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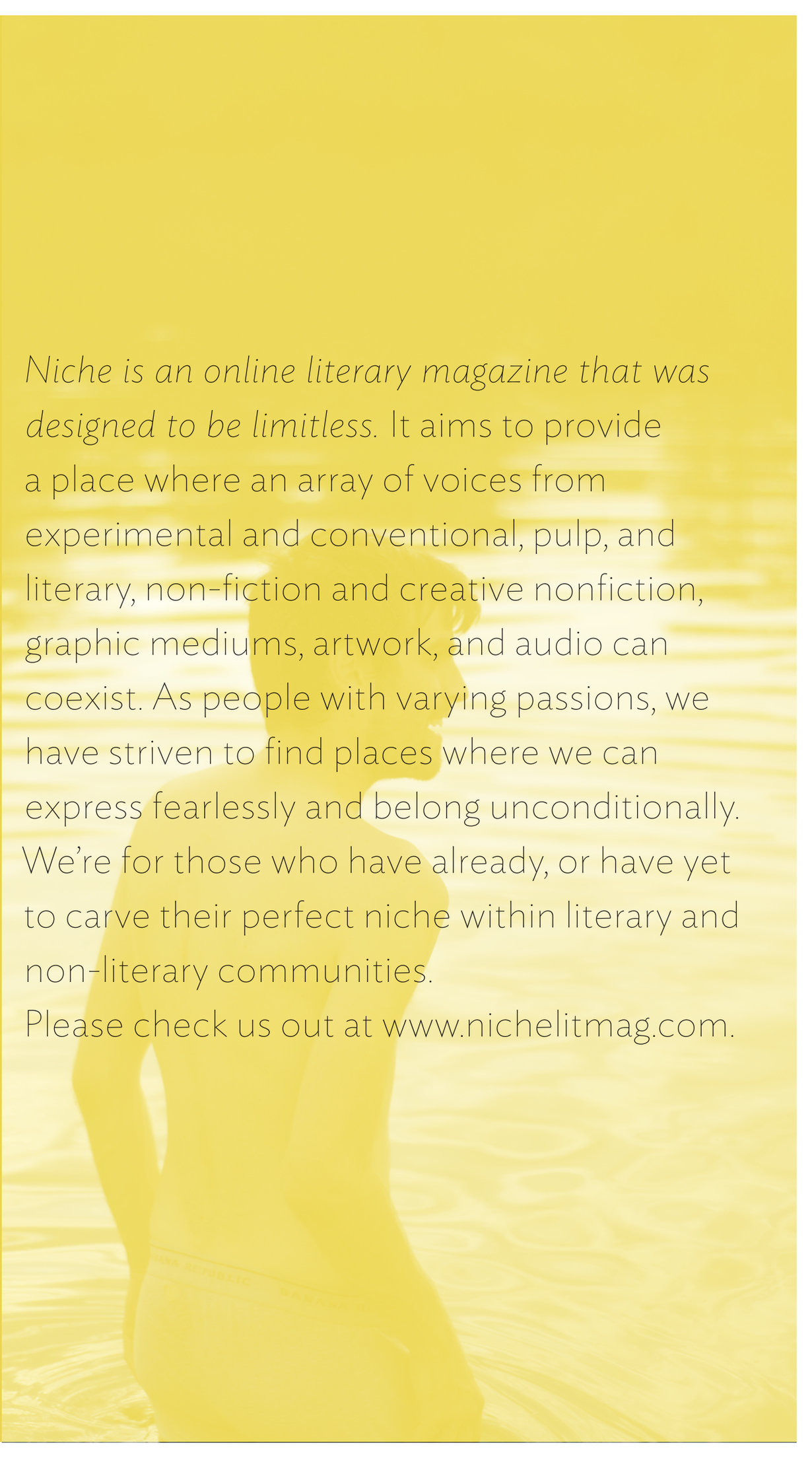

Niche is an online literary magazine that was designed to be limitless. It aims to provide a place where an array of voices from experimental and conventional, pulp, and literary, non-fiction and creative nonfiction, graphic mediums, artwork, and audio can coexist. As people with varying passions, we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

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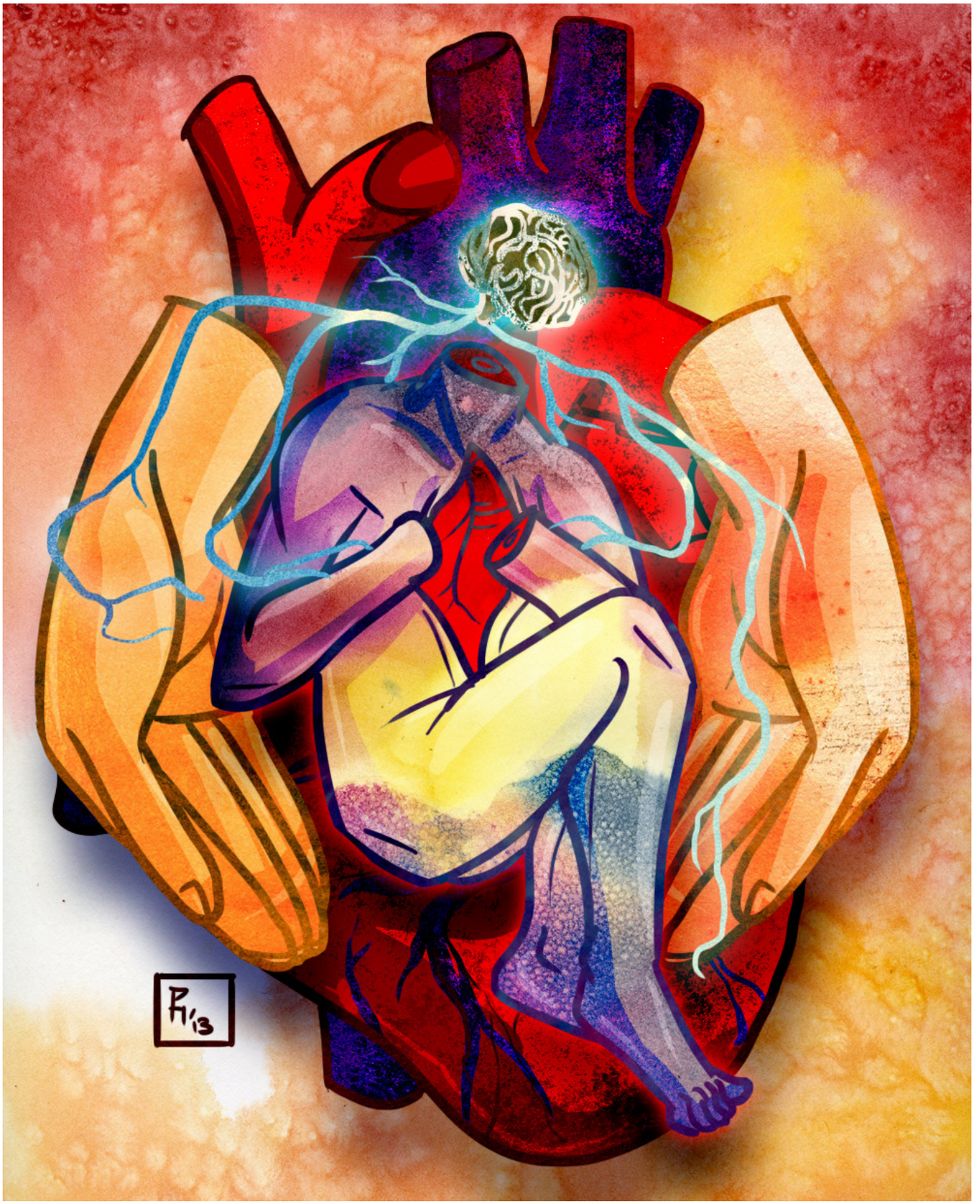


Head Hands and Heart

BY PEARL HODGES

Damaged Goods

BY LOU GAGLIA

The Friday before Halloween, Mr. Olsen leaned toward Steve and his friends at the Canteen—open gym night to them—and told jokes. Jeremy and Wilson laughed, and Steve smiled, wondering how his science teacher's breath could smell like that and why he wasn't worried about being caught. He was the only adult there, watching the crowd of 7th and 8th graders at St. Thomas School. Most of the students were inside the gym playing basketball or sitting against the gym walls. But Steve and his friends were in the hallway, taking a break, talking with the suddenly friendlier—"smashed," Wilson said to them out of earshot—Mr. Olsen.

Wilson and Jeremy, and later Al, laughed their way back into the gym, and Steve laughed too, but he couldn't help but look back at Mr. Olsen who stood against the wall and made cheerful remarks to the kids who walked by. He'd been so smart and serious during classes, and sometimes pointed back to the cross on the wall to let the students know about sacrifice and effort. But now he grinned and said something to a few girls who walked by. "Mr. Olsen," they scolded, and Steve turned and strode into the gym.

They played two-on-two, with Al joining him against Wilson and Jeremy. Kathy and Joan and Elizabeth sat against the gym wall. Steve played hard. He tried finger-rolls, and he double-pumped fakes on his way to the basket, missing easy shots and winding up on the floor. But the sweating and the quick movement, the jumping and the hard passing, and the elbows-out snatched rebounds meant more than the score to him with the girls watching.

Each of them was pretty, especially Joan. Elizabeth was pretty, too, but in a different way. It was Kathy though who asked him, between games, what girl he thought was the best-looking in the eighth grade.

His mind raced and his heart beat hard. He thought of saying the expected Heidi, whom everyone knew was the prettiest. She sat on the other end of the gym with her friends. Joan, sitting right there against the wall, straightened the sleeve of her shirt and pretended not to listen.

"Cristina," he said, though, and they were quiet.

"Really?" said Kathy.

"Yeah," Steve said and turned, feeling his face a furious red.

During the next game he played so hard that he ran his shoulder into Wilson, who was guarding him, and he fouled Jeremy so hard on the arms that Jeremy cried out, "Man, what are you doing?"

Cristina was nowhere in the gym. She wasn't sitting against the wall like the others, or in the hallway walking by Mr. Olsen. She was in her house somewhere, a place that he couldn't picture in his mind. He didn't know exactly where she lived except in the development behind the school; and he hadn't spoken to her since the end of seventh grade, after she'd come back to school after a long absence, quiet and brooding, before Easter break. Now in late October, she had one friend, Nora, who sat with her alone in the cafeteria or walked with her in the hallway where Nora did most of the talking and Cristina nodded, stone-faced.

"Cristina? Really?" Kathy said again when he raced to retrieve a loose ball that had bounced near them. "Really?" she repeated, and Joan and Elizabeth smirked.

He nodded, and returned to the court. *Really, yes, really, really...really like you a lot.* From the top of the key he imagined telling Cristina, imagined squeezing between her and Nora in the hallway. *Really, really...*He remembered the way she shifted her body, one seat ahead and one row over from him in English class. *Really, really like you.*

He looked back at the girls who sat against the wall. They shook their heads and talked. Their mouths were scornful and their brows knit. He chopped Jeremy's wrist trying for the ball on the next play.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Jeremy said, and Steve yanked the ball away and jumped high for a layup and walked across the gym. He passed Heidi and Mary Pat, who were shooting

baskets by themselves now, and went into the hallway and stood with Mr. Olsen, who leaned quiet and gloomy against the blue tiled wall.

"Talk to me, Stevie," Mr. Olsen said when Steve, leaning against the wall, too, didn't say anything for a while. "What's wrong? Is it a girl, Steve?"

Steve smiled, trying not to. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Of course it's a girl. What girl?"

Steve shrugged. "A girl no one talks to."

"You mean my wife?" Mr. Olsen said, and laughed.

Steve smiled.

"Do you talk to this girl, Steve?"

"No, I can't."

"Well...that's the problem right there, then, Steve. No one talks to her because you don't."

Steve looked at Mr. Olsen. "No, no, that's not it."

"It may as well be it, kid."

Steve looked, open-mouthed, at Mr. Olsen's bleary blinking eyes.

"What are you waiting for, Stevie? You're in 8th grade already. Talk to her."

"I don't know..."

"Is it one-way or mutual?"

"Uh...mutual," Steve said, startled by the word "mutual."

"Good, so no problem, then."

Later, after Jeremy and Al and Wilson came out into the hallway with Steve and Mr. Olsen, they watched a play fight between two ninth graders, Pops and skinny Bill Erickson, from public school, who had crashed the open gym. Erickson fought by leaning his upper body far backwards to avoid Pops' punches. Mr. Olsen let them fight, even after Erickson connected with a glancing punch, and Pops, furious, rushed Erickson and caught him with a slug in the mouth.

"If you guys bloody up the floor you'll have to clean it up," Mr. Olsen said with a smirk, not moving from the wall.

* * *

The voices of his mother and father woke him on Halloween night, and then he heard the steady tapping. Steve got up and followed them, through the hallway into the kitchen and then to the den where the tapping continued on the window. His father waved at him and his mother to stay back, so they stopped behind the dining room table. His father ducked to the side of the den window.

"Who is it?" he said loudly.

"Sir, sir..." A voice, clear and calm, came from the other side of the window. Steve squinted at the clock. It was one A.M.

"Sir," said the voice, "someone just sideswiped your car."

Steve's father looked back at Steve and his mother. "Oh yeah?" he said.

"I saw the whole thing. He just sideswiped it and kept going. He was right in front of me, but I stopped."

The voice waited. His father waited too. Steve was ready to go to the door with his father, to go outside with his father and help look at the damaged car and thank the man with the sincere voice, to shake hands with him.

Steve's father looked right at Steve while he said to the window, "That's all right, I know about it already. I already called the police."

Footsteps outside ran. The chain link gate was swung hard against the fence. His father listened at the window.

"Call the police, Jimmy," his mother whispered.

"They're gone."

"Call them," she said as he walked toward her and Steve.

"They're not coming back."

From bed Steve looked at the ceiling and remembered the sincere voice of the man outside. He looked at the darkness outside his bedroom window, and heard his mother in the kitchen telling his father to call the police, or come back to bed.

"No, it's all right. I'll stay up for a while," he told her. "Go back to sleep."

"I can't," she said. "Call the police."

"Funny..." his father said, and Steve strained to listen. "It's always the ones that sound the nicest..." He laughed quietly.

"Not always," said his mother. "Sometimes what you see is what you get."

"...Sometimes," he said, his voice low and deep.

In the morning Steve shuddered when he looked out the window and saw his father's prize Chevy, parked on the street next to the curb, perfectly undamaged.

* * *

PLETHORA. Sister Crucifix wrote it on the board, and asked Steve's English class what it meant. Steve glanced around at his classmates, at the twenty-seven silent English students sitting tightly in rows, and at the one empty desk in the next row in front of him.

Sr. Crucifix, annoyed, asked them all to examine the root of the word, then, if they didn't know what plethora meant.

"What's a pleth?" Jeff asked from behind, and his friends laughed.

"I know a sentence," Greg said from near the window.

"Go ahead. What sentence?" said Sr. Crucifix.

"There was a plethora of eggs chucked at cars on Halloween night."

More laughter. "Right," Sr. Crucifix frowned.

In September he'd heard the same kind of laughter at the cafeteria table. He sat with Wilson and Jeremy at one end of the table. At the other end were Jeff and Sammy and Greg, already making jokes about Cristina, absent on the second day of school.

"She must be dating her uncle again," they joked. Then Howard, smart and sour-faced, came by their table, and they asked him what he thought.

"Well, the first time, maybe it's rape. But if it happens twice, it's mutual."

Steve chewed more slowly and hated them all. He glanced glumly at Wilson and Jeremy, and then down at the table while he listened. Big mouths from Catholic school, he thought. All of them were big mouths—cruel bastards, each one of them—except for Wilson and Jeremy, who'd left public school for St. Thomas' after sixth grade, and except for Cristina, who'd left for St. Thomas' after fourth grade.

