
Niche
issue n°
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POETRY
FICTION
NON-FICTION
INTERVIEW
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MUSIC

Niche

ISSUE # 2

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Niche is an online literary magazine that was designed to be limitless. It aims to provide a place where an array of voices, from experimental and conventional, pulp and literary, non-fiction and creative non-fiction, graphic mediums, artwork, and audio, can coexist. As people with varying passions we've striven to find places where we can express and belong. We're for those who have already carved or have yet to carve their perfect niche within literary and non-literary communities.

THOMAS COCHRAN was raised in Haynesville, Louisiana. His work includes the novels *Roughnecks* (Harcourt) and *Running the Dogs* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Non-fiction and poetry have appeared under his name in *Oxford American*, *Rattle*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, and other publications. He currently lives with his wife on a mountain in rural northwest Arkansas.

WILLIAM DORESKI teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire. His most recent book of poetry is City of Palms (2012). He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's *Shifting Colors.* His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review, Atlanta Review, Notre Dame Review, The Alembic, New England Quarterly, Worcester Review, Harvard Review, Modern Philology, Antioch Review*, and *Natural Bridge.* He won the 2010 Aesthetica poetry award.

ALEX GUARCO attends Susquehanna University, where he is the senior co-editor of the nonfiction magazine *Essay*, co-founder of the campus spoken word poetry group, and a member of the Ultimate Frisbee team. He spends his summer days working as a gardener and spends nights serving clam fritters at a local drive-in movie theater. His writing has appeared in *RiverCraft, TomFoolery Review, Outrageous Fortune*, and *The Blue Route*.

LUKE M. JONES is a creative writing MFA student at Emerson College. He writes both fiction and poetry. His work has appeared in *HazMat Review* and *Slush Pile*, among others. He is also the editor-in-chief of *Words Apart*.

JULIUS KALAMARZ received his MFA from Columbia University. His work has appeared in *Opium Magazine, The Los Angeles Review, Fortunates, Ninth Letter,* and elsewhere. PIROULETTE—an automatic last words generator (LCD screen, wood) showed last year in Apexart's, "Let It End Like This." AVENIR (24 boxed postcards based on the work of Yves Klein) was published as Object 009 in the ZIMZALLA Avant Object Series.

LUBNA SAFI has wanted to be a writer since she was nine years old. Her passion for poetry and words has propelled her into the fast paced world of literary publishing, where she hopes to make her mark one day. She is currently residing in Doha, Qatar where she teaches writing by day, and sets pen to paper by night.

contributors | ART

ELEANOR LEONNE BENNETT is a 16 year old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with National Geographic, The World Photography Organisation, Nature's Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland trust and Postal Heritage. Her photography has been published in the Telegraph, The Guardian, BBC News Website and on the cover of books and magazines in the United states and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia and The Environmental Photographer of the year Exhibition (2011) amongst many other locations. She was also the only person from the UK to have her work displayed in the National Geographic and Airbus run See The Bigger Picture global exhibition tour with the United Nations International Year Of Biodiversity 2010.

KIMBERLEY MOK is a writer, designer and illustrator based in Montreal. She has a bachelor of architecture from Cornell University, and writes about green design and architecture for environmental blog *TreeHugger,* named one of TIME's top blogs in 2009.

DR. ERNEST WILLIAMSON III has published poetry and visual art in over 380 national and international online and print journals. Some of Dr. Williamson's visual art and/or poetry has been published in journals representing over 35 colleges and universities around the world. View over 1000 of Dr. Williamson's paintings/drawings on this website: www.yessy.com/budicegenius

contributors | DESIGN

MARIA SURAWSKA is a graphic designer living in Chicago. She photographs what she sees and designs what people use.

ROBERT BOUCHERON is an architect and freelance writer. His academic degrees are Harvard, B. A. 1974 and Yale, M. Arch. 1978. At Harvard, he studied poetry composition with Elizabeth Bishop, and won the Sargent Prize for translation from Latin. Since 1987, he has lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he writes on housing, gardens, local food, communities, and the people who build them. His articles, fiction, poems and drawings have appeared in the *Advocate, Albemarle, Baffler, Classical Outlook, Country Living, C-Ville Weekly, Echo, Inform, Literary Dilettantes, New England Review, New York Native, Northern Virginia, Piedmont Virginian, Prime Number,* and *Real Estate Weekly*.

RONIT FEINGLASS PLANK writes fiction and nonfiction and has written and performed her own work for the theatre. She is the winner of Switchback's May 2012 flash fiction contest and has also had her fiction published by Red Fez. She lives in Seattle with her family.

HUDA BIUK is a Libyan/American writer. She holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from the University of South Florida, and works as a columnist for *The Tripoli Post,* Libya's oldest English-language newspaper. Her work has appeared in *Sweet Magazine* and *Consequence Magazine*. She currently lives in Tripoli, Libya with her family where she enjoys exploring the Libyan society without Gaddafi in it.

JAMI NAKAMURA LIN is an MFA candidate at the Pennyslvania State University. She is a nonfiction editor at *Revolution House* magazine (www.revolutionhousemag.com). A Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Monkeybicycle, r.k.vr.y, Escape Into Life, Airplane Reading, Thunderclap Press, Prospective,* and *Short, Fast, and Deadly*.

contributors | FICTION

NANCY DEVINE teaches high school English in Grand Forks, North Dakota where she live. She co-directs the Red River Valley Writing Project, a local site of the National Writing Project. Her poetry, short fiction and essays have appeared in online and print journals.

FYAN FARKER works in an office and writes stories in Excel cells.

HEATHER RICK is a law student and writer living in central Massachusetts, and a former student of the story workshop program at Columbia College Chicago. This is her first publication.

AIDA ZILELIAN is a NYC writer. Her stories have been featured in journals such as Pen Pusher (UK), Slushpile, Wilderness House Literary Review, Suss: Another literary journal, Halfway Down the Stairs, Lowestoft Chronicles and Waccamaw. These and others can be found at www.aidazilelian.com. Currently, she runs a new reading series in Astoria, NY—Boundless Tales Reading series, that she will be hosting in the summer and fall. This year her novel *The Hollowing Moon* is one of the four semi-finalists of the Anderbo Novel Contest. *The Hollowing Moon* was also chosen as one of the first round of semi-finalists of the 2011 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. She is writing a sequel.

Bubble Town

BY ELEANOR BENNETT

What's

BY NANCY DEVINE

Spring made me different, like I had a fresh hair cut or new skin. I wanted to run everywhere, certain I was so light I wouldn't have to bother with the ground. I could float.

And spring made my mother different. She started cleaning our house, spending hours before closets, each an animal's open mouth where she excised strangeness: a broken clock with a bent second hand; mismatched shoes; marabou; rickrack twirled around cardboard from nylon packaging; worn tennis balls, empty album sleeves. Sometimes she pulled out an old dress, slipped it over her shirt and jeans, and wore it around our house, a costumed butterfly caught in mid-metamorphosis. Or she took out a photo album and stared at a single page for hours, her expression as vacant as the moon, her hands still as earth, so quiet I thought she was gone.

That spring, she put a crippled ironing board, legs bent like an injured camel, along with a sack of shredded hosiery and dusty furnace filters, stacked like musty waffles, out by trash cans near our back door where junk went every year before it was hauled to our berm so the city could whisk it away, bury it underneath everybody else's trash.

"Mom," I said. "I can't believe all that stuff out there."

I tossed my blue book bag onto our sofa and slumped down in a captain's chair at our dining room table where my mother mended my skirt, its hem frayed like notebook paper torn from a spiral.

"It's worse than last year, isn't it? Remember all the scrap iron and magazines?" I asked.

She looked up, her dark eyes pulling me, telling me things I wasn't sure I was old enough to know and I thought someone had just sketched wrinkles at

Underneath

the corners of her eyes and mouth, delicate as an impression of fern fronds in mud. Then she smiled, her face softening into an image I could accept, tempered, warm, her dark hair up in a loose crocheted chignon, shining under incomplete light of a chandelier above, two bulbs burned out but still there.

"Melanie," she said. "It is called spring cleaning."

She said "spring" and "cleaning" as if they fit together as naturally as a first and last name you've said your whole life, as if they depended on one another as much as hydrogen and oxygen in water.

She said nothing more and started a needle at one side of material where she puckered the hem of my skirt, ran the needle and thread just below the surface, and then pulled it through, in a whip stitch, until the hem began to close up, an incision being repaired, a tear undone. She worked her needle around in a mid-air loop, passed it through material and the loop itself she made, and then clipped it with child-sized scissors. She often advised me against biting thread as her mother had because it left indentations like tiny scallops of new teeth or baby teeth. But she didn't mention it. She set my skirt next to other clothing she mended: a blue chenille bathrobe; a velvet dinner jacket with wide, slick lapels; wool socks with threadbare heels; and cuffed linen trousers wrinkled into diagonal pleats across the front.

"Look out there at your sister, snooping around in the garbage. Mary probably thinks I pitched her ugly flannel pajamas. If your father weren't on call all the time, he'd see how seriously she takes things, especially for a seven-year-old. The knees are practically gone," my mother said. "Drives me crazy."

I thought of the summer before when my mother

inherited money from an uncle in Oregon who considered her his favorite. I saw a picture of her, a girl in a dark, corduroy jumper he'd given her, a prim, high-collared blouse beneath, its puffy sleeves clouds at her shoulders. He died suddenly, and my parents used the inheritance as an excuse to take a vacation that included my sister and me.

"Girls," my father said one evening.

It was odd having him at our dinner table with us instead of just hearing about him on call or dealing with an emergency. It was like an actor who looked like my father playing his part, saying his lines, attentive to subtext, his bangs a sweep of gray across his forehead. He looked at us for some time, in the long silence a parent knows best, his brow squeezed into a staff of wrinkles, as my sister and I twirled fettuccine around the tines of our forks, pale skeins of noodles we slid into our mouths.

"Your mother got some extra money, so we're going to take a little trip together."

"Really?" I asked. "Where?"

"We thought maybe Disneyland."

"We're going to Disneyland? You never leave work. We never go on vacation. Never," I said.

"Well," he hesitated and took a long, luxurious sip of red wine from a cut-glass goblet, sculpted ice in his hand. It seemed he had all the time in the world, so rare for him, that I couldn't shake it.

"I know. But we're going to drive to California, and we're taking off in a couple of weeks," he continued, propping his elbows on our table, his white cuffs rolled down like ladies stockings.

We sweltered in hazy California sunshine by the castle that lit up with a spray of fireworks every week on television, and at a Smallworld, Mary looked at those singing dolls in bright, native costumes and said, "What about the countries on TV news? Those people never sing or look happy. They're always dirty and sad."

I didn't answer. Our boat crept through shallow water and Mary put her hand over its edge, her fingers propagating a ribbony wake trailing behind her, a Maypole streamer. Our father had told not to do that.

We stayed at a hotel just outside Las Vegas, lights of the distant strip shining up, stars banished to the ground. Mary stopped me as I tried to get a can of pop from a vending machine there and stood in front of it, her blond hair smashed against its red and white lights.

"Mel," she said. "Mom and Dad really were going to the Ribbon for a second honeymoon. Not Disneyland with us."

"The Ribbon?" I asked. "What are you talking about? The Ribbon?"

"The Ribbon," she answered as if it were written simply in bold letters above her, a cartoon thought balloon I should just read. "I heard them talking when Mom first got that money and Dad said, 'Let's go to the Ribbon for a second honeymoon. Give it a second shot. Let's use this extra money like an omen, telling us to try a little harder,'" she said.

"What's an omen?"

"Oh, God," I said.

"Mom wanted us to go somewhere fun like Disneyland."

"Really?" I asked. "Move, so I can get my pop."

"I heard it," she said, tugging at her Mickey Mouse shirt hanging past her knees, shimmering blonde.

"Hey Mom," Mary called as she came into our house, her voice a wall at the end of my remembering.

"I just don't know about that kid sometimes," she said.

I stared at my mother folding clothes she mended.

"Mo-om," Mary repeated.

"Those pajamas, Mary, are almost worn out," she said. "I didn't throw them. They're in your top drawer. Go look."

Mary came from the back of our house carrying a quivering puppy, its head burrowed in the crook of her arm barely able to see over it. It looked like a mutt, and with Mary, they were a living paint-by-number picture: she in a red turtleneck, its folds darkened into cardinals of red tint, the puppy black and gray.

"Look what I found by the garbage under the sack of nylons," she said, "for keeps."

My mother and I didn't reply. As soon as Mary put the dog down, he crouched, wet on a rug, his back legs spread in shame, and then clumped off to the living room, Mary chasing, laughing.

Mary named him Clipper because he made a "clip," like paper caught in wheel spokes, when he walked and kept him because no one answered an ad we placed in a newspaper. My mother noticed cuts, one behind his left ear, and several on his front paws, and told Mary that maybe the owners never really wanted him, that maybe they didn't really understand having a pet when they got him and that she should think carefully about keeping him.

Still, Mary rolled him over and said, "roll over," and grabbed his paw and commanded, "shake." During meals, he sat on her lap under the canopy of our lace tablecloth, lucky enough to get petted between courses. And when Mary watched television, he was next to her so she could rub his neck and tell him about what she watched.

My mother tended to his cuts with Mercurochrome and bandages, though he chewed them off. After he healed, he loved to play. Mary and I sat in our living room, a few feet apart on the carpet, and coaxed him to gnaw on a raw-hide

"Spring made me different, like I had a fresh hair cut or new skin."

chew toy or bunched up socks, or we got him to run back and forth between us by saying his name over and over, "Clipper. Clipper. Come here, Clipper," our sing-song chant, a playground jump rope melody. He got so exhausted he'd lie down exactly where he was, claiming the spot, a spent canine explorer finally in new territory.

One morning, Mary and I walked outside while islands of ice still floated on black water of a nearby river, it banks rimmed with soft dark mud. We stayed on a sidewalk that runners and bikers used. When we were little, our mother used to take us there on long summer afternoon walks, Mary in a stroller, I hanging on to help push. We often went again early evening to pass time until our father got home from rounds. Children in other strollers dozed, but Mary sat upright, always looking around for whatever she could find and name: "Tree, squirrel, car, river."

"Mel," Mary said.

"What?"

"Do you ever wonder if Mom and Dad are happy?"

She carried Clipper and petted him, her right hand under his chest, his haunches resting on her elbow.

"Why?"

"I just asked," she said.

I remembered how she craned her head out from under the shade of her stroller to study everything, even the movement of leaves on the trees.

Later, I sat with my mother in our kitchen after Mary was in bed. My father was also in bed, reading journals and had left his supper dishes on our dining room table. He wasn't able to eat with us again because of some emergency, a car accident on a north-south interstate that connected us to Fargo.

"Mom," I said. "Today Mary asked if I ever wonder if you and Dad are happy."

"Doesn't surprise me," my mother said. "She's a nervous, little bird inside, all jittery. She worries about things. Always concerned with what she thinks is below the surface, what's underneath.

"She had stomach aches when she was a toddler; I think from worrying. I always thought it would pass. I guess you think things are going to pass. But sometimes they don't."

