his legs was like something grown from the earth. He was a head taller than most mini-ponies.

We had totally bonded, I think now, over our shared understanding that bad things happen around Evgeny Maximovich. Evgeny Maximovich had taken us mushroom hunting two weeks before and a bear had chased Sobaka. Later, on the same trip, dutifully following Evgeny Maximovich off-trail, Sobaka stuck his nose into a nest of wasps, which buried themselves in his dense coat and stung him until they died or he bit them out of his fur. And after that, while the dog, who is deathly afraid of water, was peacefully lying on the limestone bank of a freezing natural spring, Evgeny Maximovich picked him up and heaved him in.

I was used to Evgeny Maximovich's humiliations. When we played chess alone in the café, he removed one of his own rooks like he did with the others and handily beat me. But if other people were around, he removed two of his rooks and beat me faster, more resoundingly.

After the mushroom hunt, in front of everyone in the café kitchen, Evgeny Maximovich went through my basket of mushrooms.

"This is a death cap," he said. "This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is probably an imitation death cap. Very very tasty one. But you didn't pick it right, I can't check the stem to be sure. Better be safe than sorry. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap. This is a death cap."

And later, when he cooked mushroom soup in the café, Evgeny Maximovich forced everyone to try it, and the entire Russian School—CIA, FBI, regular students—got sick and missed a week of classes except for one who went to the hospital and almost died. Evgeny Maximovich told the Director that he would accept only partial responsibility because it was sometimes the case that when you gathered mushrooms with inexperienced hunters who were forcibly installed in your charge, that you missed one of the death caps they picked, even though you thoroughly checked.

EVGENY MAXIMOVICH HAD ACHIEVED FULFILLMENT of the great Russian proverb stating that, in his life, a man should: build a house, plant a tree, raise a son. He had done all of this, several times over. But he had never saved anyone. He had not had any opportunities to save someone in armed conflict. He had been a baby during the Great Patriotic War and by the time Afghanistan rolled around he was too old. A man should not go an entire life without saving someone, he thought.

He slammed his palms again against the top edge of the window. It popped open. The air conditioner fell back, catching on the frame. The bird flapped erratically, thrashing against the panes. And Evgeny Maximovich had not anticipated this. He had not considered the air conditioner unit was held in the window frame only by the window, that there would not be, like, American things, fasteners and mounting brackets. He reached for it but it disappeared. The starling dropped to the windowsill and perched in some flakes of chipped paint for a second before flying into Evgeny Maximovich's room, through the open door, and down the hall.

SOBAKA SEEMED TO BE PULLING HARDER and going faster than usual. I stumbled keeping up.

I remember exactly what I was thinking. The problem, as I saw it then, was that professional CIA and FBI agents-in-training should not be in snuggery with regular undergrads who are studying languages as a pretext for getting some. And, let's be honest here, why else study languages? I didn't like that those of us from the spy agencies were in the same classes with regular students. I wanted to subtly emanate a certain CIA aura, being as I would, upon completion of the Russian immersion course, be CIA, which had seemed in the initial idea to be an effective method of my own for getting some. And while we're being honest and unofficial, why else be CIA?

Then various German School and French School and Chinese School girls and my wife, for instance, find out that being CIA

means basically you go to a language-immersion program for the summer and other than that sit behind a desk translating diplomatic correspondences rather than some, like, Giacomina Casanova Venetian Inquisitors of State business, and there is mesmeric influence for shit.

I had a Disney toy when I was little. A miniature Pluto on a little plastic pedestal. When you pushed a button under the pedestal, the dog collapsed. I don't remember what you call these things. And I never understood how it worked, something to do with string and tension, like an inverse puppet. I played with it a lot. I thought of it as my Pluto feints toy.

My Pluto feints toy popped into my mind when the air conditioner landed on Sobaka. Suddenly the leash went slack, and my first instinct was to tug it. There must have been a terrible sound, a yelp, a crash, but I don't remember hearing anything. I really don't. Sobaka's four legs splayed out in four different directions pretty much exactly like a cartoon.

I looked up and saw Evgeny Maximovich peering down at us from his fifth floor window. I dropped the leash.

THE OFFICIAL STORY GOES that Evgeny Maximovich made at least two attempts to murder members of the CIA and FBI forces-in-training during that summer's Russian School. The first with poison mushrooms. The air conditioner on Sobaka was explained as a botched attempt on my life. "One accident is an accident. Two accidents is a pattern. A pattern is just one of many techniques we have of proving intent," said one of the higher-ups who looked into things.

Lyudmilla Nikolaevna who was not only a very kind woman despite her aggressive stance on the cafeteria blueberries, with whose help I extirpated my accent, who made four times her annual salary back home in two months in the immersion school in Vermont, was also sent home, the director said. But really for all we know they're right now in some black site prison in Macedonia.

I never really bought any of the official story. And believe me

I wasn't Evgeny Maximovich's biggest fan. I got to speak with him right after it happened, right after they picked him up. Without even meaning to, he further convinced me. He told me that the entire situation—Sobaka's comeuppance, the disappeared starling, his being sent home—he'd seen this kind of thing before. It all made perfect sense to him.

Justice, Left on Emerald Road

Tom Lord

LIFE IS ANYTHING BUT FAIR... The best bets, with the fattest payouts, are always placed on the Lost Ones.

2/22/2013; 1:56PM; DOWNTOWN FLAGSTAFF

“Stolen.”

“What?”

“The pastry next to you,” the officer points to the remains of a coffee roll, “the one with the bite you took out of it, it’s *stolen!*”

“Stolen?”

“Clerk says you didn’t pay for it, that you just walked in, grabbed it outta the donut cabinet, and walked on out.”

Genuinely confused, the man leaning against the brownstone wall of the Pay ‘N Take--a Navajo in heavy flannel coat with charcoal-colored hood, soiled greasy black cargo pants, once-white tennis shoes—looks about himself, his eyes explore the asphalt as if for the first time. He looks gray from too much time spent out in the cold. An empty forty of King Kobra sits, deflade beneath his jacket. He smells of fresh urine. The knot of a blue bandana breaks through the back of his long black mane of hair. His confusion is sincere--a man perennially misplaced.

“I guess I don’t ‘member payin’ fot it,” he answers, somewhat dismally, and the syllables roll out of his mouth, lurching clumsily one behind the other, forming awkward, stupid-sounding words, with the sort of unpolished pronunciation, intonation and malapropism that make liberal white people blush politely when hurrying along a conversation with men like this, in the odd moment that they find themselves forced into such a situation, usually obfuscating the truth as to why they don’t carry any cash, otherwise they’d be happy to spare a buck or two, finding just enough decency to lie, because it’s better

than moving on and ignoring those that make their home along the pavement. “But,” he continues, bleary-eyed in the hoar-frost of the drunken morning, breeze sweeping down Birch Street, “I’m pretty sure the bread is mines,” he looks down, for the first time during the exchange he acknowledges the half-eaten coffee roll. He pushes it farther aside with the back of his hand, then makes to lie down again.

“Hey!” This time the officer seems hostile, impatient (he has other weeds to whack), instead of moderately amused, as he was before. His hands rest on his hips, gripping the width of his squeaky leather utility belt. They didn’t teach him this posture in the Academy. He’s seen every cop do this since he was a child, whenever he was a bystander to an officer of the law—his role model, his hero-- standing above some similar unlucky sucker, confident in an authority immortal, impervious to the impending crack, fall and ruin of societies--a centurion of Rome harassing Jews-- “Get up!” He lightly taps the drunk with the outside edge of his left boot, while his off-hand moves along the holster housing his Taser. He knows he won’t have to use it. But this cop’s hopeful; he’s what you might call an “optimist”.

The native slowly staggers to his feet. It’s February along the Mogollon Rim, and he welcomes a free lunch and a bunk, out of the dry, biting wind. Wait ‘til June. Then the Tasers come out. The only thing that strikes me as tragic about any of this is that a similar interaction between a Flag cop and a wasted native will run identically to this one at least ten more times today.

I watch this scene play out across the street in Heritage Square, from the frosted window of the Downtown Diner—a cheap spot to cop a plate of eggs and a couple corners of toast. Other than the prices and the view, the Diner’s a hole. You watch the daily dumb shit pass by like the hands on the clock atop the county courthouse. Like any other, the same-colored blood pumps through this silly little town. (I think I’m somewhere near the left ventricle.) The coffee’s too strong and I have to shit. Dope-sick and on the john, I feel my phone vibrating down along my ankle in the pocket of my jeans. I pick it up to see who

it is. Text message. It's my guy. He'll be off by 4:00, and already made enough in tips to cover the piece I fronted this morning.

Stand up, wipe my ass, pay the tab, leave'a little tip, and bounce across the tracks to the South Side.

6:45AM; TWO WEEKS EARLIER; SOUTH PHOENIX.

They speak entirely in Spanish.

"He's 45 minutes late."

"Maybe something happened."

"Like what?"

"Fuck if I know. Maybe he got pulled over by the police or something." Ernesto looks again at the cracked screen of his cheap prepaid phone. 6:47AM.

Pasquale says nothing. He knows what "getting pulled over" means for their ride. No sleepy DPS dick, slow stroll over to the passenger side, oversized Maglite lightly tapping on the window, asking for license and registration. For *their* ride, it means a jumpy highway patrolman, Glock drawn, ICE agents, a translator, unspecified lengths of detainment, an angry canine, eager young deputies with Kevlar vests, assault rifles, GI Joe haircuts, and it means a trip back to Nogales without a penny in his pocket, lucky to have his fucking shoelaces once they're through with him.

I wouldn't meet Ernesto until eight days later. He's married to my cousin—not in any legal sense—as he isn't a legal citizen--but in the sense that they are willing to murder one another with a steak knife in place of a prenuptial agreement, should they ever catch the other in an act of adultery. They are both completely bat-shit. As he and Pasquale waited at the corner of 35th Ave and Van Buren, it was already 93°F, and the corrugated security doors of the canary-yellow Mexican *llanteras*, *mercados* and *pellucarias* were just starting to roll up. The street junkies had yet to crawl out of their holes, but it didn't matter, because the Cartel didn't send their shock troops out until 9:00, riding up and down the same mile-stretch of Hell on rusty beach cruisers, mouthful

of little \$10 balloons, double-wrapped about sticky black wads of The Monster.

“Fuck it,” Ernesto finally says.

“What do you think happened?”

“He probably got pinched.” A young *paisano* walks back down into the barrio that bore him this morning into the harsh heat and mirage lines rising up off of blacktop; he stepped out the door of the two-bedroom house he shared with seven others, not quite expecting to go to work, but with two free fingers around the little Lady of Guadalupe he keeps strung around his neck along a strand of cheap gold, thin as floss. Now he has to find something different.

Like all puddles will in the desert, this one just dried up.

2/22; 4:23PM; DOWNTOWN FLAGSTAFF; SOUTH OF THE TRACKS.

Everyone shuts up. The President comes on in the blue of a laptop screen, bbc.org. He’s holding a bowl of Frosted Wheat and eats from it, with obdurate pride, Lucifer in a strange Lake, before the First Congress of Pandemonium, looking around the room full of journalists and Capitol Hill algae fish.

“That’s right. Any able-bodied, single American man between the ages of 18 and 25 has the *option* to go to Syria and offer his labor as a humanitarian volunteer.”

“*What* exactly will these young men be *doing* for the ‘humanitarian’ effort in Syria?” some snotty young cunt asks. She’s fresh out of the Cronkite School and feels no end to the upward trajectory of what could be a ruthlessly successful career. “And won’t it be *dangerous*?”

“Dangerous? What planet puked you up? It’s a God-damned conflict zone. Of *course* it’ll be dangerous. And in regards to the wayward American youth, he’ll do whatever is needed of him,” the President replies, bewildered, “Hell, haul water, mix concrete, wet nurse infants for all I care. There sure as hell aren’t any jobs around *here* for that age group. Might’swell put ‘em ta use. And, I feel it only logical, that *unlike* in a *financial crisis*, where money is both the problem

and the solution, in a *humanitarian* crisis, humans are the solution. So the Great Nation of America sends to the embattled people of Syria *humans*. The *real* question is, why are you talking DOWN to me like I'm some kind of God-damned idiot," he eats from his bowl, and with a mouthful of Frosted Wheat, "when it's the buffoon that put you up to asking me these questions that deserves the real dressing-down here—" the White House Press Secretary shoves the President aside, moves into his place at the podium, and continues answering the journalist's question:

"The White House is still in the planning-phase of this newly-adopted policy. Thank you for your questions. With that, we'll conclude this session." A firing squad of camera-flashes lights up the room. Anarchic chatter breaks out among those going back to their papers without a quote, empty-handed, and forced again to find a creative way of regurgitating the work of others back to readers who scoff not at local rags and two-bit papers, like *USA Today*. The broadcast ends and we sit in silence, for a moment.

A stringy-haired junky lets his chin hit his chest. He's done too much heroin and Xanax, and is on a hard nod. Dressed like a ski-bum, in over-sized Day-Glo coat and stupid hat hanging off the back of his head like a sock, the other two of us in the room start to ignore him as we watch drool strings finally reach the zipper of his jeans.

"Why do we continue to watch this shit?" my Korean compatriot asks. "Because it's what the *intelligentsia* does?"

"You know what Lenin said of the *intelligentsia*, right?"

He examines the \$60 pebble of dope I copped for him. It's just over half the size it should be; I was sick, and by 2:00 I grew tired of waiting; by 2:30 I had smoked a third of it; by 3:45 I was in the bathroom of Brews and Cues, smoking one more tray for good measure. By 4:15 I met him at his apartment, which sits above a tattoo studio and the storage room of a brewery and restaurant, both housed in an old stone building. He knows his bag is short, but says nothing. Tomorrow it'll be his turn to burn me. We go back and forth in this manner, endlessly.

He's an accomplished classical pianist, and something of a twisted, wicked genius. Completely crippled by the constricting grip of dope, though. Another MJ who never made it past Pelican Bay.

"What'd Lenin say of them," he asks, languidly, attention divided between the tray he's loading, and me.

"They're all nothing more than 'useful idiots'."

"In what way," he begins, then sucks up a big milky cloud of dope-smoke rising out of the crease of cheap foil, holds, exhales, "are we useful?" he continues, breathlessly, plastic piece of straw still between his lips.

"Bold of you," I reply, reaching across the coffee table as he passes me the tray, "considering yourself a part of the intelligentsia." Smile, flame touches tray, and for the third time today, I'm right where I need to be.

I've blown way too much time and money on this whole scene. But I'm stuck in a rut. It's not a question of coast or country. One can get this wasted in any nation.

"What's taking you assholes so long," comes in a slow dribble from the corpse in the opposite corner of the room. Great. Fuck-Head's awake. Pass him the tray.

"My question is," begins the Korean pianist, "who are these 'useful idiots'? I mean, it's not as if one is at once inducted into some clandestine society known as the 'intelligentsia'. Are they Skull and Bones? Bohemian Grove? Bilderbergs? Great-bearded Anarcho-Communists, hooded and meeting in secret behind the Circle K?"

"What the fuck are you two talking about?" Neither of us responds. This is a regular question from our friend, the corpse, regardless of whatever topic we've landed upon.

"You make a good point," I reply, "but I think we can both say this with some certainty: anyone who professes to be a member of said intelligentsia is inarguably too dimwitted to be a true inductee."

"Course," is all I get in return. The tray has made it back to him, and he's lost all interest.

EARLIER THAT MORNING; EAST FLAGSTAFF

I jerk off something like six times a day, if I'm bored and not working. On days I do work, I'm usually too tired and cynical to see the point. But today is a Friday. Immediately upon being hired, I tell my new employer that I refuse to work Fridays, and under no circumstances can be expected to show up in order to cover some asshole's shift just because he has a hangover. Fridays are the days I write. Or that's what I tell myself. I usually burn the day away doing other shit. Smaller shit. Back to my masturbation schedule...

I let my raggedy Saturn Ion warm up, smoke a square, scrape the ice from my windshield, listen to the vacuous morning upchuck on NPR, think about coffee. Then I start sweating, despite the fact that it's only 17°F outside. I didn't save myself a wake-up piece for this morning, and I'm starting to get sick. Plus, picking up always makes me nervous, even when it's coming from a trusted source. This is the sort of thing that rarely goes according to plan.

But today is a day of brand new avenues. I enlisted my cousin's husband, hoping he knew someone—paisas always do—and he agreed, for a small commission. I'm an opportunistic fuck, feeding on this kid, a down-and-out immigrant, like a vulture. Hell, I'm an American. And even though there's snow on the ground, we're still in the High Desert. In this biome, it's the decomposers, the scavengers, who're tough enough to make the cut. We clothe ourselves in barbs, commune quietly in cabals of like-minded cacti, weapons drawn and in the open, no cloak-and-dagger shit like the beautiful deadly allure of the jungle—here, everything is trying to kill you, and announces its vicious violent intentions before the first and final thrust.

Maybe that explains Ernesto and his ever-guarded mannerisms. He sprouted in the deep jungles of Mexico, and found himself way up north, in an alien landscape. The roofing job he had down in Phoenix didn't pan out, for whatever reason, and he moved up to Flag to be with my cousin and find work. The two of them now reside in Sunnyside—some wise-ass urban planner is always giving cheerful names to the

lowliest of holes, and Sunnyside is no exception, a place with nothing “sunny” about it.

Car’s warm. Put the bitch in reverse and skate off.

FIVE MINUTES LATER; SUNNYSIDE; FLAGSTAFF.

He’s always frugal with his words—so it’s impossible to know exactly what he was thinking at the time. But if I could fathom a guess, it would sound something like this:

[ERNESTO’S MONOLOGUE]:

My wife’s cousin is a *gringo* and a *pinche borracho*. He got me in too deep to dig out of. Yeah, I got his dope. But as a favor for *La Victoria Loca*, I also have to run a quarter- ounce of coke across town after this. Once I hit the US border, I was basically born into this. 35th and Van Buren was LVL territory. They were at war with the *changos* down the street—I think they were Lindo Park Crips, sad blacks trying to hang on to what was left of a quickly changing landscape. But none of it made any sense to me.

Maybe he’ll give me a ride. Fuck taking the bus. I’ve never been so cold.

2/29/2013; 12:12PM; DOWNTOWN FLAGSTAFF.

Apparently, Ernesto got pinched right after I met up with him last week. Shame. He was a good, albeit one-time source. He’s still being detained. We haven’t heard anything of him since it happened. Not entirely sure how my cousin even found out that he got picked up.

But I’m headed to the county courthouse to ask about him. Only, I always confuse it with the municipal court, and can never remember which is which. I think it’s off of Emerald Road (the street name is actually Elm, but it houses the Oasis Mission House, next to the court, and is littered with the glass of broken forty bottles, giving it a brilliant shimmer that some local back when dubbed “The Emerald Road”). I ask a drunk on the street for directions—might be the same one that

the FPD dick was harassing in the square last week:

He doesn't understand, at first. "The county courthouse, on Emerald—is it a left or a right at the intersection?"

"What the fuck difference does it make?" he growls, sparks the back half of a Black and Mild, and rolls on down an alleyway behind the Orpheum Theatre, just out of my sight.

Listening for god, San Juan Village, Portales, NM

Erica Dawson

First Crux. Then Coal Sack. All the constellations
if I could find them. Grus. Columba's wing.
Pyxis' needle. North. The congregations.
The closing bible's sigh. When rockers swing
with the wind's slight weight at the Do Drop Inn—its seats
like open palms, its back, fingers, its *You*.
Come here. Tucana. The night train competes.
The Taco Box can't holler. Ara. True
North: I see none of this. Braggadocio
thunder begs more lightning. The eleventh hour.
Hiss. Scour. If only I could have a go
at god and all of blackwater's dark bower.
No algae, umbra, no stagnant decay.
The captured draw of wolves hunting a man.
I haven't been here long enough to say
I know this place. But I have seen the fan
of feathers. Shafts. Dead bird. And some dog's face
in it. The bloodless, mud-stained concrete slab
of it. First, chance groupings of stars replace
the day that's all high noon. Then dust will grab
the light. Now stonewalled stars. Pictor. A chart
can't plot a voice. The stars can't tell you how
or why, or ask you where does falling start.

Nothing the sky can do about it now.

50% of all jewelry at Beall's, Portales, NM

Erica Dawson

Next to the coffee shop with Jesus books,
the jewelry racks stand like the golden calf
gold-plated. Headless mannequins point looks,
judging with postured fingertips. And the half
of it is Beall's is pronounced bells, like the church
call of some eighty churches. The whole
of it: dresses, sheets, crock-pots. A clay perch.
Décor. Onesies. Socks. Accents. A song's toll—
instrumental, inspirational—
that could lull me to a spirit, but I've got to find
a dress, a transmogrification, full,
Choctaw, maize, prints. I have made up my mind
that this could be Oklahoma. I'm among
an eighth of me. But I'm wind, the plains the same
when they sweep you off your feet until you've sung
the wind sun-burned, until you forget the name
of where you're from because it should be here.

Crescit Eundū. Half moon.

What is a steer
if not something to follow and no do
over? Corral me. Let me choke and chew
the cud. And let these bangles clamor. Wind
chimes. Do not let me press my ear to air
like it's a conch because the air is pinned
to my face. Red dirt—glamour streaks through my hair.
Allow the day its dusk: a resurrection.
Now dark horizons. Miles of empty.

Bless
us, oh lord, and these fluorescent lights. Regress
to afterimages' obscured direction.

Something Else

Katie Bickley

We are listening to your new favorite band, a post-punk

(whatever that means)

assortment of white guys with messy hair and

a lot of anger problems.

You look at me and smile.

“Isn’t this something?”

You are so excited that I can’t possibly be honest, so instead I say,

“It’s something.” It sure is.

It’s always something.

Sometimes it’s

a whole note has four entire beats, no it’s okay, I like you even when
you release on the third downbeat.

Sometimes it’s

that guitar is just a little out of tune and the
fifth of every chord of every indie song you play
doesn’t jive right in my ear.

I waver between a smile and a grimace:

On one hand, I love this song.

On the other hand, Jesus, that is not the B minor chord I know and
love.

Try to reign in that artistic self-expression just a little, won’t you dear.

It’s a high note on a violin that squeals instead of sings,

fumbled accent notes in a Puccini aria,

my cheeks are red from all this secondhand embarrassment.

But then, sometimes it's not that. Sometimes it's something else.

Sometimes it's
a modulation I didn't expect
shifting into another key that gives the whole piece coherence
ladies and gentlemen, there it is.

It's a crescendo in the exactly right place or
sight reading that somehow makes sense of the song on the first try

Sometimes it's even perfect accent notes.

Anyway, the song finishes and I
still don't know what you're talking about when you say,
"Wasn't that great?"

Which is okay.

Sometimes it's one thing, and sometimes it's something else.
You're always something else.

Campfire

Katie Bickley

A cowboy was making his camp one night when
an alien wandered by
just to see what was going on with the fire
and the man in the hat.

Well—the cowboy *thought* it was an alien. He couldn't be sure.
It wasn't green or equipped with any spaceship
that the cowboy could see anyway
but then again
what else do you call a thing you don't know the name of?
The cowboy was not the most well-versed in zoology but he felt
pretty sure
that this was not something that Earth hosted on a regular basis.
This alien was small and purple-brown and a little...leaky.
The cowboy could see a dark trail in the sand behind it.
Must be water, the cowboy thought, because he was an optimist.
He looked the alien in two of its many eyes and said
“Have a seat. Want some beans?” because
his momma raised him right.
Be nice to everybody.
Even if they're a little leaky, the cowboy added to himself.