She had begun to smile again in the hallways at the very end of seventh grade. She smiled with her friend Nora in the hallway between classes, and once even laughed with Steve when he found himself standing next to her in line in the cafeteria, after he made a weak joke about not knowing what the Salisbury part of a Salisbury steak was.

In church during September's First Friday mass, he sat next to Nora, with Cristina on the other side of her, and he sneaked glances at Cristina whenever they had to stand, whenever they sat or knelt, whenever it was time to reach for the hymn book, and whenever someone coughed or sneezed or cleared his throat somewhere on her side. He sneaked each glance at her, at her hair and her eyes, at her cheek and lips and jaw.

The talk about her had stopped by the end of seventh grade, but she no longer stayed with the other girls like Heidi and Mary Pat and Joan, only with Nora. Steve felt a pang and missed her immediately after he saw her in the hallway on the last day of school. But on that second day of eighth grade, the day she was absent, the talk began again in homeroom. She was making rape some kind of habit, one guy said. And there was laughter. She was busy being fondled by her father and couldn't come to the phone at the moment, another mimicked, and there was more laughter. Howard, though, grew impatient with their comments, and said there was no use even talking about her because she was simply damaged goods.

And now in the cafeteria, Howard was the one talking about her, after only her second absence of the year.

The second time had to be mutual, he decided. "There is no way anyone gets raped twice," he said. "It's impossible."

Steve wondered how he knew that, how any of them knew anything about her, how any of them

had known anything even back in April when they first started talking, when some girls somehow knew why she was absent for so long and spread the word. He wondered, between images of wringing Howard's arm behind his back until it snapped in half, where this knowing started, what made them all so expert, why their smooth voices made something so or not so, and how, next to them, he could know so little and know it always so late.

* * *

The next Saturday morning, a week after Mr. Olsen slurred his encouragement to Steve on open gym night, Steve decided to look for Cristina's house. He walked through the fallen leaves of the school field, hopped a small chain link fence, and ran through someone's yard, coming out onto Larsen Lane where he'd heard she lived with her father and younger brothers. He glanced at mailboxes while he walked, until he saw "Berry" on a black one, and he looked at the small red house. No cars were in the driveway, and there were the remains of flowers all along a rocked-off section in front. The other houses on the block were fancier—split-ranches or two story houses with vinyl siding and leaves raked up. But her house had a moss-covered roof and wood siding. It was small, and except for the flower garden, unkempt and leaf-strewn. A single, old elm tree stood close to the house, casting a shadow over it in the late morning. There were no cars in the stone driveway, but he imagined her inside, maybe peeking out of a window, so he moved on quickly, the long way around the block before finding a road that led to the public junior high school field where his father taught. There were a few cars in the parking lot, but none of them belonged to his father, who would never go to the school on a Saturday, often busying himself with yard work instead.

He found a football on the outfield grass of the baseball field and stood at a distance from the tall school fence that separated the school from the houses behind it. He punted the ball, trying to reach the fence, only intending to kick short of it or just reach it, but he got too much leg into the ball and watched it sail over the tall fence into the yard behind it.

There was an opening at the other end of the fence far down the field, so he went around and walked between it and others' yards until he reached where he'd seen the ball go over. He had to walk sideways there because the school's tall chain link fence and the residents' small wood or chain link fences were so close together. He hopped a wood fence and hopped back over with the football, stopping first to examine a tree that looked like the one in front of Cristina's house.

The football players had come out of the locker room and were on their way across the parking lot to the field for practice. They were almost all ninth

graders, Billy Erickson and Lenny and Pops among them. They spotted Steve first and said something to the others.

"You got our football, kid," Pops said.

"No, I found it. Here," said Steve, and looked to throw it over the tall fence but it was too high a throw, so he made his way sideways between the school fence and the wood fence.

"Let's get some practice before Coach comes out," one said. He ran full speed and rammed into the chain link fence, smashing Steve between it and the wood fence. Steve folded his body inward to protect his ribs, but before he finished straightening himself upright, another shoulder padded player rammed into the fence, and then another, harder, until Steve turned his back to take blow after blow, finally staying on the ground, rolled up against the wood fence.

"You still have our football, man. Throw it over," Pops said. Steve didn't move. He stared at the bottom of the brown fence, at the grass and at a leaf. Then he heard the coach, from the parking lot, shout at them all to get on the track and do laps. The players went on, and Pops and another player warned Steve that if he didn't give back that football, he'd get it worse—that he was lucky.

His ribs and back and shoulder bruised, Steve slid his way between fences, holding his side. But when three more football players walked by on their way out to the field, there was shouting from the track, and before he could hurry to the fence's exit, they each rammed into the fence at him, one time each, with shoulder pads and helmets leading, just missing him because there was more space now between fences. Clinging to a neighbor's fence, his back turned, he heard the coach shout at the three players to take laps too; and it was well into practice, with all of them busy on the field, before he let go of the neighbor's fence and—bent over and holding the ribs on his left side—made his way to the exit and let the football drop from where his elbow held it against his body. ¤

Empathy

BY LAURA GOLDEN BELLOTTI

Jamie was in his mother's arms when she was shot to death. The bullet, intended for the guy next door, missed its mark and killed Yolanda instantly. The incident was not uncommon in Yolanda's neighborhood. What was remarkable was that her month-old son was unharmed. Placed in the custody of his grandmother, Jamie was well cared for in the weeks to follow. But his health would progressively deteriorate.

* * *

Geoff assumed it was the baby's ordeal that triggered Claire's decline. He should have known. Claire's beauty was witch-scary, her spirit too intense, her composure too easy to undo.

* * *

Jamie refused to eat. He cried incessantly and failed to respond to his grandmother's attempts to soothe him. Hours would pass and the baby's rabid cries would not abate. His grandmother tried everything: holding, rocking, singing. A social worker told her about the bundling technique: *Wrap up the baby tightly in his blankets so that he feels as secure as he did in the womb.* The grandmother followed the social worker's suggestion, learning exactly how to fold the blankets so that the infant resembled a papoose. It didn't work. The crying persisted and Jamie continued to refuse a bottle. A neighbor told the grandmother to run the vacuum cleaner. The white noise would calm the baby, the neighbor said, because it would remind him of the womb's fluid swishing sounds. The grandmother tried it but Jamie's cries became more tormented.

* * *

As a child, Claire instinctively felt the emotional pain of others and was compelled to alleviate it. In elementary school, she took it upon herself

to befriend the outcasts who suffered ongoing taunts and humiliations. Although her beauty and un-showy intelligence would have assured her a position on the highest rung of popularity, she pulled away from the well-liked cliques and watched out for the sad ones: the fat girls who everyone else snickered at, the pointy- headed boys who were too goofy smart and awkward to avoid ridicule.

She felt it was her responsibility to quietly prove to these undesirables that they were understood and loved. At lunch Claire sat with Penelope Gross, whose very name drew sneers and whose hunched posture and potato shape made her look prematurely aged. Claire graciously traded her Oreos for Penelope's soggy graham crackers and told Penelope she liked her new brown glasses. Because she could feel his despair as if it were her own, Claire chose Arthur Blanger (another unattractively named pariah) for her third-grade dodge-ball team. *So what if we get hit by the ball?* Claire reassured the toothpick-bodied Arthur, whose homely face broadcast his panic as the ball was about to be hurled by an ace-shot on the other team. *It only hurts for a second,* she promised.

* * *

The grandmother had little time to grieve for her murdered daughter. Her energy was spent trying to care for her distressed infant grandson, who was now losing weight due to his inability to take the bottle. She cuddled and sang to him as she tried to ease the rubber nipple between his lips, but he would shake his head from side to side and his crying would increase. *I am your mommy now,* she would whisper, *the only mommy you've got.* But the baby boy couldn't hear her over his own wails.

* * *

In college, the first in a string of lovers accused Claire of being too nice: *Your sweetness makes you dull. You have no edge. You need to expose yourself to the world and get kicked around.* Claire took the boyfriend's criticism to heart and resolved to put herself into situations where she could experience the hardships that would enlighten and strengthen her. She took a year off from her college studies and joined AmeriCorps, accepting a tutoring position in a gang-infested neighborhood. On her way to a student's home one evening, she was accosted by a group of toughs from the high school. *Hey teacher! Sexy fox!* they taunted. One of the teenagers grabbed at her breasts and crotch as the others stood by and laughed. As she firmly broke away, Claire saw in the young man's eyes abandonment and terror, and she felt in her own bones how lost he was. He can't help it, she told herself. His family is broken.

* * *

Claire appreciated her mother's exuberance and daring but knew Madeline was not like other moms. During Claire's junior year of college, Madeline left Claire's father to test the waters of independence, flirting with men in high class clubs and hoping to get something going. Claire understood why her mother needed to break free from her loyal yet dull father. She also felt her mother's self-loathing beneath the cheerful,

make-up sweetened face that struggled to attract an exciting lover. Madeline never found the man she was looking for and returned to her demoralized husband who took her back, no questions asked. Empathizing with her mother's failed quest for the passionate life, Claire also felt the deepening sadness of her well-meaning father who would never elicit passion in anyone.

Her parents' off-kilter relationship and her own ambivalent response to it drove Claire to become a psychologist.

* * *

On the fourth day after the murder, Jamie was so weak he stopped crying. He was still refusing nourishment and had lost two pounds. When the social worker came by and discovered the severity of the infant's condition, she ordered the grandmother to go to the E.R. immediately.

* * *

Claire decided to focus her psychology practice on survivors of child abuse after hearing a friend's story of being sexually abused by an uncle. Adults who struggled with the after-effects of having been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused by a father, stepfather, teachers, or even a mother, recounted the years of being unable to trust or have normal sexual relationships—and worked with Claire to regain those abilities. Then there were the children, many of whom could not use words to describe what had happened to them. So Claire offered crayons and paper, dolls and other toys to allow the younger ones to tell their story.

When friends asked Claire about her practice, she would respond only in generalities. The horror of what her patients had been through was too painful for Claire to describe. She was a powerful advocate for her clients, who experienced her as the strong protector they had lacked during childhood. She was caring yet professional during therapeutic sessions. But outside her office, she was haunted by the cruelty and degradation her clients had suffered. Injuries inflicted by a parent's beating, vaginal and anal tissue torn by a brutal rape—Claire felt the pain in her own body. Eating dinner alone in her apartment after a long day of treating her patients, she couldn't think about a particular client's story without feeling as if it were happening to her. Tears of rage and sorrow would mount and she would switch on a TV program or open a novel to try to escape.

* * *

The baby improved slightly with intravenous feeding, but it was a protocol that could not be undertaken indefinitely. The doctors informed Jamie's grandmother that they knew of no physical reason why the baby couldn't eat. The grandmother wondered if she would soon be burying another piece of herself.

* * *

Claire heard stories of fathers raping daughters as young as six years old and imprisoning them in a web of lies throughout their childhood; of young boys being sodomized by an uncle or family friend and threatened with worse if they told; of women so confused and traumatized by what had happened to them that some had turned to prostitution, others to a cautious, sexless existence. The simple act of listening was balm for the victims' emotional wounds. As Claire validated their sometimes buried feelings, her clients became open to the possibility of healing the scars of betrayal. But the stories became embedded in Claire's psyche after she left the office: during workouts at the gym, when she was oblivious to the guys trying to chat her up; at dinner with friends, who noticed she was never fully present.

Since the first day she began her work with abuse victims, Claire was aware of the fact that she could not separate herself from the lives of those she was helping. She could not erect a sturdy boundary between herself and the horrors her clients recounted. Gradually she began to feel the abuse in her own body. The punching and bruising of flesh; the marks left by rough insistent hands

"The simple act of listening was balm for the victims' emotional wounds."

pressing over her mouth to suppress a scream; genital tissue violated and scraped raw; and worst of all, the ongoing fear that a trusted human being could turn into a monster in a heartbeat.

Claire's gift—and curse—was her ability to suffer in her very cells what her clients had suffered, so that they could purge the terror from their minds and bodies, giving it up to their all-caring therapist.

* * *

More than a week after the shooting, the baby's father, Alonso, came to see his son in the hospital. He had attended Yolanda's memorial service and told Yolie's mother he would be by to see the baby, but this was the first time he had made it. Jamie was no longer crying but still wasn't eating and was getting weaker.

Your boy may not survive, the grandmother told Alonso. *He'll make it,* Alonso said, stroking Jamie's face with the back of his hand. *He's a fighter like me.*

* * *

I met someone in the bakery who would be perfect for you, Madeline told her daughter. *I just have this feeling...*

The bakery? Claire took deep breaths as she struggled to recover from today's session: a twelve-year-old client raped by her grandfather as he pressed a huge fat hand over her mouth.

We started chatting while I waited for my Danish. He does something with computers but seems real sensitive. And he's gorgeous. Tall, single, thirty-something.

Claire rarely dated. After too many confusing sexual encounters she was trying to keep her personal life uncomplicated. She had too easily fallen, not in love but under a kind of spell that she found disorienting. If she had been able to engage in casual sex, she could have avoided the sense of losing herself whenever she became involved with a lover. But there was nothing casual about Claire. And after working with her troubled clients, she craved solitude at the end of her long day.

What makes you think he's sensitive?

He bought me two black-and-white cookies and told me to give one to you.

Sweet... And how did he know about me, Mom?

Claire didn't have to ask, knowing that her mother loved to brag about her. She had a clear mental image of her mom reaching for the photo in her wallet as she told the stranger about her brilliant psychologist daughter.

I showed him your picture and gave him your number.

Claire didn't have it in her to disappoint her mother. She wanted to quell the fears Madeline had about her not being normal, and she knew her mom would relax a little if a boyfriend were on the horizon.

Thanks, Mom...I'll look forward to hearing from your cookie guy.

* * *

The doctors could not send the baby home until he was able to take a bottle, and that was still not happening. Every day the grandmother sat by his hospital crib, expecting the worst but praying for a miracle. She watched as the nurses attempted to feed Jamie, only to see him listlessly turn his tiny head away. Why was this little one so stubborn? Didn't he want to live? Didn't God want him to grow up and fill the space in her heart that Yolie had left? The grandmother held the special rosary beads that had belonged to her mother, but for the first time in her life she had little faith in their power.

* * *

Claire liked the sound of Geoff's voice on the phone and agreed to meet him for dinner.

How'd you like the cookie? —His first words when they met outside the Indian restaurant. She liked him immediately and could tell that he was attracted to her. Unfortunately, he was too attractive. She would have to hold herself in check. It had been months since she had slept with anyone and she already knew she wanted him. During dinner there had been the obligatory questions about each other's careers, and he looked at her with concern when she gave him the abbreviated version of her work with survivors of child abuse.

How do you handle all that pain?

Sometimes I can't.

* * *

I know of someone who may be able to help. The social worker had visited Jamie's grandmother several times over the course of the child's hospital stay, informing her of various resources that would be available to her when she brought the baby home. But until now she had not offered the grandmother any advice on dealing with the crisis of the baby not eating.

There is a psychologist who comes highly recommended. She would be open to meeting your grandson.

The grandmother thought the suggestion strange and inappropriate, and she was suspicious of the social worker's intent.

I don't need to talk to anyone. I don't have a problem. The only problem is my baby won't eat.

The grandmother suspected that this woman with the stylish hair and expensive jewelry was trying to get the goods on her, trying to take her grandson away from her. She would not allow it. Yolanda's baby was hers now. A psychologist would twist the truth, ask questions she wouldn't be able to answer, and make it seem like she would not be a good guardian for Jamie.

No, I don't want to see a psychologist.

The baby would be her patient, Mrs. Guerrero, not you.

* * *

Claire fooled herself. *I can do this.* *I can have a relationship like a normal thirty-four-year-old woman.* Over the years whenever she had tried to have a night out with friends, she couldn't stop mentally replaying one scene or another from the week's disturbing case histories. It was as if it was her ongoing duty to never let go of her client-victims, to keep them uppermost in her consciousness regardless of the social gathering she was peripherally engaged in. After all, how important were drinks after work or a colleague's birthday party compared to the rape of a first grader? If she let the survivor slip her mind, what did that say about her priorities?