She looked at dirty pans on a counter and then at the white crescent moon like a spy outside our kitchen window. I wondered if she wanted the moon to tell her something, divulge a secret she suspected it kept only from her.

"I don't know what to say to her," I said.

"I know," my mother said, waiting for the moon.

"That trip we took to Disneyland—she told me she overheard you and Dad talking about going to the Caribbean for a second honeymoon. Going to 'the Ribbon' she thought. She swears you said it would be nice for all of us to go to Disneyland instead. But it was the way she said it. Like it was a big deal. A secret. Like there was trouble."

"It wasn't a big deal," my mother said. "No trouble."

She stood up, left the kitchen and began to carry in what was left on the dining room table: napkins balled up like tissue paper, a gold wicker trivet stained red with marinara

sauce and a glass bowl of salad half-full, an oily mix of greens like twisted lily pads.

The next day, a Sunday, Mary and I walked along the trail again. We loved weekends and being outside, even though spring had apparently retreated, the way it can around here, leaving a watery sheet of ice at the river's edges, crystallizing glass candy that looked like it could snap even if a breeze touched it.

Mary worried me, how dark clouds unnerve a farmer. But I tried not to think about what she might ask in this early spring chill.

"Let's see how fast Clipper can run. All those scars are healed and he's getting pretty big," she said.

He'd begun to lose the round, doughy shape of a puppy and taken on the angular traits of a dog, probably a Sheltie-lab mix our father said. Mary put him down, and he scurried along a sidewalk, his tongue lapping up air. We trailed him, half-heartedly in chase, despite a cold breeze grabbing our breath like angry hands. We maybe laughed at ourselves, two girls happy under a dog's spell even if it was cold outside.

"Do you think Mom and Dad are happy? Are they happy?" she asked, slowing down.

"God! What possesses you to ask me that?"

I stopped.

"You asked me yesterday. You're asking me today, and you'll probably ask me that stupid question tomorrow. I'm sick of it. You hear me?"

"Melanie," she said. "Do you?"

"Why do you keep bugging me? Ask them, if you want to know! Ask Dad, if gets home soon enough! Ask Mom! Yes! Yes, they're happy! Mom told me last night. Why do you always have to dig?"

I shouted and stood still, cold sucking up my words. Mary slowed more, turned to face me and ran backwards. I remembered my mother's face when she left our kitchen last night. Maybe she was sad or bored, or maybe she was just tired. Maybe she carried her duty as much as she carried those things in from our dining room.

Suddenly our house was farther away than I realized, and it was hard to believe it was really spring with branches dark, in silhouette against a leaden sky, and no buds yet on trees. Mary began to cry, and I felt shame and guilt course through me, as though I'd pushed her into mud and run ahead. Then she stopped, as a sound of rain falling and becoming snow at the same time was enough to fill both of us up.

"Look," she shouted, "Clipper's out on the ice."

Clipper couldn't get his footing and was splayed on thin ice just beyond where our fathered repeatedly told us not to go. He said water there rose high and spilled over its bank when it rained, and river current ran too quickly not only for little girls but even for the best swimmers like him. He'd seen the bodies of people who had gotten pulled down by undertows there and drowned. He'd seen their parents weep outside the emergency room while we waited at home for him.

"Let's get him," Mary said, grabbing my arm as she began to run.

"I realized I had just held both of them in my arms, even if for just a moment. So I propped myself up on my elbows and watched old ideas about spring slip beneath ice floating away."

"We're not supposed to go there. Dad said," I pleaded, surprised how hard she pulled. I followed, my face stung cold, prickling my cheeks.

"Wait. We can't. The ice'll break. Call him in," I shouted. "He'll come. He's a good dog."

"Clipper! Clipper! Come here, Clipper! C'mon good dog," she said and bent down as if she could scoop up the entire river in her small hands, as if her body were a cave where he could hide protected from wind.

He tried to stand, but ice snapped and started to float, carrying him away.

"We've got to get him," she said.

"Hold my feet and try to lean into the ground, away from the water, okay?" I said as I lay down parallel to the water's edge, my heart a pounding fist in my ears. I stretched out over the water as far as I could, but Clipper was out farther. I strained and my sleeves grazed the cold water. Then my right arm and shoulder went in as I grabbed him by a fold of skin at the back of his neck and dragged him up out of the river. Mary collected up as much of my jacket as she could in her hands and pulled so that I rolled over onto my back.

"We can't tell Mom and Dad. We'll get in trouble," she said, her hands at my ribs, the three of us lying on cold, wet ground, Clipper licking her wind-burned cheeks, candy to him.

"We'll stay outside a while, which should sort of dry us off. Then when we get home, if we're still wet, we'll say we got splashed by a car where there's always a big puddle near the corner mailbox," I said.

"It's cold. They won't believe us, especially the part about the puddle," Mary said. She stood up and pulled Clipper tight against her chest. "They're not going to believe us. We're too muddy."

"Then we're going to have to do a pretty good job of lying," I said, still lying on the ground. "Okay? You understand?"

"Yes," she said. "I understand you, Melanie."

I realized I had just held both of them in my arms, even if for just a moment. So I propped myself up on my elbows and watched old ideas about spring slip beneath ice floating away. ¤

The Scars of Germany

BY ERNEST WILLIAMSON III

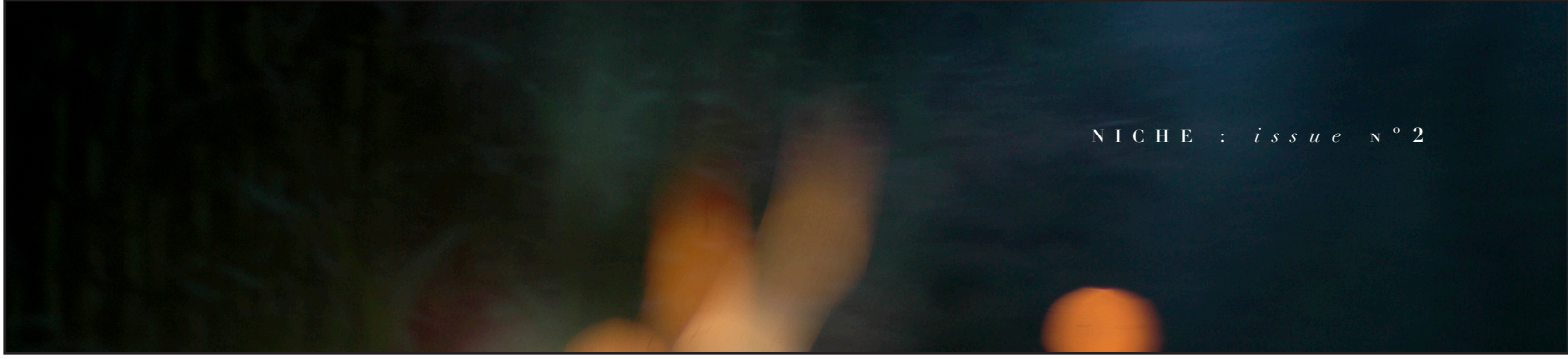
55

BY THOMAS COCHRAN

The day before the event,
unfounded attacks led to a blossoming
of misshapen effigies.
Policemen—who prior to this turn
had stood around twiddling their hats—
sheepishly reported to their precincts,
where they were given instructions
regarding the removal of the protesters.
The effort was a success,
allowing the original festival to proceed.
Parade-goers dressed colorfully
in costumes representing a future
of high employment rates and religious tolerance.
Applause was constant along the route.

LAWNS TURN BLUISH

BY FYAN FARKER



They tasted like cardboard braised in halitosis. We were halfway through with the bag, the two of us, and hadn't bothered splitting it up, so we took what we thought we deserved—a little more than the other. The sun was out, and the occasional firework exploded in a translucent, smoky burst.

I pulled a can of beer from the case between my feet. Sean, in the driver's seat, stopped humming a song on the car stereo and asked for another one. We smoked spliffs and watched people pass on their way to the park. Some of them recognized Sean's car and put their heads close to the tinted windows. I told him they were a bad idea, that they attracted, not repelled, cops. He didn't listen, and I didn't care, but I was in his car.

We had just graduated from college. I was back home, sending resumes to cities in the morning, and working at Donitello's Pizza at night. Some of us skipped town early with finance gigs, but the rest of us drove around a Neverland of bars, basements, and leaf-strewn pools. Earlier, we went swimming and chased sandwiches with cold beer. There were ten or twelve of us. We spoke as veterans of the unknown: How "grad school might actually be worth the dough," because out there, "there ain't shit." It was bad policy, one of them would say, "the generation before us wanting immediate results, immediate profit, man," that screwed us over. We were pleasantly convinced of this, drunk for the sixth day in a row, waiting for something to happen because that's all we knew how to do.

When enough people arrived to park the car in, we got out. I lugged the half-empty case of beer with two hands. People sat in groups around the park, on bed sheets or blankets. Girls wore summer dresses. Sunglasses were raised above

heads. Music played from three different car stereos. I tried to pick my favorite song and ignore the rest. Sean said he had to shit and did a weird dance, bringing his ankles to his waist. No, Sean stepped in shit. No, he didn't even do that.

We passed a few people crowded toward the center of a blanket. I leaned over and watched them play with a toad. They spoke like babies and giggled. One of them knew me and said hello, but I had left to catch up. Sean's tan and navy striped shirt made him look like a cartoon burglar. People got out of his way, and I followed.

We stopped when we found coworkers from the pizza shop. Jason, the oldest of us, spoke and nodded "Good, yeah? Good," and I agreed. Something slithered around my leg, and I found Mary, who worked the register, hugging my calf. She rested her bandana-pulled hair on my knee and held tight. I ran my fingers through her curls and quickly massaged the back of her neck. The kid who watched the fryer shook me from behind and said my name. I couldn't remember his, so I just smiled.

Everyone spoke at the same time. Brothers and sisters of minimum wage all ready to blow the week's paycheck on a night off. Tomorrow we'd sweat out tonight next to a 400 degree oven, but at least we'd be out of the house. They were worried because we found happiness in being stuck, but all we knew was small shifts were good shifts, and small aspirations were honest, even if nobody gave a damn.

Mary got up and threw her arms around my neck, not getting close but hanging. A few people sang the opening lines of one of the songs playing from the car stereos, *"I was alright, for a while... I could smile, for a while..."* but knew to stop at the same time. I drank another beer. Somebody started a firework that launched blue sparklers in different directions like a neon fountain. It burned out to the laughing jackals responsible. I probably knew them.

Jason and Mary went after the beers with me, Mary smiling each time she took one out.

"When do you go back to school?" Jason asked me.

"I graduated, remember? I'm here," I said.

"Shit, that's right. My bad," Jason said.

I had been here the last three summers. Jason had no reason to distinguish them. He was the closest thing to a shop manager and the town dealer. You could only count on him to be around. I don't think he ever wanted anything but proximity. He would go home with someone tonight.

"How'd you get here?" I asked.

"Walked," Mary said, "I'm off Wilder Street."

"That's close?"

"Mmhmm, there's a trail right through the woods."

Another firework went off, this one straight up in the air, screaming. People cheered. Its pop set off a car alarm and a few groans. I took a big, slurpy sip, tipping beer over my right cheek. Mary brushed it aside with the back of her hand.

Next to us, people ate a pizza with cheese so hot it slipped off the slice when tipped the wrong way. I'm not sure who made it. Everyone from the shop was here. Sean stared at it, probably wondering the same thing. I caught his eye. We

stared at each other for a second then turned away. It would just be minutes now.

Mary passed me a bowl. I took a thick hit and passed it to Sean. He skipped his turn. A stranger approached Jason and whispered in his ear. Jason nodded his head and followed the stranger. The park had filled out. "The Fourth of JUUUU-LY!" someone screamed.

*

Sean and I went for a walk through the crowd. He said he needed it. I liked sitting with Mary, but I could tell he didn't want anyone else.

Everyone seemed to be having the same conversation but on different blankets. Sean walked in front of me, close enough to grab my arm if my path went off his.

"Need more beer," he kept saying. He spotted a group of people sitting on a blanket with a case of beer ripped open. He pointed to them. "They got beer, get it."

"We don't know them. Need to find someone we know," I explained. He nodded, but stood there, staring. I asked him to come along.

Sean rubbed his belly the way a child wipes dirt off his hands. He did this every few steps. My old neighbor, a younger kid with spiky hair, surprised us from a nearby blanket and threw his arm around me. He yelled right through me and all over Sean. Sean grabbed the kid's arm as it hung around my shoulder. I told him to relax. He let go and stared at the grass between his feet.

"Whoa, what did you two do? You got eyes like saucers" my neighbor said.

He put his hand too close and I slapped it away.

"Easy," he said.

"Sorry. We're taking a walk. Looking for beer. Got any?" I asked.

"Totally, come on over."

Sean held onto my shoulder for the walk over. My neighbor kept talking.

"It's crazy, man, I've never tried it, always wanted to, though. What's it like?"

He was with four guys and two girls. The girls talked to each other while the guys observed a slew of fireworks. Sean covered his ears when he saw them and then rubbed his shirt.

"Yo, dude, what's it like?" my neighbor said, again. His arm was elbow-deep in a case of cheap beer.

"It's like being a kid again," I said.

My neighbor laughed, I'm not sure why, and handed us beers. Sean cracked his open. I saved mine for when we would get away. The girls spoke to one another, but stared at us. My neighbor talked to me about *War*, a game we used to play in his tree fort where we fended off nameless evils with an arsenal of plastic weaponry. Sean finished his beer in three sips. I asked for another, for Sean, and we left.

"That girl likes you," Sean said.

"I don't know them," I said.

"Mary. The bandana," he said, and his eye dripped down to his lip.

*

Fireworks popped at machine gun rapidity, blurring the real and the echo. The field was thick with smoke, as if it came from the ground. You couldn't see further than the closest group-on-a-blanket away. One group disappeared in the smoke as another one showed up, like walking through rooms. Sean walked right through a group of people and sparked a gruff "what the fuck." I yelled that he was all right to no one and stopped Sean, so we could move from group to group together.

"In between, stars applauded t
we had sent to the sky."

People ran and screamed from the smoke behind us. A red shooting star whizzed from the panic. Silhouettes of cursing kids followed its fizzing trail. There was excitement everywhere.

Two guys walked past us talking about how they "could have been fucked up," and how they are about to be "fucking somebody up." They were short but strong and upset. They asked us "who lit that?" and Sean looked at me, to make sure it wasn't us. I raised my shoulders in confusion, and Sean watched them leave.

The shooting star crash-landed just ahead. Two girls, one laughing, brushed ash and singed paper from a cooler. Their blanket had several cigar-sized burn marks, some of which still had moving borders.

"Did you see that?" the laughing girl asked us. She shook her head. "Crazy," she said. She opened the cooler and brushed the damage onto the grass with leftover napkins. Beer bobbed in melted ice.

"I'll give you ten dollars for six beers," I said. She laughed and looked at her friend who was still pissed off, still cleaning.

"Okay." She opened the cooler and plucked out six beers, holding them against her stomach.

"Can we have those?" Sean asked.