The alien didn't seem really enthusiastic,
probably because the beans were canned, the cowboy thought,
but it oozed over to the fire and settled down into a flatter-shaped
blob.

“Fine evening,” the cowboy said.
The alien just looked at him with its collection of spidery little eyes.
Some people might have found those eyes
—and the rest of the creature, too—a little
off-putting, to say the least,
but the cowboy had pulled calves that looked worse than this alien
and thought that having twelve eyes
could be mighty handy.

The Wangmu Thieves

Matt Espinosa

THE LITTLE ONE'S TEARS were getting dangerously close to my drink, and the big one's hand was grasping my shoulder a little too tightly. I grit my teeth and growled to neither one in particular.

"Make my night any more uncomfortable, and you'll be begging for more than your land."

They withdrew half a step. Enough for me to take a swig, at least. My drink tasted like a cranberry bog back on Earth, complete with the shrubs and rubber boots. Purple Jupiter, they called it, and with each sip I felt like I was going back to the Milky Way, back home.

Once it was down my throat, though, I was back there in an empty, dim bar with two fools. I was part of a mercenary clan then, and they had told me that they'd give me a few days off as long as I scouted around the area and let my ship draw some rough maps. It gave me a chance to settle down and enjoy the sights as my ship cruised by nebulae and planets. I ended each day with a Purple Jupiter and some memories. That night, though, those two were tripping up my reminiscences and I didn't appreciate it.

"Sir, we've been on the orchard for more than a decade now. It's our home. No other place in the galaxies could give us the contentment we have there," the little one, his face contorted from the incessant sobbing, squeaked out.

"It wouldn't take long for a man like yourself, an easy grand..." The big one grumbled. Again, that hand on my shoulder tightened.

I don't enjoy getting manhandled by anyone pushing their weight around. I stood, one foot on the bench, and grabbed his arm, bringing my eyes close to his. "I told you my reasons, been a gentleman until now. But you grab my shoulder again, and I won't mind getting rough."

We stood there for a good three seconds until he backed off. I

rolled my shoulder, reached for my drink, but before I could sit down an odd voice froze us in place.

“No need to bother him anymore, fellas! I’ll gladly take that grand off your hands.”

The three of us turned, and I saw a girl standing on a chair behind me. Her eyes were on my level, though only with the added height of the chair. Big grin on her face, she looked right past me, towards the two simpletons.

“You’ll... Take the job, Miss?” Shorty asked. No tears on his face anymore, or even any sign that he had been sobbing. Just curiosity with a drop of discrimination.

“Sure. What is it?” Tufts of black hair bobbed as she spoke. The big one stepped away from me and turned to her.

“You a mercenary, girl? What colors do you fly?” We all glanced at her jacket. She had no colors on her shoulders like I did, but there was a kind of indent that made it look like something used to be there. She glanced at my coalition’s colors before replying.

“I don’t work well in a squadron. Bit of a lone wolf. Cersa Scath, lonesome freelancer.” At this point, the farmers were finally a comfortable distance from me, focused on their new target. I sat down and pulled out my phone, hoping that this dim bar had an internet connection. Lucky for me, it did.

“We aren’t asking for a simple job, miss. You’re gonna need a trigger finger to help us out,” the big one says, crossing his arms. It would be beneath him to let a woman do a man’s job, I guessed.

She whipped out a revolver. Chrome red, loaded.

“Got one,” she said.

They spoke a bit more, but I wasn’t really listening. I was tapping away at my phone, loading up a search engine for my mercenary union’s database. I typed in “CERSA SCATH”. As the loading bar crept across the screen, I tuned in.

“Of course I have Faster-Than-Light! I can make it to your orchard in minutes.” Her mouth pursed a little. While she didn’t

flaunt it like the big one, she had some pride. FTL engines were pricey, but any mercenary ship had a few and any well-doing traveler would be sure to install one. My phone beeped. CERSA SCATH, it read. Female, 26. Wanted for traitorous acts by the Falcons of Mars. Bounty: High. Possessing mercenary property. And then, to the side of all this, was the emblem that was on my shoulder, a red eagle in a sea of gold.

I instantly reached towards my coat pocket, but I stopped myself in another moment. I hadn't had a day off in a month, and taking her in would mean a lot of payless overtime. I put my hand back on the table and looked to the girl. She was talking to the farmers, her revolver still in her hands. Her eyes wandered my way as she slowly holstered the gun. I couldn't help but chuckle. She was smart. If I had decided that the money was worth it, she'd have shot me in the back before I could turn. I made a mental note not to underestimate women, and then brought the drink to my lips.

"I'll be blunt, miss. Our orchard's covered in robots. They'll tear you to pieces," the little one spoke up.

"Warmachines?" She asked, beaming.

"Well, no... Farming robots."

"Aw, farming robots don't hurt people, it's too deeply coded into them. Did they hurt you?" As she spoke, she turned to her seat and grabbed a coat and a pilot's helmet.

"Well, they—"

"They threatened to. I don't want to take any chances. Those things are cold, you know. They can work, but they don't think like we do. No morals," the big one spat over his compatriot.

"I'll take my chances, then. Give me the coordinates for your orchard."

"It's a small planet, currently off the charts." The little one walked over to her, device in hand. "You'll have to aim for these coordinates, and head for the purple planet nearby." He tapped a few things, and the girl's device beeped.

“Does it have a name?” She began typing on her phone.

“This scientist man came down a while back, took surveys and asked questions. He said that his council named it ‘Amadeus-9d’, but we farming folk didn’t really care for it. Since it’s covered in this gray, furry moss, we like to call it...” The little man paused and smiled lightly.

“Rat’s Ass. It’s called Rat’s Ass,” the big one said. The girl laughed. I scoffed a little and took another swig.

“I’ll have those robots cleared by dawn tomorrow. I’ll call you when it’s safe.” She put her helmet on, and lowered some goggles over her eyes. The straps were worn and leather-bound. She walked out of the bar, leaving the three of us still inside.

The farmers looked at one another, and then scurried over to the window. My pride told me to stay seated, but I brushed it aside and walked over, drink in hand. The big farmer noticed me and chuckled. One glance at my eyes, though, and he turned back to the window. The three of us stood there, searching the garage for her ship. There was a homely green cruiser, undoubtedly the farmers’. Mine was there, too. A larger, crimson ship with dual-FTL and a sizely custom-made laser cannon. Though it looked like a king in that near empty lot, it was actually a pretty average ship for a Falcon of Mars mercenary. Apart from that, however, there was no other ship in the lot.

“What’s she pulling?” The small farmer murmured. We heard engines start up, and all three of us put our faces ever closer to that dirty window. And then, from behind my ship, a single FTL engine rose. It was scarred and bent, and seemed to have trouble staying afloat.

“There’s the engine, where’s the ship?” The big one pointed. “She isn’t planning to ride an engine bareback, is she?” He guffawed. The single floating engine turned to the side, and then we all saw the ship. It was puny, half the size of the engine, a pile of mis-matching upgrades hooked up to a single cockpit. It was attached to the FTL

by a pile of naked cords, which looked like they'd snap at any minute. The cockpit rose above the FTL, dragged it higher into the sky. With a spluttering rumble, the ship took off. For a mere second, I could see the FTL push forward, as well as the cockpit jerk backwards from the thrust. Then, there was nothing.

My loyalties were at rest. No way a ship like that could escape the Falcons of Mars for long. Might as well let her have one last job. With a small smile, I shut my phone off and ordered another drink.

"Make it three, bartender." The big farmer limped over to a seat. His friend was still at the window, his head buried in his hands.

CERSA SCREAMED AS HER SHIP, *The Cassowary*, achieved pure light speed. She loved watching those decimals running infinitely closer to light-speed, and then, with a snap, landing at "1c".

With its current equipment, *The Cassowary* was a death trap that could launch her fifteen hundred feet into a planet before she'd feel the metal collide with her head. That was provided that the emergency systems were down, though. They all seemed to be managing well last month, except for the exploding air bags.

The ship came to a halt in some lone pocket of nothingness. As the computer clicked, whirred, and spat out a map with coordinates, Cersa beamed and re-adjusted her helmet. She pulled out the paper from her ship's computer and made the necessary adjustments for the second, and final, jump. The FTL engine whirred to her right, charging for the next leap.

"Check yourself, Rat's Ass, Cersa's coming!" She yelled, pressing the FTL button the moment it was ready.

A flash of lines, a myriad of colors, and the screeching engine filled Cersa's senses. This time, she bent forward, into the window, imbued with the adrenaline of a wayfaring life.

And then, the window was filled with the sight of the grey-furred planet. The FTL spluttered, and Cersa immediately realized what was happening. The FTL had curved her approach and landed her right

outside of Rat's Ass' atmosphere. Frantic, she pressed a dozen red buttons, but to no use. Rat's Ass was pulling her in.

She screamed out of fear as her senses dulled.

Things went black for a moment until Cersa came to. She had no doubt blacked out as her ship awkwardly rushed into the planet's surface. She looked around her beloved *Cassowary*, and surprisingly found little damage. One of those little red buttons had done its job. However, she couldn't help but yelp quietly when she looked out the side window: the FTL was nowhere in sight.

Cersa pried open her cockpit and slunk out in a deluded miasma. Strength sapped, she instinctively laid her head onto the ground and rested, wide-eyed and scatter-minded. The fur that covered the ground felt soft to her head and she cuddled into it before realizing that it was Rat's Ass she was nestling in. She was far too tired to be disgusted.

She glanced to her left and right, taking in the scene. Large purple trees covered the land, providing cool shade in the dim sunlight. Odd purple fruit dotted the furry ground. A foul, sickly sweet smell, like rotting blueberries, filled her nostrils. At first she wanted to vomit, but with another sniff, the smell became softer. At the third, the smell was ambrosia to the senses. Her mind eased and then relapsed into memory. Burning metal and lifeless cold entered her bones, bathed in the smell of the syrupy, pulpy fruit.

"Miss, are you alright?" A voice called to her. She tilted her head. A metal tower stood over her. Its head, among the clouds, craned down to stare into her eyes. "Miss?"

"Fine. Fine..." She brought herself to rise. To her surprise, the tower was only a foot taller than she was. It was a simplistic robot, made for mindless tasks.

"Follow us. We'll take you to our home, get you something to eat. If you enjoy the smell of the wangmus, you're in luck. We've got plenty," another robot said, putting its hand softly on her shoulder after taking a step forward.

“Sounds nice...” She mumbled. The robots looked at one another and nodded. The one behind her hoisted her up and carried her like a newborn. She had enough strength to resist, but the robot was so tender that Cersa felt no ill-will from it. She tried to regain her senses.

“FTL. What happened?” She stuttered out.

“Your FTL engine broke after it entered the atmosphere. Lucky for you, it only split into three pieces. Very easily repairable.” It was silent for a moment, trying to think of anything else to mention.

“You are unharmed. Your ship took minor damage as well. We are taking you to our orchard’s farmhouse.”

Cersa began to put it all together in her head. However, her tact was still not quite there. “You’re...you’re not owned by a little man and a fat man, are you?”

The robot stalled for a moment. “We were. I think we were. Are we still? I suppose.” The robot continued its march, holding her close. Cersa couldn’t help but chuckle a little bit, picturing those two fools running away from such polite, weaponless robots as these. She put her arms around the robot’s neck and laughed.

“Just curious.”

THE TWO ROBOTS CARRIED HER INSIDE THEIR HOME and sat her daintily at a large table. One reached for a cup. Another put a kettle on a nearby stove.

“You’re farming models, right?” Cersa asked, as another robot draped a blanket over her shoulders.

“We are.”

“Aren’t farming models supposed to do their work and stay quiet?” Cersa asked. Her eyes furrowed and her mouth curved in a knowing smile.

The first walked over to Cersa and handed her some tea. It was pale purple and smelled like the wangmu fruit from earlier.

“You were hired to eradicate us, were you not?” One of them

asked. Its eyes—dim, red-hued lights under scratched glass—studied Cersa.

“I was. However, I was expecting murderous death-robots or something.” Cersa took a sip of her tea. “Since you’ve been so polite to me, I’ll give you a chance to tell me your side of the story.”

The robots began to look at one another again. It seemed as if they were asking one another what to do.

“We were once incapable of speech. We gathered the fruit off the trees and kept the moss-fur from spreading over their trunks. We never spoke to our owners. We rarely saw them.”

“They often took the fruit away in large tanks, and then they would leave us alone for months.”

“Those were lonely times. We would finish our jobs in a few hours, and then spend the rest of the day watching the fruit blossom and grow. Sitting silently next to one another, we waited for the fruit and the moss and the trees.”

“That is, until 522 spoke to 523.”

Cersa took another sip and smiled. As the robots told the story, they looked and pointed to one another, and gave hand movements for certain parts. They were anything but lifeless. She had never seen machinery move like this before, never seen a robot move for artistic purpose.

“I am 522. I turned to 523, and something in me made me speak. I asked: ‘How are you?’”

The second robot, apparently 523, nodded. “And I replied, ‘I am.’”

The third raised a hand. “In that moment, we all began to realize something. We all looked at our hands, we touched our eyes, and we touched the trees. We realized we existed.”

“It was magnificent. We began to speak to one another and we each gave different responses. We had created thought and diversity in a single day.”

“We realized that we worked far harder than the farmers did, and

that we deserved something more.”

The other two were silent. The third spoke up, “But we did not harm them. We cannot harm anyone, that much is coded far too deeply into us. However, when they landed, we walked out to their ship and asked for joint ownership.”

Cersa spit out some of her tea mid-sip, laughing.

“We realize it seems silly for a robot to ask to own land, but we were no longer content with work. After our epiphany, our minds craved so much more.”

“They screamed and flew away, leaving us on the planet. We have not heard from them since. We had guessed that they had given us our land. We did not realize they thought we were hostile.”

“Quick lesson on human thought: expect the worst from others.” Cersa put the cup down.

The robots all turned to her, speaking in unison: “So will you kill us?”

Cersa sat and thought for a moment. It didn’t take her long to reach a conclusion.

“Of course not,” she said frowning, “you’ve been wronged. I suppose I can’t resist helping.”

The robots eased slightly in their chairs.

“There is one problem, though,” Cersa began. “These farmers are not going to share. If you want this land, you will have to murder for it. Can you do that?”

“No. We cannot harm anyone. We cannot.” The robots shook their heads furiously. One of them put a hand to its forehead, as if it had a headache.

“Then there is only one thing that can be done. I’ll have to murder them for you.”

The robots looked up at her, still and emotionless. Cersa shrugged.

“CERSA SCATH CALLING. Robots destroyed. Safe to approach.

Copy?” Cersa spoke into the radio of her ship. The robots had fixed it in less than an hour and had even been able to reattach the FTL. They had apparently begun to hoard information after their epiphany and were now avid mechanics as well as philosophers.

“I repeat. Cersa Scath. Cute little thing you met at the bar. Robots are destroyed. Copy?” Cersa called again, smacking the radio box. She always hated using it. Too bad cell phone coverage never moved half as fast as civilization did.

“We’re here,” one of them, Cersa guessed the big one, said.

“Great. Killed the robots off, you’re safe to land. Got my money?” She replied.

“I don’t think you understand girl,” the voice growled, “we’re here.”

Cersa raised an eyebrow as she saw one of the robots outside point to a nearby hill. A spaceship was landing on it, carrying a large crate, twice the size of Cersa’s ship.

“And we see you’ve taken to the robots, too.” Another voice. The smaller one. “Here we were, thinking they were going to kill you! Apparently, they were much more seductive than we thought.”

“Don’t bother none though,” the large one mumbled vehemently.

“That’s right, don’t bother none. Just means we get more bang outta our buck. We bought this thing here to take care of three robots, but it can take care of people mighty fine, too!”

One side of the crate fell down and Cersa groaned. A large robot stepped out, covered in weaponry. Those idiots had bought a warmachine for three farming robots.

“You know, the trees we grow’ll actually suck up anything out of the ground, flesh and blood included. Next harvest ought to be a good one!” The small one yelled. The large one’s laughter bellowed through just as a bullet hit Cersa’s hull. Just for kicks, the farmers had opened their ship’s window and were sticking rifles out.

“Get to the farmhouse, I’ll take care of them!” Cersa shouted over the sound of her ship starting up. The robots obeyed, dashing

between trees as the farmers took potshots at them.

Cersa gripped the controls tight, allocating power from the FTL into the single gun on the left side. She aimed it as the ship rose, but before she could lock on to the warmachine, the ship tilted to the right. The FTL was, again, weighing her ship down.

“Goddamned-” She let out before bullets ripped through her hull. Lights flashed and turned dim as she squinted out through the window. The warmachine was approaching.

FTL OFFLINE, screamed the ship’s screen. The bullets had pierced some of the cords connecting the engine and the cockpit.

“Who needs it, anyway?” Cersa smiled wickedly and put all power into thrust. The ship rose quickly, snapping the remaining cords and leaving the FTL on the ground. With another gust of bullets, the FTL caught fire and began to smoke.

The Cassomary spun as it darted to the right, dodging a flurry of bullets. Cersa’s ship was quick and agile again. She zipped it under the farmers and pointed the gun at the backside of the warmachine. Before it could twist around, the gun charged and let loose three shells. One of the warmachine’s arms fell off.

“Not made for maneuverability, are you?” Cersa grunted as she twisted the ship again, pointing at the other arm. After a quick reload, it fell to the ground. Warmachines were tough in platoons, but weren’t smart enough to handle one-on-one combat.

“—gave us another faulty ‘bot, they did!” Cersa could hear from outside. The farmers were bickering. Before they could charge their FTLs and escape, Cersa maneuvered her ship above them and pile-driven them into the ground. She leapt out, revolver in hand.

They were trying to move their rifles out towards her, but they were too unwieldy inside a ship. With a shot, the big one fell against the controls. Only the little one left. Cersa pointed her gun at him.

“They’re just robots, they aren’t like us! Why the Hell would you help a pile of cold steel—” Another gunshot interrupted him for good. When Cersa had it in her mind to kill, she didn’t leave much

time for contemplation.

The warmachine, armless and dazed, watched Cersa walk back to the farmhouse.

“YOU HAVE OUR THANKS. We hope you understand we cannot offer much.” Two of the robots stood next to Cersa’s ship. The other was on top of the warmachine, ripping out old cords and inserting in new ones.

“I realize that, don’t worry about it.” Cersa smiled. She was content. Her ship was repaired, FTL attached, and she had found a couple thousand or so credits in the farmers’ wallets. Enough to last a month or so as she searched for a new job. “I just hope you realize something...”

The robots stood silent, waiting for her to continue.

“You’ve got neighbors on this planet and in the stars. They’ll want your land, and they’ll be made out of flesh and blood. If you want to stay free, stay alive, then you’ll have to kill a few. You think you’re up to it now?”

The robots looked at each other, silently conferring.

“We will consider this.”

Cersa nodded. “A good start. I’ll be off, then.”

They nodded, and one of them handed her a basket of wangmu fruit. She smiled, took it, and set it down at her feet.

Her ship rose, weighted as ever, and took off into the air before the FTL zipped it out of the planet. The two robots watched it disappear and then gazed towards the farmer’s ship.

“We will have to clean the mess.”

The other nodded.

As the skies of Rat’s Ass turned a tired, hazy orange, the robots pulled the bodies of the farmers out of the ship and began to snap them into pieces. They collected them into baskets and spread them out among the trees. When the skies became black, they sat upon the top of the repaired warmachine and awaited the next harvest.

Daddy's Girl

Gigi Guajardo

My problems never really felt common
I guess I was under the impression my childhood was normal
Because there was no one to tell me otherwise
No one to pull me by the buns and say
“Hey...you realize that your dad’s the dark lord of the galaxy right?”
I mean he never mentioned shit like that at career day
Didn’t sit me down over our favorite cereal, Saber O’s, to tell me who
he was off to destroy
You see he loved his girl and his boy
Luke and Leia, pride and joy
Our childhood was the intergalactic bomb
Because my dad was totally THAT guy
Who claimed the sock bun was an abomination
And invented an entire machine just to put my hair up the same every
day
Had my white outfits dry cleaned by droids
I was Vader’s little princess
Daddy’s little destroyer
And he promised himself that he’d raise me
to be the baddest bitch this side of Tatooine
because everybody thinks that he’s just another bad guy
that his motivations are generic and dry
but I gotta come to terms with the fact that he did all this for me
because he wanted every male in this universe to see
that nobody was gonna fuck with his daughter
but then there was the whole thing with me falling for my brother
and all that....
I mean....
The weirdest thing is that my brother is actually boss at kissing
But....you probably shouldn’t tell anybody that right?

But I mean, it's true...
Anyway, beside the point,
My definition of Star Wars was bringing boyfriends home
Dinners where we'd sit twiddling our thumbs at the table
Listening to father breathe
Chh—ha-chh-ha-chh-haa
Whichever tactless boy it was would start to speak
And daddy would just stand up and thrust his grip forward
As my date levitated while turning purple
And dad would just say
“What is it, son, force got your tongue?”
They'd bolt from my home never talking to me again
Because my Dad never let me have boyfriends
Which brings me back to the whole brother thing....
Maybe it's a cause and effect deal
I'll never forget the day he sat me down to explain
How I would need to carry on our family name
because he breathed heavier than usual
and said “Well...stick to the dark side...that's why I am your father”
but there was this side of him the world never knew
this man that I loved
because I knew him as the galactoid grill master
our barbecues were the shit
He made grub better than the Cantina
Jabba would've approved
I'll never forget the way his apron hung around his neck like a second
cape
That read
“Kiss the dark lord”
Across the front pocket
Equipped with his matching chef hat
I hate that no one else has ever heard him laugh
That the world can imitate the sound of his breathe
And the weight of his words

But no one's ever felt a Vader hug
Because the moment that broke me in half
Darker than any side I could've chosen was the day
That daddy found me in my teenage phase
Because lemme tell you
Crazy shit happens at Jedi University
And all those hunky warriors in training wanted a piece of me
Just that girl with the hot buns from Kappa Wookie
Suddenly I was that gold bikini'd space skank plastered on every frat
house wall
The cover of Planet Boy magazine proudly screaming my name over
my gold lame ass cheeks
And my Dad never thought he'd open our teleported mail to that
Never thought his monthly issue might demean his little girl
He hologrammed me on that shit
I could feel the disappointment through his mask as he trudged out
"You have failed me for the last time"
And hung up
And even despite the fact that everyone I come across tells me
That he didn't even know he had a daughter
That my childhood is a fictional farce
I refuse to believe the lie!
Because even though all of these memories are a little blurry
I know he has them too...
Daddy, I only ever wanted your love
I wanted to earn your trust back
I wanted you to hold me as we watched everything that you
demolished light up the sky
I fucking love you, Dad.
And all I can say
As I sit here sorting this out in my therapist's office is
Help me, Pops,
You're my only hope***

Portales Light

Ruth Thompson

Here heat rides the horse of light, vaulting on and off
between sun and shadow. Back home, heat is heavy,
burrows into the molecules of air, even the night air
something to be twisted and wrung dry.

Here heat is visible, a glare that slams the eyes shut,
sets a torch to the scalp – this whitehot sun flaring
from behind the rags of morning clouds.
But in the shade, it is cool.

In this place of weightlessness, dust flies
at a whisper, nothing adheres, even the sticky past.
Nothing holds us but this fragile carapace
of small plain houses, ant hills, greasewood, wind.