* * *

The grandmother was so focused on Jamie that

Yolanda's absence had not sunk in. Maybe she couldn't think about her daughter because the pain was too great. Maybe she had to avoid her grief in order to be strong for the baby. If an image of Yolie broke through while she sat watching over her grandson, she pushed it away. Yolie riding her tricycle in the rain. Yolie spinning her globe, asking, *which country is this one, mommy?* Yolie heading outside on that last Saturday afternoon, her new baby in her arms. Glimpses of her daughter were too sweet and too brief to bear. The infant boy was where her attention must remain. She had finally agreed to the crazy idea of a psychologist after the doctor told her they were running out of options.

I know it doesn't make much sense for a psychologist to treat your grandson, Mrs. Guerrero, but Jamie isn't taking a bottle and he can't stay on I.V. forever.

So she gave her okay. But who ever heard of a baby needing a psychologist? Yolanda's boy was not crazy.

* * *

Claire had never treated a baby. The youngest client she had ever seen was three years old. His mother had beaten him so badly that his eye was swollen shut and two baby teeth were knocked out. It had taken her a number of sessions to gain the boy's trust and begin the slow process of helping him understand that not every adult was someone to be feared. But a five-week-old infant? How would she approach him, communicate with him?

The baby's file contained medical reports on his condition since the day of the shooting, as well as the police report, which included photographs of the crime scene. The seventeen-year-old mother had been standing on her front lawn near the sidewalk with the baby in her arms, talking to a male neighbor. A car drove past, slowed down, and a male passenger shot at the neighbor, missing him but hitting the baby's mother on the left side of the chest. Upon the bullet's impact, the mother fell to the grass, the baby still in her arms. The child, having been held on the right side of the mother's

chest, was not hit. The neighbor fled and the baby's grandmother ran outside, grabbed the screaming baby and called 911. The mother was pronounced dead at the scene. The photographs showed her lying on the grass in her jeans and bloody sweatshirt. Her arm was still positioned as if holding the baby. The grandmother stood off to the side, the crying child in her arms.

Claire would meet the baby in the morning.

That evening she mentioned the case to Geoff on the phone after they'd made plans to get together that weekend.

Poor little guy. He needs someone like you on his side.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be in the arms of your mother as she is shot to death?

I don't think an infant is aware of all that. He probably was startled in the moment, but a baby isn't aware of what a gunshot is.

Right. But he's aware of what his mother is.

* * *

Claire stood outside the hospital room trying to compose herself. Reviewing the report, she heard the gunshot: thundering and abrasive, shattering the baby – the bereft baby in the hospital and herself as a baby – both of them going deaf from the awful blast. She experienced the mother falling, crashing to the ground, the single shot obliterating the baby's world. Claire felt the bullet entering her own chest, her arms loosening their hold on the phantom infant.

Claire had to hold herself together now. Meeting the grandmother and the baby for the first time, she would be calm. She would learn from the baby what he needed from her.

* * *

The grandmother was not expecting someone who looked like Claire. Tall and beautiful, like a strange goddess from another world. Wild blond hair that hung past her shoulders. A cape for a jacket and sandals like in the bible days. But the woman looked her directly in the eye when the social worker introduced them.

I'm Claire. I'm so sorry about your daughter.

The grandmother could tell she meant it.

May I hold Jamie?

* * *

Claire took off her cape and lifted the baby out of his hospital crib. He whimpered softly, lacking the energy to cry. She had not held many babies in her life, but after adjusting her arms to accommodate his tiny body, she felt comfortable. He continued to whine in his weak voice. She looked into his eyes, brown and pale, letting him know she wanted to understand him. Careful not to create a jarring motion, she swayed slowly from side to side and continued looking into his eyes. The boy in her arms weighed so little that the substance of her own body seemed massive. Was it a human that she held or some small, helpless animal? She listened to his half-cries, waiting for the clue to his misery. Blocking out the others in the room, she closed her eyes and tuned in fully to the person in her arms. The sounds he emitted were of a deep distress emanating from a place shared by every human regardless of age. He was trying to communicate in the only way he could his wordless protest: anger... fear...despair...grief.

* * *

The psychologist visited her grandson three times. Twice in the hospital, once at home. During the first visit the woman said nothing, just held the baby and swayed from side to side so that her body became a cradle. On the second visit, she did the same thing but talked to the baby as if he could understand her.

Oh, Jamie. I am so sorry. I'm so sorry, Jamie. So very sorry.

Over and over she spoke to him in a quiet voice as she walked slowly around the room with him in her arms.

The baby started to take the bottle after the woman's second visit, and the grandmother wondered if the psychologist was some kind of

"It was a simple discovery: the baby needed to grieve and no one had realized that until Claire held him and listened."

curandera. She had broken the spell. Yolanda's child was recovering. He would survive.

On the third visit, when the psychologist came to the grandmother's house, she did not look well. She held the baby and talked sweetly to him, but she seemed frail and tired. Her long bushy blonde hair was losing its color.

* * *

It was a simple discovery: the baby needed to grieve and no one had realized that until Claire held him and listened. She knew as soon as she heard his weak, insistent moaning. Everyone who had dealt with him—the police officials, doctors, nurses, child welfare workers, and even his grandmother—had assumed he could be handed over to a loving substitute mother and that would be enough. They had neglected to factor in the child's irreplaceable loss. He had suffered more than the trauma of a violent incident. He had lost his mother, and as young as he was, the baby needed to mourn that loss.

At first she had just listened to the child, respecting the sounds he made as his only means of communicating. Then, with the tone of her voice and her few words, she let the baby know that she was deeply sorry for his loss, that she understood his intense sorrow and suffering.

I'm so sorry, Jamie. How horrible this loss is for you. Your dear mother taken from you. I'm so sorry, dear boy.

Of course he didn't understand her words, but he understood the feeling behind them. Offering the same sincere emotion she would give to anyone who had lost a loved one, Claire conveyed her heartfelt condolences, but she also let Jamie know that she acknowledged his unique agony. His mother had been shot and he had witnessed it, but he was unable to speak or to understand his own confusion and terror. He was devastated by the loss of the most important – the only important – person in his life. In an instant his world had been shattered.

Claire's ability to experience what the baby was

feeling, and to let him know that, allowed the child to release some of his pain and begin to heal.

But now, having given Jamie the comfort that would save him, Claire had fully absorbed his grief. This time the transfer of her client's agony was complete. She could not release the infant's anguish from her own terrorized body.

* * *

Geoff hadn't heard from Claire since the night before her first hospital visit with the baby. They had spoken on the phone but she had cancelled their date. *I have to let this pass. It has taken hold of me pretty strong.*

A week or so later, on the night of her last visit to the infant boy, Claire knocked on Geoff's door. *I need you.*

They didn't talk. He offered her some wine and then they made love. It was frantic, raging, violent. Claire pounded him with her body. Sobbing. Pounding. Beating her fists against his body. Crying out like a dying animal. It was too much.

She left in the middle of the night.

* * *

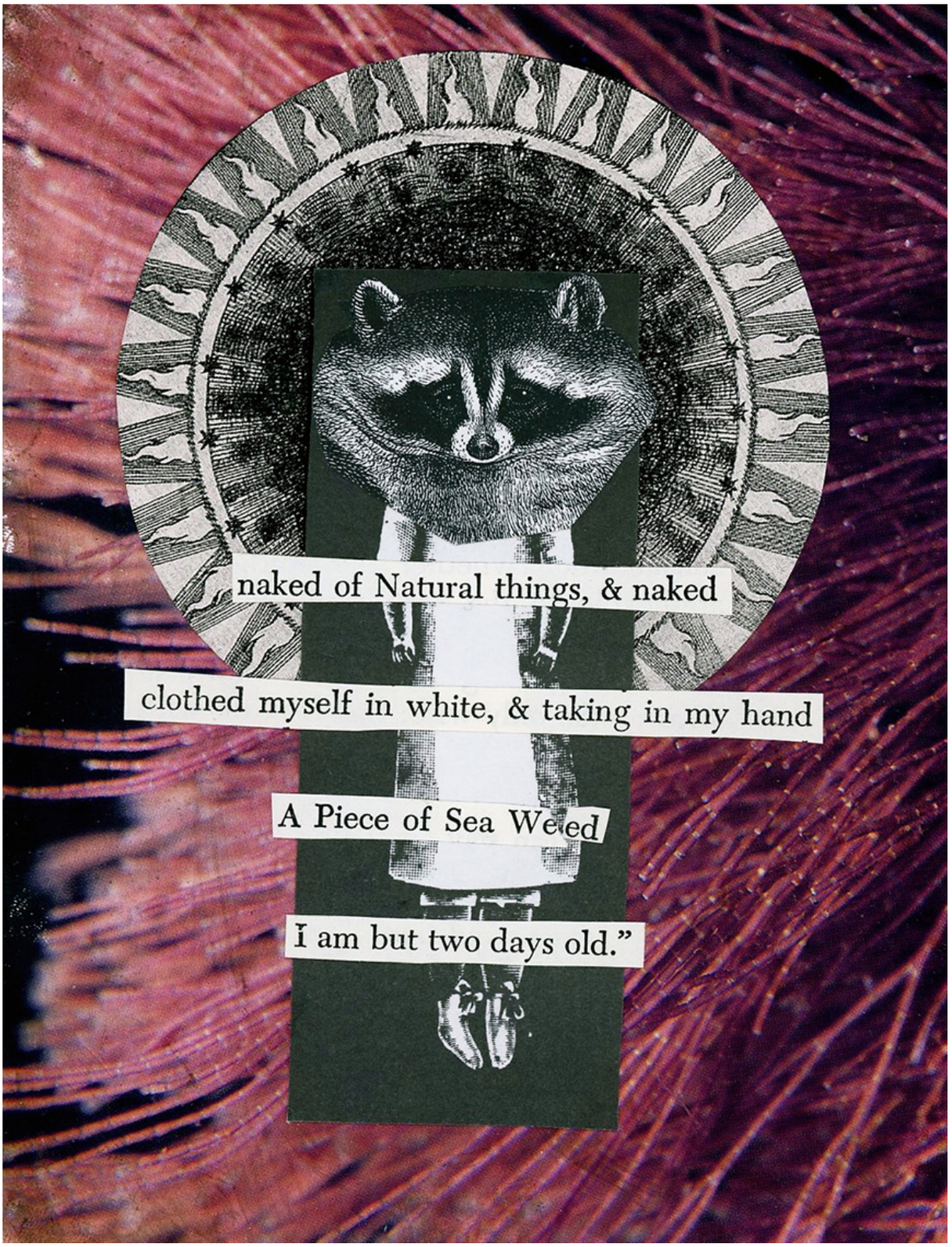
I never knew the whole story. *I knew my mom died holding me when I was a baby and that she was shot by some gang banger even though the bullet wasn't meant for her. She was only seventeen. My grandma told me that my mom wanted to travel the world. And she was a good student, liked math like I do. I don't know if she was into art at all, but if she were alive I could tell her that I'm getting an internship at a graphic design company after I graduate. She'd probably think that was cool.*

My grandma and I were talking about my mom and how she would be proud of me, and I said wasn't it kind of a miracle that I wasn't killed when she was. And she said, yes, it was a miracle but there was another miracle she couldn't tell me about before. She didn't want to burden me with another sad story, she said, because my mom dying was enough for any kid to handle. But now that I'm old enough...

And then she told me about the lady who came to the hospital when I was a baby and whispered to me when I wouldn't eat. She walked around with me and whispered to me, and I'm not sure why it saved me, but my grandma says it did. My grandma said the lady died a few days after I got better, and that her death was a big shock. She wasn't sick and there was nothing physically wrong with her. She just died.

It's too bad my mom isn't around to go to my graduation, but my grandma and my aunts and uncles and cousins will all be there. Even my dad who I hardly ever see. And my grandma says my mom will be there in spirit.

It's also too bad that lady had to die so young, because now I'll never be able to tell her thanks—for everything. ¤

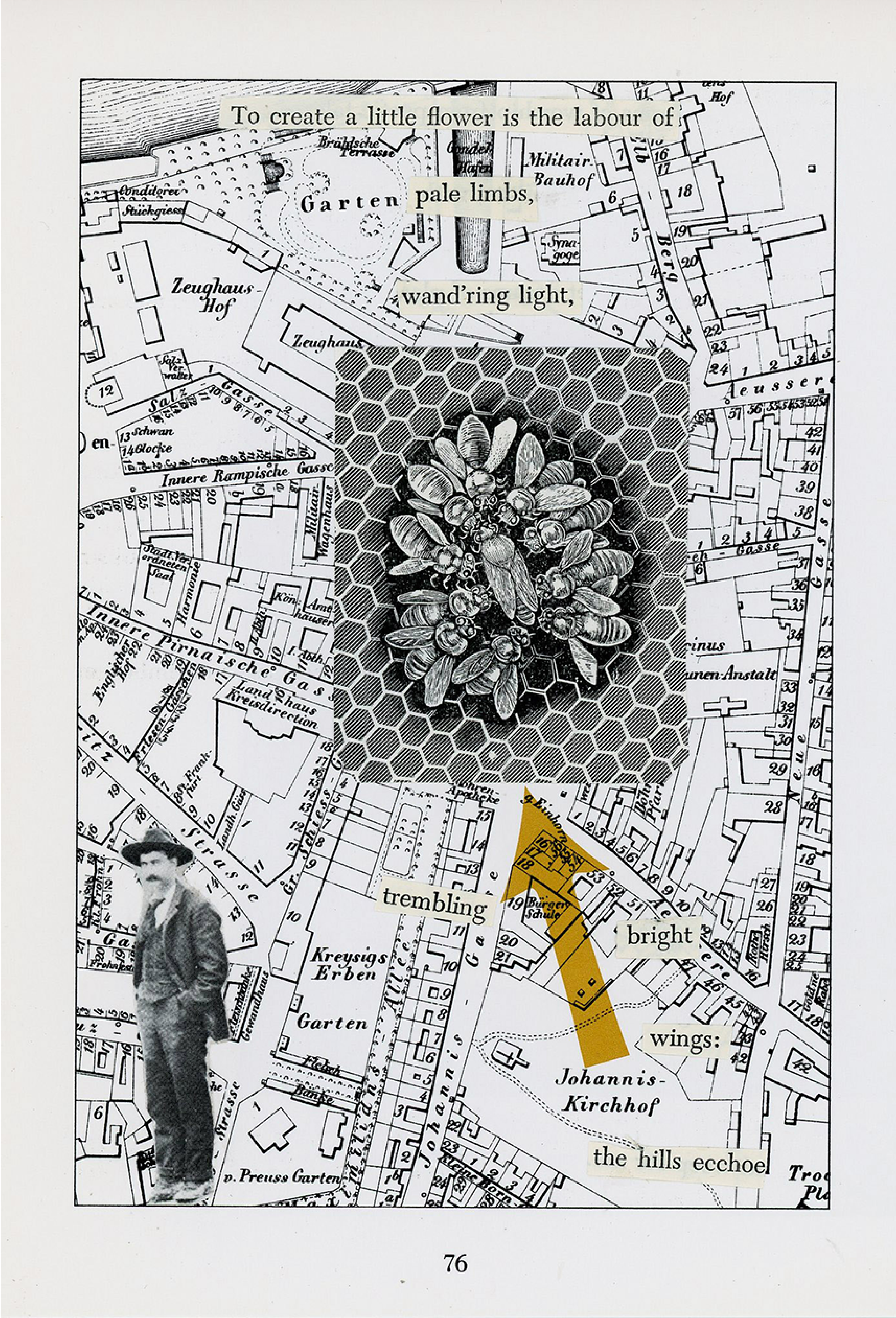


6am walk

BY MARIA MADDOX

kreysigs erben garten

(RIGHT)


To create a little flower is the labour of
pale limbs,
wand'ring light,
trembling
bright
wings:
the hills ecchoe
76

Christmas by Design

BY AMANDA LEWAN

She can remember the first one clearly in her mind: the clean lines of the black tree, the horizon filled with an empty white. Below the lowest tree branch were two little fawns. It was a still landscape, filled with only the incandescent script of a holiday song. Lace lined the bottom, leaving an imprint of shapes, larger snowflakes, much larger than any snowflake in real life. That was the image she wanted to show, the large and overbearing quality of snow, coming from the flakes. This landscape was the beginning of her holiday tradition, and each year she created a new design for the season.