"We got 'em, they're ours." I said. The girl smiled and dumped the beer from her tummy to mine. A couple fell and Sean picked them up like they were spilling. I held the other four awkwardly and asked for a moment, trying to readjust. She laughed and asked which pocket. I told her, and she dug in. We both laughed. She pulled out a few bills and put some back. I thanked her for making us right, and she waved us off.

I remembered a few blankets, but none of the people. We were close. Sean found an empty bed sheet and sat on it.

"Nooo," I whined.

He spread out, like he was making a snow angel without wings. Everyone in the smoke had something to say, but not us. They stepped in and out of the clouds.

"What are we doing?" Sean asked.

"We're walking back to friends," I said.

"Why won't they come to us?"

"Because we left them."

"I know, but..." he trailed off. The treetops bordering the park stood where smoke died. They seemed stable, like

he whizzing imitations

connected ladders. I drank beer and watched people pass while waiting for Sean to get up. A distance grew in our stability, I felt like a target on the foreign blanket. What we needed was motion—a pulse. I picked up Sean by the waist, and he climbed up me until we stood side by side. People came in from the smoke and laughed.

"You look like a burglar," I told him. He nodded and closed his eyes.

"We can't do this anymore," Sean said.

"I know."

"But really."

*

I heard my name, then Sean's, from the smoke beside us. The clouds collapsed long enough for me to see Jason. Another break came, and I saw Mary behind him, her bandana around her nose like an outlaw. Sean skipped ahead. I did my best to maintain my cool and not mimic such glee. My stomach gurgled, and my intestines wrestled, stopping me in my tracks. I took a deep breath, a big swallow, and forgot about everything.

"Okay there?" Mary asked.

"Couldn't be better."

She burped me and let out whatever took place inside.

"We were worried about you," Mary said.

"Never worry." I said, and burped out the rest of the dysfunction.

"I was worried you left," she said. I smelled vodka in her heavy, soaking eyes and wanted to taste it. I put my mouth over her, and she laughed, pushing me away then pulling me back to rub eye shadow off my lips. All this rotten egg smell and stale smoke, it wasn't for her. She had that hopeful quality of girls in early summer, that look as if she'd never witnessed expiration; as if she could sit in a bath for hours and never prune, never giving a thought as to how some things get so damn lucky.

The smoke cleared, explosions stopped, comfort was still. I rubbed roots that had grown through the blanket and over Mary's bare legs. Sean watched me, then his lap, then me. Jason spoke loudly of amusement park rides. A girl I didn't know sat Indian-style with a bottle of water propped between her folded feet. She rubbed her arms and smiled, sometimes closing her eyes.

Another stranger came and spoke so only Jason could hear him.

"Ecstasy?!" Jason screamed and startled the stranger. "What the hell is wrong with these kids," he said to us, "they want their happiness too easy." He turned back to the stranger, "this is America, son, and I don't sell happy buttons. All I have is good, old-fashioned, work-for-your-high type shit." The stranger stared at us, not sure if he was in on the joke, or if there was any joke at all. The others laughed, and I hated them for it. We started talking again, and after a moment, the poor kid walked away hoping we'd forget him. I tried to.

Headlights of the departing poured over us and broke through leftover smoke. People walked through the lights, projecting giant shadows over the distant trees. We all turned to watch. This happened for quite some time. Mary rubbed my shoulders and the back of my head until I fell into her lap. In front of her nose, smoke, air, and cloud swirled together in a dark marble ceiling. In between, stars applauded the whizzing imitations we had sent to the sky.

Sean came close to whisper. He put a clenched fist over my stomach and let go of something.

"I can't do it," he said.

I picked the small bits off my chest and choked them down with warm beer. Sean got up.

"Why won't they turn off their lights?" Sean asked. Then he walked towards the giants and was gone.

*

Most of the cars had left. You could hear the few groups pushing past closing time, a mix of the left-behinds and newly-discovered. Jason and the girl with the water bottle slow-danced and laughed. Mary kissed me. I had to remind myself to kiss her back. Her bandana was gone, and her curly hair had wrapped itself around my head. Jason opened his mouth, and the girl tipped her water bottle until he pulled away. I waved her over. She put the bottle to my mouth, then Mary's. It was warm and old, like a mouthful of clean spit. Mary rolled off of me and stood up.

"Come on," she said, and I stared at her. She grabbed my hands and pulled me to her. My head took a while to get there, but when it was, I'd already been kissed. She turned, my hand still in hers, and began to walk towards the woods. There was some hollering.

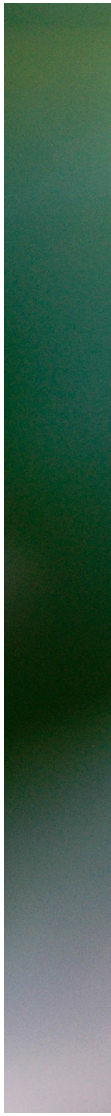
At the brink of the woods I stopped and pulled her back to me. She moved like a yo-yo; her forward momentum finding it just as easy to come back. I pulled her close and let her melt into my chest. This is how I'll protect her, like a kangaroo with its young. We started this way, but she got fidgety and started to laugh, taking over as the guide.

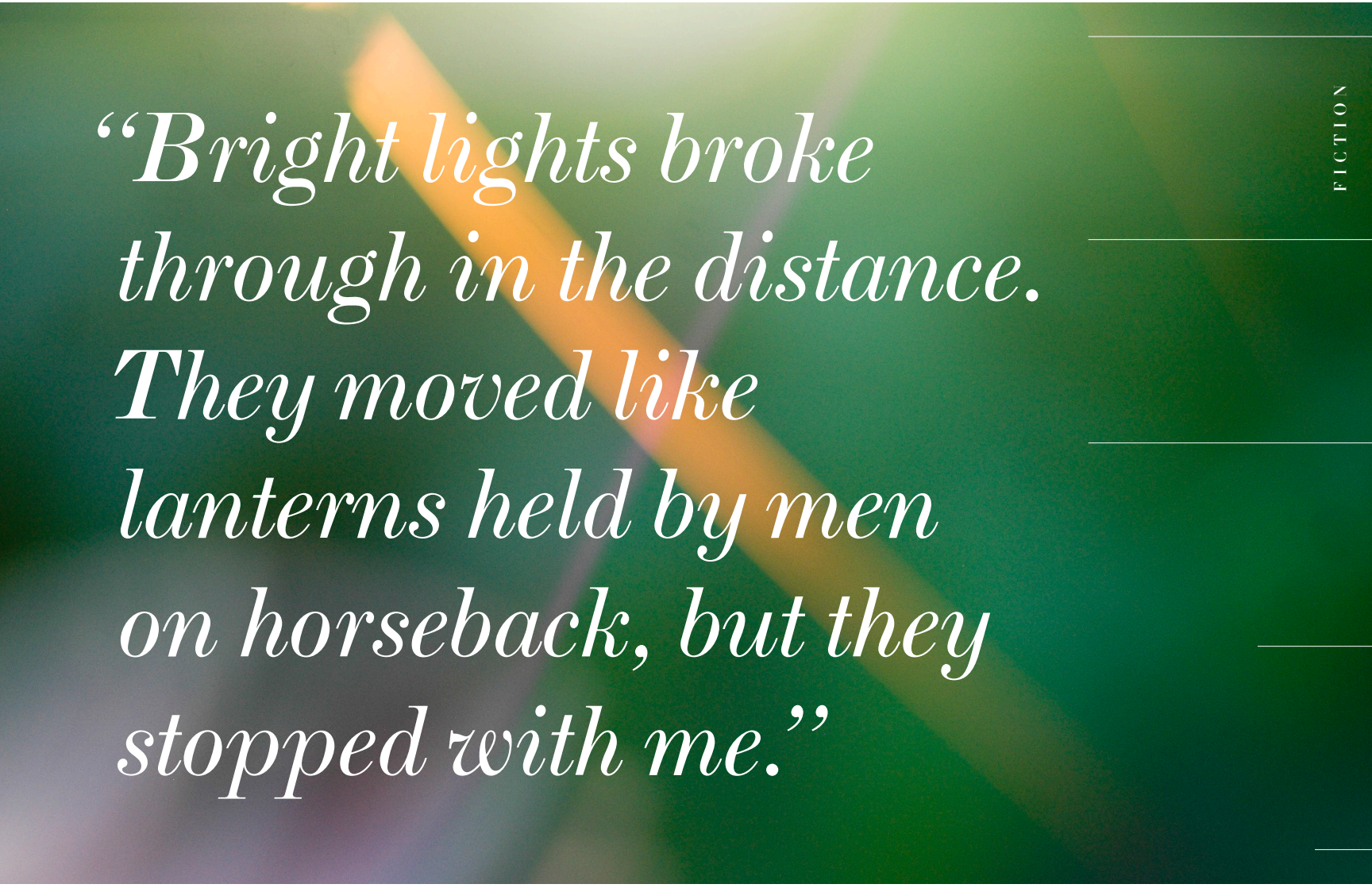
The trail was too thin to walk side by side. I lost a sandal on a twig. When? I don't know. I took big steps to avoid tripping on vines and weeds. Big, wide, predetermined steps, so that I moved like I shit my pants. She pulled me out of it, stripping patience.

Our path blended into the surrounding brush, but I had the bouncing ghost that was the back of Mary's neck and bare shoulders to guide me. Things became clear; trees broke from darkness. Suburban wilderness divided into its parts: dead grass, twigs, wet leaves, leftover trail signs, sun-bleached soda bottles, knee-high vegetation, dug-up invisible fence wire. Was morning already approaching, or had I mastered the woods?

I lost myself in peek-a-boo with the small of her back, her brown tank top flapping just above her waist.

Bright lights broke through in the distance. They moved like lanterns held by men on horseback, but they stopped with me. She raced ahead, spinning once in a while to make sure I was still there. I ducked away from branches before I saw them.





"Bright lights broke through in the distance. They moved like lanterns held by men on horseback, but they stopped with me."

She hummed and hopped over a log across the trail. A fork in the road arrived, but we took a right and dove into the woods, avoiding it completely. We moved towards the far-off lights.

I asked what we were doing, but she turned and shushed me with a finger to my lips. I grabbed her bare arms, to stop myself, and felt the chill of aged night hidden in her flesh.

"Got to be quiet," she whispered, and kissed me. The woods thinned and broke for sloping grass. Its cool blades soothed my sandal-less foot. I left the other sandal behind. On top of the grassy hill, the shadow of a home rose from the ground. A lone light in the backyard lit a flagpole where its subject hung like a wet tissue.

"My brother tried to climb that," she said of the flagpole. "Nearly broke his neck trying to touch the flag."

She had her arm wrapped around mine, but still led the way. I put my hand out and brushed the iron poles surrounding the pool. I tried to match her careful steps through a garden, avoiding plants of dark blue dusk in midnight soil. Windows reflected the fading night and then us.

Inside, it was dark again. The silence of the car's still engine filled the garage. With her right knee at my waist, she pinned me to the sedan. Her lips grazed my cheek until they found mine to kiss. Her tongue a washcloth dipped in vodka I tried to ring out. Someone said something in the car, and I turned to see what the problem was, but no one was there. We took a break from kissing and caught our breaths, agreeing to something as long as it wasn't mentioned.

To the kitchen—stone, to hardwood, to rug. She filled glasses with sink water, and we drank them down right there, filling up again. A black and blue pallet had settled over the back yard, but the kitchen was still dark enough to leave the creases of her face at midnight. She mouthed something and turned away.

I followed her to the basement, putting my weight on the handrail to quiet my footsteps. She turned on a light, and I covered my eyes. I found her next to a dresser, a giant bed with a bronze frame and a comforter thick as pillows behind her.

"Who's here?" I asked.

"No one," she said.

I put my hands behind my back and timbered onto the mattress. The comforter smelled of old Mary and laundry detergent. I rubbed my face all over it. She laughed, and I found her without a shirt. She moved to the door like a flipbook missing pages, in strobe-like hops of ceased movement. The navy "V" of the Villanova flag followed her. She flicked a switch, and let the black and blue of outside into her room. I leaned back.

My shirt came off... My pants came... I was naked... She would come then slip away. Was it her or the comforter? Her eyes were closed, and her face rubbed against mine. My hair was pulled, my back was grabbed, my dick carried something. It carried everything, then nothing. I stood up and stared at her, she smiled back. We talked about friendly things, and she fell asleep. I closed my eyes, but it was no use. The floral pattern on the sheets wouldn't rest. As for her curls...

*

Thunder rolled through the room in descending footsteps. Someone yelled her name, someone old. She moved slowly then jumped out of bed in a blink, pulling on clothes. She whispered rapidly towards me, holding my pants. I put them on, without underwear, and ran for the door as she whispered stop – stop – STOP, but I was there, and it opened, pushing me against the wall, and it opened again, trapping me between the door and the wall, and again, so that I was kneeling in the small crevice with my knees at my chest. An

eye peaked through the crack and thinned. She screamed, already crying, and the eye turned towards her. They moved right by me, stuck behind the door, and followed each other up the stairs, yelling together out of turn.

I forgot how to move, I forgot how to talk, I forgot everything. It was here, back in the darkness—a ray of light sneaking through the crack between door and wall—that I hid. It was safe, nothing happened here.

Their screams were far away and another voice, like hers, but older, joined in. Small footsteps shook the wall I leaned my head against. Someone was coming for me. The footsteps leveled out; they got close. I could hear them in the room—they moved from one end, then stopped, then to another end, and stopped, then to the other side of the door, and stopped. A small hand pulled the door open and, a small man, no, a boy, stared at me—a munchkin in red soccer shorts and a black Nike t-shirt, picking his nose and rubbing the prize between his fingers.

"Did you and Mary go swimming?" he asked, and flicked the dry booger into the rug.

"No," I said.

"Where's your shirt?"

"By the bed."

"Want me to get it for you?"

I nodded. He smiled and ran over to the bed. He checked the pillows then dug his head under the comforter. There was a wiggle and he pulled it out, proudly lifting it over his head. I nodded, again. He smiled, ran back over, and tossed it in my lap. I thanked him and pulled the shirt over my head. Yelling continued in the distance.

"What'd Mary do?"

I stood up and walked over to the bed. He followed. I tried to open the window, but it wouldn't budge. He climbed onto the mattress and swung his legs around to sit. The room refused to stay still, as if everything was made of a waterbed somebody just got off of. His greasy hair tangled together after every blink, but his eyes stayed stuck on me.

"You have big eyes," he said.

"Thank you."

He leaned back on the bed, embarrassed, and made a gun with his fingers, shooting targets around the room. I tried the window again. The yelling was getting closer. The kid looked up at the ceiling, as if he could see through floors and watch the fight. Outside the sun dried dew off the flag. It swayed from the top of the flagpole in small ripples, the occasional gust presenting stars and stripes in their entirety. The kid sighed, dramatically, and made gurgling noises with his mouth.

"We were supposed to take the flag down," he said.

"Who was?" I asked.

"Dad and me, but now Mary's in trouble."

"That's too bad."

"It takes *forever*. We have to fold it, and put it in the attic, and take it down."