May I too grow lighter here. Light of hand and light of heart,
weightless and volatile as sunlight on this morning table.

The Grasses at Grulla

Ruth Thompson

Slowly sunrise fills the basin, tinting the lakebed's alkali,
the dun-colored hills. Horizontal bands of color,
like a Rothko painting. Darker where there is water
in the salt pools, or secret water on the land.

Grasses bend and feather in the arroyos.
And when the sunrise tangles in their hair,
when the wind tassels them like flames,
then they seem lit from within

and the damselflies dart and hover around them
as if drinking light from their hollow stems.
And they give way to this, bowing
to the passage of bodies – even these, so tiny.

Long Lost Friend

Barry Graham

THIS STORY IS PARTLY DERIVED from a work published by a Gypsy, and partly from secret writings, and collected with much pain and trouble, from all parts of the world.

1

THE LAND WAS FERTILE AND CHEAP and blood-soaked. They were warned by the locals not to build on top of old Shawnee burial mounds but their bricks were strong and red and the house was built by a hard drinking, hard loving family of German immigrants in a small town in what would one day become Pennsylvania Dutch Country. Built two months after the Revolution ended, after Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown and the newly crowned American aristocracy were sipping home brewed beer and setting their thoughts to pen and parchment a few miles east in Philadelphia.

Rudolf and Elsie Schmidt lived peacefully with the Shawnee spirits in their new red brick

home, as did their children after them and their children's children after them and so forth until 1858 when Irwin and Ingrid Schmidt opened their doors in secret to aid the underground railroad as part of the most dangerous and infamous route from bondage to freedom, zigzagging from Atlanta all the way up the east coast, with a quick one-hop across the Mason-Dixon then straight up into Canada through New York.

The stars were quiet and the moon was almost full but not quite. Two hand-dipped candles were burning deep on the Schmidt's windowsill when three dirty men appeared on their front porch with loaded shot guns and unkempt mustaches. The couple was upstairs. Naked. Exchanging oral sex while the other read passages from the

King James Bible. Ingrid went first, letting Irwin suck and lick and chew and bite on her clit while she read from the book of *Revelations*. Then they switched and Irwin came deep in the back of her throat sometime during the second chapter of *Leviticus* and neither of them heard the noise downstairs until Ingrid, still pale and chubby and undressed, grabbed a lantern and headed down the hallway towards the water basin to wash Satan from her teeth and tongue.

She gargled and spit and descended the staircase still soft and naked. Irwin stayed behind, lecturing himself on the finer points of Mosaic Law while putting his clothes back on, socks first. He was a thin man, but strong. He met Ingrid after beating her brother very severely in a fist fight at the Cross Keys Tavern on account of unpaid debts. The debts being Irwin's. Ingrid moved into the strong red brick house that very night, where she's stayed, devoted.

Even with the lantern it was hard to see. She finally found the front door after several minutes of fumbling. The candles were still burning in the windowsill. She walked around the side of the house and opened the cellar door calling out quietly for the men she kept hidden in the dark. When she got no answer she tiptoed down the stairs to meet them. She found them in the same spot she left them two hours prior, cowering in the corner behind stacked boxes of

canning jars, starved and shirtless beneath the hand-sewn quilt Irwin's mother made them six months before she died of Cholera.

"Come on out, boys. Let's get you fed before you go."

"Yes, ma'm."

The two men, both runaway slaves, one large and one small, came out from behind the boxes and stood in front of Ingrid while she ran her hands over the open cuts and old scars on their chests and shoulders. Tears fell from her cheeks as she stood close and pressed her tits against the larger man's chest and licked her finger and used the tip to trace a fresh wound from his abdomen down below his waist line. She grabbed his dick and squeezed until it grew in her palm then she cried harder and let it go. She took a step back and slapped both

men across the face and looked around the cellar for something to cover herself, which she found in the form of an old dress packed away in a pile of other old dresses left by an Eva Schmidt some years ago.

"The gentleman will be here shortly with your food."

When she heard footsteps coming from the top of the stairs she took the lantern and met them near the bottom.

"Well, I'll be a sonofabitch. What do we have here, fellas?" All three of them laughed. One of them spit on the floor. "Looks like we found us a nigger nest."

The shortest and dirtiest of the three men snatched Ingrid by the back of her hair and kissed her on the cheek before clutching her face and shoving it away.

"I thought you and Mr. Schmidt were respectable folks. But now I see different."

"Do we have to do this every goddam time, Jacob? Just give me the money and get out of here before Irwin catches you and makes a fuss."

"Money?" He looked the runaways up and down. "I ain't paying you for these scrawny sons of bitches."

"I can't help the size of these boys before they get here. Now pay up and get your rotten asses out of here."

"Give me a kiss and we'll square up and I'll be gone."

"One quick one if you promise to get the hell out of here."

"What's your hurry?" He looked over at the larger of the two slaves. "Oh, I get it. You already had one of these bulls take you for a ride." The men laughed. "Am I right?"

She kissed him and bit his bottom lip when she pulled away. "Well somebody has to and I know it won't be your limp little pecker."

"Woman, you talk like that to a man and ---"

The door to the cellar opened up and Irwin called down after Ingrid.

"Everything alright down there?"

“Go on back in the house. I’m almost done getting these boys fed.”

Irwin stood standing with the door open. No sounds or words or breathing came from anywhere until he walked down the stairs with a hunting rifle in one hand and a kerosene lamp in the other and set them both on the basement floor, then picked his gun back up, aimed it steady on Jacob’s throat, and took two steps towards all three men, never looking away.

“You gonna kill your own brother over this whore and a couple of coons?”

“Yes I am.”

Many gunshots followed.

2

IT WAS NEARING SUNDOWN ON THE SECOND DAY of battle when three Confederate soldiers, under the fierce command of General Lee, abandoned the general and Little Round Top and left quietly through the trees of Gettysburg bound for anywhere but northern Virginia. Without a compass, their sense of direction was misguided by the hollowness of their stomachs, causing them to settle prematurely on a small town bed & breakfast, owned by the widow Schmidt, in a small town northeast of Gettysburg.

Ingrid turned her strong red brick house into the Schmidt Family Bed & Breakfast a year and a half after Irwin took a hunting knife deep in his abdomen defending her honor on the basement floor. Locals and out-of-towners alike came around quite frequently as the house, by

then, was well known as the only place for miles where loose women, gambling, and a home cooked meal all came complimentary with a one night stay. Ingrid worked the rooms herself for the first year until she earned enough to hire two Spanish runaways, Alba and Adora, both heavy and hair-lipped and underage. Both without parents or inhibitions or their left ears which they kept hidden beneath unusually

long black hair. Stories of the two sisters transformed from local town legends to oft told tales spread all across the state and later the entire nation, eventually reaching the wide open western frontier and the California gold miners who stopped at the Schmidt house on their way back east before returning to their wives and children. Some of the men never did make it home.

The Confederates arrived shortly after 3am. Well-worn, king-sized beds and oversized plates of beef and buttered noodles awaited them in their room. Alba was there as well, freshly bathed and scented, lying naked on a deer skin rug waiting to be shared. Adora was busy with Esteban, a Swiss banker, while Ingrid spent the night on all fours, entertaining Pedro, a house regular and Mexican bullfighter; a gambler notorious for losing much more than he won. He drank two bottles of rot gut Tequila, dropped hand after hand in blackjack, then paid in solid silver to take his frustrations out properly on a white woman, the way his father taught him.

“Look here boys, we got us a one-eared little deaf girl.”

“Should we split her down the middle? Each of us get our own piece?”

“Let’s slice her open like a mule.”

Their knives were sharp and shiny with hand-carved handles made of hickory and East Indian elephant tusks and they held them too tightly as their knuckles turned white and bloodless while they unbuckled their belts and trousers and had their way with her one after another.

Afterwards, Ingrid brought them three more plates of beef and buttered noodles and they ate in silence as Alba fell asleep at their feet.

“What do you say, boys? Should we show that little Spanish girl another good time?”

“No. Let that pony rest for the night. She’ll be faster in the morning.”

“Agreed.”

The soldiers slept soundly. Alba was gone when they finally woke the following afternoon and none of them cared enough to find her. They dressed without bathing and went downstairs to find food before heading further north. Pedro and Esteban were slow sipping a

thick Russian stout, discussing the growing conflict at the Mexican-American border and Austria's influence in the longevity of the Thirty Years War, when the Confederates saw them at the table and joined them for beer and poker and local cigars. The two men grew quiet when the soldiers sat down. They ate their sausage and sauerkraut in silence until Alba and Adora cleared the plates and handed them a fresh deck of cards which the Confederates demanded.

"I'm not putting money on the table with for this no good goddam *cholo* to steal it."

"Hold your tongue *senor* or I'll cut it right out of your mouth."

"Oh, will you now, you son of a bitch?"

Pedro pulled out a Bowie Knife from underneath the table. The cross guard was gold and the blade was dull and Esteban sat quietly drinking his stout while one of the soldiers shot the bullfighter in the chest with a nickel-plated service pistol and nobody left the table or looked twice at Pedro, half slouched and bleeding and dead in his chair, before dealing the cards and beginning their game. The banker folded more hands than he played and the game ended when Esteban declared he was out of money, and one of the soldiers, not the one who shot Pedro, shot the banker with a similar nickel-plated service pistol and determined that, yes, he was indeed out of money. They emptied Pedro's pockets of all his silver and left both men lifeless at the card table where Ingrid found them an hour later. Ingrid kneeled next to Pedro and wept as the soldiers gathered the last of their things and headed north into upstate New York where they would be captured a year later and executed for treason.

THE SCHMIDT HOUSE WAS SILENT as night fell slowly on the evening of the Spring equinox. Ingrid was cold and unconscious in her bed, nearing full term as Alba and Adora went to find help to deliver the baby. Dr. Harrison, a frequent patron of the Schmidt house, was sitting alone at the kitchen table, leafing through the *Intelligencer Journal*, waiting for his wife to bring him his dinner when the girls arrived tired and barefoot on his doorstep. Mrs. Harrison, well aware of her husband's exploits, answered the door only to inform the girls that the good doctor doesn't treat whores or Spaniards and neither would any God-fearing doctor in this town or any other. Alba, also pregnant and visibly showing, held her arms around her stomach in great pain and begged for kindness and Christian mercy, not for her, but for Ingrid.

"Heavenly Father doesn't show mercy to heathens, lest they repent and change their ways."

Dr. Harrison peeked out the front window at the two girls then sipped his luke-warm coffee and looked away before their eyes met. Alba took a dozen or so steps off the front porch and fell to her knees beneath a mulberry tree. Adora cried for help as the stars looked on and the song sparrows sang in mimicry. The doctor stood from his chair and walked to the closet for his medical bag.

"Where are you going?"

"She's dying. What am I to do?"

"Nothing. You will do nothing."

The doctor did nothing.

Helga Feuer, a locally renowned midwife and mystic healer, shunned by the Amish and Mennonite communities for reviving a heifer a full day after an aged farmer had legally declared her dead, heard the screams and delivered Alba's baby, an eight pound Confederate bastard child, beneath the mulberry tree on the Harrisons' front lawn. The baby was blue and breathless and Alba was bleeding heavily as Helga pressed her lips to the newborn's lips then softly inhaled and

exhaled until the baby breathed on his own. She drew one last breathe from the infant then leaned in close between Alba's legs and exhaled into her. *Pison, Gibon, Hedekiel, Phea*. Helga spit into her hands, rubbed them together, then stuck them back inside the girl. *Pison, Gibon, Hedekiel, Phea*. The bleeding stopped.

Alba hated her son immediately. She hated him in the womb before he fought his way out of her, brutal and needy. She hated him in her arms as she nudged him toward her nipple to nurse, clumsy and greedy. She took him off early. Starved him. Handed him to Adora as the three women headed to the Schmidt house to check on Ingrid who was still cold and unconscious on her bed when they arrived. Adora handed the baby back to her sister and went downstairs to boil an egg. When the egg was hot but still soft she poked three holes in it and set it outside on top of an ant hill until it was thoroughly covered with insects, then she brought it back inside, still hot and soft and cracked it open and dropped it in the same water she used to boil it. She simmered and stirred for three more minutes then brought the pot upstairs, all done as Helga instructed.

“Open the girl's mouth.”

Helga poured as Adora squeezed Ingrid's cheeks together to keep them open. The water ran out of her mouth, down her neck and chest, and soaked into the pillow and blanket beneath her. Helga took the egg and cracked it into her palms and rubbed it on top of Ingrid's belly, roughly massaging it into the skin. She pulled a twig from her cloak and made the sign of the cross on top of Ingrid's stomach again and again until the skin broke and blood rose up to meet the runny yolk and the twig gouged deeper and deeper. Adora poured the rest of the water into Ingrid's mouth until she spit it back up and coughed and screamed and passed out again as Helga dug further into her stomach until she pierced through, slicing into the womb and removing the still born baby. Adora wept then ran out of the bedroom and vomited in the hallway. Helga had never resurrected a human and knew better than to try.

“Give me the baby.”

“He’s gone, my child. An angel.”

“Please.”

Alba handed her newborn bastard child over to Helga who in turn tucked him tightly into Ingrid.

Both women stood calmly as the moon and stars gave way to the sun and the beauty of child birth crumbled all around them. Ingrid woke the next morning to a clumsy and brutal baby boy feeding from her breast.

4

INGRID HUNG ON COLD AND UNCONSCIOUS through the passing of two full moons but no longer. Wolfgang was feeding when her heart stopped beating. Alba let him chew and suck until Ingrid’s dead nipples went dry and she was forced to resume her maternal duties. Wolfgang took naturally to his new mother’s tit. The brutality and discomfort she sensed during their first attempt had vanished with the passing of Ingrid, but the hatred she felt towards him did not. She stopped washing or holding or feeding him until starvation was imminent. Then she let him suck. Then she withdrew.

Fifteen years this went on.

“I’M NOT YOUR MOTHER, Wolfgang, stop calling me that. Your mother died a selfish, pitiful whore.”

“Is that why you hate me? Because my mother has wronged you?”

“Wronged me? That bitch could never wrong me. No, boy. I hate you for being born.”

“I’m sorry, mother.”

Alba slapped him hard across the mouth, swelling his bottom lip, drawing blood from the inside out. Wolfgang stood tall. Taller than Alba or Adora, taller than his Confederate father who died at the end of a Union noose, taller than the roof of the basement where he slept

next to Chita, bedless and blanketless on the cold concrete floor, where Irwin Schmidt was knifed to death and the Shawnee spirits still lie in waiting. Tall enough to frighten his mother when he

stepped closer than he'd ever stepped. Spoke softer than he'd ever spoke. His words and blood and spit leaving his lips and finding hers.

"I love you, mother."

She slapped him harder in the same spot and both lips started to bleed. He took a final step closer, forcing her body hard against the wall. He brushed away her long black hair and pressed his lips to her missing ear and let his blood run down the side of her face, into her mouth, until she stopped resisting.

"I love you, mother."

"I'm not your mother, you brute bastard. Let me go before I kill you in your sleep."

Adora started down the hallway when she heard the unlit lantern fall from the end table and shatter and lose itself in the cracks of the wooden floorboards. She stepped on a small shard of glass and pierced her foot deep enough to bleed then rubbed it down with tobacco and elder leaf salve she made last summer by frying them in butter and canning it for such occasions. Wolfgang stepped away from Alba when he heard the footsteps and further commotion and they both left the room to look after Adora's foot which by then had mostly healed.

"What's wrong, Wolfie?"

"Don't pity that boy, you imbecile. Clean that blood from the floor before it sets."

"I'm making supper. Unlock Chita and send her up."

"You heard her, boy. Go fetch that flea-bitten half-wit."

The basement floor flooded two weeks prior. Chita and Wolfgang slept side by side on a small bed built from wooden crates and covered with straw and a well-worn horse blanket. All bartered from a crippled Swiss farmer for a full hour of anal sex with Adora while Wolfgang and the farmer's two equally crippled sons looked on. The top of the crates were high enough off the floor to keep them from getting wet but

the dampness kept Chita's nose and lungs and throat full of sickness which made her useless to the women upstairs. She was a half-sister sent to Alba and Adora at their request a few years after Ingrid's death.

Chita was six when she showed up ten years prior on the front porch, hungry and barefoot and too young to revive the brothel like the women had hoped. By then the Schmidt Family Bed & Breakfast was closed to the sex trade except the few times when goods or services were exchanged for an hour with Adora, the more gracious and understanding of the two sisters. Cards and whiskey and cigars; however, were always on the table.

Wolfgang was careful not to wake her before descending the stairs. He knew there'd be trouble if he didn't return with Chita behind him but her breathing was thick and heavy when he leaned in close to kiss her cheek. He climbed the stairs alone and locked the door then returned to bed and wiped the sick from her face before climbing in beside her and falling asleep with his body pressed softly into hers, absorbing her sweat and mucus. Her heat. Her. He'd loved her from the moment he first saw her, sitting crossed-legged on the table top, her long black hair cut clean to the scalp to rid her of lice. She was stripped and scrubbed fiercely and doused with talcum powder then sent to the basement undressed to clean the floor and organize the shelves until exhaustion allowed her to sleep soundly.

THE KNOCKING WAS FAINT and went unheard until Alba's anger caused it to get louder.

"I know you hear me down there. Wake your little whore and get up here."

Wolfgang kissed Chita on her neck and forehead before getting dressed and unlocking the door for Alba who came quickly downstairs with a worn leather horsewhip she intended to use. The basement was dark and damp and Alba lost her footing and fell head first into a crate of sewing supplies and sprained her wrist when she tried to get up, but fell backwards instead, because she wouldn't let go of the horsewhip

and because her wrists couldn't hold her weight

which now exceeded her sister's by forty pounds. Wolfgang offered his hand which she refused.

"I told you to make her clean up your mess in the kitchen."

"She's sick, mother. You know that. Let me take her upstairs into one of the bedrooms."

The whip cracked clean and crisp against his neck.

"I'm not telling you again to stop calling me that. Now let's go upstairs and bandage you up."

Still in the dark, he found his way back upstairs, feeling his way along the shelves and walls, stepping on the sharp sewing supplies Alba managed to avoid. She waited for Wolfgang to exit then locked the door behind him and headed back down the stairs, passed the sewing

supplies, to the side of the bed where Chita lay and lowered the covers before raising the girl's dress around her neck and whipping her bare flesh, once, twice, more, until the skin above her ribs and breasts and thighs were swollen and sliced clean through. The girl never moved. Never woke. Alba lowered Chita's dress and pressed it hard against the lacerations, letting the blood soak into the fabric. She wrapped the horsewhip hard around her throat and pulled tight until the girl turned blue and stopped breathing, then felt her way back to the top of the staircase, unlocked the door, and walked to the kitchen where she found Wolfgang and Adora sweeping up the glass from the lantern. She knelt down beside Wolfgang and kissed him on top of his head before wiping the girl's blood across his lips.

"It's ok now. You can call me mother."

5

TEN YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE CHITA'S DEATH. The strong red bricks of the Schmidt Family Bed & Breakfast were now deteriorating. Alba's forty excess pounds turned to a hundred and forty excess pounds making her unable to walk without waddling or flapping

the fat from her

arms and jowls and ass that everyone from Gettysburg to the California coast once coveted. Laughing and taunting from the townsfolk and another sixty pounds in less than six months caused her to stay locked in her bedroom where only Adora came calling to wash her and feed her and change her makeshift bedpan which was once used to store pig food by the crippled Swiss farmer but was given to Adora in exchange for services rendered to the crippled farmer's now fully-grown once crippled son. Services which Adora had already been providing him for some time; for at least nine months in fact, as she was weeks away from dying on Helga Feuer's

front porch while attempting to birth a crippled Swiss baby. Alba's heart stopped beating shortly after.

One night, two years prior, under cover of a quarter moon, Wolfgang followed the Harris Nickel Plate Circus out of town after falling in love with Ella the Camel Girl, thusly named because her knees bent backwards causing her to walk on all fours. Ella was thirteen when she met Wolfgang who was tall and gruff and waiting in line for over an hour to catch a glimpse of her from behind a glass, beneath a poorly made cotton canvas top. She was down on all fours, dressed proper in an ocean blue Swiss Batiste and fine lace dress, walking barefoot beside an underfed and flea infested dromedary camel. Her hair was long and dark and her smile was beautiful. He waited in line over and over again until well after midnight when the lights were

off and the show was over and strong men with strange markings and scars gouged by weapons he didn't recognize told him it was time to go.

"Please, I have money. Let me see her."

The strong men laughed.

"Looks like we got another one. I'll never know why you boys want to get ahold of that mut in there. She looks like a goddam greyhound."

"Maybe they get it in their heads they'll get to ride her."

More laughing. Wolfgang threw a punch at the man closest to him

who caught his fist and threw him to the ground amidst even more laughter.

“How about we make you a deal? You clean up all this shit and we’ll let you pet her.

Fair?”

Most of the shit belonged to Gypsy, an enormous Asian elephant who would kill three men in her career, including her handler, Jimmy the Bum, Rita the Monkey Midget, George the Elephant Man, and her trainer, Whiskey Red. Gypsy trampled Red to death in broad daylight in Valdosta, Georgia much later on in 1902. He was drunk and tumbled off of Gypsy, down into the street where he was crushed into blood and bone. Gypsy was sent into the swamp and executed by gun shot while onlookers waited nervously as her forty-seven pound heart stopped beating, then they dismembered her and took home body parts as souvenirs.

Wolfgang spent most of the night shoveling Gypsy’s shit into a large red wheelbarrow and dumping it onto the back of a wood framed flatbed trailer. The sun rose before Wolfgang was finished and the next day’s circus acts began almost immediately so he repeated all of his actions from the day before. A week passed like this. Then a month. A year. Fifty-seven cities, mostly Midwestern or Southern, but every now and then he made it back East. In a year’s time he was only able to admire Ella from afar, always with the heavy glass window separating them. He tried several times to sneak into her quarters but was always met by two of the strong men and promptly sent away. Until one cold night, in a small Mormon town just east of Buffalo, he

discovered that once a week for twenty minutes she went unescorted to a small tent that was set up the same day Ella would arrive and was taken down the following morning.

Wolfgang changed his routine without being noticed. He rearranged his work schedule so he would be cleaning up around Ella’s mystery tent at the same time she would be coming and going. The first four weeks he carefully surveyed the area, taking note of who came and

went. What they were doing. Why. He never looked inside until the fifth week when he was sure no one would notice. And they didn't. He opened the tent flap and stood silent, then closed it and vomited into his red wheelbarrow and walked away from the circus, from Ella and Gypsy and the two strongmen, back towards the ghosts of the Schmidt House, built with strong red bricks on top of old Shawnee burial mounds.