The idea came to her when she first graduated college. Mel couldn't afford to spend much on Christmas and instead decided to hand make cards as her gift. She still enjoyed picking up a flat, smooth piece of paper and drawing on it, sketching a glimpse of a scene, and framing an image. She loved to find that single line she'd use each year, an echo of a song, or a feeling that came to life on the paper.

It was mid-December and this meant that she really only had another week to finish the cards if they were to arrive on time. The problem was that she hadn't even started yet. There wasn't a central image in her mind for this holiday; the snowflake, the candle, the menorah – it had all been done before. It had been easy those first few years. But now she was growing tired of the holiday theme and was beginning to avoid this project altogether. She saved each card tucked into a box somewhere, along with all of those other things she held onto just for memory's sake.

Visiting that box would be her last resort, she thought as she sat down at the desk to work on this year's holiday design.

* * *

Mel had once quit drawing, and the thought of those faded years haunted her. She had stopped when her very first mentor, her father, had left the house for the hospital. At the beginning of Mel's high school career his illness had worsened, and by the end of ninth grade Mel knew he wouldn't return. Though Mel continued to go to school, passing her classes without much effort, she lost any motivation to continue to draw.

It was just Mel and her mother at the house, and her mother did not care one way or another where her daughter invested her time. Mel's grades were not too bad, and her daughter kept busy, so they

got along just fine. They got along with even more ease after her father left. His illness had been a great strain on her mother. She'd wake up often to find him drinking in the kitchen. Mel would hear them arguing in the middle of the night, find her father still up the next morning with heavy eyes and an empty expression. Insomnia weaved through his thoughts, tightening around him, and he tried to fight this with his own work early in the mornings.

Eventually that grew harder for him too, though Mel never knew how bad it had really been. Her mother concealed as much as she could.

The first year after her father left, he sent her pictures of everything he could draw. He was always drawing objects and scenes he knew Mel would appreciate. When they'd go out to town for errands, her father would pull over on the side of the road to stop and ask Mel what it was she could see in the sky or the field. They'd point and pick out what could be drawn. Mel thought it was fun as a child. This was always her way of bonding with the man, understanding him. When she was just five she remembered learning how to shade a drawing, playing with his charcoal, feeling the smoky residue on her the tips of her fingers. Sometimes she'd smear the color onto his hands, onto his face. He always let her.

Mel received five or six pictures when he first went away. They were mostly sketches of other people, a man with large glasses and a pointy face looking down at his table bewitchingly, or a nurse with exaggerated features, so curvy and large she looked as if she might roll off the page. Mel always laughed when she got them; they were cartoonish figures, shifting from his usual work. She thought he was finding humor in the hospital.

After that first year the pictures stopped.

During the second year, so did the phone calls.

Mel knew something had taken a turn for the worse. Eventually, she had to stop calling, because she couldn't understand anything anymore. It had been a slow and painful process, but this condition did not resemble the father Mel had once known. Their conversation was dry, and her father tried so hard to remember what it was once like, but his words drifted far from her. He was not what Mel remembered, and she preferred to imagine their confused mess of smoky, chalk drawings instead.

She thought it would be hard at first to stop calling, to stop looking for his letters and pictures in the mail. She imagined the pain of never receiving a gift from him again.

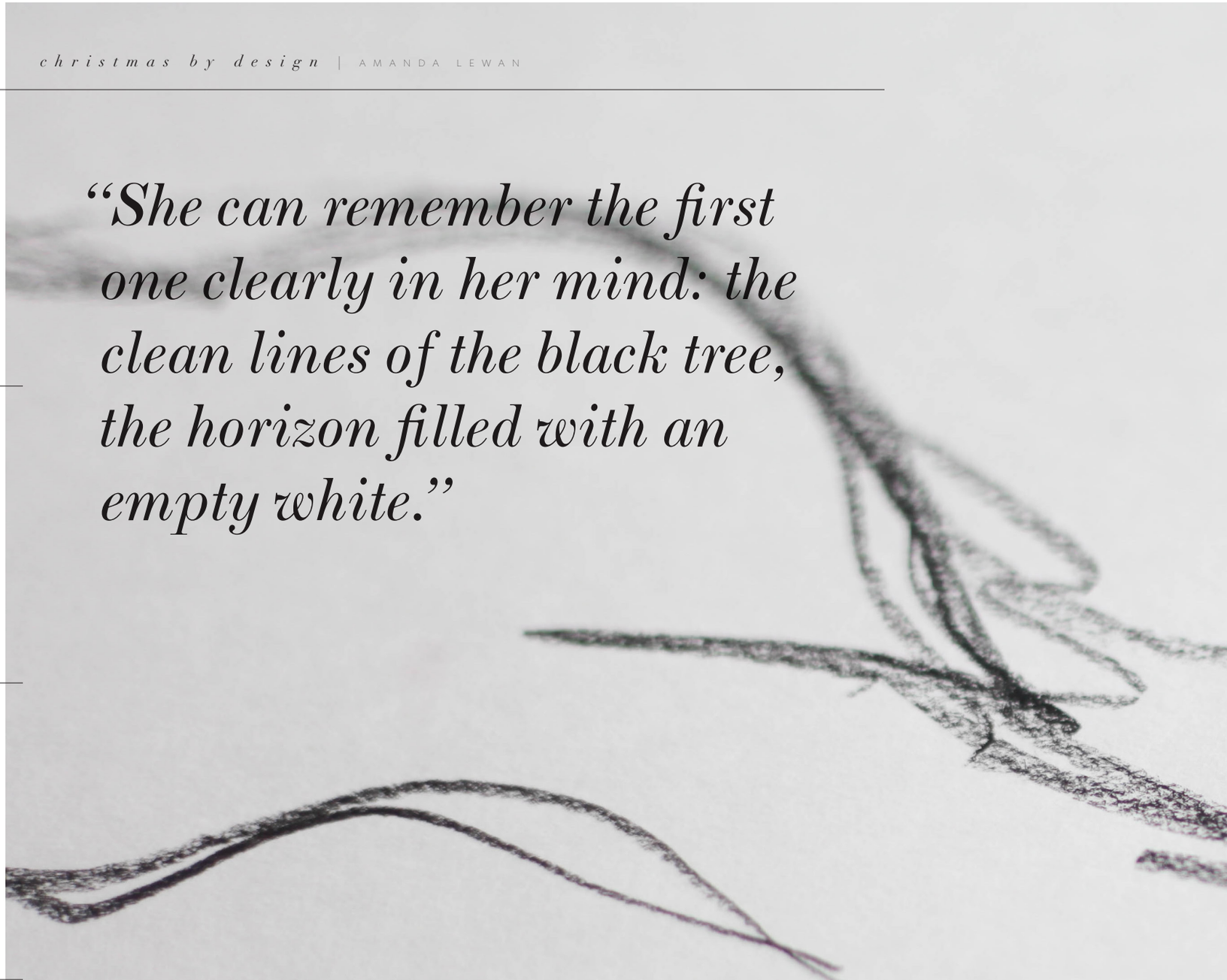
But it didn't really feel like that all. It just felt as if the last lines had been drawn.

* * *

A mountain view could be turned into a Christmas view, couldn't it? The only problem was the overbearing gray that sunk through the clouds, washing over the land, and removing any blush of color that could tease any visitor outdoors. That was winter at her stepfather's: a powerful, ugly force. Mel reminded herself that this place had a warm Christmas indoors. Though the snow was never calm, the meals with her stepfather were. Still Mel yearned for soft snow that glittered like dreams, a glimpse in the light before we wake, lost shimmers frozen in the mind. She never could find peace with the wind and the heavy, heavy snow.

Mel wasn't surprised when her mother remarried quickly, bringing her to this new place. Her mother's marriage with her father had been on the rocks for many years, and in the way a teenager avoids talking about sex or drugs with conservative parents, her father talked about everything else with her expect his fights with mother. She knew they were often bad, and her mother was always tired and unable to deal with him. The space of his absence created a silent remorse for Mel that she kept to herself, while her mother found a light and free beginning from the emptiness. When he left, she found freedom to leave too.

Besides, she had told Mel frequently, he was too far gone. She did not want to wait and obsess over someone who was not really there.



"She can remember the first one clearly in her mind: the clean lines of the black tree, the horizon filled with an empty white."

"I let go a long time ago. You should start doing the same," she had said to her, when Mel had received one of the very first portraits. She was shocked by this comment, for this was the first time her father had been gone for more than a few weeks.

"Where should I put these?" Mel had wanted to continue to sell her father's work, to do something for him while he was away.

"Keep it. It's yours, isn't it?

Her mother glanced over the piece in her hand.

"We could still sell it?"

"There won't be any galleries or shows anymore."

Her mother was right; there were no messages asking for her father's work, no more work to show off. Mel placed his portraits with her belongings instead.

By the time Mel entered college her mother was dating, and when she had finished she had chosen a doctor to be her second husband, moving a few hours away from their tiny apartment in a small city, to a larger house in the mountains. It was a very beautiful house, and often a very beautiful place. Each Christmas Mel made the drive to stay for the weekend to his house, with his family, because her mother had considered it their own now too.

When Mel thought of an indoor view, she thought of Christmas breakfast spread out across a beautiful table. Her stepfather always cooked special breads, muffins and toast, along with homemade jams and juices, and plates of fresh fruit. No one had ever cooked much of a breakfast for Mel growing up. Her father always ate eggs and toast, up early before Mel left for school if he was in a condition to eat that day. Her mother advocated for cereal,

and any meal she didn't have to make.

She knew this year she would really miss that breakfast.

"He really enjoys having you out here you know," her mother had said to her earlier in the week. "His daughter can't make it this year. It's a shame she just wants to be in Florida instead."

Mel drew a very realistic morning in her mind: a cup of coffee with bits of smoky steam coming up through its dense, chalky black mix. Leftover Christmas cookies were for breakfast, along with a few browning bananas. The table was filled with the shine of bows and wrapping paper, for the children had already opened their gifts before eating. The children, Mel imagined, always did.

"I'll try to be there," Mel said.

"It's not healthy for you to stay home on Christmas. And you haven't made a trip here in months."

Her mother had complained last year that the Christmas breakfast card just wasn't as good as her usual cards.

"I come when I can, mom. It's been a very busy month."

She had lied, and she wondered if her mother even sensed it. There just wasn't enough energy this year. She felt tired and quiet, and wanted to reflect and work by herself in her home. Just the thought of trying for hours sounded tiring.

"Well, I would hope you change your mind," she said in a very low tone of voice. "We do like having you here."

* * *

Another year Mel fastened together a large ornament. The shape was the card but the sketch inside was a scene: two arms reaching towards you, as if to place you on their own Christmas tree. She used a bright and beautiful red, a deep, royal color that she matched to the leaf of a poinsettia. She thought it was the only color that year to announce the holidays. It was sent out all of her friends and family, but she was surprised to receive a message in return from an old friend. She felt a sharp tug at her stomach, remembering how many years ago they had parted ways.

"So beautiful. Your work is just amazing. We'll take a two dozen more," signed with love, Greg.

He was so impressed with the picture that he hung it in a frame on their wall, and added it to their family's holiday décor. She saw it in the background of a holiday photo he sent back to her the following year, his four smiling kids sitting in front of the Christmas tree. The littlest one a wide open mouth with missing front teeth. She did not hang his card up on her wall with the others. She read it and placed it aside, before tossing it away with the Christmas garbage.

* * *

This year she drew with charcoal. She wanted to feel with her fingers the smoky image she could make. Nothing good came to her, and she had gone through an entire note pad in one night.

Mel poured another glass of wine. She thought about her father's drinking. She thought about her father's work. She thought about his condition and how her parents would find. She remembered a drive, just her and her father, leaving for the afternoon to draw in the field. They were practicing portraits and a smile came to Mel's face. She finally knew what she would make for this year.

She shifted in her chair and began to work for several hours, finally coming up with the right adaptation. She drew a sad Santa with a pointed nose and glasses. She had never done just a portrait for Christmas before, but this one was inspired by that first picture her father sent her years ago.

She added red to the black and white card. She kept the man's face somewhat bewitching, but a sad, passing look overcame it. She wrote: *"Thinking of you. Until we meet again, sometime next year."*

It seemed oddly enchanting to see this Santa, his duties fulfilled, his time to shine gone now, passed away with the other days of life, absent of the hope and joy that he brought with him. But Mel thought

"Still Mel yearned for soft snow that glittered like dreams, a glimpse in the light before we wake, lost shimmers frozen in the mind."

it seemed so right, so fitting, that we should know this man as a part of the every day. She wanted others to remember him too, while he thinks and waits for the world he serves.

"Mom probably won't like this one," she said to herself, as she began to duplicate the fifteen cards she would send out this year.

On her list was her father's address at the hospital, a mental institution several hours away from her.

***

It was two days later when Mel found a card addressed to her, without a return address.

The envelope was bright red and inside was a folded piece of white paper.

Inside she found a hand drawn sketch, simple and beautiful. It was a drawing of a few people smiling around a fire, the distant window showing a snow they would not receive this Christmas. It was distinctly in her father's style. The note read:

"Doing much better. I started drawing again. Would love to hear from you soon. Thinking of you every day and saving each card you've sent.

Send me more. Love, Dad."

***

It was Christmas morning and Mel was sitting inside her beat up Camero, listening to its low rumble, and watching the exhaust puff out behind her. She had dialed her mother's phone, knowing it was only right to call them, as she had promised to come for the day shrinking her usual weekend trip to just the holiday.

When Mel left, she did not drive towards the mountains. She couldn't think of it at all.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," she said at the answer of the phone.

"Merry Christmas. Are you almost here?"

In the background she could hear her stepfather wishing her a Merry Christmas too, and music humming from their kitchen.

"No, I'm calling to tell you I won't make it," she said. "I've gone to see Dad instead."

"Excuse me? Your father?" her mother sounded shocked. "He's not in any condition for you to visit. You know this."

"But actually, he is mother. You haven't been updating me with the doctor's reports. They sent you information months ago, didn't they?"

"Well, yes. I always get that."

There was silence for a moment. Mel was waiting for some sort of apology.

"He's still not right. You're only asking for trouble."

Mel didn't know if he was right, but he was better. She had been thinking about his condition for days, thinking over everything they told her when she called. He had stabilized on his medication and was responding well to all therapy and treatment. It had taken years of different treatments; periods where he appeared better than fell back into an episode. She knew she had to see him.

"So you'll be by later?" her mother asked again.

"No, Mother. I'll be here today. Merry Christmas."

Mel hung up the phone, and shut the engine off. She had been sitting outside for at least a half hour, thinking about the words to say, feeling anxious at seeing her father for the first time in nearly ten years.

But when Mel walked inside, she immediately recognized him, sitting a table with a sketchpad and pencil. The nice lady at the front desk walked her over to her father, and she sat down at the table, asking him what he was drawing. On the paper was a picture of a little girl that had almost looked like her when she was younger and had her blonde, curly hair. Her father smiled at her and stood up slowly. He leaned in to hug her without saying a word.

He kissed her on the cheek.