The crescendo of descended stairs filled the room again, this time with more than one pair of legs. The kid got up and

"She had that hopeful quality of girls in early summer, that look as if she'd never witnessed expiration; as if she could sit in a bath for hours and never prune, never giving a thought as to how some things get so damn lucky."

walked to the door. A balding man in light blue jeans and a tucked-in golf shirt came into the room. He was about my size, but with a gut, and the type of hands that look too big for pockets—the type of hands that have made something.

"Scotty, go upstairs," the man said. The kid ran by him and we listened to him take the stairs. "Scotty," the man said, again, and the kid went the rest of the way.

"Sir, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for this to happen."

"I'd hope not."

Mary looked at me until I noticed her.

"Get the hell out of here. You can't be in my house without me here, understand?"

"Yes sir, I'm so sor—"

"Go."

I took a step forward and misplaced my weight, tripping backwards before catching my balance. He muttered something along the lines of "Jesus Christ." I walked by him, shoeless and with eyes turned. I apologized, again,

to no response. Mary whimpered "sorry" as I passed her, and I did the same thing. There was nothing to say that we couldn't say at the five o'clock shift we'd be meeting at this afternoon. I wouldn't be a bad person then. I would be working, sir, and trying a bit. I would be found at your dinner table, not in your daughter's room. There was still time to break in these hands.

I left through the back door. Last night's chill was trapped in the stone of the patio. A neighbor ran their lawn mower in the distance. Birds chirped, dew dried.

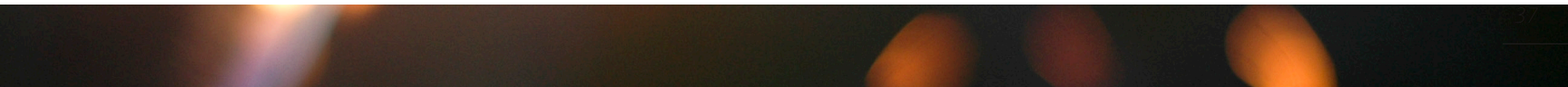
A circle of mulch and brick protected the flagpole. I stepped in and examined the many strings that put the flag in the air. It seemed like far too much for such a simple idea, like using a power drill to hang a photo when a tack would do. I pulled on ropes that didn't budge, until I found one that did. It moved all the others, too. The flag came down with it. I took a step back and saw that nothing was ruined, that it was correct, so I continued.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled. He was on the porch, watching me. I continued taking down the flag. "Hey!" he screamed, and started down the path, past the pool and towards me. In the distance, the neighbor's mower stopped.

* * *

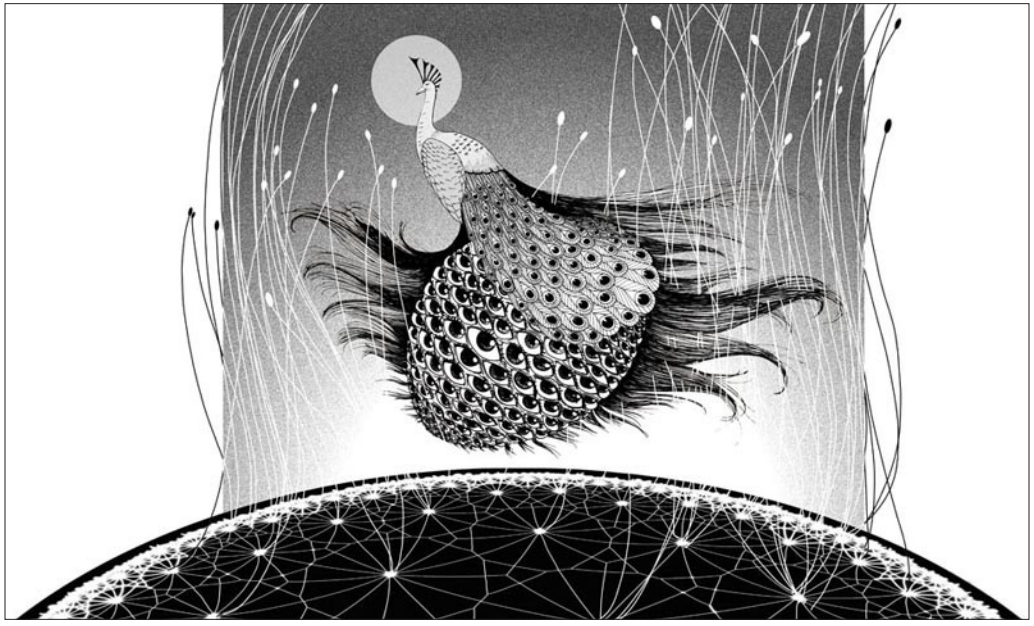
I killed the mower assuming it was Susan needing something, but the screams rolled up the grassy slope that put our home above the McArthur's, and it came from Mike McArthur himself. It was a violent yell, not the usual kind telling Scotty to get out of a tree or come inside for dinner.

The cut grass sunk into my nostrils and made my eyes water. There was somebody else out there standing at the flagpole. It appeared to be neither a child nor man, but something in between. It wore no shoes and ran through my yard without looking at me, as if eye contact would give it away. Its speed tremendous, its destination nowhere. ¤



Beholder

BY KIMBERLEY MOK



Morning Ash

BY HEATHER RICK

My mama smoked Marlboro menthols, the kind that come in a white and minty blue box. She'd have one dangling from one hand while cooking breakfast, lighting them on the glowing coil, careful not to ash in my Spam and eggs. If it was after Christmas or Easter, there would be greasy plates of leftover honey ham wrapped in crinkled aluminum foil crowding out the Kool Aid and Busch Lite in the fridge. Then she'd put real ham in my scrambled eggs – long, thin, sweet-salty ribbons of it that gave way meltingly against your back teeth. Otherwise it was Spam. Mama would plunk the pencil-eraser-pink rectangle of meat-product out of the blue can and cut it into little rubbery cubes to go in the old scratched cast iron skillet with the eggs.

"What do you care whether it's Spam or nice ham?" she'd ask, ashing into the milky brown puddle at the bottom of an abandoned coffee cup. "They both turn into the same thing," gesturing out the window, to where the upstairs-neighbor's dog was shitting on the March-withered grass that straggled along the front walk and died out at the sidewalk.

She would breathe that smell of Marlboro menthols into the homes she cleaned. I imagined the furniture and drapes soaking up the smoke, the way my spam and eggs did. My mama worked for a cleaning company, owned by her sister, my Aunt Lydia. Every morning she put on a starched white uniform and got into a white van that smelled of Clorox bleach and vacuum cleaner bags full of dust and cat hair and went to clean the offices of small-time doctors and lawyers, storefronts with second-hand clothes and dusty electronics grinning in the windows. She'd drag the vacuum cleaner up the stairs of the lilac-colored Victorians over on Church Street, where many of my classmates lived. I was glad my mama didn't look like me and didn't have my last name, so those kids wouldn't know I was the daughter of the woman who cleaned their toilets.

My mama had a thick snake of black hair that coiled against her shoulder as she stood at the stove in her cleaning lady's uniform. My mama's hair was part of the breakfast routine, as it slid off her shoulder when she reached for a plate for my eggs, when I was eleven and still thought that black braid could wrap around the whole world twice, when she was thirty-six and the gray hadn't crept into her hair yet. She got that black snaky hair from my grandfather. Granddad was half Micmac, half French-Canadian. He got called a spic and a nigger by the kids at the high school where he wore a brown janitor's uniform (cleaning up the messes of those more fortunate than us runs in the family.) He was just dark enough, a cinnamon color with mama's obsidian hair, black eyes, two wild front teeth that stuck out in every direction, these white sparks jumping from his dark face when he smiled.

Granddad clung to the French surname and whiff of white privilege he'd inherited from his father. He would have slapped the bitter, earthy-tasting Algonquin words out of his own mother's mouth, so eager was he to plunge headfirst into the maw of white America. Granddad knew

"My mama smoked Marlboro menthols, the kind that come in a white and minty blue box. She'd have one dangling from one hand while cooking breakfast, lighting them on the glowing coil, careful not to ash in my Spam and eggs."

white trash was better off than reservation trash, that he could get farther by downplaying his Indian blood, telling people he was Italian or Greek, something swarthy yet cleanly European. I don't know whether that's self-hatred or survival. So he married a white woman, real old New England stock. Gramma's folks came over on the Mayflower and quickly established the white trash traditions of shiftlessness and unchecked reproduction. I wondered if it ever occurred to Granddad, when he came home from work and saw Gramma in the doorway with a bottle of cheap whiskey that she'd traded food stamps for with the woman next door, that his wife's people had killed his people, or at least cheated the woodlands and hills right out from under their feet.

Mama always said she was the least favored child, because she got Granddad's dusky complexion and black hair. Aunt Lydia was the jewel, with her blue eyes and blonde hair (inherited from one of Gramma's many "friends" while Granddad was mopping bathroom stalls at the high school.) Then mama married Irish, and Granddad was pleased to see that telltale Indian hair die out when I got dad's red-gold hair and a faint ghost of his freckles across my cheeks and nose.

Some people think it's sad when I tell them about my Granddad. Violet got mad, threw phrases like "internalized racism" into the 3am insomniac darkness of her bedroom, as though I was to blame for the intentional white-washing of my family's complexion. She was a mutt

herself. Half white-Chicagoan, her Polish and Czech great-grandparents imported to work the stockyards of the South Side, half 19th Street Mexican. Maybe it was because she existed somewhere between both cultures, not fully inside either one, while my granddad had realized his dream of assimilation through a pack of fair-haired grandchildren.

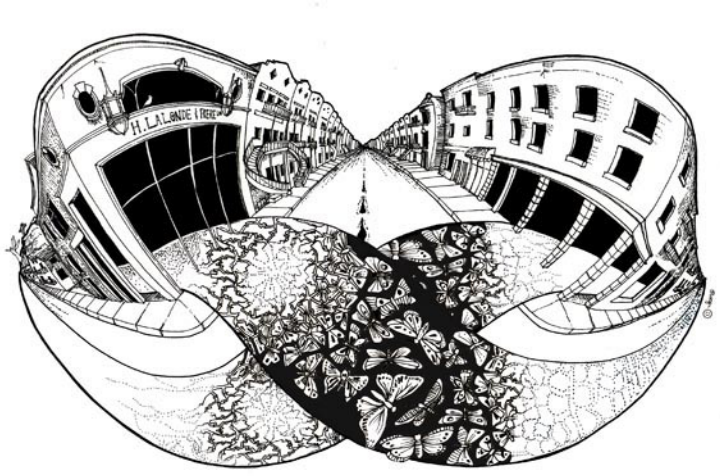
This was when we weren't sleeping, and would lie awake in her bed every night, listening to the sleep-breathing of her roommates on the other sides of the walls and the night-clatter of late El trains shaking the pylons outside her windows. We'd rub the palms of our hands under each other's t-shirts and in circles over our backs, trying to soothe each other to sleep, the way my mama would rub my back when I was sick. My rubbing would awaken Violet's stomach, bringing the hungry growls to the surface, vibrating the seashell curves of her stomach. Somehow we were always going to bed hungry or drunk, or with feet wet from a long walk home from the train, or thighs numb with February cold from waiting on the wooden El platform in the wind. Her stomach woke mine up, which should have been annoying, but I liked it, how our bodies responded to each other and synced up in unusual ways.

I stood at Violet's miniature stove in my underwear and a wife beater, clutching a cracked spatula in one fist. The chill from the wine-colored linoleum crept up my bare legs to roost in my thighs, in the fat that only seems to exist to absorb heat and cold and touch. I watched the cubes of Spam brown, the eggs fluff yellow, hoping to feel the fiery lances of Violet's fingers on my cold legs. I kept turning the eggs even when the touch never came, because sometimes cooking is an "I love you" in and of itself, one that need not be reciprocated, only eaten. I don't know whether Violet could sense that, any more than I did as a child, when my mama slid the blue plate with my Spam and eggs across the scarred tabletop, then pitched her cigarette out into the yard as she shouldered open the door for another day of work, and how I never said, "thanks," or, "bye." Some things bypass the bridge of language, especially between mother and daughter.

But Violet was not my daughter, just a dirty sometimes-lover. I dumped her eggs on a plastic plate, threw the skillet hissing into a sink of water. I lit my last cigarette of the early morning on the burner, as it began to fade from cherry red to the same dead gray that swam outside the windows. Violet always told me my white trash roots were showing when I did this. She twined her hair around one hand and shoved it over her shoulder as she began to eat. It wasn't the same, that hair, the way it shone in the light above the sink, treated with hot irons and styling gels, smelling of apple shampoo, the cigarettes we smoked, and the winter air we walked through. It wasn't the same, but in the smell of eggs and menthol cigarettes, I figured all I could give her was what my mother gave me – ashes in her eggs and the ashes of family history, dissolved into the present like a cigarette end tapped into a cold cup of coffee. ¤

Moebius Carpet

BY KIMBERLEY MOK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Humor Like Yours

BY WILLIAM DORESKI

Vandals have dismantled my car,
leaving a shell as flimsy
as a cicada's. You laugh
your cutest laugh, the one shaped
like a keyhole. Insurance
will cover the loss but not
your laugh, for which the entire world
must pay.

Meanwhile, carcasses
rot in the leaves, recent victims
of the serial killer we raised
from the egg. We're responsible,
but you blow bubbles and snort
with glee when I propose dragging
the unsightly mess into forest
too profound for local police
to penetrate.

Humor like yours
can't be purchased off the shelf.
Too bad it won't emasculate
our vicious offspring, who maunders
across the campus with backpack
full of ordinary textbooks,
his expression a mockery
of the tombstones in Flanders Field.
We ought to teach him morals
of pure arsenic and antimony,
heavy metals that will last him
all his life.

He ought to help us
conceal his crimes, but studying
quantum mechanics has numbed him
to our arts and humanities view
of the landscape. The wreck
of my car rusts in the rust-red sun
and you form a perfect circle
and laugh right through it, rousing
but hardly inspiring the dead.

Refusing to Reuse

BY ELEANOR BENNETT

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Lake Place

BY ROBERT BOUCHERON

In the autumn of 1975, I moved from Boston to New Haven, to start graduate school in architecture at Yale University. I arrived by train, with two suitcases that contained all my possessions, except for some boxes of books that followed by mail. Too precious to abandon, the books represented my life as an English major.

My new address was an old house near the center of town, behind the Payne Whitney Gymnasium, on Lake Place. Built around the year 1900, the house was a wood frame three-story house with an apartment on the first floor, and furnished rooms above. It was shabby, and Lake Place, like much of central New Haven, was little better than a slum. But it was a short walk to classes, and it was affordable.

The apartment was occupied by a young couple, the landlord said, both of whom worked, and whom I never saw. The second and third floor rooms shared a kitchen and bath on the stair hall. I rented the cheapest room, on the third floor at the back, with a view of trees and similar houses beyond. Each of the other two rooms on my floor was rented by a young woman. The one in front was Asian, to judge by the scroll painting she hung in the kitchen, and the chopsticks she left in the sink.