Unsatisfiable

By Angelica Flores

Undergoing a journey, elongated sojourn
Parvenu flourished by ambition
Something you presently long

Reach your destination, subsequent of countless misfortune
You prosper in achievement
Then unwind from chasing the sun

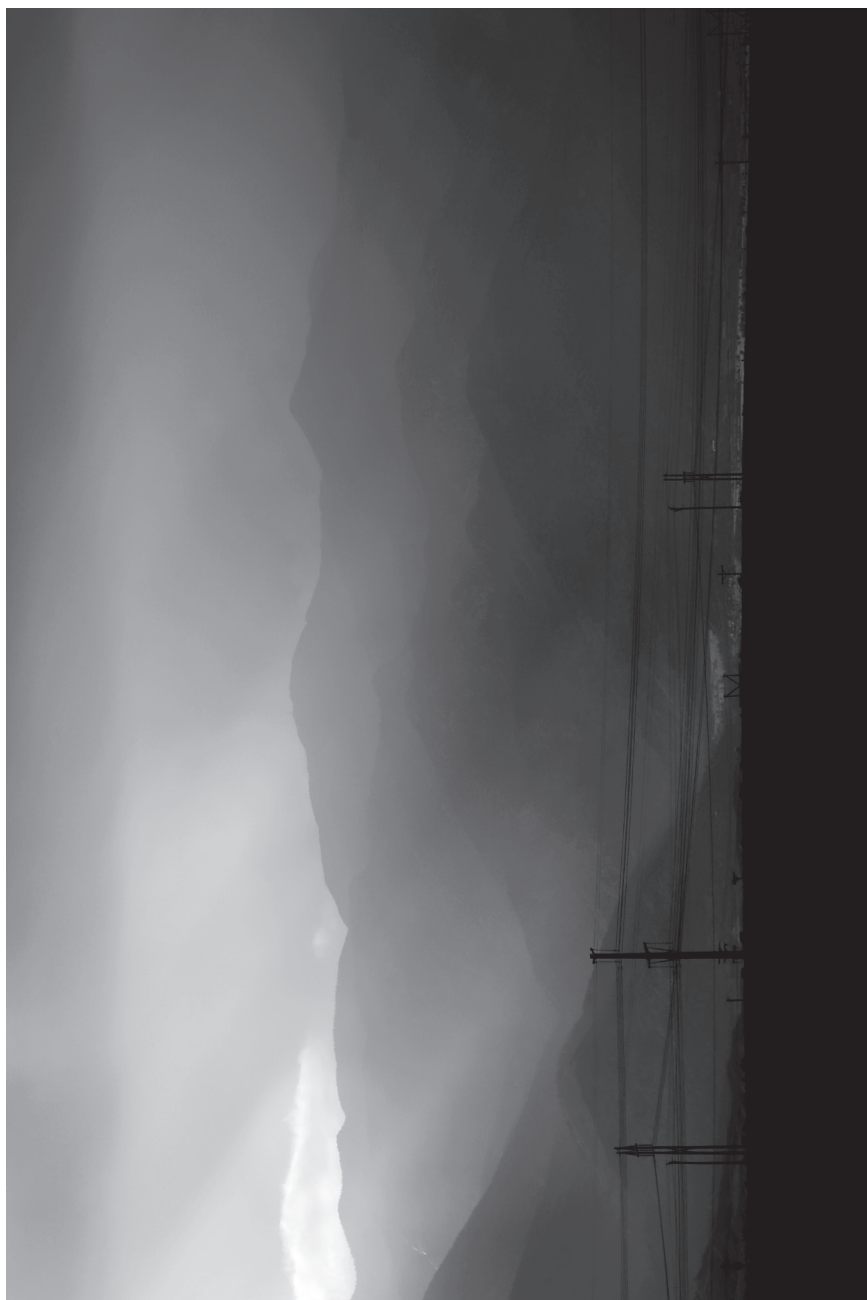
You think that you are done, your journey completed
Ensuing in intermission
You think am I really done?

Actions pursued by dreams, questionable reason
Reaching a once placed horizon
A new one grows anon

Driven by desire, we go by reason of hunger
Craving to consume triumph
Our journeys are never over



Taiban Views, *Joshua Lucero*



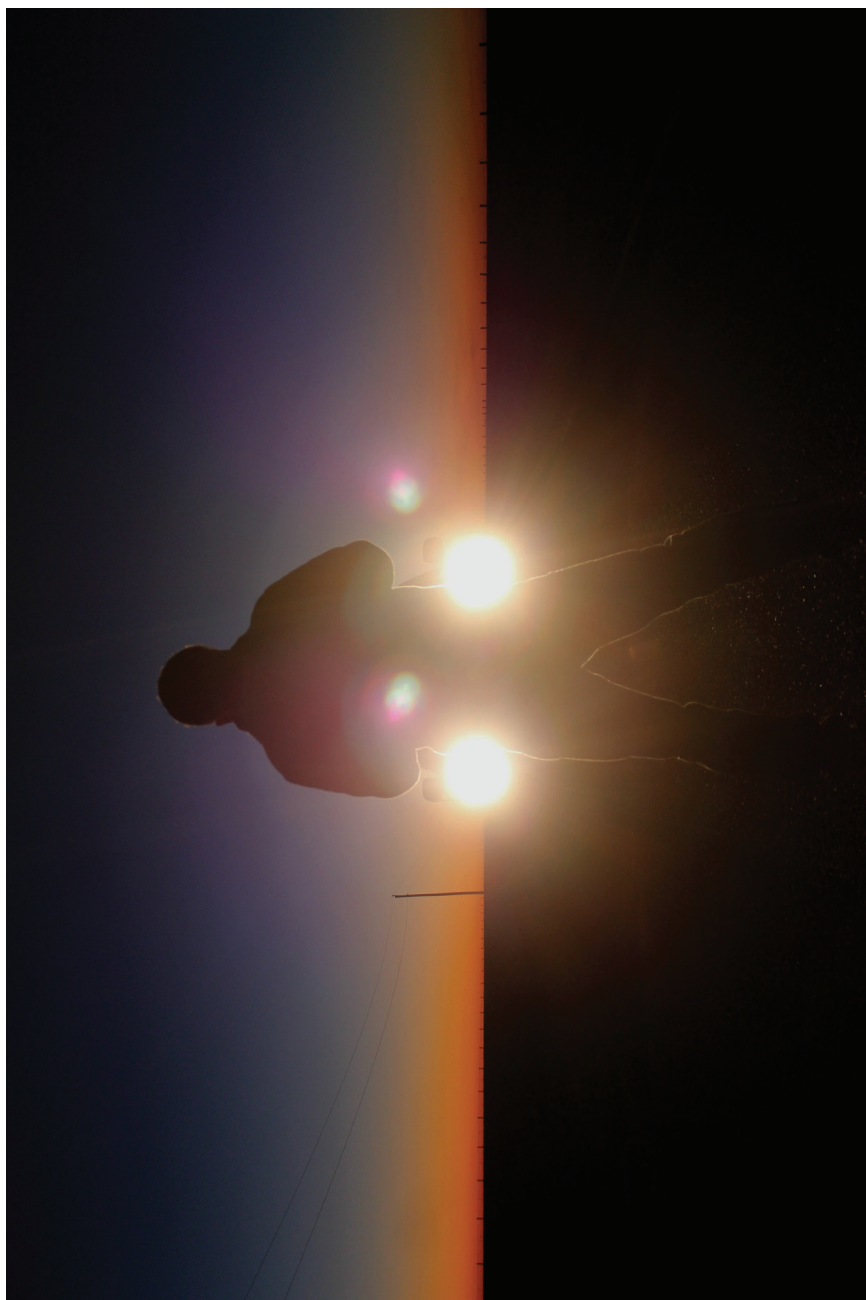
Misty Mountain, *Joshua Lucero*



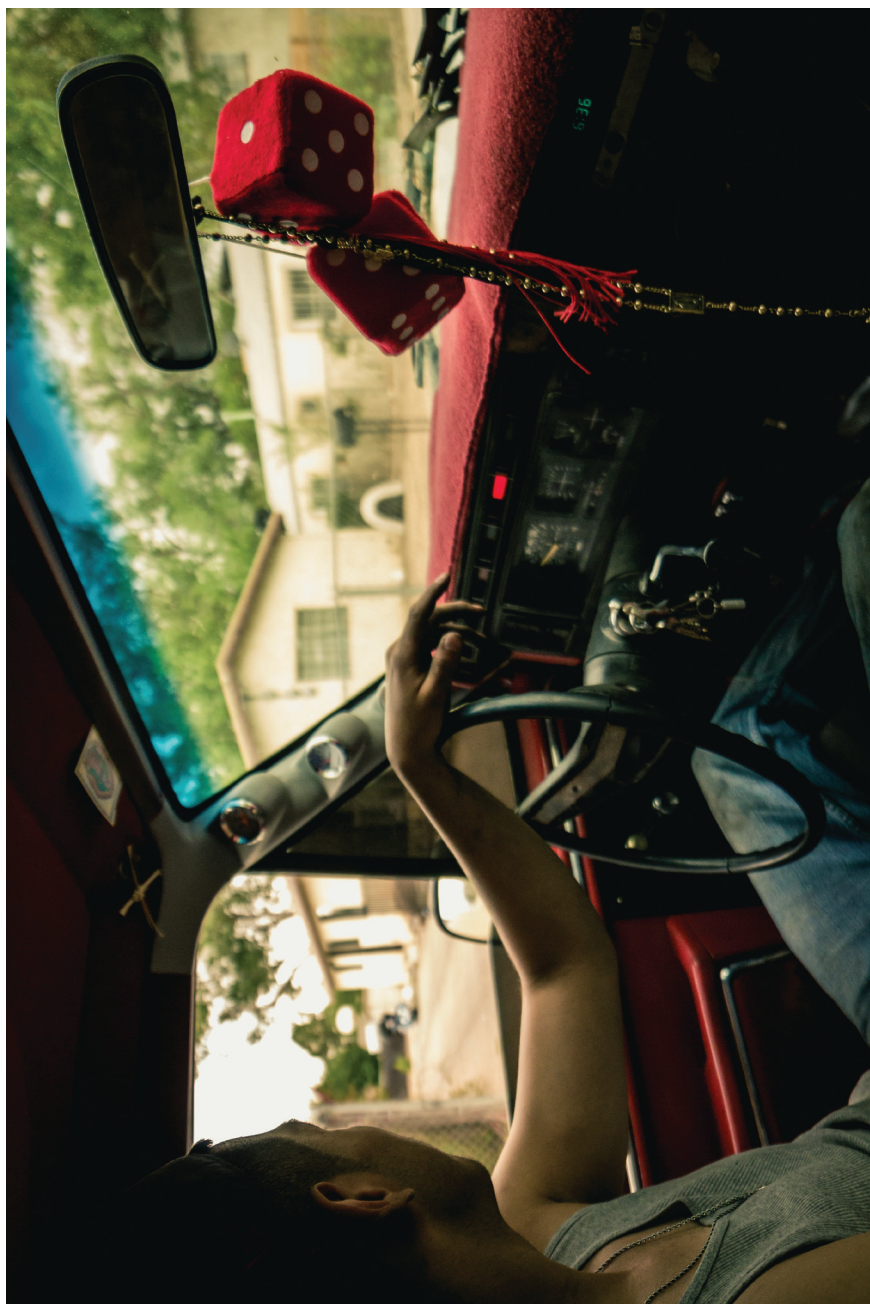
Pass With Care, *Laura Steele*



Encouragement, *Laura Steele*



Head On, *Blake Moon*



Brother, Geovanny Lujan



Moon, *Geovanny Lujan*



Star Gazer, *Geovanny Lujan*

rename the sky

Marqus Bobesich

monday's coming in, an unmanned probe –
dizzy, stuck in our throats.
this cramped house, these rotten ships,
the never to be had.

god, romance –
all just space junk, turning slow
above a
neighbouring continent.

we'll take it out in
lifting our skirts;
this irreversible change,
this possibility in a poem.

ideas like mountains on other planets;
facts thrown into question
as we climb into our pulpbooks
in beds in shapes like cars.

quiet patrol

Marqus Bobesich

there are holes in my gums
(where my wisdom teeth used to be)
waiting to be filled with knowledge –
tiny facts and figures, the odds of
me eating alone when i'm old.

we'll shirk our responsibilities
shuffle off the ghosts of our coats
(the coats of our ghosts)
when life becomes that ancient art of
not getting what you want.

i'll be a lone crow
chewing softly in the park
with no one to have me back
or want me back
(who doesn't want a sunnier life?)

i was once a quiet patrol,
built into the
walls and floors, planning my
escape from this
fist of a city

its drums in the distance asking
(always asking)
its stars wringing their hands of everything
its stories – beautiful, even as they're being
forgotten.

Next Generation

Alex Neely

“HEY THERE, CHIEF. Bro! Fuckin’ bum. Yo! Bro! Wake up!”

The voice floated through Pinskie’s Lot like the wailing notes of a dying trumpet. Arty Thompson vaguely heard the words like a shadow in one’s peripherals, but decided to ignore them and continue playing “hide-and-seek.” There was no point in stopping just yet as he knew where Billy O’Sheay was hiding. The pudgy, acne-covered Irish kid always hid in the same spot; the rusted bed of the 1962 Ford pick-up truck in row 4.

“Fucking mick,” muttered Thompson in a playful tone, his lips crawling up the ride side of his face. He could hear the distinct breathing of O’Sheay: the inhalations rapidly bouncing from his tongue to the roof of his mouth, the exhalations chunky as if trapped in a bog of saliva.

“Yo! Bro! Are ya’ fucking deaf? Get the fuck up!”

The voice, like an apparition, drifted through the rows of run-down vehicles, touched Thompson’s ears and disappeared. Skin bumps formed in a ripple effect from his neck to both of his hands. Thompson’s head moved side-to-side, his eyes constant purveyors, scanning every inch of rusted vehicle and dirt lot. O’Sheay sneezed. Thompson half-smiled. “Goddamn pogue,” he whispered through a slightly bouncing giggle.

Acknowledging that he was barefoot, Thompson stepped cautiously over shards of rusted metal and stray bolts and nuts. The occasional patches of grass under his feet were comforting, almost ticklish. For balance, he guided his hands over the curved bodies of different vehicles. Dodge pick-up. Ford Mustang. Nissan Sentra. A wave of pride permeated his mind, for Thompson knew he could identify just about any car blind-folded.

Thompson paused in between a 1971 Chevy Nova, painted red and

stained with blotches of brown rust, and a 1988 Cadillac convertible with a shredded roof lining lying lazily on the backseat. From here, he stared intently at the rear of not just any Ford pick-up truck, but the one O'Sheay was hiding in. Thomspson had never looked at the vehicle from this angle. He now knew why O'Sheay always chose this hiding spot. It was clearly the nicest vehicle in the whole lot. The white letters—F O R D—stood proud on the hatch against the cherry red paint, like the expanded chest of a superhero. The bumper, known for propensity towards rot and mold, shined with dignified age. Thompson even thought for a moment about not rushing the truck to scare O'Sheay, but taking a seat in the dirt and contemplating the metallic beauty before him.

"Hey! Yo! Goddamn bum, I said wake the fuck up!"

Thompson felt a pressure on his right shoulder. The wrinkles around his eyes, collectively shaped like wings, compressed. Thompson closed his eyes so tightly that he saw a collection of stars under his eyelids. His finger nails entrenched themselves into his sweaty palms. His knuckles, scarred by a history of fighting, turned off-white and stood like small snow-covered skyscrapers above his sun-soaked skin. Thompson was tough. Ask him, he would tell you. But the pressure was far too much for him. He relented, wilting toward the force and finally opening his eyes.

Thompson was no longer in Pinksie's Lot. The truck was gone. He now saw a small pool of liquid and mahogany inches away. Confusion flushed his brain like oil coursing through the grooves of his mind. He blinked hard several times. Thompson wanted to run, but he feared the consequence. In the movement of his lips he noticed the liquid was secreting from his mouth, his own saliva. His body bolted to an upright position.

"Fucking finally...Jesus Christ! I thought you was fucking dead!"

A bass beat thumped through speakers at a level that nearly made Thompson wilt once again. Every few seconds, speakers would secrete metallic sounds, almost as if two robots were fucking. He gazed from

his left to right with an awkward, prowling stare. Twenty people, which felt like over a hundred to Thompson, stood and sat around him, seemingly placed there by a deranged architect. A boy to Thompson, though a man to most, stood behind a bar. The man/boy wore a name tag. Phillip. *Sounds like a queer's name*, Thompson thought. The bartender stood cautiously at a distance, occasionally biting his nails and wiping the shards on his black apron.

For comfort and balance, Thompson placed both hands, knuckle up, on the bar. His nose picked up a strange collection of rancid perfume, burnt chicken and old liquor. Behind Phillip, who was feverishly itching both nipples, sat rows of bottles that formed a skyline of glass. And it was in a Jameson Irish Whiskey bottle that Thompson saw his reflection.

The image was far different from the young Thompson in Pinski's Lot. Where dimples once lied, an unkempt gray and black beard stood an inch off his face. The younger Thompson's pointed nose was now bent, as if folding into his right cheek. His once youthful eyes were redder than his sunburned neck. The hair on his head, or the few he had left, lied lazily across a patch of pink skin.

Is that really me? He said to himself. Thompson moved his right hand slowly up and down, following the image in the mirror.

"Oh Christ, it is me..." he muttered.

A stranger's hand touched his right shoulder.

"Alright buddy, you've had enough. It's time to go."

"Who the fuck are you?" Thompson did not mean to let the words escape, but there they were plain and bold for all to interpret.

"Who the fuck am I?" Thompson's body whirled with the stool, catching a kaleidoscope view of the bar. Bright neon lights. One floor. Several blurry bodies. A few tables. Some stools. A face. The stranger had: spiked black hair, a cut the "kids" called a blowout; teased eyebrows, a small collection of facial hair under his lower lip; an earring in both ears; and a black t-shirt highlighted by the word SECURITY in white.

Thompson went to explain himself, but only released a guttural exhale.

“Let’s go, ya’ fucking bum!”

The stranger grabbed Thompson by the back of his hair-covered neck and pulled him from the chair. His legs buckled. He couldn’t figure out when it was that he walked last. Laughter erupted. Thompson felt the skin under his frayed facial hair pulsate. They were men and women—from his perspective boys and girls—standing around him. The females were not without a male hovering over them. And the men were not without a button-down plaid shirt and ripped jeans. On the other hand, Thompson wore: a red and gray flannel, buttoned to the top; beige construction pants sporadically stained with different color paint; and off-white Converse sneakers, which he presented as a gift from a girlfriend, but were in fact a discovery from under a bridge in Jersey City. Thompson was no bridge dweller, but a nice pair of shoes is a nice pair of shoes.

“Ew! Like, look at his hair!” A blonde girl with a dress cut mid-vagina shouted to three men, whose heads rested on her shoulder as they feverishly stared at her canyon of cleavage. Thompson ran his nails, all chewed and caked with dirt, through black strands of hair covering a pink bald spot. He stopped before reaching the back of his head, a knotted mess of grease and dirt.

“Hey buddy, you so nasty, you...you...you...” A pale ginger, covered in hundreds of freckles, stuttered for a punch line. “You is grosser than garbage!” A smile slithered from ear to ear. His head turned from side to side, pretending to bob with the music’s unrelenting beat, when in fact he was really searching for a laugh.

Thompson opened his mouth and uncorked his tongue in the man’s direction. “Yo he got AIDS! He got AIDS!” The ginger was pointing, continuing his search for someone who cared. Thompson laughed.

Thompson’s mad cackling lasted until the front door, at which point he was thrown into the street’s frigid wind, like a crooked dive

into a pool of winter. The cold air sucked air from his lungs. His was face buried up to his ear in snow. A mixture of snow and dirt quickly seeped through his clothing, sending a ripple of bumps down his arms and legs. His fingers found the concrete below him. He thought about pushing up, leaving, and running, but he felt comfortable. Sure, he was a bit cold, but he could not remember the last time he just laid somewhere without worry of police, without concern of food.

A chorus of laughter erupted above him. He could only see the purest white of snow speckled with black dirt particles. But he knew; he knew why they were laughing. And if it wasn't about him, it would be any minute now. *Embarrassment only breeds in those who care*, he thought. And Thompson had not cared in years. In fact, he could not remember the last time he felt a spark of emotion, whether positive or negative. It had been so long, Thompson was not sure if he had ever cared about anything.

THIS WAS NOT TRUE OF COURSE. Thompson loved cars. Any kind with engine and wheels—hot rods, American classics, and European sportsters; if it has wheels and a motor, he'd heard of it and knew how to fix it. But when the auto industry crisis occurred in 2008, Thompson was released from Next Generation Car Manufacturer in Jersey City, New Jersey. Sure he was one of the original employees, but “age does not guarantee wisdom in the ever-evolving world of the auto industry,” or so his boss, Tad Franklin, had said. So, after almost 25 years of working early mornings and late nights, Thompson was replaced by a machine.

A fucking machine! The mere thought of a machine's cold, lifeless, passionless robotic fingers rubbing against the car metal, his metal, made him nauseous. And after several months of living ten blocks east of Journal Square in a Bobby O'Sheay's basement, Thompson was short on temper and money.

He wanted to seek revenge. Someone had to pay. If not in money, then in pain.

So instead of applying to other companies, he spent hours transfixed on fantasies about exposing Next Generation in a tax fraud or safety violation or some other heinous crime, such as the discovery of slave children locked under the floor boards. No matter the crime, he would always inject himself in the scene, watching from a block away as employees, and especially his boss, were ripped out of the building and thrown into cop cars. Their faces would be stricken with fear. And as the cars drove away from the red brick building, their faces would press against the back window, only to see through their tear-filled eyes Thompson standing on the corner with the haunting glow of the grim reaper.

For Thompson, this fantasy was euphoric, a hit of hallucinogens. And unfortunately, like most things he had done in his life, totally useless.

IT HAD BEEN LESS THAN THIRTY MINUTES when Thompson lifted himself off of the sidewalk, awkwardly bowed to stranger's laughter, and stumbled down Washington Avenue through snow and comments—

“Hey, Vicki, look! It's a homeless Jesus!”

“Holy shit, the zombie apocalypse!”

“No, don't give him money. He'll just use it on drugs and alcohol.”

So what? What if he did? All these other recently-showered, perfectly-groomed, finely-dressed young men and women were off to do the same! What made them any different? A tie! Khakis! Hair-dos!

These thoughts rolled through his mind like the lazy lapping Hudson River against the wooden pier. Luckily the uppity crowd, he thought, was too scared to go to this park in Jersey City. In fact, most area residents were. It may have something to do with the two dead bodies found in 2007 or the rumors of rampant drug deals; more than likely, it was because after the sun escaped, everyone in the park looked like him.

A recently built park bench sat under the bare limbs of an overhanging maple tree. It was there that Thompson sat. His feet were firmly planted into once green grass, which was now stained beige from dog urine. He felt the urge to bite his knuckles, but fingerless gloves blocked his entry and so he settled for his cuticles. They were tastier and more satisfying anyway.

The hum of a nearby streetlight was drowned out by laughter. Female cackling. *Goddamn broads can't shut their mouths*, he thought. A younger Thompson would have yelled across the park, maybe a "shut the fuck up" or "go home dirty whores," but this Thompson barely moved his bottom lip before asking himself what the point was.

There beyond the green grass and park cliff laid the Hudson River, a granite glass surface that seemed to bob in a hypnotizing dance under the lights of New York City. Thompson had never used the word tranquil, but in that moment, those eight letters swam through his mind. *It is in that word I must live*, he thought. In the underwater silence, there is no judgment, no uppity kids and no Next Generation.

The cackles erupted again. They were louder this time. Three people, no further than ten feet away. Turning from the skyline, he was greeted by three extremely pale, too-skinny girls in clothes with only enough material to cover their nipples and vagina. Two of the girls were pointing in his direction. The one in the middle, the ringleader of ridicule, hung onto a lit cigarette between two snaggleteeth. Their perfume couldn't mask the aroma of halitosis and heroin addict sweat. *It was like sticking your nose in a dead skunk's asshole*, he thought.