"You're as beautiful as I always remembered," he said, sitting back down at the table.

"And you still look the same Dad," Mel smiled

They sat together, eating coffee and eggs served by the cafeteria. Few people were around, but it was still quite early this Christmas morning. Her father had always been one to wake up early to draw and enjoy his coffee before Mel could arrive to join him. ¤

THE ROAD FROM TAHLEQUAH

BY M CID D'ANGELO

For Leonard Peltier and Russell Means

She has a mohawk. She isn't Mohawk; she is Cherokee. She has a nose ring linked to an earring with a thin gold chain. Her eyes are dark with mascara and there's a spiked collar around her neck. When she speaks she says fuck a lot. He thinks she talks too much.

His granddaughter reaches over and turns on the radio after a glance. A tortured soul fills the pickup with cries of getting popped in the ass with a cap; the voice slugs it out like a jackhammer. She likes it; she pulls a tight grin across her young face and concentrates on the road.

My truck, old man, my music.

Ahead stretches tedium in flat green and amber fields. As the old man watches, he notices a billboard with the smiling, idiotic face of the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz* begging them to pull off a side road for the graveyard remains of the Golden Era of Tinseltown. They are in Kansas.

Flat. Flat like you'd guess it to be. Flat as the sky.

"Fuck. We need gas."

There's no use protesting when she has her mind set, the old man has discovered. He doesn't want to protest anyway. His whole life up until now has been a paradigm for protesting. Some battles are best un-fought if you want to win them, or so a wise fool had once said, that wise fool of a young man he once was; a younger man who'd weighed the consequences of his actions against the ages-old idiom of ends justifying their means. Things had been different then.

Tom Long wears a black hat with a feather stuck in it. It's supposed to be an eagle feather, but it's not. It's from a turkey. No one knows that. His drawn, horse-shaped face bears glasses, and although he possesses a large man's frame, his jeans have trouble staying up despite a weak belt. It's been more than thirty years of revisiting what he'd done and now, on the flat road to oblivion, it's coming back. That's the problem with perdition: it doesn't let you rest, whether it's yours or not.

"Smoke?" He asks. His shirt pocket is empty.

She nods at the glove compartment. He takes out a half-empty pack of Marlboros and slides a stick out. She wants one too.

"Mom took my whole carton," the girl says after another grin. "That's okay because I stole twenty bucks from her. If it wasn't for the fact she got that credit card, we'd both be fucked."

He coughs, wipes speckles of blood on his sleeve. Death. It's both savior and damnation from federal prison because they can't do anything for him anymore and no one wants to die behind bars.

"But it's not like I hate her or anything. I mean, she's cool. I just hate it when she gets all up in my shit for nothing." She rubs her nose with the back of a hand. "What a hypocrite, know what I'm saying? She keeps spewing this shit about it being bad for my health and she goes through two packs a day."

"What did they tell you back there?"

She blinks. "Back where? Oh. The prison. Nothing. But I was scared shitless when those fucking protesters tried to stop us after we got out of the gate."

The radio spits venom in the shape of a female DJ's outrage: a rude question about whether to leave the toilet seat up or down for a lesbian.

"Fucking feminists," the girl mutters and switches the station. His granddaughter is very colorful in her point-of-view, the old man thinks. She drums her fingers on the wheel. Thumpety-thump-thump.

Asphalt, heat, and cigarette smoke on the flatlands. A thousand years and it doesn't change here, Tom Long thinks. Another thousand and it'll be the same. The land is always the land. That's okay but it's screwed up too: the land never forgets anything. It holds onto its memories because time changes nothing.

Yes, memories. Shit, like it was 1971 all over again. The cabin near Tahlequah on that day the soldier boys showed up with the FBI and turned the nearby community center into a bloodbath. Maggie, his wife, had been at her sit-in. One of their boys – his granddaughter's father – with a .22 rifle running after a jackrabbit and the old man

remembers calling him up to the porch and taking the gun away. Nobody likes seeing a redskin with a gun. They didn't have much to drink in the cabin, so his friend Walker Clouds got into his truck and went to buy beer at Winnie's Market on the way to Tahlequah and the community center where Maggie was. Tom Long didn't work even though he'd left Vietnam with an honorable discharge, but Maggie had made a good paycheck as a social worker for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They were quick to get the government cheese. Walker Clouds and Maggie Long didn't come back that day, by the way.

"Big sky," his granddaughter mutters.

The old man says nothing.

"Ain't too bad, though. I kinda like it. I can see how some people come out here."

She drives them onto the ramp of a Conoco gas station and hops out. A greasy-looking man in a dirty dress shirt watches her from the street. There's a clunk as the driver slips the spout into the tank. There's an argument between her mother's credit card and the reader. She hits the display with an open palm and stalks to the store to pay in person. When she comes back, she has another cigarette dangling from her mouth.

The old man passes her for the restroom. He urinates for an hour, it seems. The place is clean and smells of antiseptic. A picture on the wall above the urinal offers the incredulous view of Cherokee Raindancers dancing for a miracle. Blue tile and white grout. His eyes run the creases between the squares as if they're roads.

Another memorial step back to '71. It's appropriate

> *"She has a mohawk. She isn't Mohawk; she is Cherokee."*

"But your mother...is she doing...all right?"

It's an inane question. His granddaughter turns up the music for a few crashing bars. "I love this," she tells him in her furious glee.

* * *

Salina. Coming up Interstate 35 you can't see it until you're almost upon it. Gray clouds – an aluminum sky – stretches out from them, everywhere. There's an oasis of green trees on the flatland, gathered around a huge red and white water tower that proclaims the town's name in ten-foot-high block letters.

"Place is a fucking dump," the girl says.

"There are worse places."

"Coming from you, I believe it."

now, with his dick in his hands, because the whole thing had been pissing in the wind. Even from his cabin they'd seen traffic rocketing down the road from the community center after the BIG SHOOT. A brown-yellow cloud billowed behind it. They hadn't come up just for lunch. The old man could remember a few of the vehicles turning on Hansen Road, before the fork to his cabin. Chief Redd MacGregor asked the wind what the hell was going on, but it hadn't answered. No one could have said there was trouble just by the dust cloud. That would be insane. They knew there was trouble because they'd *sensed it*. The final sum dawned when the men at Uncle Tom's cabin put two and two together: federal and U.S. Army trucks on the dirt

road, and Maggie Long's sit-in at the community center. They ran inside, locked everything up. The lone Indian there with a colorful name – Clouds-In-His-Eyes – had asked, "I hope you've got guns, Tom Long."

Maybe the way the old man remembers it, it wasn't the same. He flushes and suffers a coughing fit. The old man in the bathroom mirror looks too old for his time.

After he's secure inside the truck, he helps himself to one of the water bottles and sips, watching his granddaughter.

She smokes, defying the warning posted on the gas pump and looking feral and militant despite the fact that beyond her mohawk and her tattoos and piercings, she's actually pretty. *She's Maggie all over*, he thinks. The girl folds her arms and leans against the truck, eyeing the gawking pervert across the way. *What the fuck are you looking at?* her eyes storm out in plain English. The digital numbers of the pump switch on and on across from her. Remembering the dirty windshield, she takes the squeegee from the water holder and services the glass. The old man in the passenger seat turns and watches the store.

"I hope we don't get any trouble on the way, Gramps," she tells him as she wipes his side. "That shit in El Reno was fucked up."

There were many people along the way who would like nothing more than to see him dead, and they, like the land, never forget anything. Despite this, the old man has nothing to say.

"If I woulda known I was going to face that shit, I would've taken Robert with me." She stops, flings water from her tool and stares at him. "But I don't think he woulda come. Nobody wanted to come."

The old man has nothing to say to this either. He thinks that everyone has their reasons for not wanting to come.

She replaces the squeegee and gives the pervert across the street the finger. She climbs in the truck and checks her wallet.

"Mom gave me two hundred bucks, but there's no way we're gonna make it all the way back on that. What do you got?"

"I thought you put it on her card."

"I did. But we gotta eat, Gramps."

He pulls out cash – all he has – from a bundle in his back jeans pocket and hands the whole wad to her. She counts it, grimacing.

"Fifty bucks?"

"I was an inmate in a federal prison, Maggie."

"You think they'd give something to you besides a swift kick in the ass on your way out."

"It doesn't work that way."

"But they said you were a model prisoner. That's why you got released, right?"

"That doesn't mean I get a prize."

"Fuck."

Margret drives with a stern look on her face. It's perpetual. The old man thinks she's too thin. She smokes as much as he does and he hopes that his cough will somehow frighten her. She wears a tank top and utility pants that Marines wear. Margret has more metal on her than a '57 Chevy. On her right arm is a litter of tattoos connected to each other. Not many pictures – just words there. FUCK THIS SHIT FUCK YOU along with the anarchist's sign and illegible scribbles. A Pocahontas from the picture books with penis envy, perhaps. The old man is surprised to see that she sports a medicine wheel on her wrist.

On her neck there is another tattoo – but he doesn't recognize it. For a young woman with a lot to show, she doesn't want him looking at her for very long. It's another circle or wheel with a knife or a feather in it.

"Have you been to Tahlequah?" He asks her.

"No. Where's that?"

"In Oklahoma."

"Did we pass it?"

He tells her no. "I lived in a cabin near there once." He doesn't know why he asks her. Maybe he wants to test her, see how much she's learned

about her family history. He's disappointed when they take the junction to the I-70 and head west. Margret tells him she wants to make Hays before it gets dark.

She flicks her spent cigarette on the road. "I hope you don't care, Gramps, but I'm putting in a CD. I'm fucking getting tired of battling static and these asshole ministers." She grabs another cigarette while she's at it. Another tortured soul begins assailing them out of the little box but Margret turns it down. It's the least she can do.

"How is your mother?" He tries again.

"Why do you care?"

"She never wrote to me."

"Because she hated you."

"Hated?"

"*Hates* too, probably." She takes smoke in a deep breath, casts a glance at the rushing fields. "It's fucked up. People back home love you and hate you, Gramps. But you know that. They talk about you as if you're still the shit."

He tells her some things die hard.

"I don't know. Mostly everyone is dead. I mean, just look at my dad."

Silence.

"They say he got cancer from cleaning out asbestos in reservation schools. I didn't go to Tulsa to see him. He was dead before I knew he was sick." She punctuates her syllables with smoke. "He was always going on about working here and working there. Never made any money because the asshole never stopped drinking. You know he was an alcoholic, right?" She doesn't wait for the old man to say anything. "I hated him. So I didn't give a fuck he died. But I mean, he beat the shit out of me almost every night."

He snorts, spits up bloody phlegm, and shoots it out the open window.

The girl glances at the rushing fields. "Mom told me you went to Oklahoma University. Go Sooners."

"I dropped out."

"Yeah, I know, but you were the only one in the family that has done that. I mean, gone to college."

"You don't?"

"Fuck no. Who has the money for that?"

"There are grants. Scholarships."

"Not for me. I have a record. Like you do."

"For what?"

"I'm just another fucking redskin on drugs." She's staring at the rearview mirror. "What the fuck?"

There is another pickup coming up behind them. It has three people sitting in the cab. Their horn is blaring and they're shouting. Margret scowls and watches them approach. When they have made her blind spot, she swerves and guns the engine. There's not enough horse, though, and the other vehicle pulls up alongside.

"Fuckheads," she shouts through the open window.

The other truck pulls close and they are struck with rocks and eggs. Margret hits the brakes and the other vehicle rockets past.

They are gone in moments.

She gives the old man a wild look. "Just how many people did you kill, anyway?"

* * *

She hates driving; she's told him. Margret says they'll make Hays before nightfall, but she doesn't want to go hell-bent for it anymore. They sit on hard plastic chairs in the corner of a Taco Bell nearest the door and eat. She chews with her mouth open and her large round eyes wide. He can see her nipples poking through her tank top and light brown hairs on her upper lip. Her armpits are unshaven.

"Does it hurt you?" She wants to know. He has to ask her what she means. "Are you hurt that I was the only one willing to come pick you up?"

"No."

"You're lying."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because it would hurt me. I'd be fucking pissed."

"So, yes, it did hurt a little. He was lying.

"I think it's cool, though. I mean, there's nothing

back at home anyway but sitting around with Rake and goofing off online."

"Rake?"

She tells him he's a black male friend she hangs around. Nothing romantic, but Margret doesn't phrase it that way. She uses "fuck" again to illustrate her relationship with Rake: *it's not like we're fucking or anything.*

"Did you meet him at school?"

"Juvenile Corrections. A work detail. They had boys and girls from all over the state working together cleaning trash from the side of the road. Rake was in for drugs, like me. We were out a couple of months later and started hanging out. We've been friends ever since."

"Kind of stupid to have a record for, Maggie."

She laughs. "Oh, fuck. Yeah, that's much worse than what you did." The girl gives him a serious look. "I don't do drugs anymore, Gramps. Takes money, and all mom gets is a stupid allotment from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They think it makes up for everything, so don't get me fucking started on the government."

He's sorry he's asked. He turns his attention to the scenery.

"So what was that place like?" Margret chases him.

"What place?"

"That cabin of yours."

He thinks. Memories are never like what they're supposed to be. Shadows. Shouts. Threats. Lots of things. The siege, the gunshots. *Uncle Tom's Cabin, but it wasn't like the literary one. Not by a long shot. Well, maybe a little bit. It's a matter of color; the literary one was all black, and this one was red. Red all over.*

"Well?"

They'd been the bad guys, but it's all just a matter of perspective. One's cause can be another's crime, and there'd been a lot of dead bodies there. He tells her he doesn't remember, though, and that's a lie. She tells him he was the one who brought it up in the first place. *Tahlequah, right?*

"Dad never said much about that place," she goes on.

The old man tells her he understands why.

"And Uncle Albert never does either."

"Where is Albert?"

"I don't know." She thinks a few minutes. "I kinda liked that radio station we were listening to coming out of Oklahoma City. The one where they were singing and talking in Cherokee. I mean, the music sucked, but it was cool to hear the words."

They hadn't listened long, he recalls. The introductory music was "Turn the Radio On" sung in Cherokee with a male and female chorus. The DJ had spoken in Cherokee for the first part of the broadcast and English the second.

"No one speaks it at home anymore?"

She shakes her head. "Where the fuck did they come from? Those fuckers in the truck who egged us?"

"I don't know."

"Bastards. You think somebody called somebody and told them about you?"

"They know who I am."

"I thought that shit was over when we crossed into Kansas." Margret gives a long look at the parking lot. "And what you did was so long ago, right? If that happens again, I'm going to shit my pants."

"We'll stop. Get a room and call it a day."

She reminds him she still wants to make Hays before they do that. He tells her there's no rush.

"Did they cause you a lot of shit in prison? I mean, after 9-11?"

He doesn't answer her.

"I woulda thought they would've. I mean, you had it all over you, didn't you?"

The old man winces; he tells her he doesn't know what she means.

"I mean, Gramps, what they labeled you," she presses him. "Those assholes outside the prison and on the road haven't forgotten it."

He tries to explain it was different in prison, but it's hard to. It's not like Margret would understand.

She's young and stupid and on fire to kill the world.

"Labels...like the one they gave Timothy McVeigh," she pushes.

He says nothing.

"What could it be, Gramps? Maybe...terr-o-rist?"

"Goddamn it, Maggie."

"Don't call me that." She slurps Coca-Cola from her straw. Her large brown eyes are pretty, despite the regalia. Soft, warm even.

"Why don't you want me to call you Maggie?"

"Because that was *her* name."

Her saying that hurts him more than anything else. "She was a great woman, your grandmother."

Margret shrugs. "I'm Margret. Christ. I even hate *that* name."

"What name do you want?"

"Does it matter? I've changed my name almost every year since school." She sighs, thinking. "I wanted something Indian at first, so I called myself Amadahy. I got sick of that and tried to be white. So, I called myself Kathy."