The woman in the middle room was Barbara, a graduate student in French. Like me, she was in her first year, and she also had moved from Massachusetts. We became friends and occasionally chatted in the stair hall or kitchen. For economy, I ate most of my meals at home, while Barbara ate most of hers at the graduate dining hall to save time. She studied mainly in the library.

Groceries and other shopping were within walking distance, on three radial streets named for the regicides, the three English judges who condemned King Charles I—Whalley, Goffe, and Dixwell. They fled at the Restoration in 1660 to New Haven, and hid nearby in a cave, according to tradition. History lay underfoot.

Like many graduate students, and despite statistical evidence, I did not think of myself as poor. I was twenty-three years old, recently graduated from college, and I had grown up in a middle-class family. I had left a job I did not like in university administration and a city I liked very much, Boston. This was the first step toward a professional career, and a plunge into a new culture, that of the design studio. Between savings and a gift from my grandfather, I had enough money to get through two years of a three-year program, if I was careful. When the third year came, I would figure out something.

The architecture school class started with thirty students. For the first semester, we were all in the same studio space, on the top floor of the Art & Architecture Building. It is no exaggeration to say that we lived there, given the long hours, late nights, intense concentration, and equally intense emotions. It was a small enough group that we got to know each other, and during the first year, we had several group meals and field trips. Architecture was a notoriously male profession, but women made up a third of our class. Many of the students were married, and they brought their

spouses more or less into the group. And most of them had experience as undergraduates in design studios. I had plenty of catching up to do.

The faculty required us to work in teams on some projects, and there was a sense of cooperation and camaraderie. I learned more from my fellow students than from the faculty. By nature, though, architectural education is competitive. We had several short prize competitions, called esquisses, and comparison of our work was relentless. Some students emerged as favorites. The jury system, by which faculty and distinguished visitors verbally critique student work, could be brutal. This mix of helpful and harsh was said to be preparation for the real world. At the time, however, I felt overwhelmed.

During the second year, while listening to a jury discuss another student's project, I had a sudden insight. The jargon I had been hearing for months, about poché, partie, square donut, figure ground, and special place, began to make sense. It does not translate readily into words, but there is a language of form, a set of physical objects and spaces, which can be arranged to produce meaning. In the press, the aspect discussed most frequently is light, the way it falls on or inside a building. In school, where lighting simulation was an advanced study, the discussion was more often about geometry, function, basic plan types, suitability to the site, and whether a student's drawing or model was convincing.

Even after my insight, I found much of the talk abstract. Rarely did the critics discuss structure, cost of construction, or style. Yale, like other American architecture schools, lingered in the cool embrace of the Modern Movement. More than a style, modernism claimed that the architect could and should create an entirely new solution for every design problem. Design was thought to be a process, an intellectual exercise, resulting in a pure and austere form. Historical styles were beneath contempt, and Beaux-Arts, which had been the guiding principle in America for decades, was a dirty word.

Assigned a monastery as a studio project, I drew on my knowledge of medieval and baroque abbeys, and composed a scheme of cloisters, cells, gardens, and a chapel located on the highest part of the site. The visiting critics, using an insult from the Beaux-Arts lexicon, called it "pompier."

Steven, one of the stars of the class ahead of me, and one of the few students I got to know well, sympathized. The critics were "without merit," he hissed. The son of Hollywood screenwriters, he grew up in Beverly Hills, and had graduated from Yale in English. So we had literature in common. Steven talked incessantly, amusingly, and rapidly. By way of praise, a critic said of him that he could draw as fast as he talked. After graduation, Steven worked in New York for one year. Then, disenchanted by the real world of design, he returned to Hollywood.

As full-time residents of the Art & Architecture Building, designed by Paul Rudolph 1961 in a rugged, concrete Brutalist style, we had a narrow view. Unloved then, the building was restored and enlarged in 2008, though it is still an acquired

taste. Ironically, we were surrounded by a masterpiece of Collegiate Gothic, the Yale residential colleges. Built in the 1920s and 1930s, they were designed by James Gamble Rogers, on the model of Oxford and Cambridge.

During holidays and vacations, while my classmates left town, I wandered through the Yale complex, which would soon be locked for security. It was then possible to weave through arches and courtyards, with picturesque views of towers and stonework, and never take the same route twice. Yale does not have a campus, but occupies considerable real estate in the blocks of central New Haven. The pedestrian moves from street to university to private property and back again. The English university towns provided the model not only for architecture but for this mingling of urban spaces.

My walks expanded. Equipped with a street map and the book New Haven: A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design, by Elizabeth Mills Brown, I saw most of the city. Founded as a port in 1637, it was an important manufacturing and railroad center in the nineteenth century. The original layout of nine square blocks, with the center left open, is a famous example of early American city planning. The center square developed into a public park, the New Haven Green, with three churches in a row down the middle. Municipal buildings front one side, and the oldest Yale buildings form a wall on the opposite side.

Though it had little to do with my formal education, as defined by the design studio, and though the conventional view was of a grubby industrial town, afflicted by racial strife and ill-advised attempts at urban renewal, New Haven fascinated me. I explored the three churches, built in the 1820s, from the great wooden attic trusses of one to the burial crypt of another. I poked into the ornate City Hall before it was demolished, and saw the great central stair hall and skylight. I walked out Whitney Avenue to East Rock Park, and I walked out Edgewood Avenue to West Rock Park. New Haven lies in a river valley bounded by two cliffs of reddish basalt.

For a drawing class assignment, I sat on East Rock one spring day, and sketched a panorama of the city. At close range, I loved the Victorian, Italianate, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Neoclassic architecture of the houses and public buildings, and the Shingle Style made famous by Vincent Scully. Scully's lectures on art history at Yale were already legendary. Though they were not in our curriculum, they were open to all students, and I attended when I could.

Some of my walks were nocturnal, returning late from school, or for the sake of fresh air and exercise. One of these sticks in my mind, though it is hard to say why. During my second year, as money ran low, I took a part-time job at a Baskin-Robbins ice cream store on Chapel Street. Walking home after work one night in November, I reached Broadway, which true to its name is a wide paved area. An unfamiliar sound from the sky got louder and more distinct. I looked up to see an enormous flock of geese migrating south. It took a minute or more for them to pass overhead, as their honking echoed from all the hard surfaces. I was

tired, blurry-eyed, and ashamed of the pink and brown uniform I had to wear. The moon was full, and the air was clear and cold.

If there ever was a lake near Lake Place, it had long since disappeared. Instead, the nearest landmark was Grove Street Cemetery, at one end of the street. Yale has grown to engulf the cemetery; when it was laid out in 1796, it was at the edge of town. Surrounded by a stone wall, with a monumental stone gate in the Egyptian style of 1845, it resembled a park, and it was more exclusive than the New Haven Green. The pamphlet "Graves of Eminent Men" lists presidents of Yale, professors, United States Senators, judges, inventors, and the architects Henry Austin and Ithiel Town.

In warm weather, I walked there. Stretched on the grass with a book, I also fell asleep there one October afternoon. On waking, I strolled in the gathering dusk to the gate to find it locked. The wall was too high to scale, and the street beyond was deserted. I found a maintenance shed built against the wall. By way of a brush pile, I climbed on the roof of the shed to the top of the wall and hopped down.

In the two years I lived on Lake Place, the old house suffered from neglect. The radiator heating came and went, as did the natural gas for the stove and hot water. Outside the window of the third floor kitchen, the miniature wooden balcony was crumbling, badly in need of repair and paint. An infestation of mice came with winter. They nested in a wall of Barbara's room, and made a surprising amount of noise, she said. So much for the saying "quiet as a mouse." I bought mousetraps, set them with cheese or peanut butter, and caught more than we could count. Mice got into cabinets, boxes of food, and the refrigerator. One night, a mouse ran across my bed. I jumped out, chased it, cornered it, and clobbered it with a book.

On another occasion, a bat flew in through an open window, not an uncommon event for New Haven, where bats nest in East Rock. I chased it through the stair hall with a towel, brought it down, and released it outside, while Barbara retreated to her room. For her second year, she found another place to live.

One by one, the other tenants left. The first floor was broken into, and the woman living there was robbed and hurt. She and her boyfriend moved out. When letters arrived from the city utility department about overdue bills, judgments, and receivership, I caught on at last. The landlord, named Gaetano—"just call me Guy"—was an electrical contractor, and he was in financial trouble. As an investment property, the house was producing too little income to meet expenses. Guy was letting it run down, which made tenants leave, which made the problem worse. He was a likeable man, easygoing. He offered me a cache of old architecture magazines stored in the basement. After a second winter of unreliable heat and water, I admitted it was time to move on.

For my third year of graduate school, I won a scholarship. It came with part-time work in the school, first as an assistant to the registrar, then as a teaching fellow for

an undergraduate design studio. The professor for the course, a new addition to the faculty, turned out to be more sympathetic than those I encountered during my first two years. By helping the younger students, I discovered how much I had learned. And during the summer break, I worked for a local architect, an older gentleman with a small office, on a project for a resort hotel. As a first job, it was an antidote to the rhetoric of school, and a foretaste of the real world of architectural practice.

Before I left Lake Place, while it was still unclear whether Guy would pull it together, or his loan would be foreclosed, or the property would be seized for taxes, I cleaned up the yard. It was a warm day in early spring. The yard could use some attention, and I felt the exercise would do me good. I cleared dead weeds from the front yard, pruned an overgrown hydrangea, picked up fallen twigs and branches, and pulled ailanthus and privet shoots that threatened to take over the back yard. There was a detached garage behind the house. From it I borrowed tools that some previous owner had left. Guy never locked the garage.

While I stooped and grubbed in the back yard, I found plenty of debris, blown by the wind or thrown away by tenants. I collected it in a plastic bag, to put on the street for the city trash collection. Among the debris were scraps of wood, some cut in curious shapes, some with jagged edges, some with green or white paint on them, and all stained brown by weather and dirt. I saved the wooden scraps without knowing why. Later, I took them in the house, where I now had the third floor to myself. I washed off the dirt and left them to dry.

Over the next few days, I assembled the scraps on a countertop, trying different arrangements as an abstract composition. I had seen photographs of Louise Nevelson's "boxes," and I had learned in an art history course about "found objects." The time I spent arranging the scraps of wood was exciting, a discovery of some kind. Architectural models hold a similar interest, but this exercise was pure design, without a program or a critic. Finally, I sorted the scraps into two groups and glued them together. One group formed a wall sculpture, which I hung in the kitchen. Another group formed a table-top sculpture, with warped and split boards suggesting a plant or animal.

As the spring semester ended, I found another apartment near the architecture school, and I persuaded a classmate to share the rent with me. The apartment on George Street was the first floor of an old house, with three rooms, kitchen and bath. None of the rooms was built as a bedroom, but two could be closed for privacy. John took the room in front, with a bay window, and I took one in the middle, with a crudely blocked door. George Street was noisy with traffic, and there were reports of crime. But we would spend little time there, and it was only for a year.

On a visit home, meanwhile, I had bought a used car from a family member. The car was faded and rusty, but the engine had a few miles left in her, he claimed. On a cloudy morning in June, I loaded my clothes and books in the car.

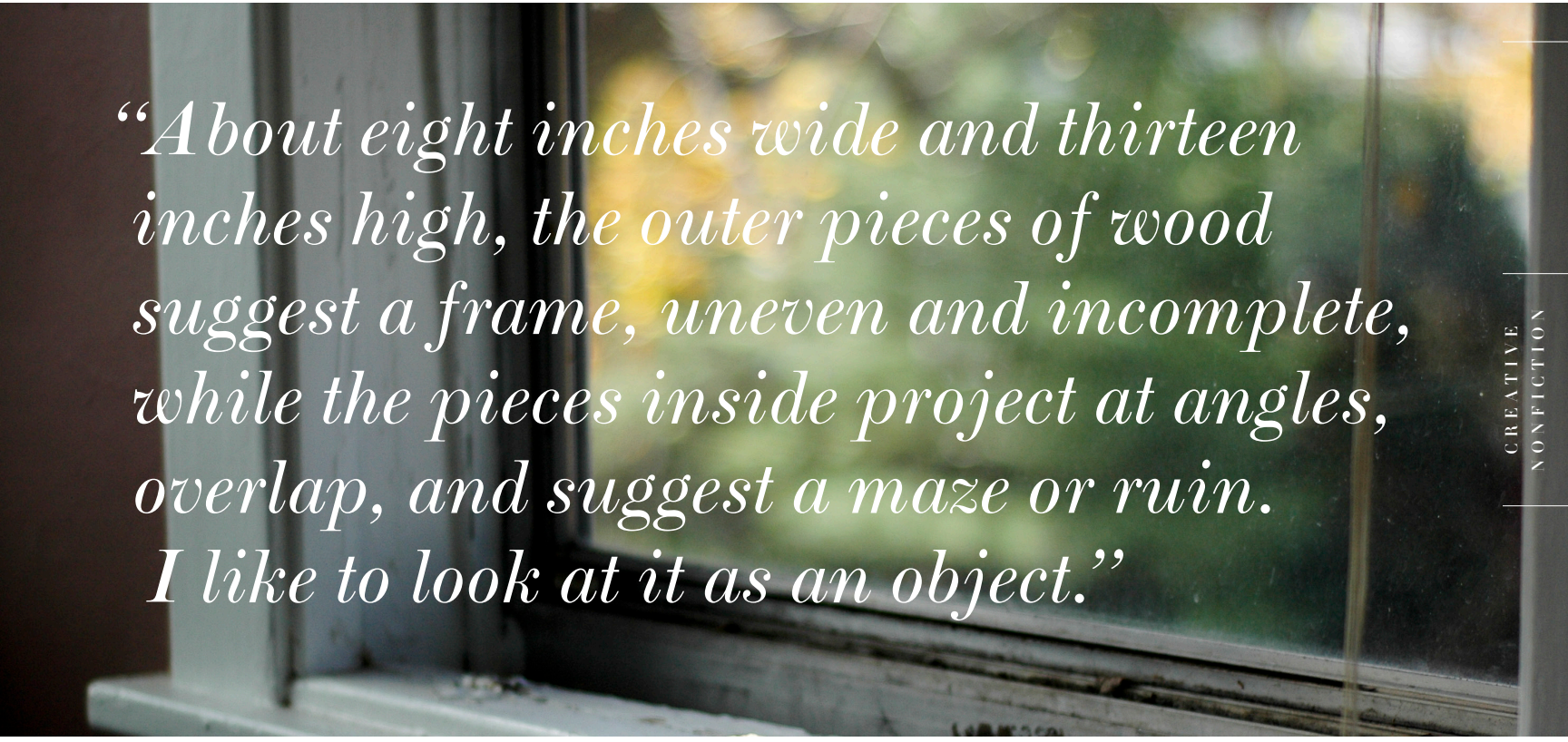
Guy had said by phone to slip the key through the mail slot in the front door, so I did. Unhappy to lose his last tenant, he seldom visited the house.

A few days later, I realized that I had left my wall sculpture behind. On a summer evening, I drove back to Lake Place. All was quiet. Despite my spring cleanup, the yard already looked unkempt.