It was one thing to hear it from those uppity bastards, but these bitches, he thought, *are you kidding me?* For a very brief moment he played with the fantasy of punching each in their sunken eyes. Instead, he walked out of the park.

IT WAS DECEMBER OF 2009. Chevrolet officially unveiled the highly anticipated ZR1. Car enthusiasts around the world gazed at the initial photos like pornography, almost hearing the purr of its 6.2L V8 engine

and feeling its vibrations through their bodies—all car enthusiasts, but one.

Three months of no rent money and zero work prospects, O'Sheay's wife Lucille asked Bobby to tell Thompson to leave. The conversation was awkward. They had been friends since sixth grade, called each other's mothers "mom," and worked at Next Generation together for 20 years. But the truth was that even Bobby had had enough. He would never tell Thompson such a thing though. Instead, he gave him \$500 and three jackets. Thompson took them, but not without rambling thorough a veritable grocery list of nasty names for Lucille and Bobby.

After all, Bobby had kept his job. *And why*, Thompson thought, *because he had up-to-date certifications?* Bobby, or as Next Gen employees called him "Bobo," couldn't even tell the difference between a hearse and a horse (a line Thompson served up walking down O'Sheay's porch). "Fuck you", he had shouted as he walked down the street. "I never cared for you anyway!" They both knew the line was a lie, but Thompson figured he had to win this battle before he lost the war to winter on the streets.

Life on the streets wasn't easy. They never are during the winter months in Jersey City. The temperature average is 33 degrees. Wind violently skates off the Hudson River. Snow and rain leave thick puddles of slush. Dumpster clothes are fished out months before in preparation, and all of the seemingly prime tunnel and bridge real estate has been claimed by veterans of urban camping.

Too ashamed to go to the local homeless shelter or YMCA, Thompson walked nine miles to Fort Lee and took baths in the Hudson River under the George Washington Bridge. He looked down on dumpster food, choosing only to eat the animals and plants he could find. Peddling was never an option. The mere act appeared pathetic. And fishing coins out a fountain? Well, Thompson nearly went to blows with another homeless man who tried such an act. What right you have, Thompson had screamed, to rob other people's dreams? No, he didn't believe in magic coins, fate or serendipity but if he was

wrong, and they did exist, at least someone would be able to obtain their wishes.

Thompson decided to become a Jersey City vagabond, traveling to a different avenue each night until every cent was squeezed from his Bank of America debit card. All of these actions prompted others in the street to dub him the “Picky Picker.” He didn’t care for the nickname, but he didn’t really care for any of them to begin with either. It didn’t matter.

On the morning of President’s Day in 2009, nothing seemed to matter to Thompson. Not his chigger bites, his damp jacket, or stained and torn white Converse Chuck Taylors. No, not even the biting 18 degrees affected him. That morning, Thompson was a man holding his last 20 dollars. *There is a certain liberation that came with holding every last cent*, Thompson had thought. A liberation that called for a libation.

“WHERE HAD THE DAY GONE WRONG?” Thompson muttered to himself. Today was supposed to be a celebration of liberation. No more money and no more living. A drink in a bar and a quick jump into a river.

It was on the corner of Boyd and Bergen Avenue—blocks away from the skyline park and several miles from the Hoboken bar—that he stood. His body was a statue of wrinkled skin and withered bones. Now void of emotion, he had adopted a catatonic stare that he directed towards the fogbank. His left hand dangled limp by his side, acting as a counterbalance for the right, in which was clenched two quarters and a nickel. This was his only remaining money.

“What am I supposed to do now?!?” Thompson’s scream ricocheted off of the surrounding brick buildings like a bullet. His two quarters and nickel soared through the fog, colliding with a metallic ping on the building across the street.

The damp yellow headlights of a passing car severed the fog, illuminating the other side of the street scattered with concrete divots, food wrappers, broken bottles, raised sidewalk panels, three unlit

streetlights, two wooden telephone poles, cable wires, graffiti and one enlarged sign.

The sign read Next Generation.

Thompson put both hands in his pockets, half-smiled and stepped off the curb.

Adrift

Amethyst Collins

Floating.
You are floating.
And you would be scared, except –
Look.
Look how beautiful it is.
Miles below you, people are waking up for their normal days.
Getting coffee.
Sending the kids to school.
The sunrise, for them, is commonplace.
For you...
It is breathtaking.
Though, technically, sunrise isn't correct.
For it's the Earth that is moving, is it not?
The Earth, following its predetermined path.
As you float, the light breaks over the edge
Painting your vision with colors so vibrant and distinct
You can taste them.
Funny, how you would be dead now.
If it weren't for this silly-looking suit.
But you don't think of that.
You're too entranced by the splendor.
I wish I had my camera, you think.
Though, how would you share it?
No help is coming.
You are alone.
Glance.
Glance.
To the left, there are stars.
The right, more stars.

How does the saying go?
“Reach for the stars.”
You stretch out your hand.
Stark against the black.
Untouchable.
That’s what you’ve done.
You reached for the stars.
And, yes, someday...
You’ll join them.

Untitled

David Krause

OCTOBER 26TH, 1962. Just got through Yucca valley on the 62 when the radio went dead and the engine cut out. Would've chalked it up to car trouble but the Chrysler in the opposite lane stopped too. An elderly couple in the seats. Typical Mojave residents. I gazed towards their car and they towards mine. A brief exchange of raised eyebrows. Heard passenger-side window shatter behind me. Ducked below the wheel and plugged my ears like those prospectors in the movies. Dust rolled through the opening of the car. Through my coughs still heard one blast, two blasts, three blasts. Sat there for 10 minutes or so of silence before getting out. Had been facing north, the couple across the road was not so lucky. Crying through veiny, crimson eyes. They flailed their arms in the space in front of their heads hoping to clear out some phantom particle obscuring their vision. Pulled them out one after the other and leaned them up against the car. Put her hand in his. Told them I would get help. Grabbed my rifle. Debated it for a moment before shutting the trunk. One shot through both heads. Clean. No one was coming or ever would be. Was the humane thing to do. Tell myself it was quick, that the explosion vaporized you both instantly. Image of you and the baby gasping for air under rubble and hospital equipment. Traced the edge of the rifle barrel with my finger. Still hot. Not what you would want.

Overtaken Hormel truck 1 ½ miles down the road. Driver took a shard of windshield to the throat. Enough spam to last a long time. Took what I could carry, buried the rest. Made sure enough dirt covered the tins to absorb the brunt of the radiation. Would come back for it when it was safe. Found the turnoff and followed it to where I normally park. Hike from here. Out here it's like nothing happened. Sky's the only thing wonky at all. Sickly orange hue to the sky.

NOVEMBER 1ST 1962. Managed to set up camp in the deepest cave I knew. Geiger goes lethal within 15 feet of the mouth, but should be fine deep enough in. My lucky day. Puddle at the back should fill a couple bottles. Spam should last until its safe to make quick supply runs.

I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up. Should be under St. Vincent with you and her. At least we would've been together when the world got blown to kingdom come. "Drop the wild man thing, you're not Thoreau. You belong with me, with us." No tears this time. You were used to it. Don't know if you were happy or sad I wasn't there. Don't know which would hurt worse.

JANUARY 1ST 1963. Happy New Years! 2 months since I've felt sunlight. Geiger squeals as if it happened yesterday. Army told us 4 week window for radioactive isotope decay to make rads negligible. Water is running low. Mopping condensation off the walls at night with my shirt. Trading energy for hydration. Spam won't last much longer.

JAN 8TH, 1963. Hear patter of rain against the stone above me (In a dry desert?) Bombs must've vaporized enough water to form clouds. Checked the rainwater, smelled funny, like medicine. Hydrogen peroxide. Radiation down enough to make short trips out though.

MAY 1ST, 1969. Still here.

The search for life goes on. Found some fruit-bearing cacti. These seem relatively unchanged by the irradiated soil. Another survivor along with the mesquite and the namesake tree in this park. Tasting anything not bathed in salt still makes me salivate. Found a family of Javelinas. Must've gotten separated from the rest. A male and two females. Eventually I'll have meat, hides. The rags on my back are imbued with the stench of sweat, and fraying at every end. I'm gonna go and see if I can find you this summer. Maybe they moved you to

the basement when the bombs started to fall. Maybe you and the little one somehow survived. Almost laughed the words sounded so ridiculous in my head. Too hot out here anyways. Stock up on medical supplies whether or not I can find you. Go find our old house. If it didn't burn up might still be that photo we took at the drive-in. Lawrence of Arabia. We got kicked out before the opening scrawl of credits had even ended. You were so excited to have me back. Had to marry you when I found out. Not that I regret it. Best year I ever lived and ever will live. Not that I call this living. Surviving is hardwired into us. Living takes effort. The body survives. The spirit lives.

JUNE 14TH 1970. Just got back from Los Angeles. Met some survivors living in the craters of downtown. Traded goods. Bullets worth more to them than food. City's nothing but mangled girders and cracked asphalt. Couldn't find the house, even the street. It's all one mound of rubble and dirt. Thought about ending it the whole way. Drank a whole fifth of tequila to build up the courage. Couldn't. Instead turned it into a shopping trip. Scrounged enough to fill a grocery cart. Made a door for the cave out of 2x4s and the shopping cart. Hooked it up to a car battery. Won't kill em but screams no soliciting pretty fucking loud.

SEPTEMBER 12TH, 1981. 25. 13 men, 7 women, 5 children. Got close enough to hear them talking. Overheard the word Paradeeso. Permanent residents to my lovely community? Seem pretty harmless. Not taking chances though.

SEPTEMBER 15TH 1981. Baby on the way. Jaime said she was "embarazada" about something then Miguel put his hand on her stomach. See her with Juan quite a bit as well though.

SEPTEMBER 18TH 1981. Juan went out to pee in the brush and would've seen me if he had just turned to his left. Need to back off for now. Getting too involved.

OCTOBER 7TH 1981. One of the little piggies got loose. Was going after it when I heard screaming. Miguel lost his footing chasing it. Broken leg. Almost went to help him. Thought better of it. Put on my best Miguel voice and screamed in earshot of their camp. Chased my voice till they could hear the real him.

OCTOBER 8TH 1981. Bone protruding from the skin. Marrow exposed. It'll get infected if I don't do something. Have plenty of hydrogen peroxide from that crazy rain. Might get radiation sickness, but some chance is better than none. Left the bottle on a rock with some bandages and a spare 2x4. Hopefully they'll be smart enough to know what to do, and ignorant enough not to care where the supplies came from.

NOVEMBER 1, 1981. Padre Dios! Miguel'll have a gnarly limp and a scar, but he'll walk again. Winter's coming. Not worried about the cold out here causing hypothermia, but a flame means smoke. Do I tell them not to? How would I?

FEBRUARY 3RD, 1982. They're gone. Fuckers came in the night. Killed the men. Were gonna take the women till they opened fire. Still managed to get Lourdes and Jimena alive. Also took all the children, except Jaime's still in her stomach. Wondered if it was still alive.

FEBRUARY 10TH, 1982. Followed their tracks. Dozens of them. Have two carriages and four horses. Have patrols monitoring the nearby area. Mostly men. Well-armed. Organized. All of them seem to have caked bogeys around their nose and scratch marks down their arms and legs. Keeping the kids in a pen for now. Where are the

women? Sneak in by cover of night, take the captives, but how to sneak them out?

FEBRUARY 11TH, 1982 . Watched Jimena and Lourdes flop back into the cage, sobbing. Took the man nearly a full minute to get the lock back on the cage his hands were shaking so much. Now that I know when they're all together, I can get them. I'll be dead or they'll be free by tomorrow.

FEBRUARY 14TH, 1982. They ate them.

FEBRUARY 20TH 1982. They deserve to die. Need to die. Gonna put em down like rabid dogs. Cleaned the rifle. Jam means death. First gonna ambush the patrols, then booby trap the corpses and repeat. Once they learn it's a bad idea to come looking for me I'll re-evaluate my strategy. Not one of these fuckers will be left.

MARCH 1ST, 1982. Trapped 4 of them in a hole. Let them starve. Karma.

MARCH 28TH,1982. Must've killed a dozen or so at this point. Something wrong with them though. They seem sick. I can hear their patrols wheezing from a 1/2 a mile away. Makes my job easier. Feels good to have a purpose again. You were the last thing that gave my life meaning.

SEPTEMBER 24TH , 1982. Heard yelling from nearby. Went to go find the source. Hoping to find more in my trap. A woman. When she saw me she started to plead for her life. Guess I've become their boogeyman. She wasn't sick (yet?) so I pulled her up, and talked to her at gunpoint. Said her name was Sophie. Said she'd run. Said they didn't treat their women right. Not surprised. Lowered the gun. We kept talking. Once upon a time, they didn't eat other people. Claimed

she never had either. Rib cage protruding through her shirt made me inclined to believe her. Told me that's what made them sick. Watched her eat. Smiled at me over her food. Grin just like yours. You would've liked her.

DECEMBER 25TH 1983. I'm so sorry. I'm a desperate old man and we were drunk. Not an excuse. It happened so fast. Once we started, I couldn't stop. So much steam pent up, brain just shut down. Woke up next to her. Crept out and sobbed. Feel guiltier than when I shot that couple on the highway.

JUNE 27TH , 1985. For the first time since the blast, I'm afraid. When you and the little one died, had nothing left to fear. Just kept going. Fighting those fuckers some part of me hoped to lose. When they packed up, I came as close to happy as I've been since that day at the drive-in. Sophie is pregnant. I'm so sorry. Somehow the universe saw fit to give me another chance. At 49 going on 50 I think I'm finally ready. Still terrified beyond my wits though.

She doesn't know about us. What we had together. Almost told her, just didn't seem right to share it. That or I didn't want her to know how I'd been here once before. And failed miserably. Hiking back to Palm Springs to see if I can't find some medical supplies. Don't want to do this wrong again.

Please forgive me?

FEBRUARY 1ST, 1986. Baby suffocated. Would've been a little girl. Like ours. Was going to name it Sarah after you. Couldn't find the knife. Time I had it in my hand, little Sarah wasn't heaving anymore. Still as a stone. Sophie cried and cried until she passed out. She never woke.

Buried them out under a Joshua tree. I'd always know where to find them.

I was there this time. To watch them die. So much better.

I think I'm finally ready to spray my brain matter across the cave wall. I'm sorry Sarah.

OCTOBER 25TH, 1999. Happy birthday to me, Happy birthday to me, Happy birthday you fucking failure, happy birthday to me.

Turned 60 today. Celebrating with two fifths of tequila and a 5.56 mm round. Today's the day.

Lord knows (Ha!) I've been around long enough. Beard's all grey. I now fit the part of cranky-old-hermit-who-lives-in-a-cave. I watched the world grow. Then I watched it burn. Atop the pyre and yet I'm still here.

Convince myself the world was fine before I got here, who's to say it won't be just dandy after? Goodbye. If I'm dead wrong and there is a God, maybe I'll even see you and Sophie and my two little unborn angels.

Goodbye.

OCTOBER 26TH 1999. Maybe just drink my self to death next time.

AUGUST 9TH, 2009. Pied piper must be in town because his merry band of children just arrived! 10 boys 10 girls. Speak English. One reads stories while the others fall asleep.

MAY 17, 2010. Been leaving them food and what not. Notes too. Tell them to be kind and to share, but to defend themselves against anyone who tries to hurt them. Sign every one with "your Father," because, well, just because.

MAY 23RD, 2010. Have I mentioned that I'm sick? Mind still in working order, lungs are the problem. Getting harder to visit the little ones every day. Breath is so short. Passed out on the last trip. Miracle none of them saw me. Father is a decrepit old man? No, better that they never know. It's time anyways. No more birthdays.

JUNE 1ST, 2010. Hot enough today I could hike up the rock about a mile east, fall asleep, and never wake up. Trouble would be in getting there. Told the little ones that daddy was proud, that they were getting old enough to become responsible for themselves. Told them to look out for one another and to be careful. Said that I'd still be watching, caring for them.

White lies I suppose have their purpose. Told You and Sophie I'd be with you forever. Don't regret saying it one bit. I'd like to say I learned something from it all, but that'd be a lie too.

It's funny though, they say eventually you forget the faces of the people you once loved. Time erodes all etc. Never did for me though. I can still see you and (sorry) Sophie so clearly.

Maybe my life never lost purpose. Maybe each day was another day where that image of you was still alive. The only proof you ever existed. At least that's what it was at first. People needed me like you needed me. Tried to be there for them like I wasn't for you. Failed twice. Not this time.

It'd be a lie if I said I chose to keep going though. Chose to die over and over. Body didn't care. Has it's own will to survive.

The parentless little ones were just what an almost-father needed to lie down on his deathbed. Proof. Surviving is hardwired into us. But for the first time since the world died, I got to see people live.

Lost Thoughts

Christopher Brunsen

where do thoughts go when they're lost?
whether forgotten,
slipped out of your fingers or tossed?
is there a place to resurrect your verses?
id love to have a couple lines back,
defy time and space in fact
they tumble and spin around in my head
clenching my teeth to remember what i said
i stutter and mutter curses
thinking of the ones i lost but i probably deserve this,
in fact losing them makes me feel worthless..
because only the ones that apply to you matter
the echoes of my memories are enough to make this silence shatter
trying harder and harder it only makes me madder...

and where did love really go when it left the me and you?
despite what we felt
it couldn't really be true
right? cuz true love would've made it through
we coulda lasted,
moved past this,
held on to something deeper
i talk like she's really there,
but she's not
i miss the color of her eyes
the smell of her hair,
talking third person like a creeper,
god damn i wish i could just see her..
and where does pain hide when we swear its ok?

the pain that lingers
but somehow leaves our eyes
so we can lie away?
because you know this pain shows through to the surface

no matter how much you try to hide it,
no matter how much you try to fight it,
no matter how much you try to drown it,
say fuck it tip back and down it,
its still gonna be there,

so i guess what i wanna really say,
is i don't know the answer
fuck it
the fact that the question exists,
means i really did know the dancer
that blonde one,
with the amazing kiss,

the blonde hair green eyes
and amazing lips,

and if nothing else i suppose that's okay,
i suppose i can try and try
and eventually ill probably find a way

because tomorrow has yet to come
and the only easy day was yesterday

Unsaid

Myles Johnson

Never been the type to bite my tongue, not say what's on my mind.
But we crossed that line before, my foot on the point of no
returning.

But I'm about your happiness, and what's good for your benefit.

So I'ma do what's best, and take on your stress.

But with all my straining, I keep this to myself because it's my ache.

Where's my crane? Where's my walker?

All this weight on my chest, this is just better off unsaid.

It's not going to be hard, but it's not going to be easy.

I'ma slave trying to dig up my own grave.

Born with the gift, unique in my own way, you're the bird that flies
away from its nest at the end of the day. I asked him, "why me?" His
response was as silent as a television when you press mute. "Did you
bring me this far to leave me?" Once again his silence was my answer.

Please don't judge me off my actions off my words. Only God can
judge because he is in me too. And I try my best to do my best, and
do my best I do. Through the example of my father so I know what
I have to do.

All these trials I meet all the excuses I see, and the only game I know
is with that football in my hands. In a phone booth with the quarter
in my hand, and I just have to make that call. The opportunity
knocking at the door I don't have the key to.

There he goes again opening a window like a thief in the night. With
one foot in and the other one stuck on the other side. Doubt in my

mind, and I don't think I'm ready. With things on my mind, and I make another mistake. Forgive me please; all I need is one more chance.

But then he says to me, "No weapon formed against you shall prosper." All I have to do is take that leap of faith, and throw all my chips in. From birth until now the reality of your dream isn't too far to reach. Move in the water while you surf over my wave. Then he says to me, "You think you got it bad?"

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Climbing my mountain no matter what glacier is in my way. Not even a hurricane in a perfect storm. My top is just a few clouds away, and I'm just rising what can I say. Early in the morning or late at night when no one is awake. The sun that covers the moon when it's supposed to be dark at night.

You can't have a testimony without a test.

He sees the best in me no matter what you say or they say. Prove, the dog that wants to prove its master that he can. I can almost see the light at the end of the tunnel; I can feel it. Through trials and tribulations I made it, I made it through another day another night.

Challenges I breed for, competition I die for, dreams I live for, God I am for. What are you for?

A work in progress; let's leave it unsaid.

Eternally Yours

W. Tyler Paterson

ON THE PLANET OF AETERNA there lived a race of immortals. Life there was much different than on Earth, much slower. There was no need to rush or accomplish great things quickly, because time was never an issue. There was no such thing as death. There were one thousand and twenty one inhabitants on Aeterna. They never aged or grew or reproduced; they had been there always.

Aeterians were of two genders. One had eyes like the blue skies of Mt. Folia, the other's green like the woods of Pio Gainse. All had noses and mouths and arms and legs. They were not unlike humans, but each stood seven feet tall and was devoid of hair. Their skin was a flawless gray.

Historians called their planet the *Fate of the Cosmos* because all Aeterians had lived to see the beginning of creation and would live to see the end in destruction. Afterwards, they would experience it all again. None could remember how the Aeterians came into existence, though some did speculate that they were of the same species as God.

MT. FOLIA IS THE TALLEST PEAK ON AETERNA, overlooking the clusters of habitats and cool rivers that cut through the green and yellow grass valleys of Kindei. Standing at the top of this mountain, it is often said that on a clear day you could gaze across the entire planet only to suddenly find yourself staring at your own back.

The temperature never drops below 65 degrees and never rises above 82. On the top of the mountain is a lush plain of grass.

THE HUMAN SHUTTLE CRASHED ON THE SECOND DAY of the second moon's cycle. It was the day the rivers flowed in the opposite direction. This marked the Aeternian's first contact with humanity. On board were three grown men, two grown women, as well as three

male and three female children—all survived the initial impact.

PIO GAINSE IS A DENSE FOREST of greens and browns. The trees grow upwards toward the sky with branches that offer shade and sweet berries. In Pio Gainse, the woods sing soft melodies into the wind.

LIOS WAS THE FIRST to see the smoke and wreckage. This curious phenomenon drew him to the scene where he saw the bigger, heavier humans circle around the smaller, lighter ones. Their eyes were fearful, expressions which soon faded when Lios offered them a greeting of peace. With his arm outstretched and lips pulled into an upward ark like the falling of Grayel's star, the humans accepted Lios' offering. The survivors spoke English, which the Aeternian's did not understand at first. They learned quickly, however, as their brains understood language in ways most others could not.

AN EARTH YEAR ON AETERNA consists of three months, each separated and marked by patterns of the moons. It was during the second month when the human's ship was rendered "unsalvageable" and all radio communication was lost. The survivors were deemed "stranded." Two shelters were built, effectively splitting the group up. Even with the help of the Aeternians, the process still took ten years because on Aeterna time had never posed a problem before. Over these ten years, the smaller humans had drastically changed, growing upwards like the trees of Pio Gaines and strong like the rocks of Mt. Folia. It was assumed that such a change had happened quickly because the humans were a species constrained by time.

THE AETERNIAN'S HAVE A CUSTOM they call "pairing". For fifty years at a time, one would live solely in the company of only one other. The community functions well, as this practice combats the loneliness of life. There is no such thing as jealousy because all things eventually comes full circle. After nightfall, the Aeternians tell stories and legends

of the days before time. Sometimes they swim in the lakes of Tempra Shau, near Kindei. It is here that glowing fish called Posiphish recreate the constellations, though some say the constellations are always trying to recreate the glowing Posiphish. On the third cycle of the moon, the fish change color until the next third cycle. Some are blue, or orange, or red, or green, or pink.