"What is your name now?"

"I suppose what the white assholes call me: 'Indian Cunt-Bitch.'"

They grow quiet for a time. He's finished eating, and he looks out the window under the Taco Bell sign to watch the traffic. She slurps from her straw, following his lead.

"What was it like in prison?"

"Why? Do you want to go sometime?"

She shrugs. "The way I'm headed, who knows?"

"That's pretty cynical."

"It's realistic."

He takes a deep breath, turning his gray-steel eyes on her dark brown ones. "Who do you think I am?"

"I don't know what to think."

"That's because you don't know, Maggie, or whatever-name-you-want. *We* weren't a bunch of..." He searches for the word, but can't find it. It lingers somewhere around the neighborhood of anarchists and murderers. "Your grandmother was shot and killed by soldiers because she believed in something. I was guilty the most, though. Out of all of them, I was the one who was guilty the most."

"Because you hijacked that train?"

He looks back at the window, those steely gray eyes now more like undefined clouds on an overcast day. He whispers, "I was guilty because in some fucked up way, I was an idealist."

Margret is grinning through her pride. "They still talk about you, every*one*. All those people with their websites and their blogs. It has to mean something, Gramps. I mean, they were all out for your release."

He shakes his head. She doesn't understand the motives of those who champion doomed causes. Margret does not understand the semantics, the details. He can see in her eyes triumph over getting one on the White Man. She represents the majority of those naïve. That's because no one knows in the new digital world what had happened those years ago; not *really*. His story is left over from the days of barbarism, and Margret doesn't know that Tom Long would have loved to have died there.

* * *

There's a somber light the next day with no sun, stretching on yellow, unknowing fields. Here the gray sky is no blanket, and it smothers you. And what's so frightening is that you don't now how it does it. It stretches on into infinity like it did more than a hundred years ago, more than two hundred years ago, more than a hundred *millennia*. All you can do is gaze up and think, *how small I am*.

A song on the radio blasts something about the singer being a rat in a cage, but it doesn't seem to register with Margret who is blissfully smoking and driving in her rage.

They are north of the I-70 now, on a low-maintained road passing out of Kansas. A sign promises them Idalia and Last Chance. The fields are unchanged for the borderline.

Tom Long whispers, but his words are lost upon the rushing wind. She doesn't know; she doesn't hear them. The words are like the rolling fire that burns across the sky-domed plains, above the

"All you can do is gaze up and think, how small I am."

amber-dancing miracles of corn and barley and wheat, above the infinity of the past. We are who we are, and maybe even that is not enough. *Idealists are the dangerous ones, Maggie.* They are the dangerous ones because they are doing and dying, and then he nods off and Margret talks because she doesn't know that he has. She will tell him of endless days of her mother sitting in front of a television that babbles incoherently about easier living from a can, or how one might stretch their food dollar by gourmet techniques; she speaks of petty squabbling in the schoolyards of her youth, how the nuns or the missionaries or some conservative teacher had berated her for wearing a feather in her hair or that she was caught with a little book in her hands that illuminated the scribbling of Sequoyah – the man who founded their alphabet – or that she was listening to Native American rap music; she'll tell him of those days when she and Rake hid from the Highway Patrol after casting empty shopping carts into busy streets, and how they'd set bonfires in the middle of endless pastures; and in between CD sets, she'll go on in her youthful, belligerent arrogance how soon she was going to piss everything away in that small little fucked town she'd been forced to endure, and that people like Rake and her mother and Robert her brother would be only shades to haunt those years she'll no longer want to remember; that everything she was and is whether Cherokee or not didn't really matter; and within her voice one might even hear a slight flutter when Margret accidentally mentions how she loves the idea of New York City and that somehow with the Indian poetry she sometimes scribbles in stolen composition notepads, one day she'll be able to go there; and she'll dream about how she'll exceed her own expectations, somehow, regardless of the drugs she's done or the low schooling she's had, or the people she's known; and Goddamn how she loves Rain Dancers – *and don't you remember them, Gramps?* but she will no longer ask her grandfather – *god fucking asshole must be asleep* – about what actually happened at Uncle Tom's cabin all those years ago. The one near Tahlequah. The one he yaks about. The one where Clouds-In-His-Eyes and Chief Redd MacGregor had ended, and what began Tom Long's history of hijacking a train to nowhere but ended up with him here, now, profoundly and utterly silent in his elder years, his spirit free of his cooling flesh. They will come to the clapboard house – her mother's house – somewhere along the way, and Margret will try to rouse her grandfather, but he will be wandering the endless fields for his lost and beloved Maggie, and finding a place where a crowd has already begun to gather. ¤

Photography

BY SAVVY GULIA

Set your own course through the ocean of life

A renewed perspective

Absolute freedom

Dishwater

BY KATHERINE DUBKE

Bubbles

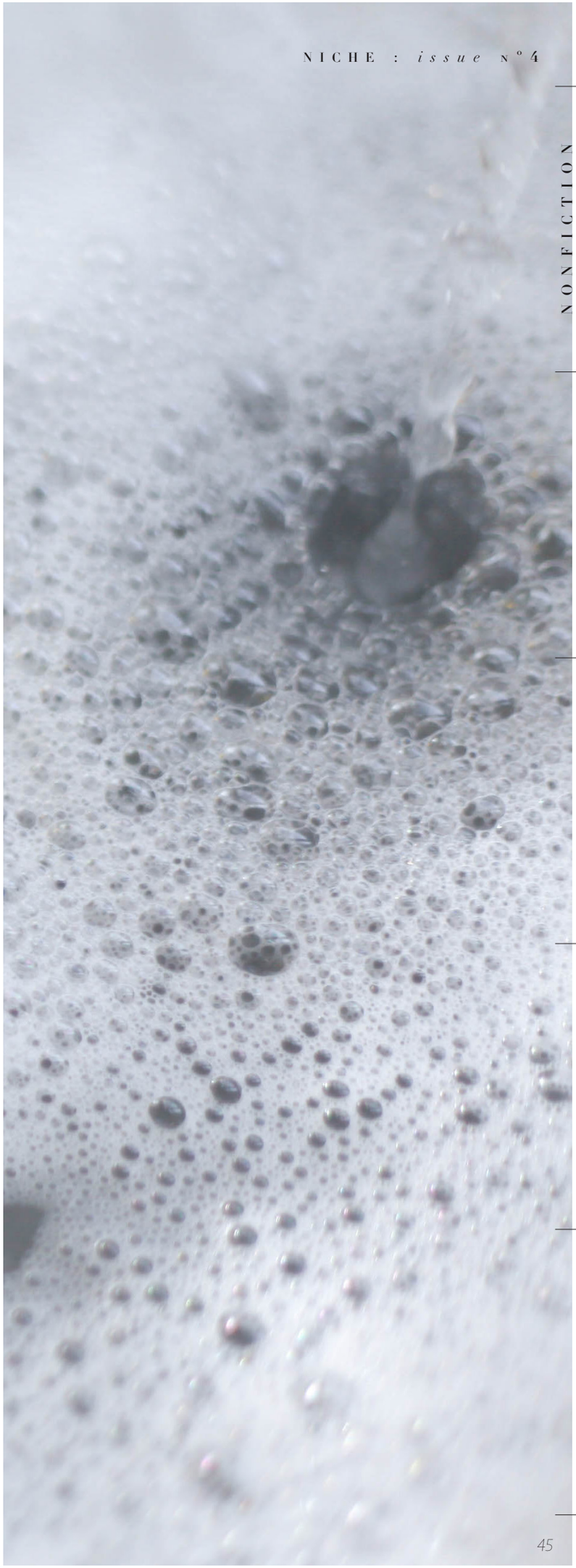
"The best time for planning a book is while you're doing the dishes."
~Agatha Christie

Wash-Cycle

We flip a coin to see who washes and Tabitha loses. I watch as she pulls on yellow, rubber gloves, rolls up her sleeves and turns the faucet to hot. She pours a glob of dish soap into the blue tub that sits in the sink. She plays with foamy soap bubbles as steam rises and hits her face. The tongue-burning water drowns the forks, plates, and cups as Tabitha submerges a towel and scrubs the bacteria and filth away. With a handful of scrubbed dishes, she drops them into the rinse bucket and they emerge from the water dripping with clear, steaming water. Utensils and plates sit in the wire rack, waiting to be dried—waiting for me. With flour sack towel in hand, I wipe off the water droplets and nestle a fork into its drawer. It sits there until it repeats the cycle of clean, dirty, soapy, wet, and dry once again.

"735 out of 740"

There aren't many people crowded in line, eager for the chance at a lifelong career in the dishwashing industry. Oftentimes, even in towns with the poorest of economies, there are hiring signs on café' windows that indicate the need for a dishwasher in the kitchen. It's not a very popular job and according to an article in the New York Times, "dishwashing ranked 735th out of 740" in regards to job desirability. Apparently, "only envelope stuffer, prostitute, drug dealer, fortuneteller and beggar were lower." Though these statistics show a general dislike of dishwashing, there is a man who used to have a career washing dishes. The people called him "Dishwasher" Pete—Pete Jordan. He was a man with the ambition to wash dishes in all fifty of the U.S. states and managed to make it to over thirty of them, working everywhere from "a fish cannery; an offshore oil rig; a college cafeteria;" to "a ski resort; a kosher nursing home; a commune and a hospital" among others. Apparently he "grew up one of seven children in a San Francisco family that didn't own a dishwashing machine." Without an automatic dishwasher, Pete Jordan became skilled at doing dishes by hand and took this unique job skill with him wherever he went.



Joy

Mom buys only "Joy" dish soap to wash her dishes because its emergency instructions read: "in case swallowed, drink water." I still question who would be stupid enough to ingest dish soap, but I guess it could happen. She backs up her purchase of this soap because she heard a story about a newly married housewife who was clueless when it came to washing dishes. Apparently, this woman scrubbed the dishes in the soapy water and left them to dry without rinsing. As a result, her husband, whom she cooked for died because of the leftover soapy residue on his un-rinsed dishes. Mom claims that if the dish soap had been natural, his death could have been prevented. "Does it make any sense for people to be washing their dishes with poison?" I like "Joy", despite its fake citrus scent and Mom's odd horror stories because the dish soap bears my middle name—Joy. It's fitting, the way the happy little soap bubbles grow when the boiling water falls on it. Sometimes I watch as the bubbles fly out of the wash bucket and float on the air. Washing dishes has a therapeutic effect upon me. The lemony scent of "Joy" reminds me of hours spent talking with Mom about everything: my troubles, my college plans, the deep questions of life—it all came out. Sometimes laughter rose like the bubbles and floated in the air. At other times, my teardrops made the towel wet rather than drippy dishes. But regardless of what mood I was in while drying with Mom, Joy was present.

Drudgery

I didn't always like doing dishes. Whenever Dad walked into my room and told me to "help my mother with the dishes" I would try to put off the task for as long as possible. Procrastination was learned at a very early age. With six people in the family, that added up to a LOT of dirty dishes. Problem is, you finish washing, and new dishes magically appear.

Magic

The first time I ever used a dishwasher was when I was first met my best friend, Kate. I was enthralled by the opening of a hide-away container that rolled out and it seemed as though all the dishes did themselves. Surely it was much easier and convenient than what I had to do, stuck with buckets and a scrub brush. I smirked while I overheard her complain about "loading the dishwasher," telling myself that "if I had a dishwasher," I'd never complain."

The Irish Washer Woman

The bubbles, her Irish music blaring, the solitude. She developed an appreciation for dishwashing after her siblings went away to college and she was left at home wanting things to do. If the house is empty, she sings loudly along with her Irish music, failing at the accents but accurate on all the lyrics. "So fill to me the parting glass and drink a health what e're befalls . . ."

She hates it when the phone rings because she has to pause her music and pull off her yellow, rubber gloves. Sometimes she dances jigs to the music and ends up sloshing water all over her socks.

The Old-Fashioned Way?

"Roll dishpan drudgery out of her life!" A 1959 General Electric advertisement marketed its latest, fully automatic dishwasher. No more tubs, no more dishpan hands. With just the press of a button the dishes are under control. The World's Fair of 1893 was the first to promote the grand invention of the dishwasher. No longer did people have to spend hours washing dishes by hand; it was as if the dishes were done for you. Housewives throughout the nation thank Josephine Cochran, who was credited with inventing the automatic dishwasher. Apparently she was tired of people chipping her china and she is attributed with saying, "if nobody else is going to invent a dishwashing machine, I'll do it myself."

Illusions

After several years of loading Kate's dishwasher and other friend's dishwashers, I wrinkle my nose at the smell of the dishes as they come out of drawer and grimace at the hardened food particles stuck to the plates... stuck worse than they were before they were washed. Whenever I'd point out a questionable dish Kate, she'd simply say, "I'll scrub it and then we'll put it in again." Dishpan drudgery? Maybe hand washed dishes are not so much of a drudgery after all.

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness"?

clean (kl n)
adj. **clean·er, clean·est**
1. Free from dirt, stain, or impurities; unsoiled.
2. a. Free from foreign matter or pollution; unadulterated: *clean air; clean drinking water.*
b. Not infected: *a clean wound.*
3. Having no imperfections or blemishes; regular or even

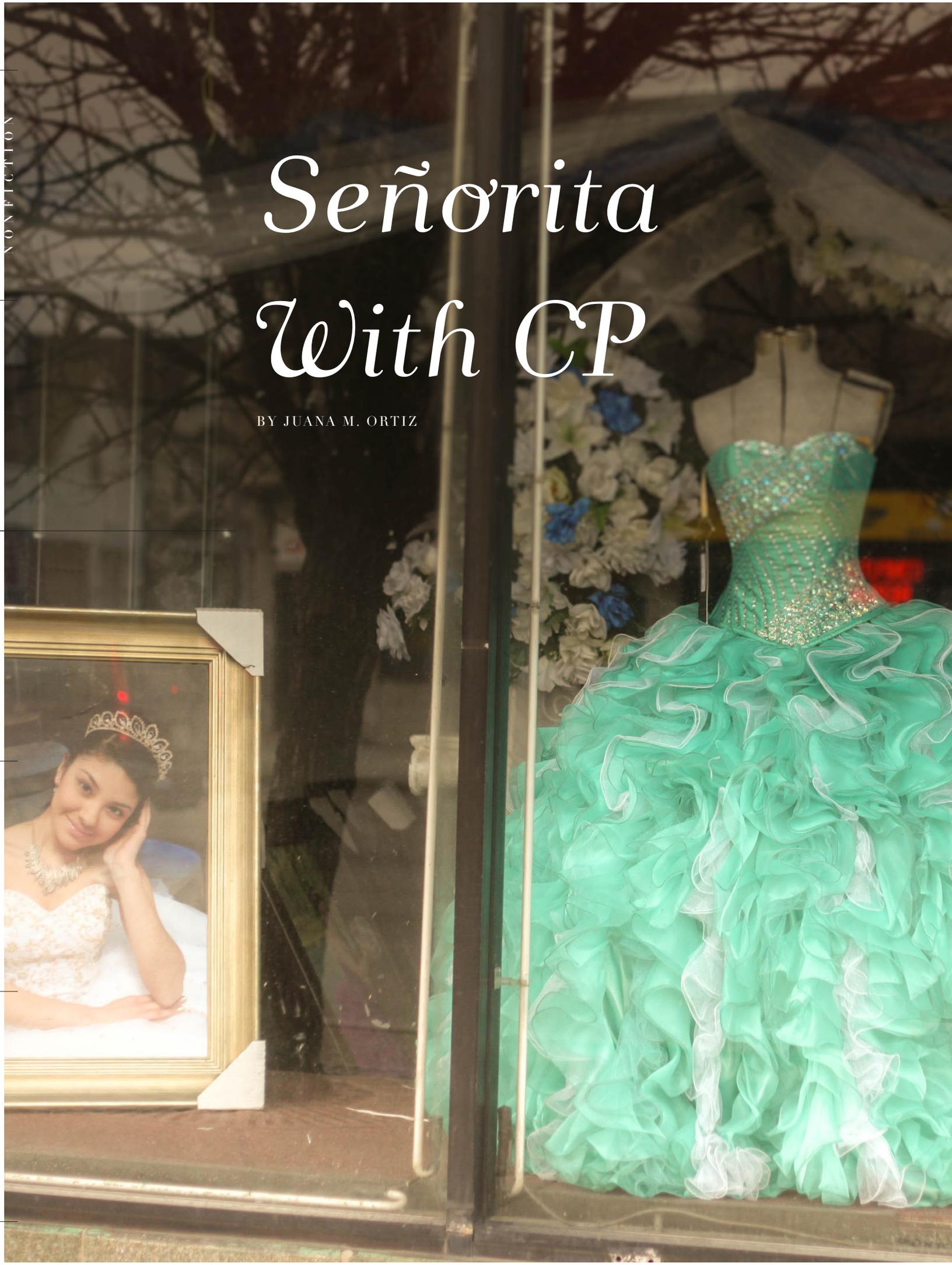
Isn't it ironic how the process of cleanliness isn't clean? How food particles on dishes can ruin a meal or ruin a restaurant's reputation? With diseases like E. Coli and other forms of bacteria floating around, how does cleanliness protect against deadly physical ills ranging from stomach cramps to possible death? Where did the FDA come up with their standards say that hand washed dishes have to be at 110°F and that "hot water for mechanical dishwashing must be between 150°F-165°F for washing and 165°F-180°F for sanitizing"? Do people have a hard time acknowledging that things become dirty? That to make them clean, hands have to be dirtied—discomfort has to be endured? Is it possible that the grime will rub off on you if you aren't careful? Are clean dishes a sign of civilization—a sign that dirt and grime lacks perfection, that the world is tainted by dirty dishes, tainted by disease, and ultimately tainted by death? Could it be that our dirty dishes are a constant reminder of our own imperfections? Can we claim to be any better than our dirty dishes?