The basement door was unlocked. I found a flashlight hanging from a nail just inside. The electric power was turned off, but the flashlight emitted a feeble glow. I crept inside, through piles of junk, past the old architecture magazines that Guy tried to sell me, and found the stair up to the first floor. Again, I was in luck. The bolt on the door at the top of the stair wiggled free. I walked through the first floor apartment, where everything remained as it was when the young couple moved out.

With the dim flashlight, I climbed to the third floor. In the confusion of packing, I had left my sculpture in the kitchen, hanging where the Chinese scroll once hung. The yellow-painted walls, which had seemed cheerful in the noontime sun or while cooking supper, now looked forlorn, the plaster cracked and full of holes. I retraced my steps out of the house, hung the flashlight where I found it, and pushed the basement door as firmly shut as it would go.

My sculpture survived several moves since then. It now hangs in the kitchen of another old house. Strictly speaking, it represents nothing. About eight inches wide and thirteen inches high, the outer pieces of wood suggest a frame, uneven and incomplete, while the pieces inside project at angles, overlap, and suggest a maze or ruin. I like to look at it as an object. And it reminds me of the time and place where I made it. ¤


"About eight inches wide and thirteen
inches high, the outer pieces of wood
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All That You Say Is False

BY ERNEST WILLIAMSON III

Pin

BY ALEX GUARCO

Every year, when the veins of the leaves turn red, I watch her go alone down the street with a
manila folder, sliding only the brightest shades into the slot.
I asked her about it once, and she said something
obscure about old age and anesthesia,
a leaf bouncing like a trampoline between her fingers.
I told her I hadn't thought too much about it.

She didn't speak to me until the bedroom that night,
after clipping the contents of the folder, like laundry, to a fishing line over my side of the
bed, saying *you'll need these more than I do*
and I said nothing, taking and pretending to understand the medicine.

A Passing Season

BY AIDA ZILELIAN

I grew faint from the perfume of frankincense and the priests chanting in their loud solemn voices, pacing down the aisles of the church, the clinking of their censers haunting the air. From the corner of my eye I saw Emma chewing the bottom of her lip to keep from crying. My father sat next to me, stonily staring ahead, and my mother next to him, her face pink and puffed, nearly unrecognizable.

At thirteen, I was old enough to fully absorb the idea of death. What I was grappling with was the senselessness of such a thing. I had never known anyone who had died so young, nor had I anticipated it the way I had when I was seven and my grandfather was put in a hospice for terminal stomach cancer. His gradual decline had helped ease his death for all of us. Sitting in church with my fists clenched in my lap, I remembered my brother leaving his bed unmade the morning he died, and what I could not tolerate was realizing that he would not ever be there again.

Ashod and I sat in the backseat of my father's 1987 Buick, our grandmother wedged between us – the referee during most car rides when we were younger. There was the musty smell of cigarettes when we first piled in; weeks ago, my father had quit smoking. The heat, even at nine o'clock in the morning, left the air pungent, smelling like an ashtray, and we rolled down the windows, waiting for our father and mother to get in.

It was our ritual every summer to drive to the beach on the weekends, where our very extended family would always meet. My mother would occasionally suggest driving to the other side of the ocean, where there was bay water, and where she could relax without worrying about keeping an eye on us. We would immediately complain about the

ocean floor being too rocky and the stillness of the water not offering the fun of waves we had grown accustomed to.

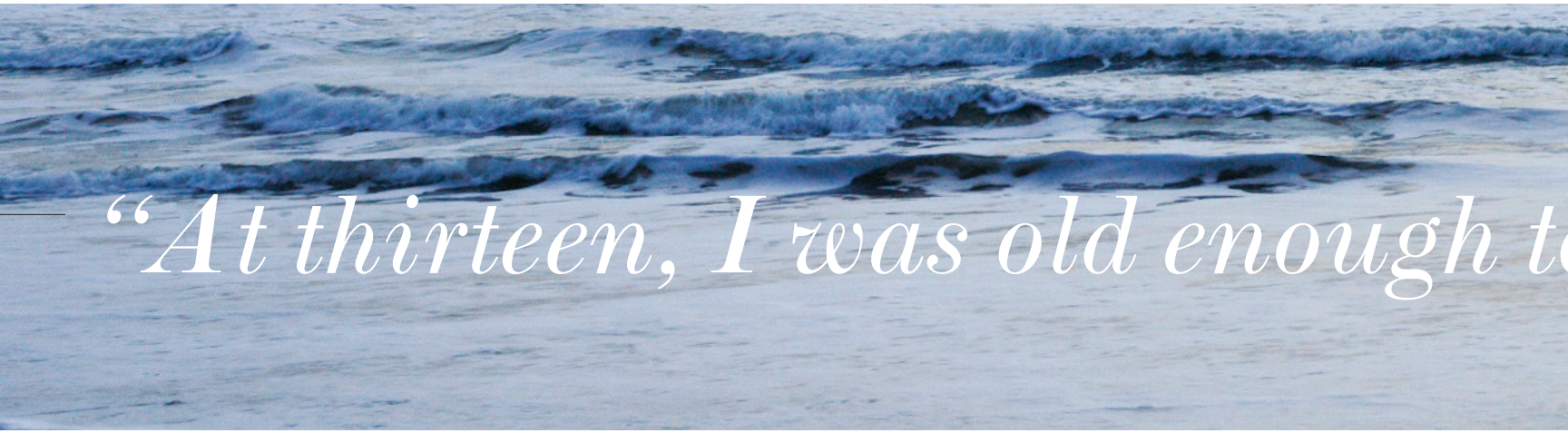
"You can wear water shoes," she had suggested once.

Ashod and I had turned to each other, our faces sour with disgust; we had seen people wearing water shoes, and aside from their unfashionable contrast to our swimsuits, we enjoyed burying our feet in the warm, powdery sand, clutching and releasing the velvet feeling between our toes.

"You can make your own waves," she had said.

This particular morning we also had Emma with us. She lived three houses away from ours, and came from a strict Polish family. Although we were Armenian, we knew that her parents, the Resniceks, felt a kinship to us. Emigrating from Poland when Emma was only five, they too, were concerned about their daughter becoming too Americanized. She and Ashod went to the same high school, and walked there together in the mornings. Sometimes I would trail after without them noticing, and I would watch them hold hands when they thought no one was looking. Although Ashod and I were only a year apart and spent more time together than most brothers and sisters, he was secretive about his feelings for Emma.

As we rode to the beach that morning, I stared out the window and my grandmother did the same. Ashod and Emma sat cramped between us, and I noticed their knees touching, attuned to their self-conscious desire to sit so closely together. Emma and I were not friends, but I liked her. She was too quiet for my taste, and we usually ran out of things to say to each other if the opportunity for a conversation arose. Despite the age difference between Ashod and me, perhaps she felt I was his little sister, and regarded me the same. She was an only child, and had no



"At thirteen, I was old enough t

experience with the dynamic between siblings.

My mother's tendency of over-packing always made us the last to arrive. We lugged the large cooler, two duffel bags, and two large umbrellas across the parking lot, while my grandmother complained about the heat, and Ashod and Emma walked ahead of us. They seemed unto themselves. At fourteen, my brother was taller than our father, and the messiness of his long brown hair lent him an air of indifference that made him seem older. Emma was only a few inches shorter than him, and she too had long brown hair, longer than my brother's, and it hung loosely almost to her waist. They were picturesque, and in the midst of their awe for one another, they were unaware.

I looked up at the sky. The clouds were large, pillowy, still. From a distance I saw my cousins Araxi and Sophie and waved. I looked forward to the predictability of these summer afternoons. My cousins and I would run into the waves screaming, and take enough lashings from the ocean that we made us return to our parents claiming exhaustion and hunger. After too much eating, we would lay under the sun and promise each other that we would lie still for at least half an hour – our notion of loveliness was inspired by the Bain de Soleil commercials where a very tan, expressionless and gaunt woman would appear wearing a fashionable white bikini and over-sized sunglasses, and lie on a lounge chair applying suntan lotion to her arms. We never lasted longer than fifteen minutes, when someone – usually myself – would suggest burying each other in sand or seeing if one of our fathers would help us build a castle and moat. Ashod would usually lie under the sun and eventually go back into the water. He was a strong swimmer, and had recently joined the swimming team at school.

My mother will always blame herself for Ashod's disappearance. As the years progressed, she had nagged us less about being careful when we swam in the ocean, sensing that we were responsible enough to know better. Emma accompanying us that day must have given my mother an even stronger sense of security, assuming she and Ashod would not leave each other's side.

I remember seeing him wading into the ocean. He wore his dark red bathing suit, and before diving in he turned and waved. I knew he was waving at Emma, who was sitting on her blanket, leaning back and smiling, her cheeks flushed. That was the last time I saw my brother.

o fully absorb the idea of death."

A while later I saw a shadow form across my sandcastle that I had been busying myself with for a while. I turned around. "Where is Ashod?" my mother asked.

I had no sense of time, and guessed he had been gone for over forty-five minutes.

"Swimming," I said. I bit into the falafel sandwich she had handed to me.

"For how long? Where's Emma?" she asked, and squinted towards the shoreline, scanning nervously. "Go ask her where he is," she said.

Emma was still sitting on her blanket.

"Have you seen Ashod?" I asked.

"He's swimming," she said. "He should be back soon."

"He's been gone a long time," I said. "My mother's worried."

"How long has it been?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You've been sitting here longer than I have." I hadn't meant to, but I sounded like I was accusing her of something.

"I'm not wearing a watch," she said, almost defensively. I could tell that suddenly she was concerned. She put her hand on her forehead like a visor and peered at the ocean. "I don't see him. But that doesn't mean anything. He could have swum to shore not too far from us. You know how the ocean can drift you."

I knew she was right. There were many times when I would go swimming, and when I would come out I wouldn't spot my family right away. Sometimes I would have to walk for a while before finding them. It had scared me the first few times.

"I hope you're right," I said. We stood up and were quiet for some time. We stood by the water, waiting for Ashod to emerge, his hair plastered across his face, wearing a satisfied grin.

"It's not like him to disappear for this long," I said finally. Emma stayed quiet.

My father came over to us. "Your mother said Ashod has been gone for a while?"

"Yes," I said. "We're standing here looking for him."

"Did he say how long he'd be?" my father asked, turning to Emma.

"Not really," she said, pools of tears in her eyes.

Time did not stop for me, but grew very still. While my mother alerted the lifeguards, and motorboats sped out looking for Ashod, I stood in the very same spot until night

came. I watched the sky turn colors, unmoved by the magenta streaks across the sky, the deep indigo that shone from the bright stars I ignored.

Even after hours of waiting on the sand, well after night came, I stood with my mother and father, Emma, my cousins and aunts and uncles staring at the ocean, waiting for the loud, angry waves to deliver my brother from the depths of the waters where he had disappeared.

They never found his body. I imagine his limp figure washed up on the shore. I imagine it is daylight, and the dim sun rising shines on him indifferently. They searched for his body for a week, and declared him missing.

*

The priest faced us and made the sign of the cross with his hands. I crossed myself and watched as my four cousins approached the casket and gripped each side to carry it to the hearse. My father tried to stand but collapsed in his seat. My mother clutched him to her chest, and for the first time I can remember, I saw my father cry. Emma stood beside me, taking deep, spasmodic breaths, and finally walked out.

I knew she had headed towards the bathroom and I found her standing outside the door, looking out the window. The sky was hazy, and the dim sunlight made her fair skin seem ghostly.

"We have to go," I said.

"I know," she said, and kept staring out the window.

I stood behind her, unsure of what to say.

"Emma – " I began.

"I think it's my fault," she said quietly.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I knew what she was trying to say. I guessed she was being dramatic, and felt irritated.

"He swam further than he should have," she said.

"How do you know that?"

"Because he wanted to prove something to me."

She stared ahead.

"What are you talking about? Prove what?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

"To prove he loved me," she said. There were pink blotches forming against her pale skin. I suddenly detested her. I detested her quiet, guileless charm, when in fact she knew much more than she was letting on, and had kept it from us for over a week now.

"He said he loved me, and I told him I didn't believe him. I told him he'd have to swim to the middle of ocean, to where there was this large ship, and then I would believe him."

I remember the large ship she was referring to. It was there sometimes when we would go to the beach. Our family would joke about how long it would take to get there on the small kayak one of our cousins sometimes brought along. It was so far away that at times the morning haze would camouflage the top half of it, depending on the weather.

And now Ashod's wave to her became more significant in my memory. Her flushed cheeks – the blush of hearing for the first time that a handsome boy loved her. Why had she not thought anything of it when his figure vanished? The haunting images of all his deaths now evaporated into one:

"My mother will always blame herself for Ashod's disappearance."

Ashod swimming longer than he should have, his muscles tiring, maybe paddling just enough to keep himself afloat, until his body could no longer bear the force of the waves.

"Maybe he's still alive," she said.

At first I didn't hear her. She had her fist pressed against her lips.

"What?"

"Maybe he's still alive," she said again.

She wouldn't turn to me, but still faced the window and stared at the parking lot as if we were on the beach waiting for my brother.

"What are you talking about?" I spat out my words. "What kind of romantic bullshit is this? 'Maybe he's still alive,'" I said, mimicking her small, thin voice. Then she turned to me, and I was glad. I wanted her to see the cruelty in my face, for my words to penetrate her stupid notions of love.

"I hate that you're making me say it loud: he's dead. He didn't sail away somewhere like a fucking pirate and he's not going to come back for his long-lost love. You asshole. He died because of some horrible dare to prove that he loved you!"

Her face crumpled and she started to sob. I kept going. "It was a dare. How could you tell him to swim all the way out there in the middle of the ocean to prove that he loved you? You stupid girl."

She slumped to the floor and buried her head in her knees. I left her there, and walked out of the church to find my parents.

*

For months after, I dreamt of Emma. They were sadistic illusions I wished I could carry out. In one dream I am in front of her house throwing rocks at her, while she willingly stands still receiving each blow. In another, I am holding her

"I felt an ache so sudden and acu

head in a plastic beach bucket filled with water, watching air bubbles escape to the surface. Each sequence so blatantly literal that I wake up shaken and exhausted.

After that summer, I began my first year of high school. When Ashod had started the previous year I imagined the two of us walking to school together when he became a sophomore. Now I walked by myself. I always crossed the street to avoid walking past Emma's house. Sometimes I had the strong sensation that she was watching me from behind the curtain of her front window, waiting for me to disappear before she headed in the same direction.

It wasn't until late October that we saw each other. I had stayed after school to finish a painting for art class, and as I walked down the hallway to my locker I saw her walking in my direction. I was busying myself with a snag in my sweater, and by the time I looked up she was standing only a few feet away from me. I turned to my locker and ignored her.

"Hi," she said.

I opened my locker and dumped my books inside and slammed it shut.

"Can you please not do that?" she asked.

I turned my back and headed towards the exit. Then I felt

ute that I had to stop walking."

a hand on my shoulder.

"What?" I said, practically yelling, and turned around.

It was the first time I had looked at her in months, and her image startled me. Her thin, slender frame was now bony, her face fragile and paler than I remembered.

She stuttered before the words could come out, "I'm... sorry," she managed.