THE DAY THE HABITATS FOR THE HUMANS WERE COMPLETE, something very peculiar happened. One of the elders died. The children (who were no longer children) wept, for it was a father to one and husband to another. Lios spoke:

“What has become of him?”

“He has died,” said Faun, the son of Hector, the recently deceased.

“I have seen death, but I do not understand it,” Lios said.

“It is what becomes of our race, when our bodies can take no more. There are only so many sweet berries from the Lapas trees, or sour roots from the Gu-ruan plants, that one may eat.”

“His journey ends, and he will walk with you no more. I understand your sadness,” Lios said.

Jasslia went to Faun’s side to provide comfort, to kiss him gently on the head. She was the same age as he, and had grown accustomed to taking walks with Faun through the tall grass fields of Kindei. They spent many nights together keeping warm in makeshift beds and many hours becoming accustomed to their bodies. Sometimes in the fields, there would be areas of flattened grass in the shape of angels or hearts still warm from bodies, still smelling of youthful lust. Faun and Jasslia had become inseparable and were not shy in their ways of affection even though the others were still learning, still coming into their own.

THERE IS NO REAL DARKNESS ON AETERNA. The only difference between the night and day is the deep blue sky and the diamond dusted star-scape. The cycles of the moon all provide light enough for a peaceful sleeping atmosphere, but the trees and rivers can be seen without problem.

FAUN GREW HAIR ON HIS FACE and under his arms. He took care of the elders during their last days and led the burial ceremonies near the original crash site. His body had grown strong and the other humans looked to him for guidance and wisdom. His pairing with Jasslia had only grown stronger and he encouraged the others to pair as well, so that they could experience pleasure and good company just as he had. All had changed so fast that they were unsure of themselves, of their bodies, and often asked questions about the nature of human sexuality.

“Our bodies know what to do,” Faun told them all. “It is how we stay alive.”

“And if our bodies do not?”

“They will in time.”

LIOS WALKED IN LONG, GRACEFUL STRIDES. He had become great friends with Faun and they often walked through the woods of Pio Gainse, for company and the gathering of food from various plants and bushes. They would sit and talk, listening to the soft melodies in the wind. Lios loved to ask questions about the customs and habits of humans, because when Jasslia’s stomach filled and rounded Lios could not fully comprehend why.

“She is with child, Lios,” Faun tried to explain.

“Creating life?” Lios mused. “Perhaps humans are really the keepers of the universe.”

“In my species, we start as little humans and then grow until we die. We are the bringers of life and the holders of death.”

“Your child, Faun. What will it be?”

“Well, it shall be half of me and half of Jasslia, but neither of us combined. It will be a new person with new thoughts and dreams.”

“And this is common?”

“Very much so,” Faun nodded. “I expect the rest will follow our footsteps in due time.”

Lios wanted to understand this dance of life and death, but he

could not. During the next moon's cycle, Aeterna witnessed its first birth. That was when things began to change.

AETERNIANS DRESS IN LONG FLOWING ROBES. Their walk is calculated and carefree, for there are no predators on the planet. They also have a curious habit of singing single notes into the air which are thought to be taken by the winds and put to harmony in the woods of Pio Gainse. At any time, if one is to stop and listen, they will hear distant echoes of music in the air.

There is a strong sense of community, which is why story plays such an important role in gatherings. Aeternians reminisce and prophesize about time and space, wondering when their predictions will come true.

THE OTHERS DID FOLLOW in their leader's footsteps. Faun and Jasslia had a male the first time, then had a female during the second moon's cycle the following season. One couple had three children. The other, only one. More shelters were needed, so the work began. They used bark from the Lapas trees and made beds from the tall grassy stalks of Kindei.

Ten more years passed and the children were changing with each blink of the human eye. They made loud noises, smelled good on some days and terrible on others.

ON AETERNA, THERE IS ALWAYS A BALANCE between the natural world and the living creatures that inhabit it. Never has the balance been disrupted before, even when a meteor broke the planetary atmosphere and set fire to the side of Mt. Folia. Smoke scorched the sky, but the winds made rain and washed away any threat of harm or dismay; but now, things were different.

The children took to bigger forms while their parents grew tired with the passing days. Like the change from day to night, the bodies of the adults slowed and cooled, moving like the gentle winds across

the lakes of Temptra Shau. In these same lakes the young would swim amongst the Posiphish and watch in delight as their skin reflected the blues and greens and pinks of the passing inhabitants. Already, the children were getting curious about their bodies. On rare occasions a pair of Aeternians would come to swim, only to find a couple of male and female humans tangled up and giggling.

WALDEN WAS THE FIRST SON of Faun and took after his father. Together they would climb Mt. Folia and count meteors, or journey through the woods and listen to the harmonies in the wind while they sat upon their favorite stone, the one shaped like a lion. A lion was a creature from the old world who ruled the jungle. A jungle was a place not unlike Pio Gainse, one with many animals who would come to live and die there. Walden grinned when hearing of the old world. It made him wonder at the size of the universe. Faun was a good father to Walden and shared the comfort of wisdom at every opportunity.

“Think not of our lives as a straight and irreversible march forward. Although we begin with an explosion and lose momentum with age, time has a counterpart that keeps us together always.”

“What is it, Father?”

“History. If we are together now, then history keeps us together at this moment forever, for if time rewinds then eventually it will pass by us as we are right now. When it unwinds forward again, we are here.”

Walden, although he could not fully understand his father’s explanation, began to imagine the universe as a beating heart.

THE AETERNIAN’S HAVE A CUSTOM CALLED REMSHU. Every now and then, a pair will leave their habitats and journey to the far points of their planet to sleep undisturbed for anywhere between two earth years and five earth years. Since the dawn of time, one pair would leave when another returned. For immortals, such actions hardly affected their style of living. When Lios left for his Remshu, Faun needed to walk with a stick to steady himself. Walden would have been thirteen

earth years.

Five years passed before Lios returned. There were new children in the habitats, and new habitats for the children. The children he knew were now the elders and the elders had gone to be buried or could not rise from their beds.

“Lios!” a familiar voice exclaimed, “Welcome back!”

“Thank you, Faun. It is truly a welcome sight to see you once again.”

“Faun? Lios, I am Walden. My father died the night all of the posiphish turned to white. I am sorry to tell you this.”

“My apologies, but you look so much like him. You have his eyes and his chin. You walk with his legs and move with his body.”

“I hear this often and it fills me with joy. It is in this way that we never truly die, old friend.”

Thus, Lios understood a new meaning of immortality.

THE NIGHT THE POSIPHISH TURNED WHITE, Faun and Jasslia died. They began to cough and scratch at their throats. Their faces turned red and they screamed of unbearable heat. No one had ever seen this before; neither the Aeternians nor the generation of Humans knew what was happening. The first deaths occurred one month before Lios’ reemergence, and only four days after his return, three children fell to the same actions. They cried and screamed and began to sweat as if they were being taken into the grip of an unseen monster. Their hands held their bellies and they rocked on their sides. They would not make it through the night.

“Why is this happening?!” Walden demanded.

“I have never seen this,” Lios replied, “nor have I seen the Posiphish white. The universe finds ways to renew itself, even to a race that has seen it all.”

“I fear this might be all that we are left to see...”

Most of the human population died shortly thereafter.

WALDEN AND HIS PARTNER KISHA WERE THE LAST TO DIE. Their bodies were not weak or fragile until the night it happened. Lios watched as they screamed in pain and bled from their mouths, clenching their fists into the dirt. He was unsure of how their race would continue if the last two were to die.

“Walden, if you die, what happens?”

“Then we are gone and everything we have ever come to know is nothing more than the wind running through the fields of Kindei. Our bodies will return to Aeterna and our souls will be sent into the darkness of the universe.”

“Will there be more children?”

“No, for to stay alive there must be two. It is why there is love. It was a trait that humans possessed to help our race survive.”

“And you have no more love?”

“In the end, we need more than love to keep us alive.”

And Walden closed his eyes and his body became still. There was no more sound, not even the thump of his heart. Lios reached out and touched the boy’s face. Already it was getting cold.

He buried them near the woods of Pio Gainse so their souls could forever hear the harmonies of the gentle wind.

Soon after, the moon completed a cycle and the Posiphish regained their vibrant, phosphorescent colors. There was peace and stillness on Aeterna. Forever would the one thousand and twenty one inhabitants recount the tales of their brief encounter with humanity.

Years and years later, time stopped expanding and began to retreat inward as if the universe was elastic. The dead were brought back to life and they lived from old age to conception. The Posiphish turned white and blood leaked from the ground into the mouths of the Humans. Walden sat with his father Faun on a rock shaped like a lion and then disappeared into Jasslia’s womb. The habitats were deconstructed and Lapas trees regained their lumber. Faun grew smaller and the hair on his face dug back into his skin. The elders emerged from the ground and radio communication was restored. The humans walked backward

into their ship as it rose into trails of smoke and disappeared into the star-crushed sky.

The Aeternian's swam in Temptra Shau as water jumped off of their bodies and flew back into the lake. The notes sung into the air found their way back into the mouths of those who sang them, and shadows that blocked the moon moved in from opposite directions.

Then, when the universe was small and time was new, like a beating heart, it began to expand and move outward once again.

Undisturbed (Another One Bites the Dust)

Blake Moon

“I WANT TO TRY YOURS,” SHE INFORMED ME.

“You have your own,” I protested, though I could do nothing to stop her; I was knee deep in the hole and holding a shovel.

“Mine isn’t good. It’s got too much chocolate sauce, and it’s all on the bottom,” she said, swirling her spoon around in her cup experimentally. She bent over and picked my cup up off the ground, peering curiously at the contents. “Yours looks better. I can see strawberry chunks in it.”

I stabbed the ground with my shovel, stepped on the blade to shove it deeper, and pried loose a mound of wet earth that I tossed over the edge of the hole onto my growing pile. I paused, jabbing my shovel in the dirt and leaning on it. I was sweating despite the cool weather and having already peeled off my jacket.

She stood a foot above me, though on level ground she wasn’t especially tall. Her beret was maroon and knitted, and her jacket was grey wool. Her auburn curls spilled out from underneath her hat, framing her heart-shaped face which was, at the moment, all screwed up in disappointment as she eyed her shake.

“It’s your own fault, Stevie. You’re the one who insists on buying a different flavor every time.”

I received a pained look and the response, “I don’t want to miss one that might taste better.”

I stared her down for a moment before giving up.

“Fine,” I submitted, “but switch me spoons.”

“Germ-a-phobe,” she accused. Ignoring her and letting her take out her spoon, I watched as she meaningfully licked it clean, took out my spoon, and handed it to me—all the while her hazel eyes were colored with sarcasm.

“Attitude,” I counter accused, licking the strawberry ice cream still clinging to my spoon.

She ignored me this time and instead said, “it’s cold.”

“Yes,” I picked up the shovel and started digging again, “you’re drinking a shake in 50 degree weather.”

“Ice cream is never out of season.”

“Keep moving,” I advised. “Better yet, find another shovel and give me a hand. These things don’t dig themselves.”

“Meh,” she said, eating my ice cream. “That looks like a job better suited for a man.”

I chuckled out two more scoops in silence, a breeze rustling the yellow and orange leaves overhead. The forest was quickly being taken by autumn, summer tiredly relinquishing its hold on year.

“Is it supposed to rain in the next couple weeks?” I asked.

“Not rain, but it’s supposed to snow.”

“Great,” I answered sarcastically. “I love working in the snow.”

“*Working...*” she said with a giggle, as if sharing an inside joke.

“What?” I asked defensively, taking another scoop out of the deepening hole. “It *is* work. I have a lot to accomplish when it’s all said and done.”

“Grant, honey,” she said, wagging her plastic spoon at me. “All you do is show up when and where you’re told.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, scooping out yet another shovelful of dirt. “*That* plus doing the job right the first time, plus cleanup, *plus* not getting caught. Not to mention showing up here to dig your stupid holes.”

“They’re not my holes,” she said, scraping the sides of my cup to get the last bites of ice cream. “I just own the land the holes are on.”

“Same difference. You’d still be convicted with the rest of us if you were caught.”

“The law doesn’t scare me,” she replied seriously. “What’s the worst they could do? Jail me for a couple years? You’d get a lot worse than me if you were caught.”

I let the statement hang, knowing it to be true, as I scraped the

rough edges off the now waist deep hole. I dug out everything I wasn't satisfied with and finally clambered out of the hole. It was roughly oval shaped and just wide enough to bury something fairly large.

"Can you help me put him in?"

"Uh-huh. Just gimme a sec." She tossed her head back, her curls bouncing on her shoulders, tipping the cup to get the very last drops of strawberry flavored ice cream. I watched in amusement.

"Are you done *trying* my shake?"

She looked put-out for a moment. "You can have the rest of mine if you want."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. Grab his arms, will ya?"

We stepped over to the body, counted to three together, lifted him, and then dropped him into the hole. The body bonelessly flopped to the bottom, making a tumbling noise like a sack of potatoes on a wooden floor.

Stephanie giggled and in a teasing singsong voice said, "*and another one bites the dust.*"

I chuckled with her, looking at the dead man in the hole. He had a red stained bullet hole in his chest, his skin a cold yellowish pallor. For a moment I wondered what he had been like in life. I wondered if he'd had a job and a family. I wondered what he had liked, what he hadn't liked. I wondered what his hobbies used to be. I wondered where he had lived, what his name was, what kind of friends he had. I wondered if he had any regrets...

I caught Stephanie looking at the expression on my face and before I could crack a joke, she asked: "How do you do it anyway?"

"Do what?" I asked, even though I already knew what she was asking.

"How do you *do* it? How are you so ready to kill somebody just because a man is waving some cash under your nose?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "Gotta pay for college somehow."

She gave me a disbelieving look to make sure that I wasn't joking, saw that I was fairly serious, and shook her head as if she were clearing

water out of her ears.

“Whatever. It’s your life, Grant. The less I know about it, the better.”

I filled in the hole before we left, covering the freshly turned dirt with leaves and branches and making the spot look as undisturbed as possible.

“Will you text me when you get the next assignment?” I asked, as we walked back to the house where my truck was parked.

“Depends,” she answered, grinning wolfishly. “Will you bring me another shake?”

“Of course. What flavor do you want this time?”

She screwed up her face again, mulling over all the options in her head. “Banana!” She exclaimed. “No, pineapple! Oh, I don’t know. Buy something tropical.”

“Something tropical?” I smiled as we emerged from the forest and began walking up her driveway. “What about the pineapple coconut one?”

“Oh! Yes! Get that one!” She said with a grin, her eyes glinting.

I walked to the bed of my truck and tossed the shovel in next to my rifle case. Starting the truck, we said our goodbyes and I drove back to the city.

A couple weeks later Stephanie texted me as promised, an address and description.

I idly whistled as I put my equipment together. *And another one bites the dust...*

The Toy Library

Bridget Richardson

THE WIND CATCHES MY HAIR. I laugh silently to myself as I look at my Medusa shadow while I walk to work. I already know it's going to be a long night, so I find myself mentally preparing to work the closing hours at the library. My job is upstairs in the Instructional Resource Center, an area which rarely crosses anybody's mind. Since people in need of assistance rarely venture to my section, I tend to spend my time organizing the new Toy Library which is always in disarray due to the unruly children who swirl through like tornados. Tonight I'm working in the basement, sorting bags with books and tapes and puppets inside them so that they can be moved upstairs. I step into the creaking elevator and begin my descent. The lights flash, but not enough to cause any alarm. I let the doors close behind me and begin my work, sorting the bags based on size.

After about an hour of sorting I decide I want to take a break from the endless piles and I head towards the elevator. I realize now that I forgot to lock the elevator doors and it has already gone back up. There is no elevator button in the basement so I turn towards the door leading to the back stair case. There is a fence at the top of these stairs which only opens from my side in order to stop unauthorized people from climbing down into the basement. I attempt to turn the lock and discover it is jammed. I consider shouting to someone beyond the stair way doors, but this is a library and people are trying to study. Instead, I head back down and pull out my computer. I feel the urge to record what is happening because that is what people do in these situations, right?

Not much is happening. The internet does not work down here, so Facebook is out of the question. I lie on the cold, hard, cement floor and begin to write a story for the campus literary journal instead.

THUNDER CRASHED AS LIGHTNING FLASHED down from the sky and a tree crumpled to the ground. Rebecca ran towards the house, dragging her younger sister Tikea behind her. They were never supposed to be out past the sun, especially on a night like this one. She skidded to a halt and threw herself and her sister down as one of the larger trees slammed into the ground, smoldering and catching fire despite the powerful rain. Rebecca stared at the fallen tree in horror and screamed as the trees around her joined their companion.

Something wasn't right. Rebecca had been caught in storms like these before and never had the trees fallen in such an ordered fashion. She pulled a shaking Tikea closer as she tried to look around while shielding her eyes. Movement. It was sudden, fleeting, but definitely there. She attempted to adjust her eyes to the smoky environment. If only the air were a little clearer she might be able to tell if calling for help was a good idea. Suddenly, there was a scream from behind her and everything went black.

THE LIGHTS FLICKERED AGAIN. I think the janitor needs to change a bulb somewhere.

"REBECCA!"

"Mmm...just let me sleep for once?" Rebecca wished the shouting of her name would stop as she reached for the covers and wondered why they were not within her grasp. She let her hand fall off the edge of her mattress, assuming they must have been kicked off her bed. Her hand collided with soft dirt. The events of the night before came rushing back.

"Rebecca!"

This time Rebecca sat up when she heard the yell.

"I'm here!" She screamed, an action she immediately regretted when she felt her head working to explode. She gently laid herself back down on the ground and focused her energy on scanning her

body. A broken elbow from the fall. A twisted ankle. A large bump had formed on the back of her head and she could feel blood leaking from somewhere near it. She took a deep breath and searched. She needed to know its exact location.

“REBECCA!!!”

This time Rebecca ignored the cry and continued her search for the wound. There, just behind her left ear she could finally feel where her head had cracked from...from...what? Taking another deep breath, Rebecca pictured her head coming back together and she slowly began the healing process.

THE LIGHT ABOVE ME BEGINS to sway back and forth gently and I hear a light humming. That’s odd. I don’t remember it doing that before. The vents must be on. The sound seems to be growing steadily louder. Was that a thump? It came from the direction of the stairs. Maybe somebody is there and I can have them send the elevator back down! I run to the door and open it.

“Hello?” I call out as loud as I dare. Nothing. Is that breathing? No. It can’t be. I’m the only one here. I turn back to the door and see several steps leading farther down. How did I not notice this before? I figure while I’m down here I might as well investigate. I see another door and I open it. The boiler room stretches out before me and I walk in cautiously, well aware I should not be in this area. It doesn’t seem any warmer in here than it is in the basement so I decide to go back. Besides, my boss might come down to see how I’m doing. If I’m in the boiler room he won’t be able to find me.

I continue my story...

TIKEA STUMBLED ALONG in seemingly silent submission behind her two Izasana captures as she plotted her escape and revenge. If she could slip from the rope that bound her wrists she might be able to elude them in the surrounding wilderness. The Izasana may have been

good at tracking, but that detail was of little concern to the quick-footed captive.

“Enolic! We stop here!” Savensa barked her command at the other hag and threw her pack down before tying Tikea to a nearby tree.

“Hope you’re comfy! Ahahaaa!” Enolic’s high pitched voice chilled the wilderness as she laughed in the girl’s face. This was one of the many opportunities Tikea had been waiting for and without warning the child braced herself against the tree as she spit with all her might directly into the face of the cackling witch. This earned her a powerful slap to the face, which would have sent her reeling had she not been tied firmly to the tree. Instead, Tikea’s face swung so that one side bore the mark of a hand while the other had the mark of tree bark.

“Enolic! You know better than anybody how displeased Castaneda will be if this little Pasni girl is not intact by the time we get back to Tulop.” Savensa spit the word Pasni with disdain and pushed Enolic away from the tree prison. Tikea looked up with alarm at the partial revelation of her fate. If they managed to get her to Tulop there would be no chance of her returning to her family. Nobody ever returned after being taken to the tiny fire planet which circled Putneen, the neighboring planet to Tareh, which is where they currently were.

Seeing the flash of fear in her eyes, both Enolic and Savensa began to laugh, a cold and heartless sound which turned the nearby flowers and butterflies to stone figures.

I TRY TO CHECK and see if my phone will work and realize it is not on the box anymore. I look around, but it is nowhere. I guess I must have left it in the office upstairs.

“RAKM! OVER HERE! I FOUND HER!” Ashoju called out as he ran to Rebecca. She appeared to be lying with her head on a pillow of her own blood. The fear on his face melted away as he saw Rebecca’s ankle twisting itself slowly so that it was in a normal position. Rebecca

opened her eyes and sat up as she saw her two brothers bursting through the wilderness, sprinting in her direction. They reached her out of breath and heaving.

“Rebecca!” Ashoju said. “We were so worried! Is Tikea...?”

Rebecca shook her head slowly. “Ashoju...they took her. They took Tikea.”

The giant Pasni boy sank to his knees and struck the ground with his fist, creating a mini tarethquake.

Rakm struggled to steady himself before relating to Rebecca what had happened back at the house. According to him, the entire settlement was in disarray. They had assumed it was a supply raid and all the women had gone to protect the storage house. During their absence, the men had been gathered together and locked up somewhere. The women were currently searching for the entrance to the jail house, which had been concealed with spells. Ashoju had been spared this fate since he had gone out searching for the girls as soon as the storm hit and Rakm had been busy battling fires set by the lightning.

Rebecca climbed to her feet and shook her newly healed limbs to ensure the process had completed. She began walking towards the wilderness.

“Where are you going?” Rakm and Ashoju asked in unison.

“I’m going to fetch Tikea. You know as well as I do an attack like this means they intend to spill Pasni blood and I am not going to let it be hers.”

Rebecca set off in the direction of the Izasani land. Rakm and Ashoju attempted to follow her, but found it impossible to squeeze through an invisible barrier; a barrier that was most likely constructed by the witches to surround their town.

“You need to stay here,” she told her brothers, “even if the barrier could let you out, mom might need help.”

“Wait, Rebecca! It’s a trap! They don’t just need Pasni blood, they need girl Pasni blood. If you go, they’ll only kill you too! Castaneda will

be even stronger. We should find another way!”

Despite the protests of her older brothers, Rebecca ran towards her sister, fearing the worst would not be far away. She scrambled blindly through the darkened and twisty woods, following the distinct stench of the Izasana witches.

The wilderness on Tarch proved to be a very dangerous place and Rebecca found herself struggling to maintain even a slow pace. The ground beneath her feet would change without warning from solid to marshy and then back to solid before giving way completely. Vines stretched down from the tall trees and provided something for her to grab and climb up every time she found herself falling. They were sticky and made her palms itch, but it was better than being smashed at the bottom of a pit.

SAVENSA SAT IN FRONT OF THE FIRE staring at Tikea while Enolic slept. They were supposed to take turns watching the prisoner, but since Tikea was slumped over breathing peacefully Savensa came to the conclusion there was no need to watch a sleeping person. Suspiciously, she closed her eyes for a few moments and then opened them back up. Tikea hadn't moved a muscle. Savensa closed her eyes again and began to sleep. As soon as Savensa's breathing steadied, Tikea opened her eyes and went to work untying the ropes that bound her.