Chamomile Tea and Clean Counters

The tea kettle whistles as the burner glows orange, the steam pressing against the metal, looking frantically for an escape. As the tea kettle whistles, I whistle with it and finish scrubbing a stubborn pot with steel wool as I dump the dirty dishwasher down the drain. It swirls around counterclockwise and glugs as the water stops and leaves only little bubbles behind. The bubbles soon disappear. I pull off my yellow rubber gloves with a resounding "snap," dry my hands, and pour myself a cup of tea, glancing over at the clean, black marble counter. Irish music is playing as I sip the freshly poured tea. An hour later, a solitary, dirty cup rests on the once empty counter. It begins again. ¤

Señorita With CP

BY JUANA M. ORTIZ



The big date was fast approaching. In two more years I would be turning 15. Very slowly my childhood showed signs of being part of the past. Soon I would become a señorita. No more dolls to play with. Despite the changes that my body started to experience, I would not be like the rest of the señoritas from my town.

Those girls at my same age had an active lifestyle. They attended high schools and had friends. In my hometown Bani, the Dominican Republic, las señoritas go out in groups to the movies, to the clubs and for a walk to the park. Las señoritas also stay overnight in their friends' house. They have *enamorados* too, guys that flirt with the girls.

At 9:30 a.m. on their day off from school, I saw las señoritas pass by my house on their way back from the *colmado*, the grocery store. They were doing *mandados* for their mothers. They carried brown bags full of rice, oil, beans, onion and pepper. A little early they went to the Mercado to buy fresh meat for *la comida* lunch, the heavy meal of the day.

Las señoritas wore pony tail shorts, some make-up and T-shirts showing their belly. The sun, along with the high temperature, made their brown skins sweat as las señoritas swung their hips along with their steps. They sang aloud to one of the hottest songs at the time. Across the street I heard los pretedientes flirt with them, "mamacita que buena estas," "You, hot." They blew kisses to las señoritas. The girls kept walking and tried to ignore the guys.

I didn't walk to the stores. I didn't wear shorts. I just wore skirts or dresses to cover my knees. None of the boys blew kisses to me. My hips didn't move the same way as las señoritas move.

Once the señoritas from next-door arrived home, they started helping out their mothers with heavy housework. These girls cleaned the house, mopped the floor and washed clothes by hand for their parents and the younger ones. They also cooked heavy meals, rice and beans. They served lunch at noon. Since they were señoritas they must share housework and show their parents that when the time came they were ready to meet the expectations imposed by society based on gender role. Once las señoritas got married they would be able to do housework, take care of their kids and be good partner to their husbands.

I didn't meet any of those expectations. I didn't have any friends to go out with. I didn't go to school. I didn't walk by myself to the grocery stores. I didn't carry heavy bags of food items. I didn't cook heavy meals for my family. I didn't mop the floor. I didn't wash the clothes by hand. I didn't meet any of the requirements imposed by society. I was different. I had cerebral palsy.

I grew up in Dominican Republic. Due to my physical limitation, I had to deal with a lot of

prejudices. Back in those days, stereotype was strong in DR. There was the perception that people with disabilities were worthless.

Each time that I walked on the streets people asked my parents, what was wrong with me. *"¿Ella Habrá? ¿Ella entiende cuando le habrán? Que pena?* Does she talks? Does she understand what others are saying to her? Poor thing."

I disliked hearing the same questions and expression of empathy over and over again. For many individuals it was unusual to see somebody walking differently than from the rest of the people in town. I was one of those rare situations. There were some cases, where the entire family feels embarrassed at having a family member with a disability. As a result, the family kept those individuals captive in their houses or they were abandoned by their families. I was the exception. My family never showed signs of embarrassment.

Even though my family treated me with love and respect, society pushed me to the side because I didn't walk or talk like them. Besides dealing with the same issues that most teens had to deal with in terms of identity and physical changes, from childhood to adulthood, I also had to deal with physical limitation due to the CP.

As a teenager in my community I never fit in. Everything goes back to my childhood. When I was a little girl, I didn't have the opportunity to attend school. *Special education* or any type of services to teach a child with Cerebral Palsy didn't exist in the country back then. Even though I wanted to attend school, I couldn't.

All this turmoil from childhood was quietly building up inside of me. Once I reached the teen years, I noticed even more the prejudice that existed regarding people with disabilities and the rest of the people who identify themselves as normal human beings.

I was 13 years old, and my life started to go through a dark road. I had no idea where to turn. I asked myself, should I turn right or left. I felt hopeless.

Then, at age 13, depression set in my face. Suddenly I became hopeless. I didn't know what to expect of the future. I had no idea how my life would be once I reached adulthood. Back then, the main role for a female once we grew up was to marry, have kids and take care of a partner. Since I had CP, these goals were unreachable. I didn't meet the criteria. I was focused on everything that I couldn't accomplish in this stage of my life.

Mami was very concerned about my emotional well-being. One day I heard her talking with Papi over the phone, about her worries regarding my emotional state. Papi moved to New York City, due to the financial hardship that the family was facing. Once Mami mentioned to Papi her worries, Papi asked her to put me on the phone. He told me to take care of myself and to try to do something that I enjoyed. Once I become aware of their concerns, I realized how much I was loved by my parents. I felt worth something as a person. Life had a meaning. My dark road of the teen years started to get brighter each day.

Once the conversation with Papi was over, Mami and her sister, Soris who was living with us motivated me to get myself busy. So I would have something to do, since I was home all day. I helped

"I was a señorita."

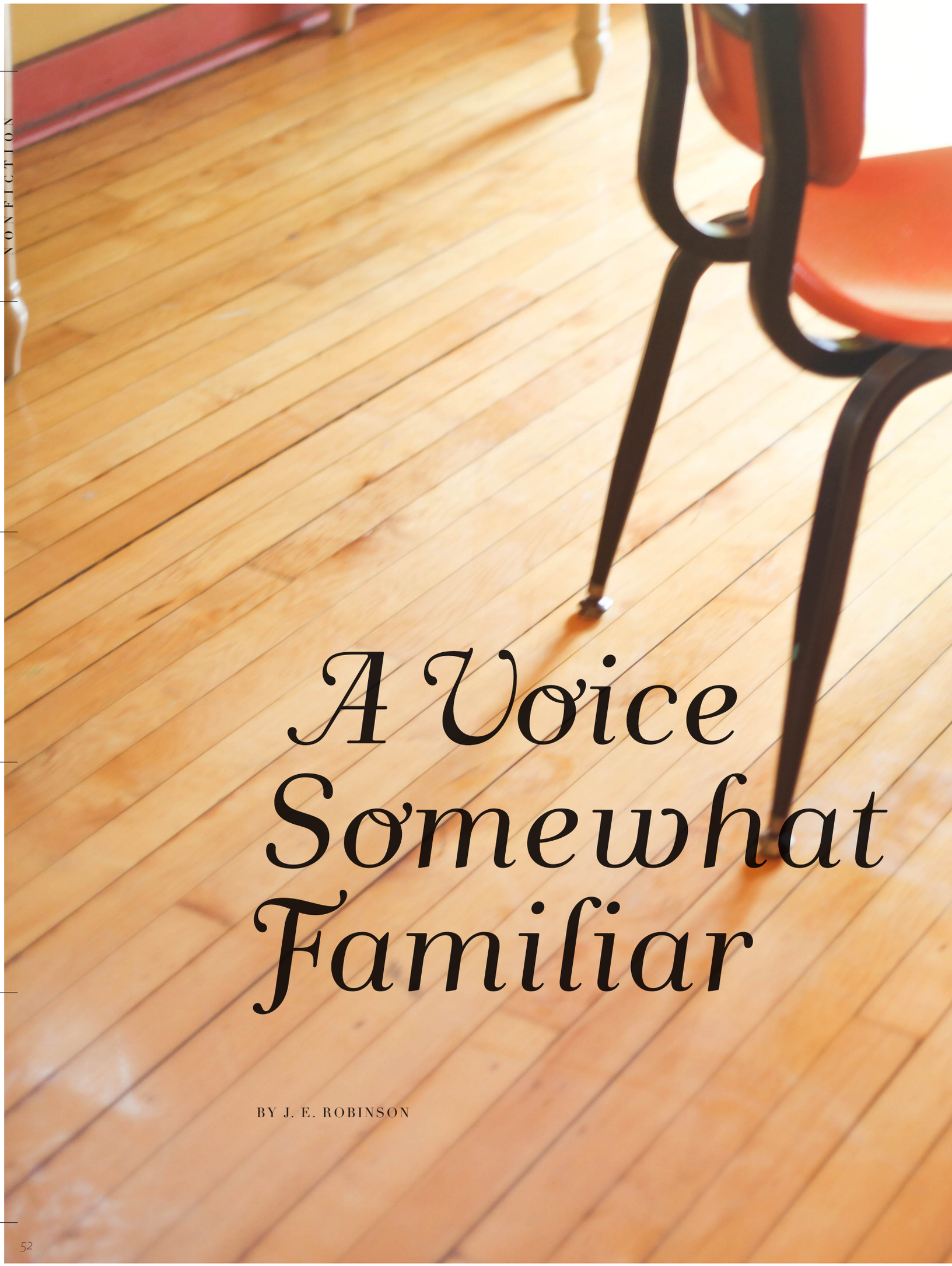
out by watering the plants. After breakfast, I did the dishes. I also swept the backyard. Getting active at home, becoming aware of how much I was loved by my family and that I was worth as a person, helped me to recover from depression.

Finally, my big day arrived. I turned fifteen years old. I was a señorita. I didn't have the traditional quinceañera birthday party as I first wished, the way that I saw it in the telenovelas soap-opera. Usually the parents host a big party for the qinceñanera the same way that takes place in the Hispanic culture. Relatives and friends get invited. The night of the party the quinceañera wears a pink or white long gown and a crown. She danced with her father, "El Vals De la Mariposa."

Even though my parents didn't host a quinceañera party for me I had a nice birthday, which I will always remember. This was the first time that I got so many birthday gifts. Mami's sister bought me a pink and a white cake. It was decorated with a small pink flower on the top. Tio Arcenio Papi's younger brother gave me a black and white teddy bear. My parents bought me a nice bouquet of yellow, red, and white flowers. Mami made me a pink outfit. Pink symbolized not just being a female but also meant being a girl, who is turning into a woman. The same day Papi called me to wish me a happy birthday.

In the evening Mami, her sister my, brothers and I went to a pizzeria, which was five, near home. For me it was amazing, given that we rarely went out since Papi moved. From outside of the pizzeria we were able to see the "el ayutamiento," the city hall across the street and the park on the other side.

It was nice to observe the full moon and the stars and to feel the tropical breeze in the middle of August, away from home at least for a couple of hours. Mami and Soris ordered "chicharrones con pollo y tostones" a typical dish from the DR. My brothers and I ordered pizza with ham and cheese. Eating pizza was like eating a Mediterranean meal. ¤



A Voice Somewhat Familiar

BY J. E. ROBINSON

The sophomores surrounded Sam, entertained by his whistling. The class batted not an eye when I came in, though I had promised a test. Young men had whistled upon my entrance before. Remember? Years ago, Benji whistled a verse, as its words escaped him, before embarking upon the chorus of "Mrs. Robinson," careful to make the lyrics gender correct.

Benji possessed an elegant voice for a seventh grader. Grown, he had a lilting Irish tenor's voice. I heard it in its maturity, pleasant as John McCormick's belting a ballad from County Derry. God had smiled upon Benji.

What had I done to God for Him to have muddled my works? God gave me a voice that leaves little to the imagination, when it comes to things meant for secrets. Not even womanish, my voice sounds like that of a winked upon young boy whose balls had yet to descend and who would soon wish for a world of men. Past that truth, my voice obscures everything else. But it utters truth everywhere.

I ought blame it, but how could I? My voice calls cards for me. Thanks to it, a West Indian professor in college dubbed me "milksop." In middle age, I googled the name.

"It means 'unmanly man,'" one of the Melissas told the rest of the class.

I wilted. "Great. I'm out to you."

Sam, a freshman then, heard it. He was a post-graduate when I broached the subject. "I knew your voice is rather soft and high," he said, "but I got used to it."

Why did he have to say that? Historically, traditionally, few comments have vexed me quite like those about my voice. An irritant, red as pepper on the palate, comments about my voice induce rage, a verbal fistfight, like ones against rough classmates who dismissed grade school me as "proper."

For that, I cursed a blue team, as if sailor on shore leave. That learned them.

My greatest irritation about my voice rests upon the willingness of so many to mistake me as infantile and light. Historically, traditionally, they had fun at my expense. How dare they! Don't they realize a tempest storms inside me?

Before discounting my downside, I ought to relish its ups. Having such a childish, such a feminine voice means most edit information for my hearing. They tell me nothing bad; if they must still, they carefully cook it down for my consumption, reducing it to near pabulum. In such a state, they reasoned, I could digest it easily, and not resort to projectile vomiting, not back into their faces.

Rarely have I complained about such a diet, though I prefer roughage above all else.

"Don't bullshit me, boy," I snapped once at a student in the middle of class. "When I ask you a question like that, you tell me the truth."

I may have rarely complained, but pride asked me to seek out stronger stuff. Since childhood, I have sought truth around corners and beneath rocks. Whenever I found shit instead, I ran. Perhaps I ought to listen to others and heed them more readily. No teacher asks why her room went silent when she entered, if she knows what is good for them.

Sam and the sophomores had a test. He smiled after whistling and grinned at the Melissas. Not a seat, he occupied a space between them, when their table accommodated only two.

"Will you take your test there?" I asked.

He nodded and grinned. His dimples gave him a pleasant, an approachable smile.