I wanted to scream, *You killed my brother!* I knew how naïve it sounded. I knew it wasn't true.

"I know," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

We stood for a moment longer, and finally I turned and left.

It was almost dusk when I stepped outside. A hush of leaves swept across the campus. The expanse of the sky reminded me of how night fell on the beach the day Ashod drowned, and I felt an ache so sudden and acute that I had to stop walking. The fall air smelled new and fresh, and I realized that I would be moving through the coming seasons without my brother for the first time. I wanted to scream like I almost had in front of Emma. Instead, I sat under a tree and leaned back and felt the cold grass beneath me. ¤

COPERNICUS, SU

UBCONSCIOUSLY

BY LUKE JONES

I drifted, dreaming, through our solar system sky,
in a creaking, crusted steamboat,
which churned the stars with its primeval paddlewheel
and left a glistening wake.

The constellation points had been connected,
as in a child's coloring book,
with wobbly crayon lines from one to two
to three, and so forth.

And then they transformed,
becoming the various things we had always imagined.
Cancer was, for instance, now a crab,
scuttling sideways along a sandy Milky Way.

The paddlewheel pushed me slowly, imperceptibly
into the sun, a circle consisting of
ten thousand hurricane lanterns and votive candles,
suspended in a suffocating blanket of darkness.

When Sheepshead Bay Was Home

BY RONIT FEINGLASS PLANK

This is what I remember: the spoiled seawater smell of the bay at low tide, the steaming scent of bricks and pavement in the hot July air, water from a emerald-green hose gurgling and glinting in the bright sunlight. Under a brilliant blue sky, my cousin and I splashed and waded in a day-glow orange blow up pool. Fresh out of the package from Woolworth's, the vinyl smell was sharp but reassuring, a reminder of things real people had.

My cousin and I were both five, but he was rapidly becoming the oldest of four. His mother kept having baby after baby, when the last one was born, she would divorce my uncle. My mother's entire family lived in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. It's where she brought me and my younger sister to stay for the summer while Dad got things settled for us in Washington. Up until then it had only been the four of us on a kibbutz in Israel.

Sheepshead Bay teemed with new people and new sounds, new everythings. There was no mingling of natural flora among the cement and dark red brick buildings. Scant grass could be found and pavement rolled over everything. Whatever was there was sturdy and hard and had been built by people.

Thick wrought iron bars painted in white or black sprung up from either side of steps that led up to porches enclosed by even more wrought iron. On my grandmother's stairway the fourth and fifth bar twisted and swirled until they met in the middle and bloomed into an iron flower. I liked to feel the metal's coarse grain, the fine edges on those frozen tapered petals, the sting of their tiny points.

Hanging over my grandmother's porch was a ridged aluminum awning, which like all the awnings in Sheepshead Bay, was an unnatural shade of green, a verdant flash of color breaking up the endless bricks of Brooklyn. During storms that summer I'd look out the window and listen as raindrops hit the corrugated aluminum with hollow pings and ran off the sloping metal in a shimmying rattle.

Very little inside my grandmother's house was real. Bulbous wax grapes shined on green plastic stems in her bowl of fake fruit. Industrial- strength transparent vinyl enclosed every inch of her white and brown floral velvet sofas. And a plastic pathway ran by my grandmother's day bed from the hospital as it crossed the living room on its way up to the bedrooms.

I tried not to stop whenever I passed my grandmother's

"When we gather now I still have a feeling of spectator, I see them as if they were newly introduced to me."

bloated body. It was hard to look at her. All but the finest cobwebby wisps of her hair was gone and her arms were huge and inflated, puffed out from her cancer treatment. But my grandmother, sick and stuck in that bed, still managed to stop me as I tried to dart by unnoticed. With a glimmer in her drowsy morphine eyes she asked "Which grandmother makes the best chopped liver, me or the other one?" I froze. I could only watch her as she studied me. I knew there was a right answer and a wrong answer and when I thought I found it, I answered. "They're both good," I studied her back

to make sure I was free to go. She smiled but I could tell she didn't quite buy it. As soon as she began lowering herself back down to her pillows, I moved past her and up the stairs.

My grandmother and grandfather had divorced a long time ago. My grandfather was a patient, balding man with light stubble on his face and lids that hung low over his wet round eyes. He smoked cigars. Big fat ones. To me the tightly packed shredded leaves smelled good when he first unwrapped them and also when they were lit and burning. A cloud of pungent ashy air surrounded him wherever he went and it was soothing to me. It was predictable.

He was a chauffeur who bet on horses and played the lottery every day of his adult life. Though he never got ahead, he promised his three children and his six grandchildren, that when he did, he would be able to take care of us. He took me out for my first ever slice of Brooklyn pizza. We sat next to each other on shiny red spinny stools at the formica counter. Him puffing on his cigar, me negotiating the bubbles in my small plastic cup of orange soda that popped and tickled my nose as I drank. I felt calm next to him like I had never felt with anybody else. I would see him only a handful of times before he died.

Several years later, after my parents divorced, we were living in New York again. My mother still brought me and my sister out to Sheepshead Bay on the weekends she had us even though my grandmother was gone. Every Friday night, right off the subway, my mother would take us to a convenience store to stock up on all the provisions we needed to get through the weekend: comfort food like bagels and cream cheese, potato chips, Pepperidge Farm Mint Milanos, Haagan-Dazs Vanilla Swiss Almond ice cream, and Entenmann's amaretto cheesecake. The three of us sat in front of the TV and ate so much when we were together. At night I'd sink gratefully into my mother's childhood sheets and breathe in deeply the sweet stale scent of old linens. Outside the bedroom window car after car passed. I'd fall asleep listening to them, thinking about the drivers, how none of them ever knew I was inside watching the shadows from their headlights move across my room.

We'd rarely see my mother's sister or her brother, who was now also divorced, or his four kids, but when we did, we cousins were ecstatic in our play, we crammed joy in while we had each other. We must have sensed how uncertain everything was. Even at our young age, we felt the ways in which our parents were lost. We must have understood the importance of blood, the evolutionary instinct to reach out and know others in the net. It was a kind of protection from everything else.

Sheepshead Bay was home, but nobody lives there anymore. My cousins and I have seen each other little over the years. When we gather now I still have a feeling of spectator, I see them as if they were newly introduced to me. But there is also a familiar feeling. Our blood is mingled, our bones and bodies knew each other when they were still soft and forming. When we had to listen and pay close attention to the adults in our lives while they stumbled to take care of us. ¤

Newly Introduced To Me

BY JULIUS KALAMARZ

carnival pony
antipodes adrift
in parading
cotton seas

look close
and you will see

our childhood river
here you came to swim

has been erased by trees.

Milk

BY HUDA BIUK

I dream about Libyan mothers, of the ones I see mourning on television screens and of ones I hear about in stories, rumors, whatever they are. I often wonder which type Mama will become if news leaks from the unknown prison where my brother is being held captive by Gaddafi forces. No news has come but these images have yet to stop.

There is the loving mother who only has one son, or never made one feel more loved than the other. Her son's fellow fighters speak the slow words and though her reaction begins with gasps, it quickly escalates to loud wails. She calls his name, her martyred son, just to hear its sound. Her eyes are closed and hands quick. She beats at her chest, pulls at the cloth over heart as if to tell all who watch that *this is where it hurts.*

Another mother reacts out of shock. Her eyes widen as if to watch her own silent tears fall. Her daughter weeps in her arms. She holds her tightly because this is her job.

She protects, she consoles but mostly she contains, as she always has, the hardships of raising her babies into adults. Now that she lost one, she continues to stare at the fighters wearing camouflage and burnt tans. Perhaps they can tell her what she should do with herself now?

Another mother expects the news before it comes. She understands the dynamics of wa She was the only one who could make all the outside craziness seem not so crazy, because she made even the mundane bizarre r, the chances of mortality, and also God's promise to reward those who fight for justice in His name. She stands up, begins to busy herself with the funeral arrangements. She's stronger than the others, she knows this. Her son's death wasn't a mistake. The timing, the exact place where his blood spilled onto the sand beneath him, purifying it, was destined before the creation of man.

When her fingers cup her mouth, the sound of her ululation resonates in the funeral tent, surprising friends. Her tongue vibrations seem to continue past her breath.

Images of these women haunt me but it's the last mother whose calm, heartfelt prayers make me turn away. This moment caught on tape is more private than my curiosity cares to watch. She is a traditional Libyan elder, wearing a white female covering. All that shows is the right side of her face as she enters the morgue where her son lies dead, also covered in white. Only his expression is visible. I want to hear what she is saying, if she will be as shocked as I am, that her dead son is smiling. She simply continues her soft-spoken prayers for God to give her the patience.

I am forced to think of the beginning of their lives together when her son was a smiling baby and she a new mother, praying for the day he'd grow up to be a God fearing man. As if she heard me, she touches her son's cheek and lifts her fingers to kiss his touch. ¤

PALPITATION

BY LUBNA SAFI

When they came to my door
I knew they wouldn't leave quietly.
They were strangers here,
wanting to make themselves known;
They were friend-enemies disguised.

I tried to get them out.

They opened cabinets
swallowed bottles, spilled blood,
gave orders when I was dizzy.

They thought I wasn't aware.
They gathered to toy with me
those champions of disorder.
Shaking me in and out of consciousness.
Suggesting in good company
all the ways to make me listen.

And all this time I concentrated,
carefully unfolding the sounds
that came regularly from my chest.
But they kept interrupting
working with such intensity.
And after inconsolable hours they left
drained from my lack of attention.

NS

I still don't know who they were;
all at once they were gone.

And in the flooding silence
I listened to an abnormal war
slowly comforted, with no interruption,
the return of well-known friends to my door.

Rampant Lizard

BY ELEANOR BENNETT

In the H

BY JAMI NAKAMURA LIN

Her name was Britt Vicious. Her last name didn't fit her, but I didn't know it at the time. She looked vicious: her messy punk hair with all the colors leaking out of it, her skin stained from too much eyeliner. Britt gave off the hardcore vibe in a way that all the suburban kids in the program envied. I thought I was grimy because I cut my own hair and chose to wear clothes from thrift stores. Britt Vicious was different.

I met Britt my first day at Adrian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital, after two nameless paramedics dropped me off on the fourth floor. A young woman with a wide smile guided me into a large room. I felt vulnerable in my hospital gown and sweatpants. I didn't have any makeup on, either, and my face felt naked. I was sure a pimple was blossoming on my forehead. But I leaned back on the squeaky chair and pretended to look disinterested, trying to gauge the other kids' expressions, the perfect mixture of apathy and discontent. In between filling out my forms, I took sneak peeks at the rest of them—the punk boy scratching an oozing scab on his nose, the short girl next to me with the faded, garbage-colored hair, the kid that was maybe a boy, maybe a girl. A few of them stared at me. I was confused by their mild interest: I was the new kid, yes, but surely they had kids coming in and out of here all the time. I avoided eye contact.

A lady wearing glasses on an old lady chain entered the room and clapped her hands.

"Hey," she said, "Let's get started." No one responded. The maybe-boy-maybe-girl grunted. Punk boy rolled his eyes. I didn't move.

"Let's talk about your weekends," she said, placing her hands on her lap. She looked around fifty; she seemed like she should work in a library, not in this hospital for crazy teens.

The girl with garbage hair finally responded to Chain Glasses' question.

"I'm Britt," she said, "and I'm pretty pissed because they said I could go Downstairs on Thursday, but then my case manager found out about the whole Bianca thing, and they brought me back up here, which is bullshit, you know, because we had the family session that Thursday and they all promised me I could go home." She bounced up and down in her chair. For all the vitriol in her words, she didn't seem terribly angry.

"Downstairs?" I piped up, curiosity getting the best of me. "What's Downstairs?"

The girl on the other side of Britt piped up. "That's the outpatient program," the girl said, holding a chunk of hair in front of her eyes, "where you just go for the day. This is Upstairs, the inpatient program. Where we have to live here." She talked quickly, rocking back and forth. She was scribbling her name over and over on a piece of paper. Tina. Tina. Tina.

Chain Glasses turned towards me, and finally I could see from her nametag that her actual name was Kristie. She nodded emphatically. Some of the other kids looked involved in what Britt was saying, others looked out the windows, but most of them looked nowhere. Those kids, the blank-faced ones, they scared me the most. A boy with

a bandage running up and down his left arm hadn't lifted his head off the table since I'd arrived. I wondered if I belonged here, or if I was just an infiltrator, going behind enemy lines. After she finished speaking, Britt shrugged her shoulders, then fished a piece of chewed gum out of her mouth and flicked it across the room at a red-headed girl, who caught it in her left hand and popped it in her mouth. I repressed the urge to gag. Britt guffawed, then turned to me.

"New girl!" she exclaimed, and clapped me on the back. "What about you!" Her cheeriness unnerved me. I looked at my feet, clothed in the blue toe socks I had received in my stocking last Christmas.

"I'm just here," I said.

"Well, slap me like a summer sausage. Aren't we all." Britt shook my hand vigorously. Kristie sighed. "Remember, no side conversations during group." Another kid spoke up then, my mind wandered. I looked at Britt's outfit: purple pajama pants with a black zombie design, and a shirt screen printed with a picture of a cat.

Kristie signaled a ten minute break. Most of the people went out into the hallway to chat or get drinks of water. Britt sidled up to me.

"I'm Britt Vicious," she said. "You can call me... Britt Vicious." She stuck out her hand. I shook it.

"You're a cheerleader?" she asked, her voice incredulous. I looked down. My sweatpants did indeed have pom-poms printed on the front, and PLUM GROVE CHEERLEADING was printed across the butt.

"Eighth grade," I responded. "Three years ago. I was different then."

Kristie entered a couple minutes later. She had combed her hair into a ponytail and reapplied her lipstick, but it was smudged at the crease. She turned to me. "Jami," she said, "It's your first day here. Why don't you tell us a little bit about it? How do you feel about your situation right now?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again, willing the correct words to come out. Even though I was trying to be the epitome of apathy, in order to impress all the stone-faced kids, I was aching to talk. So I opened my mouth again.

"They brought me here," I began, "on a stretcher." Some kids nodded, as they had probably gone through the same routine. I continued, "And I was like, what is this, I'm not going to have a heart attack or anything, I'm pretty sure I can walk down a hallway by myself." A few giggles from the girls in the corner. They were warming up to me, I could feel it. I felt encouraged, my story gaining momentum.

"Who brought you here on a stretcher? Where were you coming from?" Kristie asked.

"I went to the ER last night because I ate a lot of pills and then I couldn't feel my limbs."

I said this last line with relish. I had been waiting to tell people this. The ambiguously gendered person perked up and asked me how many pills I took.

"Remember," Kristie said, "no war stories." I guessed that they didn't want the kids trying to one-up each other, didn't want the kids to become fascinated with the other's misdeeds.

"It's not a war story," I said, picking at my Band-Aid again. "I'm not proud of it." But this was a lie. I was a little bit proud, a little bit in awe that I had actually gone through with it. I pretended to be penitent.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," I added. The kids relaxed, now less interested. The ambiguously gendered person went back under the hood of his or her sweatshirt.