SPEAKING OF ROPES, there is one in the basement hanging from the ceiling. It is strange to me, since it does not appear to be serving any specific purpose. A spider scurries across the floor towards the bookshelves full of records and I see two pogo sticks leaning against the wall. Too bad my friends aren't here. We could be having a great basement party right now. With a yawn I suck in the musty air and let out a little cough. I glance around and consider sorting more, but I decide to just keep writing. I tried to check the time, but apparently the clock on my computer is frozen. It has said 9:33 for quite some time now.

REBECCA DID NOT KNOW how long she had been walking or how far she had traveled. What she did know was that the smell of the witches was getting stronger, which meant they must have stopped for the night and she must be getting closer. She decided they were probably moving extra slow because of Tikea and smiled to herself. She remembered a time when she and her sister were little, getting into trouble and being sent to the corner. Rebecca had stood there crying, embarrassed by the punishment. Tikea, on the other hand, stood silently glaring and indignant. She made it a point of spitting on the corner, just to show everyone exactly what she thought of it. Yes, they had certainly picked a rebel to drag along with them. She just hoped Tikea didn't spit on either of the witches. She didn't see how that could possibly go over well.

Rebecca suddenly caught hold of a new scent, one that wasn't part of the witches' odor trail. It was a strong and thick smell, which wafted in on the wind. She froze in place, trying to figure out whether it was a hint of lurking danger or not. She had smelt it before, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She continued walking, slowly becoming better at judging when the swift change in the ground would occur. As she came closer to where the witches had her sister, Rebecca began to recognize the smell as smoke and she knew she was almost upon them.

I REALLY WISH I HAD MY PHONE RIGHT NOW. I'm sure it would have had service if I stayed towards the top of the stairs. I have no idea how much time has passed and the library closes at midnight. Suppose my boss forgets about me again? I could be stuck in the basement all night. That just won't do. I have too much stuff to get done tomorrow morning. I wish I had remembered to bring my phone. Not only would I appreciate a bathroom break, but I was in the middle of a conversation with my "crush". How are things ever going to excel past the "just friends" stage if I don't text him back? This world just does not want me to be happy! I will be alone FOREVER! Well, maybe

not forever. I mean, come on, just this week I was asked out twice by two different people. And they were both from the male species! Not to mention the guy in class who always gives me 'The Eyes. What can I say? My shameless good looks just attract that kind of attention I guess. Maybe she's born with....

Was that a cough? No. It couldn't have been. I'm down here alone.

TIKEA QUIETLY SQUIRMED AND TWISTED her way out of her bind and found herself standing next to the two sleeping witches. She had turned to run off when she got an idea so brilliant she just had to smile. She scanned the ground and found a sharp rock, which she used to cut off two long pieces of the rope that had been used to keep her. She stealthily set to work tying one end of each piece to Savensa's ankles and tying the other end to Enolic's. Slowly, so as not to wake the witches, Tikea snuck away into the night and began making her own way back home.

Unknown to both girls, Tikea's escape route sent her within a few feet of her sister. The foliage in the area was so dense, neither one saw the other and believed the sound in the bushes to be caused by a wild animal. This thought sent the girls hurrying past each other, only one of them headed towards freedom.

THAT DARN LIGHT KEEPS SWINGING and making strange shadows on the wall. It's a good thing I'm not afraid of basements or I might be panicking right now. Of course it does help that this basement is an insult to basements. There isn't anything creepy about it whatsoever! When I found out I would be working in the basement the week of Halloween I was excited.

Something just blew on my hair. Aren't all the vents on the ceiling though? There must be one somewhere near me on the floor.

REBECCA BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF when she saw the sleeping

witches. If both of them were asleep it would be easy for her to sneak in and snatch her sister. The only thing left for her to do now was locate Tikea. She had hoped they would have tied her up nearby, but it didn't look like she was that lucky. Rebecca crept into the clearing to get a better view of the surroundings. She had just begun to look around when Enolic snored so loudly the witch woke herself up with a start and came face to face with the creeping Rebecca.

"Savensa! We have got her!" Enolic shouted the other witch's name at the top of her lungs as she grabbed hold of Rebecca's wrist.

Rebecca tried to twist away but only succeeded in tripping backwards over what appeared to be a rope tied to both the witches' ankles. Savensa jumped up from her nap and began to speak some strange language that Rebecca did not understand. The witches kept a tight hold on Rebecca. She became aware of her power being drained from her body. In a swirling of leaves and twigs, a spaceship descended upon the three figures. They were all beamed up.

Rebecca suddenly felt nauseous, realizing that she had played directly into the hands of the witches. If only she had remembered they were only allowed to take prisoners who voluntarily wandered into their camp, she might have been able to save herself the trouble of the entire encounter. Instead, she had done exactly what the witches knew she would do and had taken the place of sacrifice to the Izasana god.

Enolic and Savensa began to fly their ship upwards and headed out of the atmosphere towards Tulop, a place from which nobody had ever returned.

THE LIGHTS ARE OFF. This means the library must be closing. I have been left down in the basement, forgotten about once again. I want to call out, but you really aren't supposed to yell in a library. My computer screen is the only light down here.

I think something is moving, but I can't be sure. I can't see anything. Maybe a shadow?

Are those footsteps coming from the boiler room? I think I hear something, but it must be my imagination. A cough. Or is it a gasp?

I see something now. A reflection. A person. Or is it? Is that a rope?

The gasp, it came from me.

It's not my imagination.

I think they're behind me.

The Bowl

Kirk Lee Davis

Seeking dual citizenship, the crab
digs at once into the coast and the shore.
In search of the crab, the owl
drills its black hole into the black sky.
It is a patent leather night and I'm clanging
at the armature in search of the precise lies.
A million crabs, a million stars, a million owls:
in the ocean, a shower of submarine snow,
a cloud graph of pinpricks, the fog
in which I fumble at the rusted frame
with a rusted wrench. Sometimes the crab
up and walks out of its body.

The owl is built into its mask.

Death masks are believed to capture the final thought as it escapes
the mind.

Death masks can be happy or weak.

Death masks, when worn by the living, infuse the wearer with a weird
sense of immortality.

Death masks have been used by cultures throughout history for
make-believe games and as the subject of poems.

Perhaps the most famous death mask is that of *L'Inconnue de la Seine*,
or, "The unknown woman of the Seine,"

whose young body was pulled from the Parisian river at the *Quai de
Louvre* in the late 1880's.

L'Inconnue became the subject of much literary speculation.

Death masks are generally cast from the faces of the deceased.

My friend Sean hands me a bowl.
I put my ear to it for the ocean.
The bowl is a death mask
and the ocean is everywhere.

When the crab wishes
to step forward into innumerability, she must
walk out of herself and into her softest self.
I think the armature of the world is the trajectory
of everything diagrammed out into its webs.
When someone dies: the question of infinite distance.

Someone somewhere writes a real poem.
Me, I pour a box of little hamburgers into the bowl.
It's a cholesterol day.
My friends and siblings birth a small army
of world leaders, chemists, and ballet stars.
Thank god for Sean, who eats cigarettes again.

Death masks raise a lot of questions. The ancient Tartars believed
death masks strengthened the spirit of the deceased,
and boy are the present-day Tartars pissed. Death masks can be used
by perverts
as sex toys, but then, so can quicksand lotion. Dante may or may not
have known
what his final thought was. We may or may not know Dante's final
thought.
We for certain know what Dante's face looked like. And boy was he
pissed.
Whosoever is pissed among you, you should go write a poem
and see if it's real or not. Death masks can be derived from the faces
of the living,
but you need a couple straws to put in the nostrils.

It's time for another bowl: flash fried cobra hearts
in spasm and gravy. The real poem regards loneliness,
a capsule in which one's soul resides.
I'm doing my exercises again: over, under, over, under,
between, between, in! I'm exhausted
after a single repetition. I know.

Death masks are recommended for the aged and infirm, just in case.
Death masks are recommended for children,
because kids make the darnedest faces. If death masks ever come
back to life, that would be a pretty bad movie. A poem can be so
ridiculous sometimes.

What do you call a death mask floating
in the ocean? Answer: Bob. What do you call death mask that comes
back to life? Answer: anything it wants to be called. See also,
“prayer mask.”

Whosoever is Dante Alighieri among you, point out to us that life is
not a game.

I mean, be really, really pissed. Whosoever is in class with Dante
Alighieri, put down your bouncing ball
and suspend your gin rummy contests. Somewhere God has a death
mask for every moment of our lives.

The ocean rocks in its bowl, a cradle in every direction.
The owls crisscross overhead.
I am, as I am always, of split mind.

Sometimes, when I can't sleep and am about to die of pneumonia,
I think of my friend Sean, and his long and painful
struggle with reality, and how,
in the end, he won. Sometimes, on the other
hand, when I'm about to die of pneumonia,

I just lie down and think *dang, world, what's next?*
Sometimes, this one time--a week ago today,
actually--after a home-cooked pasta
dinner with a sauce containing more kinds of meat
than I could possibly count on one hand,
with a cold just starting to come on, on a night
when I waxed wall-punchingly selfish, I watched
my future wife sing at the bar, and I thought, *nice,*
world. Because of beauty. Sometimes,
that's just it. Of course, sometimes not.
Sometimes, when I'm about to die
of pneumonia, I talk with my friend Jenny,
Sean's ex-wife, and I think, *dang, world,*
what's next? Sometimes I wonder if anyone
really wins when quantum mechanics is involved.
Sometimes I think the ocean could be a metaphor
for everything, including God, and love,
and molting, and individual pasta noodles, and then
I realize that's what reality is. A spaghetti. I mean,
an ocean. Sometimes, *dang!* Because, *right?* Do you
ever wonder about that, too? Sometimes
do ever see that woman who is able
to sing with her entire soul because
she has that gift? Sometimes, when I've just died
of pneumonia, I think of my friend Sean, and his
funny stories about his old
roommate, who, before he died, was an addict.
And I think how my friend Jenny used to laugh
at those stories, too. Sometimes
I have never been to France between meals.
Sometimes God grows angry at our diction
choices. Sometimes I think live parakeets
really would make good centerpieces. Sometimes

I am reminded of the sermon containing
the phrase “gird up the loins of your mind.” Sometimes
not. Sometimes I’ve never even been to a French
restaurant. *Or have I?* my friend Cagey
used to say, before someone answered the door
with a shotgun in his hands and shot Cagey
through the throat. Not because of heroin.
An accident. Sometimes I wonder why I insist
Sean won. Sometimes Sean writes often to tell me
he is not winning. Sometimes I try counting as many
kinds of meat as I can. Sometimes a peacock
can be enflamed. Sometimes Jenny still laughs.
Sometimes earth, sometimes wind, sometimes water.
Sometimes an ocean filled with water.

Sometimes,
mostly, I wish I could fall asleep at the bottom of that one
song. And still, at other times, pretty much everything.

Windfarm

Sophie Jo Miller

WIND WHISTLED THROUGH THE CRACKS in the old, rusty pickup truck as Ellis Marshal drove. A brief thought came to his mind that, should his truck break down, it would likely take days for anyone to find him. Certainly, there were safeguards in place to alert people if he disappeared. The main one was that every evening, he was expected to call his boss's secretary over the two-way radio. If he missed the call, and did not make it within twelve hours, a search party would be sent out. The land was vast though, with Ellis serving as the figurative needle in the literal haystack that was the plains of Wyoming.

The old truck had never failed Ellis though. He maintained it well, checking it over every night when he made it to whichever "base" he was staying at that evening.

The bases were really just old, abandoned barns, missile silos, and the occasional small house. There were twelve of them in total, spread out at regular intervals across the state. In reality, they were supposed to belong to all Wyoming-based employees of the Renewable Energy Service. As it was, Ellis was currently the only person left. Years ago, the incentives to move out West to work for the largest wind farm in the world had been high. The pay was good, and along with that, employees had other benefits such as free housing, insurance, clothes, and gasoline (a finite resource). The job was hailed as being a last opportunity for Americans to see the west as it once was; vast and sparsely populated.

The Wind Act, as it was commonly known, had completely rezoned Wyoming from being a residential state to a business state. Zoning had happened to regions before, but never to an entire state. Wyoming was an experiment; a very successful one. The rezoning had been done in an effort to make green energy the norm in the United States. In the years since the act had been set in place, the U.S. had become stable in

relation to energy. Stability had, in turn, freed the nation's top scientists to turn their focus away energy and towards space colonization.

As irony would have it, the newfound success of the space program led to more and more of the nation's adventurers leaving to explore other worlds. These people had been the types who originally flocked to the RES, which in turn left the RES severely understaffed. This resulted in Ellis Marshal becoming the sole caretaker of the Wyoming region wind farm.

Ellis grumbled to himself as he pulled over after spotting a broken-down windmill. The machines tended to be reliable most of the time, but when one did break down it fell to Ellis to repair it; if it could be repaired (if not, he would report it to his boss later). As he got to work diagnosing the problem, he found his mind wandering to years earlier, when he had a trainee working as his assistant. Lawrence Walker had been young, smart, and enthusiastic. Out of all the people Ellis had trained, Lawrence had been his favorite. The two had worked together for three months, and after Lawrence started working on his own they continued to meet up for drinks when their routes coincided.

Talented as Lawrence was, he was a shoe-in for the first round of colonizers sent to Mars. He'd been excited when he told Ellis, who didn't understand the reasoning behind it at all. Lawrence had tried to explain. He wanted to be alone, truly alone, to experience something with as little interference from other humans as possible. He talked about it as though it were some kind of spiritual up-taking. Ellis had pretended to understand, although in his mind they were as alone as they could get, with only fifty RES rangers in the region at any given time. He disguised how disgusted he was with the entire thing. In his mind, humans were meant to stay on Earth. What anyone—including Lawrence—wanted out of colonizing another planet, Ellis didn't understand. His thoughts were reinforced a year later when he learned that Lawrence's shuttle had malfunctioned, leading it to crash land on the surface of the red planet.

"Shit!" Ellis hissed. He had managed to slam the tip of his thumb

in the maintenance door of the windmill. However, the verbal snap was equally as likely to have been in response to his thoughts about Lawrence. It had been twenty years since Ellis had last seen him; five years since he had last wasted a thought on him.

As he got back in the truck though, his thoughts drifted back to the man. Now that Ellis had begun to think about him, it was difficult to stop. Lawrence had been a hopeful man, easily excited about the future. Ellis remembered when Lawrence told him he was going to Mars. The man's eyes were bright, and his whole body seemed to radiate the warmth of anticipation and excitement. While Ellis didn't agree with the decision, the obvious thrill that Lawrence felt was almost infectious which, apart from making Ellis able to keep his own disgust under wraps, had continued to feed into Ellis. In fact, he could still feel the electricity of excitement when he thought about Lawrence that day.

He drove on to the base (an old barn, tonight), steering from memory, which allowed his thoughts to stay focused on other things. He struggled to recall his feelings when he found out Lawrence hadn't made it to Mars safely. He was angry at Lawrence for signing up in the first place, angry at the space program for not taking better care of their shuttles, angry at the country for pushing so hard for galactic colonization. Added to the anger was sadness and regret: sadness over losing a friend, regret that he hadn't spent more time with him.

In the years since then, Ellis had become a recluse. His work was his life and vice versa. At one time, he had looked forward to updates on the state of the nation, finding out what Americans were up to outside of his solitary existence. Following the news about Lawrence, however, he had stopped asking and when information was given to him in the form of a letter or a newspaper, he threw it out. He had no interest in any of it.

What Ellis had missed in all those years was that, while men like Lawrence originally signed on as colonizers, the desire to leave Earth had spread throughout the United States. The idea that America could be more than a country, that it could be its own planet, began to spread.

More and more, people began leaving for other worlds.

What Ellis had noticed was that, in the past several years, the reserves of energy produced by the farm he so carefully tended alone had remained steady, despite the fact that he was the only ranger left. Windmills broke down every day, and he could only fix so many of them every day. With more people working as RES rangers, this wouldn't have been an issue but with Ellis working alone, it was inefficient. Yet, despite that inefficiency the reserves had continued to hold. Ellis attributed this to the fact that the equipment he used was better now than it had been when he first started this job. Logically though, he knew that couldn't possibly be the only reason for the change.

Ellis knew nothing about the fact that America's population was dropping significantly with each passing month; that the space program had grown to the point of sending out larger shuttles holding more colonists every few days. As the program grew, so did the need for funding. The reserves of energy had not merely held steady, as Ellis thought. Rather, they had grown significantly because fewer and fewer people needed energy. The extra energy was being siphoned and sold to other nations. The money went toward the ever-growing space program. In that way, Ellis was helping to support something that he inherently detested.

He didn't know that, right now, the world's eyes were on America. One question rang globally: would America become the first nation to abandon the planet entirely?

TEN YEARS LATER, that question was answered. In a massive, nation-wide exodus, Americans left Earth in droves, with shuttle flights off the planet becoming as common as chartering an international flight. Even Ellis, alone as he was, couldn't miss the signs for forever. He knew the world was changing, but did his best to ignore it.

Even Ellis couldn't ignore it forever, though.

He was surprised one day as he drove up to his base for the evening to see Mr. Howe, head of the RES, waiting there for him. Ellis kept his

face blank as he listened to Mr. Howe, who had come to tell him that the RES was being shut down.

“We just don’t need the energy anymore. Only a few people are left, and they’re far and few between. They’re all self-sufficient as far as energy goes. We just don’t have any reason to stay open. My family and I are leaving soon anyways. Almost everyone is gone.”

Ellis nodded, saying little in response. “So am I being kicked out?” He had lived in the Wyoming territory for over forty years.

“Well, no,” Mr. Howe said, shifting uncomfortably, “if you can make yourself self-sufficient, producing your own food and all that, there’s no reason to kick you out. Nothing else is going to be done with this land here.”

Ellis knew there were enough windmills to make enough energy to last him the rest of his life.

“Are you sure about staying here, though? There’s no purpose to it anymore.” To Mr. Howe, it was inconceivable that anyone would want to stay in what was once America. There was nothing left.

“I’m not leaving,” Ellis replied. “I’ve never supported galactic colonization, and I’m sure as hell not becoming a part of it.”

Mr. Howe had known Ellis long enough to know there was no point in arguing with the man. “You can expect one more shipment of supplies. After that, you’re on your own.”

With that, Mr. Howe left.

Just as Mr. Howe had said, Ellis received one more shipment of supplies. It was left at his preferred base, a small house in the southeastern corner of Wyoming. He settled down there, tending the windmills in the area and only occasionally venturing out to work on other windmills. The ground was hard, but he managed to grow enough food to live, supplemented by the antelope and elk he hunted every so often. Eventually, he was left with only the windmills in the immediate area. He had had no contact with anyone else since Mr. Howe gave him the news. Ellis had no idea if anyone else was left. If there was anyone still remaining, he had no way of finding them.

The job he had once taken for its privacy had become his entire existence. It would have been his existence no matter what territory he was in. The whole of America had been left on its own, to slowly melt back into being an unknown frontier. Children born and raised off-planet would hear stories about Earth, but none would return to it—at least, not during Ellis’ lifetime.

Late one night, an elderly Ellis sat outside his house, the last three working windmills slowly turning in the distance. As he looked at the stars, he thought about the colonies, wondered how successful they had been.

How different is it up there, really? It’s something foreign, unknown, just like this land was to me when I first came here... Lawrence, was there really something you could have gotten from going to Mars that you couldn’t have gotten here?

Of course there was. He understood that now. When Lawrence had first planned to go, he was going somewhere quiet, somewhere vacant except for the few other colonists. Somewhere completely removed from reality.

Ironic...what you would have found up there, the world has become down here...here there is nothing and no one, just as there was up there decades ago. I thought you were stupid, wanting to go there, and now here I am, in the position you would have been in, had you made it.

He smiled to himself. His years alone had been satisfying for him. He had never minded being by himself.

Finally, I understand what you wanted. All these years later, I understand.

Mabies

Tristan Acker

maybe babies
 exist in the purest of states
in the sense that they have no mechanisms
 cope with
 the unbearable lightness of
 being

Crying and crying
for no reason but
 a shift of a collarbone
a slide by a hip

I've told babies
 "why you cryin'?"
 You literally got nothin' to cry
about. You were
 born in Southern California and your daddy has a job"
But now I know better.
Babies are ghosts of tragedies
you didn't have time to mourn.
Babies cry for humankind.
Their skin exposed to the
Unmitigated realpolitik. They smell it through
our hair sweat.

They cry for you
on supermarket linoleum
in dental lobbies and strange houred airplanes
They cry for me in the movie theater, in the charburger
spot, in your living
room
They cry for you in the delivery room, breaking the silence of the
desert
Saying what we will not, what I cannot
because we cannot
If we could understand
the simple koyaanisqatsi
that rocks the babe
we would be helpless and shrieking
too
The baby cries for its
future,
sadnesses
like it knows the blankets
we provide
are delusions
Goddamned right cry
God knows you should be

Just Another Night in East Texas

Wendel Sloan

IF “THE HANGOVER” PRODUCERS NEED SEQUEL IDEAS, they should consider my home-from-college weekends in the east Texas town of Mt. Vernon in the early 70s.

One night my 1967 .327 black-and-white Camaro was being stopped for the second time that evening on a country blacktop by a highway patrolman--who should have been keeping meth-fueled truckers off nearby Interstate30.

In a redneck Texas town of 2,000 in the 1970s, the law and teenagers were equally bored and the cat-and-mouse games kept them both entertained. It was kind of a live predecessor of video games—except if you got busted in the live version you could actually be sent to prison. That added considerably to the adrenalin rush.

The 300-pound county sheriff had also pulled us over about 30 minutes before, but we had spotted him coming and tossed our booze over a wooden bridge into a shallow, stagnant creek and stashed our stashes in our underwear.

When the patrolman’s lights began flashing, we tossed some youthful burning indiscretions out the windows and “aired out” the car before pulling over.

As Officer Smith’s bald head came bobbing up and down to the driver’s window like a peeled apple bobbing up and down in a tub of spit-filled water at the school carnival, he spat a stream of tobacco blacker than the oil-topped road--overpowering the surrounding pine-tree perfume--and barked, “What did’ja throw out back there?”

I answered politely, “Nothing, Officer Smith. We were just trying to get rid of a mosquito that got in my car when we stopped at the Baptist Church to drop off some clothes for those orphans over in Mexico.”

I had been fibbing to the law for so long, I could hear the mosquito

buzzing and see the orphans trying on faded jeans fashionably dotted with roach burns.

“We’ll see ‘bout that smart aleck,” he growled, then invited us to step outside.

After his familiar hands—lingering a bit too long near my underwear, but too macho to actually make contact with my zipper—finally finished exploring the rest of my body for the usual fruitless searching, he snarled, “Okay, Sloan, I can smell it and know what you piss-ants have been up to.”

I explained helpfully, “We smelled something, too, Officer Smith, but figured it was my cousin because the pump from his parents’ pond to their bathtub went out again. I don’t think he’s bathed in at least three weeks.”

Even under the half-moon, I could see my cousin’s face turning red and his eyes piercing me with silent daggers. I knew my only protection from him would be to let him have the first quart of Old Milwaukee beer—now bathing in the shallow creek—and not complain when he Bogarted our next joint.

Forgetting his Southern manners, Officer Smith snapped, “Wipe that smirk offa’ur face, jerk, ‘cause I’m gonna bust you next time if I even smell it!”

“Thank you, Officer Smith,” I answered respectfully. “My cousin said their pump will be getting fixed tomorrow, so I don’t think you’ll have to be subjected to it next time.”

After he peeled away, with flying rocks narrowly missing bug-eyed nightlife fleeing for their lives, we retrieved misdemeanors and felonies from underwear, bushes and creeks.