"Also—" I began. I looked around. The rest of the kids were all staring at me, but their eyes weren't hostile. They were simply waiting for my response. I finally spit it out. "Bipolar. I'm bipolar. That's why."

*

After that first group, I went back to my room to unpack my sad assortment of belongings. Britt Vicious followed me.

"I like you," she said. "But you need a name."

"I have a name," I said, putting my four pairs of sweatpants in a drawer. "Jami, with an I, no E." I looked at the other bed, where my roommate was supposed to sleep. I hadn't met her yet. Kristie had said her name was Michelle, and that she was thirteen. I was worried about the four year age gap. I wondered if she would be similar to my little sister Cori. I missed Cori.

Britt lay down on the floor. "You need a good name, though. I'm Britt Vicious. Your roommate's Michelle Murder. You are..." She paused. "We'll think of something. We have a long time here in the H."

"The H?" I asked.

"The H!" she shouted. "The H! The H! The ABBHH! Adrian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital."

I laughed. "Hopefully not that long," I answered. "I mean, I don't want to be here forever."

Britt stuck her face straight down into the carpet. "It's okay, I've been here for a really long time, and I'm still alive and kicking!" Her voice was muffled and she sounded far away.

How did I get here? I wondered. How did I end up in this tiny, empty bedroom with a crazy girl lying spread eagle on my floor?

*

But it got better, largely because of Britt Vicious, who thought of me first as her pet project, and then, by degrees, as her friend. At breakfast the next morning she plopped down next to me and said, "Whoo boy, I dreamed I had sex with an elephant. Twice!" I didn't know how to respond. But bit by bit, I gleaned information about Britt's unconventional life through group sessions and side conversations during breaks.. Her parents were gone somewhere. Britt never really specified; she just told me that her dad was a deadbeat and her mother kicked her out when she was thirteen. Since then, she had been living with her grandmother. I had thought my grandmother was peculiar for making us sing Disney songs before we could receive our Christmas presents, but Grandma Vicious was real crazy. Not crazy in a "let's paint our nails lime green" kind of way, not eccentric, but truly screwed up weird. Grandma Vicious kept a bar of soap under her crotch when she went to sleep at night and she was convinced that her dead husband was reincarnated as her cat, Wiener.

Britt ran away from that house full of strange vibes and cat shit. She stayed at some friends' houses before the Department of Child and Family Services caught up with her and plunked her in foster care. One foster dad tried to rape her, another mother beat her with a stick. Eventually she ended up in a "home for wayward girls."

"What's that?" I asked her.

"It's for punks like me, so we don't have to sell our souls on the streets," she said.

"Or your bodies," I added. Britt giggled.

Britt Vicious was always laughing. She pulled shenanigans that everyone else was afraid to do. After dinner on the second night, when I was still disoriented and sad, she pulled me aside.

"Let's play dirty limbo tonight," she said, eyes wide. I looked at her warily. I still didn't know all the rules, still was trying to find my footing in this place.

"It'll be fine," she said, rolling her eyes at me. "I'll get something we can shimmy under." When Gracia, the night warden, was off checking on the boys, she ran into the janitor's closet and pulled out an orange electrical cord. She scurried into my bedroom.

A few other girls tagged along behind her. I was learning their names slowly. There was Denise, who was Upstairs because she got busted for pot again, there was Liz, who was mousey, had glasses, and was chronically depressed, and there was the tiny girl, Tina. Tina was a lot. "I'm Tina, I want to go to Monmouth College because it sounds like mammoth. Isn't that funny? They should have a mammoth as their mascot!" She was seventeen. I didn't know what to make of her yet. She was very friendly, but in a startling kind of way.

Britt leaped onto my bed with the cord. Her zombie pajama pants fluttered up and down, as did her hair, hair the texture of straw from so much dyeing. She whipped the cord over her head like a lasso and threw it at me. "New girl, you hold on to one end. I'll hold onto the other, and everyone else, limbo underneath! If you fall on the ground, you have to take some of your clothes off!"

We all stared at her, not sure if she was joking or not.

"You're so silly, Britt," Tina said. Britt started singing the limbo song at the top of her lungs. I didn't know what to do, so I just held my end of the cord, our makeshift limbo stick. I wondered if we would really have to take our clothes off. This is so Girl, Interrupted, I thought, imagining Winona Ryder in the room with us.

Luckily for me, Gracia found us before any disrobing was necessary.

"What you girls think you're doing?!" she yelled in her thick accent. "One of you trying to kill yourselves?!" She grabbed the cord and marched us all into the hallway.

"Sorry, Gracie," Britt said, sincerely apologetic,"We were just joshing around."

Gracia shook her heads at us. "You old ones, you know better. You have choices, but be good." Be good.

"Don't give me the booty juice! Not the booty juice!" Britt

squealed. Gracia clucked her tongue. Britt stuck her rear end out at her.

"What's booty juice?" I asked Tina.

"It's tranquilizer," Tina said. "They only give it to us when we're really out of control. I've only had it once."

The blood rushed out of my face. This was the movies. They did that here?

"Do they give you electroshock here too?" I whispered, as Gracia tried to usher us back into our respective bedrooms.

"Oh, you mean ECT?" Tina asked nonchalantly. "It's rare, but it happens. More for the adults. Supposedly it's safe."

*

On the morning of my third day upstairs, Liz quizzed me during yoga. "Do you like girls?" she asked, bending her body into something that could possibly resemble a downward facing dog.

"Like, like-like?" I asked, pulling myself into an upward facing dog. I shook my head. My short, spiky hair confused kids sometimes.

Liz sighed. "Damn. I'm a lesbian, and so is Michelle. Well, I mean, she's bi."

"I'm bi too!" Tina piped in. "Bi-polar!"

The girls cracked up, but I felt a pang of uneasiness. I thought she had some other, more serious disorder. We were the same? I remembered what my doctor said, that the illness manifested itself in different ways in different people. Tina also had a different history: she lived in a one-bedroom apartment, and when her mother entertained gentleman guests, she was forced to sleep outside in a hammock. Once, in retaliation, she threatened to stab her mother; incidents like these were what landed Tina in the H. She was very childlike in her mannerisms and behavior, not so much immature as just innocent. "What do you do if your parents do something that pokes a hole in your heart?" she asked Kristie during one group session.

Tina also threw temper tantrums. During lunch Liz ate the last bag of pretzels and Tina screamed at her. Ten seconds later, she was all smiles, apologizing profusely, but those few moments were terrifying. I could understand her rage—at home, I'd break things just to try to calm down—but I had never let mine get that out of control. I liked Tina, but I didn't want to get too close to her. I didn't want people to group us together as "the bi-polars".

Other times, though, Tina was just silly. She loved Conan O'Brien. "I would have sex with him, and I don't even like sex!" she told us during one group session, before Ryan shushed her. But she was hopeful. No one else was optimistic except for Britt Vicious. Britt turned every terrible experience into an anecdote.

"Entering a foster home is so awkward," she announced one time. "When I got to my second home, they were so nice, and their house was so fancy, and I was just standing there with a mustard stain on my pants."

I didn't know whether to believe her sometimes. She told me she had once lived with an obese woman who shit in her living room. I remembered a similar story from Augusten

Burroughs' Running with Scissors, but I didn't say anything. Maybe she needed to believe in her stories. Maybe to her they rang true.

*

On the fourth day, my parents came to visit. It ended with my parents confused and me crying. When they left, I walked back into the main room where all the other kids were. My eyes were red. Britt Vicious looked up at me from where she was lying on the floor.

"Don't let The Man get you down," she joked, and handed me a pink Crayola, my favorite color. "We're drawing some bullshit dreams and aspirations thing," she added. "Come here."

Andre, the young art therapist, waved at me. He handed me a piece of construction paper. I looked over at Britt's drawing, which was of three mummies juggling skulls. She didn't say anything else, we just colored silently together.

*

"I'm leaving tomorrow," Britt told me during dinner that night. I paused, my bite of reconstituted applesauce halfway to my mouth. I closed my eyes. She gave me a half-hearted smile. "Yeah. I know. I have a new foster family, I guess, and they're coming to get me."

I told her congratulations. I didn't tell her I felt like throwing up.

We did the hokey-pokey that night in her honor. All eleven of us girls crammed into room six and sang the words as a group. Gracia heard us, but she must have caught wind of Britt's departure, because she didn't get us into trouble. Britt made up her own lyrics. You put your hospital bracelet in, you put your hospital bracelet out, you put your hospital bracelet in and you shake it all about...

I couldn't fathom of an Upstairs without Britt in it. She was the one who navigated my path throughout the program. She was the one who introduced me to all the old kids and shepherded me into her group of friends. Most importantly, she was the only one who could make me laugh, not just giggle but full out guffaw, so I could forget I was locked up. She was the only one who could make all the outside craziness seem not so crazy, because she made even the mundane bizarre. She knew how to make light of our problems without making fun of them. "I tried to cut myself once," she said during our talk on self-injury, "and then I was like, shit, this hurts."

*

The day she left, we sat alone at a table together for lunch.

"I figured out what your name should be," she told me. "Jami Massacre. That's hardcore, right?"

I nodded, trying to keep my sadness under wraps. It's silly, I thought, to be so upset about somebody I just met five days ago.

"Don't screw up," I told her, trying to joke, but I meant it.

She left after we ate, packing up her small amount of belongings into a SpongeBob Squarepants backpack. Kristie called Britt into the main room. We all followed her.

"This is—you'll be going home with her," Kristie said. She looked uncomfortable, shifting her weight from one foot to another and avoiding Britt's eye contact. The woman standing next to her was short, probably in her fifties, wearing a cheap synthetic coat. Britt smiled at her, and the woman tried to smile back. She was holding a brown paper bag.

"Here," she said, shoving it at Britt, "I thought you might be hungry." Britt opened the bag and pulled out a limp sandwich. She let out a noise that was half a laugh, half a choke. Tina and I looked at each other. I wondered what kind of woman would take in a girl like Britt. I hoped she wasn't the kind that just wanted money from the government

"She was the only one who could make all the outside craziness seem not so crazy, because she made even the mundane bizarre."

and made their children sleep in barns. She didn't seem so bad—tired, but kind.

Britt hugged me. "At least you don't have mustard on your pants this time," I told her. She laughed and slapped my arm. Then her face got serious.

"Jami Massacre and Britt Vicious tore up the H, didn't we?" she asked. I nodded. Her new foster mother looked at her watch. I wondered if she had other children, other Britts waiting for her at home. Britt said goodbye to the other girls, then hugged Kristie. Her foster mother picked up Britt's backpack and hoisted it over her shoulder. She groaned a little under the weight.

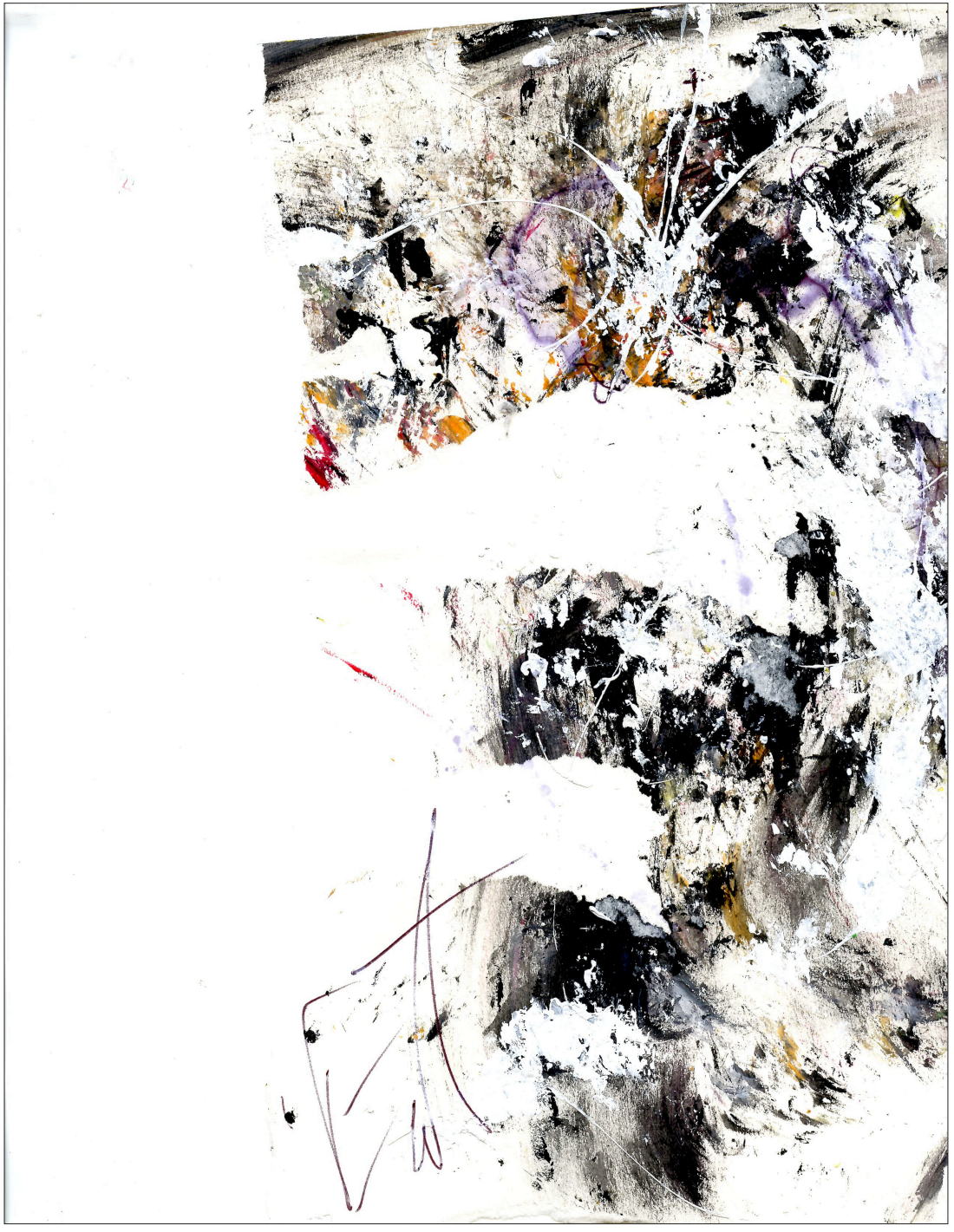
After the two of them got into the elevator, I raced back to my room. I pulled up the shades of my window. I could see Britt and her foster mother walk out of the building and into the parking lot. I saw her twitching. She was scared. I was filled with anxiety. If she, the girl with the word "vicious" in her name, was afraid, then how could I be safe? I waved to her from the upstairs window, the window with the bars running across it. She didn't turn around.

*

Britt had made a collage of a crow during art therapy and gave it to me. The Crow was her favorite movie, and she used the bird as an emblem on all her papers and drawings. It stood for freedom, but it also stood for being fierce, being brave. Now her artwork is hanging up on my wall at home, black night crow against light purple construction paper. And her credit in the corner: Britt Vicious, 2006. ¤

Hidden In The Brilliant Water

BY ERNEST WILLIAMSON III



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