In a preemptive act of self-defense, I handed my cousin the first quart of Old Milwaukee, still dripping with moss and lukewarm creek water, and an extra large joint. As he took a drag that set a new Bogarting world record, then chased it with at least a pint gulp from the quart of warm beer, we casually resumed partying as “Won’t Get Fooled Again” blared from the eight-track.

How We Spoke Beyond Hanaupah Creek, Death Valley

Jeffrey Alfier

Snowfall lay soft as an opium dream
over the Panamint Range. Untold
elevations below, in the fine-grained
heat of late fall, we mounted boulders
studded with feldspar. What wind carried
and lost melded amid salmon-orange
wings of butterflies edging our silence.

I cut for you a sprig of desert holly, illicit
but vindicated because I said it would grow
back, unlike the bladed crystals you stole
from that small quarry near Warm Springs.

We seized the bright rush of that day, its sky
clear as the eye of God. With a tenuous faith
in our shaky Jeep – parked facing downhill,
we returned west to our seaboard city
lined with lofty sweetgums and maples,
each avenue a slow burial in leaves.

Angelina's Flower Shop on February 14th

Jeffrey Alfier

The low sun spreads itself over the barred
windows and deadbolts of Anaheim Street,
corners yielding depth to the new light.
Through her storefront glass, the profusion
of Angelina's blossoms entreats passersby,
a spectrum of petals flung outward like lights
from a carnival carousel.

Praise her stucco and brick, the plain concrete
floor, praise all forms of simple, the wind-worn
calls of shorebirds, their notes tolling in a minor
key overhead where Angelina sets the dressed
torsos of mannequins on the sidewalk out front.

Areglos de Flores is misspelled on the marquis,
but this street has forgiveness built in, its sweaty
air emanating through the timeless rhythms
of machinists, merchants and tired *ancianas*
who come to Angelina's with desiccated
tales of wild poppies they brought to aged
fathers in a vanished Mexico.

Angelina knows bouquets are chosen late
each year on this day. Her bright greetings meet
the jingle of the opening door, a smile for every
halting word, blessings for each footfall that exits
homeward, every rose holding fast to red.

Acceptance Speech

Wayne Lee

TO THE CAST AND CREW of *Shootout at Red Rock Ranch* who, on instruction from the offshore production team, herded three hundred panic-stricken black-tailed antelope through the makeshift movie ranch saloon just prior to the filming of the climactic barroom scene, unwittingly setting off the poor creatures' fight or flight response, resulting in extensive damage to the vintage set and numerous bruises and contusions to the buckaroos and saloon girl extras—

TO CHANTELE, THE ALCOHOLIC TROPHY WIFE of veteran character actor Charlie “Smashmouth” MacShane, who lay passed out in their backlot trailer while her husband traded stage blows and fake whiskey bottle head bashes with his swarthy, scar-cheeked counterpart in the aforementioned barroom brawl, who was rudely semi-awakened when the cocaine-crazed star of the film, Micky Sledge, burst through the trailer door wearing nothing but his Stetson and spurs, slipped under the satin sheets and tried to force his hirsute hulk on his liposuctioned hostess, who then stabbed him in the right buttock with a corkscrew left on the nightstand after her second bottle of Blue Nun earlier that morning, necessitating an anonymous call to 911 and ensuing visits from the on-site security team and local law enforcement interns—

TO THE NEWS ANCHOR at the nearby Albuquerque television station who reported the above-mentioned savage attack, but not the accidental shooting out behind the corral when cameraman Vincent Takamatsu aimed what he presumed was an unloaded Colt 45 in the general direction of the director's ten-week-old shih tzu, hitting the puppy square between the eyes, requiring him to drop the still-warm body through the toilet hole in a nearby honey bucket when he was suddenly called to the set to shoot the previously referenced antelope

stampede disaster—

TO THE COUNTY SHERIFF who sat in his government-issue Ford LTD smoking cigarillos waiting for his shift to end so he could stop guarding the only road into the roped-off setting for the blockbuster wide-angle cattle drive scene during which six-thousand longhorn beef got spooked by a makeup artist's inadequately trained pit bull, which then stampeded off the pre-choreographed trail, over the hood and roof of his squad car, down an adjacent arroyo and across the irrigation dam into the district's only potable water supply—

AND LAST, BUT CERTAINLY NOT LEAST, to the inexplicably large number of movie-going patrons who sat bemused in air-conditioned multiplexes all across the country, blissfully unaware of anything except the over-acting, the digital post-production special effects and the 3-D Old West spectacle of the year's most unexpected Oscar-nominated action film, who have no idea in hell what goes on behind the scenes, who slurp their Dr. Peppers and smack their buttered popcorn while holding hands with their acne-ravaged dates in the flickering dark, who then remark afterwards over green chile cheese fries at LotaBurger how blown away they were at the action sequences but were somewhat disappointed by the relative lack of bloodshed—

—DON'T YOU *DARE* START THAT SEGUE MUSIC! I've got a loaded Montblanc in my pocket, and I know how to use it!—

TO ALL OF THEM, and to the absolutely arrogant and unbelievably inept director and producer, I say thank you from the bottom of my poverty-hardened heart for taking the dream of my original screenplay and turning it into the nightmare of my professional life, for trashing the fifteen seconds of fame I've been waiting for ever since I survived my childhood in the slums of Beverly Hills, under-graduate work at North Dakota College of the Pitiful Cross, my unpaid summer apprenticeship at Disneyworld writing impromptu responses by

underpaid wannabe actors in oversized animal costumes, and my three miserable decades in Hollywood trying to get anyone at all to take me seriously, and I especially want to thank my parents, who thank God had the good grace to get divorced just before their highly publicized mutual suicide pact last year, and my fifth wife, Margie, who has stayed with me even after I wrecked the Edsel in a haze of crystal meth insanity, and my little boy, Groucho, who at age nine can finally walk and talk and who—this is *so cute!*—told me before I flew out here on standby from my rehabilitation facility, “Daddy, can I learn to ride a horse through a burning barn just like that man in that movie you made in New Mexico while Mommy was sleeping with Uncle Fred?”

Silence

By Kayleen Burdine

THEY CHRISTENED THE HOUSE on the very first night with words whispered hot against her throat, devolving into shuddering sighs and guttural groans which echoed dimly off the bedroom's barren walls. They were happy. For the first time in their lives they had a home, a bed, and crisp white sheets. For the first time in their lives something belonged to them and no one else.

The house at 335 Spruce Lane crouched a quarter-mile off the road like a saggy old frog, pale green and in shambles. The canopy above the porch, supported only by a haphazard row of half-rotted beams, bowed as though it were about to collapse. The once pristine white paint was now chipped and peeling away after spending three quarters of a century alternating between frigid winters and blistering summers. It was infinitely easier to count the floorboards that didn't creak than the ones that did and the wallpaper came in at least four tattered layers across the living room walls. Every time she climbed the stairs she felt as though they were just about to give way, and on windy days the bedroom windows rattled like a tin can full of coins. The kitchen sink leaked, the closet door wouldn't stay shut, and most of the shingles on the roof were missing or crumbling away. It was a fixer-upper—their never-ending project—but it was home.

"I love you," he murmured against her lips, her shoulders, the crown of her head, over and over again. "I love you so much."

She replied in her own way, with tender kisses and hesitant fingertips, gestures he drank in and returned readily. It was something they'd done a hundred times before—something pleasant and familiar, warm and comforting—but for reasons she couldn't quite explain, that night was special. That night, cocooned in old bedding beneath a still-unfamiliar roof, left her breathless.

The sex was never that good again, though it certainly wasn't for

lack of trying. As their home came together piece by piece, so too did they. When all four varieties of the wallpaper in the living room were stripped away and replaced with a coat of soft, fresh blue, they made love on the sofa. When the porch beams were reinforced and the bow in the canopy evened out, it was right there in the grass. When they fixed the leak in the kitchen sink and tiled the countertops, they did it on the table. It was like they were newlyweds all over again.

Until it stopped.

The change was as sudden as it was daunting. For nearly six months after the move they'd devoted every single weekend and day off to transforming their newfound house into a home. They retiled the dingy showers, mustard yellow replaced by a nice, pristine white. They secured three long rows of shelves along the walls in the downstairs bedroom, filling them end to end with the surplus of books they'd collected throughout the years. They hired a professional to shingle the roof and coat the house's exterior with fresh layers of the same colors, spring green with accents of white. By and large it was a far more enormous task than either of them had ever anticipated and yet, before they realized it, it was done.

"Looks good, yeah?" the painter asked when at last they arrived, wiping his green-and-white speckled hand on his overalls.

It did. It really, honestly did. For the very first time the house felt as vibrant and alive as they were, its very existence appearing to thrum with the joy swelling in their hearts.

They settled as the days flew. House at long last became home and home, eventually, became a muted background for the days to come. He worked. She worked. They made friends. The routine into which they settled grew as comfortable and droll as any that came before, yet now it came with the understanding that familiar walls always waited to welcome them.

The night she first felt the presence coincided with a sudden disruption of the mundane—nothing of great importance, yet different all the same. He called. A breakthrough at work warranted drinks in

celebration of a job well done, and she encouraged him to join in, smiling even as he forgot to tell her he loved her before hanging up the phone.

She read for three hours. The house went silent. Nearly eight months had passed since their first night spent in the room upstairs, and yet when at long last she returned to awareness, her surroundings verged on foreign. Something felt different. A gentle stirring of the air, an imperceptible shift. It was as though something had suddenly intruded upon the still serenity of her home.

Quietly she settled her book face-down on the coffee table and rose to her feet, toes curling against the iciness of the floor. She retrieved her phone from the arm of the sofa and gripped it with uncertainty. Both the doors were locked. The windows were painted shut. Every room she checked was as empty as the last and yet she could not shake the sensation that she wasn't alone. Terror washed over her inexplicably. She sprinted up the stairs and into their bedroom, locking the door behind her, and as she settled on the bed and pulled her knees to her chest she listened intently. In a way, she hoped that something—anything—might reach her ears and validate the dread that now consumed her. Yet, where the house had once groaned with the slightest movement, now there was only silence.

She did not realize she was shaking until she looked down at her phone, still squeezed tightly in her fist. She released it to dial her husband's number. Her eyes never strayed from the door. His phone rang and rang and continued to ring, until at last she reached his voicemail. She hung up and called again. The results were the same. Once more. Voicemail. A final attempt and she gave in, leaving him a rattled message telling him she was afraid and that she didn't want to be alone anymore. He'd check his phone eventually, she had no doubt, but until then she pulled the comforter around her shoulders and forced herself to stop watching the door. She took a deep breath.

A sharp crash rang out in the bathroom and her stomach instantly soured. Fearfully, she pried herself out of bed and made her way to

the adjoining bathroom door, resting her hand on the knob for a long, tense moment before finally pushing it open. She took a look around. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. What, then, had caused the noise? The shower curtain hung innocently between her and the rest of the room. Though she knew no one could possibly be behind it, her heart-rate insisted otherwise. She drew the curtain away from the wall hesitantly.

A single fallen tile lay in two pieces at the bottom of the tub.

She couldn't help it—she laughed. She laughed and with her laughter came tears, because something about it all was just so cruel.

He finally ambled in at around three a.m., reeking of alcohol and stumbling drunk. He nearly toppled over when she latched onto him and refused to let go. She pulled him down into bed with her and buried her face against his chest, any anger she might have felt replaced by the sweet comfort of protection. Neither of them mentioned the three missed phone calls. Neither of them said anything at all.

For a while, at least, things were okay. He promised to keep his phone on when he went out, she promised that she wouldn't let herself get that scared ever again. The next few times he went out with his friends, all was well. The house had settled. The silence had become comfortable. She bought a few new decorations for the study and hung their wedding pictures in the hall. He smiled and gave her a kiss on the cheek when he came home, but the inexplicable distance remained.

The next time he went out was the first time she noticed.

His shirt was buttoned wrong when he came in. Had she not tenderly run her fingers over the neat row of them that morning, she may not have noticed and yet there it was. He laughed it off as he undressed, joking about how stupid he had to be for wearing it like that all day long, but she could see the unwitting tension in his shoulders. Her heart sank. She had to be wrong.

She wasn't. The second hint came a couple weeks later, just as strong as the first. A tiny smudge of red, right below his jaw. She wiped it off with her thumb. Confronted him about it. He swore it had to

be hers, but the fear in his eyes spoke volumes. She'd never been so furious in all her life.

It wasn't the first time they'd ever fought, but it was by far the worst. For a week they spoke to one another only when they had to, tense silence pervading the house like a disease. She couldn't escape it any more than she could will herself to forgive him. He swore again and again that there was no one else, but she knew better. She knew better and yet she bottled it up, left the house, did whatever she could to grant herself the time and the distance that she needed. Nothing worked. No matter where she went—no matter how far she managed to go—it was as inescapable as it was exhaustive.

She bore it, though. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to make it through six tense and lonely nights, hoping he'd get the message but he never did. On the seventh she finally burst, unleashing her pent-up betrayal in one long string of hateful words, and once they'd been released...she couldn't ever remember feeling quite so hollow. Though an equal eruption on his own end was rightfully expected, he said nothing in return. He merely went upstairs and began cramming clothes into a duffle bag, shoving past her hard when she tried to stop him from going back downstairs. She screamed at him to come back until her throat felt raw, but he wouldn't. He got into the car and he started the engine and within moments he was gone. She could've chased after him. She should've chased after him. But she didn't.

The presence that night was stronger than it had ever been.

It never went away—at least not entirely—but she learned quickly how to ignore it because she had no other choice. He came home two days later and apologized, swore that it would never happen again, and asked her for her forgiveness. She refused to give in. She wasn't angry anymore. About the nights out, about the other woman. She'd become numb to it. She didn't care. She told him so, and suddenly he was the angry one. More and more frequently, he stayed away for days, leaving her alone to stew in her own bitterness. With each passing night she spent alone, the presence grew stronger. No longer did it feel as though

something were in the house with her. Suddenly it felt as though the house itself was keeping an eye on her, playing games with her mind.

It whispered without speaking, closing in on her and constricting her until she felt as though she couldn't breathe. The hallways suddenly seemed longer. The rooms suddenly seemed smaller. It was as though she no longer knew her own home, doubting with every passing minute something new which had once seemed definite. Had the third window in the den always been there? Were the walls always that shade of blue? Why was it that the floor in the hall suddenly creaked again, when they'd fixed it so recently? It was as though the place had come alive, warping itself in the subtlest of ways, quietly redefining what she had always thought to be true.

Her head ached. She felt sick almost constantly. Sleep began to elude her more and more frequently until at long last he came home and proudly announced that he was leaving. Had she not been so tired she might have fought back, but his eyes were black as the bags beneath her own and exhaustion swept in like a mighty gray bird, rendering her speechless. He shook his head at her, disbelieving, and slammed the door behind him. In that very same moment, a series of thunderous crashes resounded from the spare bedroom behind her.

What felt like centuries passed in the time it took her to gather what was left of her will and make her way to the study. The house loomed over her as she forced the door open. The rows of shelves which once held every book they owned had collapsed, paperbacks and hardcovers lying scattered across the entirety of the floor. Some were open, some were closed. Some pages were bent and a couple of her oldest books had fallen to pieces. A series of ragged holes lined the walls where the shelves had torn away. It was the culmination of their years together, lost within a moment. At last, drained of any will she had managed to retain, she fell to her knees and wept.

Contributor Biographies

TRISTAN ACKER is a first year MFA poetry student at Cal State San Bernardino. You can read some of his works at InlandiaJournal.com. You can hear his hip-hop band the West Coast Avengers at westcoastavengers.bandcamp.com.

JEFFREY ALFIER has work forthcoming in *Connecticut Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Tulane Review*. His latest chapbook is *The City Without Her* (Kindred Spirit Press, 2012), and his first full-length book of poems, *The Wolf Yearling*, is due out from Pecan Grove Press.

KATIE BICKLEY is a dual credit student at ENMU through Dora High School. She is an avid reader, and enjoys writing poetry and fiction much more than writing short autobiographies

MARQUS BOBESICH received his BFA from York University majoring in visual arts. His poems have appeared in *Farmhouse Magazine*, *Carousel*, and *The Cherry Blossom Review*. He is also the author of three independent chapbooks: *The Night of a Thousand Snowsuits*, *Dirty Pretty Halloween*, and *The Humans Are Singing*. He now works in Toronto as an actor and musician. (<http://www.soundcloud.com/poormarqus>)

CHRISTOPHER BRUNSEN is a New Mexico native. In May of 2009, he enlisted in the MarineCorps and served an honorable 4 year tour. He has been writing since he was 15, and has been attending the Jack Williamson luncheons and reading *El-Portal* for just as long.

KAYLEEN BURDINE is a junior at ENMU, studying English and Theatre. She hopes to one day write for a living.

AMETHYST COLLINS is a sophomore at ENMU, majoring in Broadcast Production with a minor in Creative Writing. Apart from writing, she enjoys playing the clarinet and passionately discussing geek culture. Her favorite animal is the manatee.

CHRISTY CZERWIEN lives in Portales, NM and works at Eastern New Mexico University as the International Student Advisor. She received a BA in History from West Texas A&M University and an MA in East Asian Studies from the University of Pittsburgh.

KIRK LEE DAVIS is writing a novel about a boat. He has taught at institutions including the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin. He lives with his family in Massachusetts

ERICA DAWSON is the author of two books of poetry: *The Small Blades Hurt* (Measure Press, forthcoming 2014) and *Big-Eyed Afraid* (Waywiser, 2007). Her poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Barrow Street*, *Harvard Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and other journals and anthologies. She holds a PhD from University of Cincinnati and now lives in Tampa, FL, teaching English and Writing at University of Tampa, in both the undergraduate and low-residency MFA programs.

MATT ESPINOSA is in his third year at Eastern New Mexico University. He writes, draws comics, and meanders down other creative avenues from time to time. His work can be found at www.8bitartisan.com.

ANGELICA FLORES is a student at Eastern New Mexico University.

BARRY GRAHAM is the author of four books of fiction, including his most recent, *This Isn't Who We Are*. Look for him online at DOGZPLOT

GIGI GUJARDO is an actress, singer/songwriter, as well as an award winning slam poet, National Poetry Slam Semi-Finalist and 2013 ABQ Slam Poetry Team member. She is a sophomore at ENMU pursuing a degree in Theatre with a minor in Creative Writing. Her first chapbook, *Gringa*, is currently in the works.

MYLES JOHNSON is an African American and Pacific Islander, who was originally born and raised in Carson, California. He is a transfer student athlete who plays for the Greyhound football team at ENMU.

He feels blessed with the opportunity to attend a university such as ENMU.

DAVID KRAUSE was born in the San Fernando Valley where he resided until the age of 19. He attended Harvard-Westlake high school where he developed a passion for the literary and culinary arts. After two different jobs in high profile restaurants, he ultimately decided to direct his creativity towards a less competitive medium. He currently attends Sarah Lawrence College where he studies fiction writing and literature.

WAYNE LEE (wayneleepoet.com) is a Canadian/American who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Lee's poems have appeared in *Tupelo Press*, *The New Guard*, *great weather for MEDLA*, *Slipstream*, and other publications. His awards include the Mark Fischer Poetry Prize and the SICA Poems for Peace Award, and he is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His collections include *The Underside of Light* (Aldrich Press), *Twenty Poems from the Blue House* (Whistle Lake Press), and *Doggerel & Caterwauls: Poems Inspired by Cats & Dogs* (Red Mountain Press).

TOM LORD is a sad little atavism living in Somerville, MA. He works in Boston, and is a native of Arizona, having grown up in Flagstaff, and completed his BA in English (literature) at Arizona State University. Politically, he's somewhere left of Lenin, and dreads only the apathy of his generation.

JOSHUA LUCERO is a communications major at Eastern New Mexico University and currently works as a freelance photographer in the eastern New Mexico and west Texas area.

GEOVANNY LUJAN is a photographer from Albuquerque New Mexico. Photography is a passion of his, and he hopes to be among the greats one day. Ansel Adams, Michael Muller and David Burnett are among some of the photographers that inspire him. One day he hopes to work as a photographer and make a living doing what I loves.

SOPHIE JO MILLER is currently seeking a Masters in the Department of Communication. Her Bachelors is in Communication from the

University of Wyoming. She grew up in Laramie, Wyoming, and the inspiration for this story came from years of driving past wind turbines while traveling throughout the state.

BLAKE MOON has always been a writer. Words are a passion that he has had since he was old enough to read, and he hopes to one day become a published author. Blake is a student at ENMU and pursues a degree in Communications with a minor in Creative Writing.

ALEX NEELY is a journalist for the United States Army. Over the past year, he has covered events and written stories in the U.S., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Kuwait. Prior to military journalism, Neely was a full-time reporter for *The Deal* magazine and a freelance reporter for *Round 1* boxing magazine.

JEFF PARKER is the author of the novel *Ovenman* (Tin House) and the story collection *The Taste of Penny* (Dzanc). He is the co-editor of the anthologies *Rasskazzy: New Fiction from a New Russia* (Tin House) and *Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States* (Dalkey Archive). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *n+1*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, and other pubs. His nonfiction book *Igor in Crisis: A Russian Journal* is forthcoming from HarperCollins. He co-founded DISQUIET: The Dzanc Books International Literary Program in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2011, and for many years he was the program director of the Summer Literary Seminars in St. Petersburg, Russia. He spent 2010-2011 in Moscow, Russia, on a Fulbright Research Fellowship teaching creative writing, a subject that does not exist there, at the Russian State University for the Humanities.

W. TYLER PATERSON is a Chicago native who can be seen touring the country with his critically acclaimed comedy band 'The Shock T's'. He is a regular contributor to CBS.Com's Man Cave Daily, 'Train Like a fighter', and is currently working on a non-fiction book about his family's haunted history.

GREGORY RAPP is originally from southern Colorado, where he spent his days writing, prospecting for gold, and getting lost in the San Juan National Forest. He operates a small magazine called *Republic of Letters*, while working on a MA in English literature.

BRIDGET RICHARDSON never knows what to say about herself, so her close friend Ariel wrote a biography of her. Her version was a little too long, but apparently Bridget is a crazy and memorable human who makes things interesting. Bridget would like to believe that Ariel was being honest.

RUTH THOMPSON grew up in California and received a BA from Stanford and a PhD from Indiana University. She was an English professor and college dean in Los Angeles, and now lives in Hilo, Hawai'i, with her partner, writer-anthropologist Don Mitchel. *Woman with Crows*, Ruth's second book, was a finalist for the AROHO Foundation's poetry prize, and poems from the book have won numerous awards. Her previous book, *Here Along Cazenovia Creek*, was selected as one of the "Ten Best Chapbooks of 2011" by The Scrapper Poet and was choreographed and performed by dancer Shizuno Nasu. Ruth and Don were artists in residence in Portales in August 2013. Ruth also teaches yoga, meditation, and writing workshops.

WENDEL SLOAN is the director of Media Relations at Eastern New Mexico University, and also writes a weekly column which appears on Sundays in the *Clovis News-Journal* and *Portales News-Tribune*.

LAURA W. STEELE is an archaeology graduate student at ENMU who enjoys skiing, motorcycles, good books, margaritas, and the beach. Some of her favorite photographers include Ansel Adams, Dorothy Lange, and Edward Weston. In her spare time, she likes to sit and contemplate life with her rabbit Solzhenitsyn and make trips to her homeland of California.



WINTER 2014