My voice, innocent as an English horn solo, gives an approachable feel. For nigh-on a half-century, strangers have felt comfortable enough to divulge everything to me, to say anything personal, be it rude or insensitive, be it embarrassing or liable. Entering my office, not even sitting, my students unloaded the weekend's orgies and gossip. After nigh-on a half-century, I have gotten used to that. Had I any sense, I would have put out the cup decades ago, and collected my nickels. Had I, I would have been richer than Linus and Lucy put together by now.

"Unfortunately, such is the pain familiar voices bear."

"You're very easy to talk to," burly Mike said in high school, before going into the Marines. "I feel like I can talk to you about anything."

By 1986, I wished he had. Perhaps, had we our post-high school chat, Mike would not have shot himself.

Unfortunately, such is the pain familiar voices bear. We long to vault time back, to catch the conversation that wished it had caught us.

I've heard no middle-aged man with such a voice, unless I hear my own recording. I hate hearing my voice. Eleven years of weekly half-hour interviews languish in my basement, but I have dusted off none of them, not even after Mom died. Occasionally, I have pulled out a recording of me reading a short story in Boston. It bemuses me. Why must I sound like such a little fag?

Back in 1986, first introduced to Babel and to Gogol, back when I first dreamed a writerly world, I watched the Greeks break line on the Quad and saw the spring blue sky over Howard University, where some left me alone. I imagined disposable income. Wouldn't it be something to hire an artist to do a portrait of my voice?

I still see imagination's product. Pale and light-eyed, honey-haired and snub nosed, perhaps a young perhaps sixteen. He has yet to find his way out of boarding school.

"He reeks of the class privilege of suburbia," a verbose classmate said back in 1986, speaking about me but feigning otherwise, looking my way and smirking, as a professor refused to grin.

To himself, the student described an Etonian from Edwardian England, transplanted to Washington, DC, by way of Groton or of Andover. Really, he described more of a Bluecoat boy, a foundling from Christ's Hospital, or so he seemed. Somewhere between the two rests my truth.

Were I a native Washingtonian, that or an old settled, perhaps I would have been a Sidwell Friends kid. That institution saw me as such. In 1985, the middle school principal invited me for a visit on the advice of one of his teachers, who had seen me interact with his seventh graders. I arrived in April. The campus stretched along Massachusetts Avenue, regal and glorious.

"That will be four-fifty, Shorty," the cabbie said. A beat, and he looked back at me. "Sorry about that."

For most of DC, everyone was "Shorty" or "Slim,"

to certain people. Laughing a little because I understood, I took no offense. I still towered over General MacArthur. It didn't even bother me that a teacher thought I had finally come to school late. In my home school district, where my mother was vice president of the school board, even the new high school principal mistook me for an incoming freshman.

My Sidwell hosts were friendly, unlike the charlatans I worked with a few years later, at a school that liked calling itself "progressive," though it hardly was, early in my career. In the Sidwell classroom, the seventh graders climbed over one another to show me an assignment. I smiled. That felt good. They said they liked me. I smiled again. That felt better.

I was nineteen, too, Sam.

At nineteen, I fulfilled a childhood ambition and began smoking. It was my birthday, October 8, 1984, a Friday again. Finished for the week, newly stuffed from the five dozen chocolate chip cookies my grandmother had baked from scratch and shipped, I waited for the K Street traffic to thin. I had my T. V. Guide and Time. A Time article on potential Supreme Court nominees caught my eye; later, I would read over and over another, more interesting article on bipolar disorder and creativity. While getting my magazines, tobacco, then kept on the floor, teased me. Dare I?

"I'm nineteen, now. She's half a continent away," I said, considering my mother. "If I want to, I can."

I went back inside People's Drugstore, just as a kind light changed. I bought Swisher's Sweet cigars, Middleton's Cherry Blend pipe tobacco, and a Doctor Grabow filtered pipe. I think I spent around seven dollars.

I was meant to smoke like a chimney through almost twelve years.

Pray, what possessed me?

Often, I try imaging myself smoking and the picture befuddles as much as the voice. While I smoked, I seemed no older than sixteen. During that time, smoking laws turned stricter. I had begun smoking at a time of cigarette machines and tobacco bins on the floor; as was the case in childhood, a child could present a clerk a dollar and say the cigarettes were for his mother. That changed in the 1990s. In the 1990s, prosecutors went after retailers for selling tobacco to minors. In the 1990s, retailers restricted tobacco to the counters and ID'd.

"You have to be eighteen to buy that, hon," a grocery checker said in 1992, when I tried to purchase my mature brand, Captain Black, one night.

"I am over eighteen," I said.

Actually, I was twenty-six. I had taken offense. Before the end of the decade, I would fight to convince clerks that I was really that young.

Why did I smoke? I have ruminated over the question over the course of years, like a cud. What possesses the young to dare any life-threatening thing? Why do you run through city streets so early in the morning, Sam, like you did in your home in the middle of nowhere, when the thugs roam? Youth interprets itself as impervious, even to foolishness. Put that in your smoke and pipe it.

On the day of his test, Sam's nineteenth birthday had passed just a week before. Looking at him wedged between the Melissas, I couldn't help myself.

"You've been getting awfully bold the past couple of days; did you buy a pipe?" I asked, putting my hand on my hip for emphasis.

Sam and a pipe became a joke between us. The next year, he played a detective in an Agatha Christie mystery. A pipe was his prop. The Melissas said he altered his voice for the play.

Had I not my voice, I probably would never have smoked. My pipe, and the smell it afforded me, granted the maturity my voice never did. I seemed older, pipe in mouth. While smoking, no one mistook me for a pup.

Wishing to be seen as no pup, I wanted to run with the big dogs. Foolish, I know now, for it has turned dangerous since. The big dogs devour pups for lunch.

I recall that some attempted to alter themselves through smoking. Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughn smoked themselves to death, believing doing so provided texture to their voices. They could turn a lyric velvet to please their audiences, thanks to smoking. Smoking turned them "debonair" and "sassy" and such. The businessman Bruce Llewellyn took to smoking as a young Marine officer, because cigars turned him older.

Thanks to my voice, my lifetime nickname has been "Professor." Professors—especially historians—smoked pipes. While I may have thought smoking invested me with a deeper voice, which I had longed for ever since I first heard my mature voice in adolescence, smoking a pipe gave me a professor's look and smell, far more readily than a stuffed horned owl clutching an olive branch amid walls of books.

In childhood, I had been conflicted about my nickname. "Professor" sounded pedantic on my schoolmates' tongues, not respected, tedious, not authoritative. As a boy, I could sense Woodrow Wilson's blood pressure rise each time his opponents dismissed him as a "school marm." Theodore Roosevelt must have done it more frequently than anyone, each time the man bullied him with "bully." Didn't he realize Wilson had also coached football at Wesleyan, and went undefeated?

In childhood, I longed to be more than just "Professor." As an adult, I longed more to be just that. In youth, we long to be more than what we are, only to acquiesce and to long to be just that.

I suppose fulfilling a prophesy stands as the answer to my reasons for smoking a pipe. It agreed with me. After a luxurious meal, a full stomach beckoned for a bowl. A pipe on the way to work commanded me to calm down, and, coming home, it helped me to relax. After I quit cold turkey in spring 1997, the holidays and the commute changed. Neither gum nor a drink meant a thing.

After I had started smoking, I found that most liked the smell. While I taught seventh grade, the kids loitered around my desk whenever they could, because my tweed jackets carried that morning bowl well. The Captain Black was pleasant then, the scent of a kitchen baking chocolate chip cookies, thanks to the vanilla. Even Borkum Riff, a sometimes replacement (but not too much: you can get drunk off its whisky), drew smiles. Though called <<rauchen>>, <<auf Deutsch>>, smoking pipe afforded pleasantry, even as the Professor's voice remained the same.

Perhaps that is why Benji broke into "Mrs. Robinson" for me. The youth, the voice, the clothes, the smell—all familiar, a Pictionary version of Teacher.

Sam is a decade younger than Benji. In their professional lives, they must walk across each other a couple times. Perhaps a certain smell will present both of them a kind smile. But, first, Sam had a test. As class began, he did not budge.

Thanks to my voice, I dread this reaction. I sense it whenever something drags, whenever I address my class and can tell they decline to address me. I see my students staring at laptops, examining cyberspace, a place in which I fail to exist. Nothing to them, still I insist upon attention.

It used to be that I would raise my voice, or repeat myself. A young teacher does that, irritated at being ignored. Generally, I gave that up long ago, though the middle-aged me, now nigh-on fifty, reverts to such practice, like remembering the ABC's from long ago, with Reading Man and *The Electric Company*.

"*Jeez!* Will you put that damned thing away! It's rude to play with that while someone is trying to talk to you!"

I did not address that to Sam's class; its members refused to be rude. I scolded another class a few years later, out of exasperation. Frustration's decades welled up and erupted. Flashing back, my sense memory recalled all those who went their merry way, ignoring me. That class did not insult me. Really, like those before, its members must not have realized that I had spoken.

My voice wears upon me. To me, it sounds like Alexander Scourby. To others, it sounds like Echo whispering on the wind, even less. For audiences, it achieves comedy. For interlopers, it boarders upon the psychotic. For prey, it teases and suggests. For me, it hangs about my neck. I wish otherwise. I wish judgment based upon deeds and character, not upon attributes and perceptions. I wish judgment as a man. I tire being dismissed because of my voice.

Worlds I had attempted alluded me because of my voice. I could have been an Army officer, a college football coach, a senator, were it not for my voice. But, what foolishness possesses me to blame my voice? I didn't pursue ROTC, football, or politics. I left investments for academia and refused to go back because the decision suits me. Something had preordained my career, and it may have been my voice. I have yet to regret it.

"Maybe you'll be a college president," a rough classmate named Ricky said in fifth grade. "You'll probably write a couple books about presidents. But, you won't be president of the United States."

For that, I hated Ricky. In retrospect, how could I hate prophets? How many ten year olds have such details unloaded upon them without even the help of tea leaves? The truth unleashes disappointments always, but, if the hand dealt seems still favorable, we simply must smile.

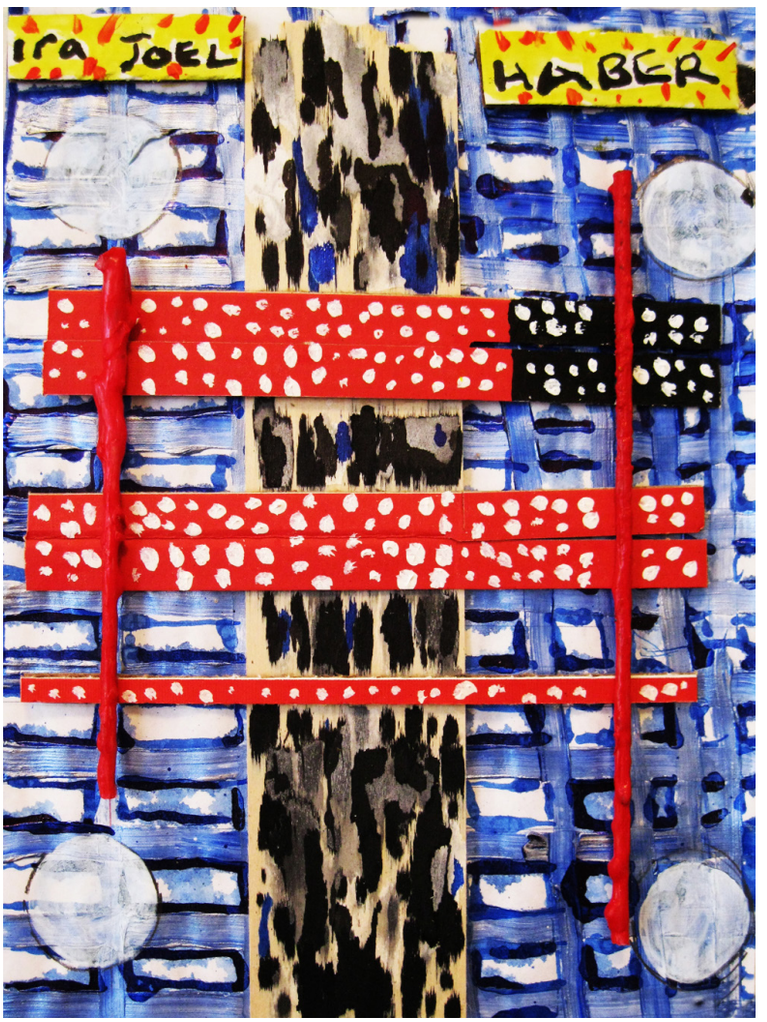
Looking at my pictures these past few decades, I hear my voice. Sweet and innocent, nearly as familiar as the wind, it calls from the edge. Most heed it. They run to it like running to the dinner bell. There are worse voices to have than one most long for as company.

I beheld Sam between the two Melissas. Turning to one of them, he puckered his lips as if to resume whistling. I commenced passing the test from the other side of the room. Not even the Melissas, great students, will get the test with him seated there.

"Mister Barberini," I intoned, back still to him, almost a disembodied voice, as if from conscience, "please take a seat where you may take your test."

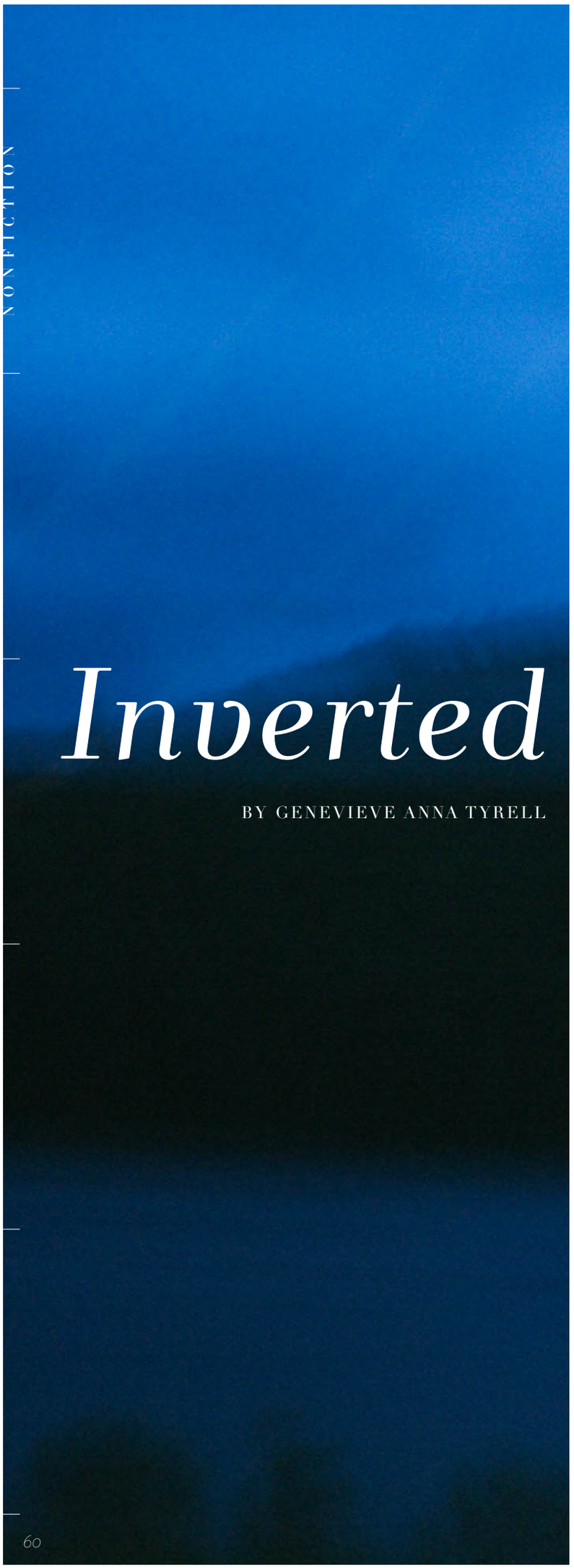
Not one to jeopardize an easy "A," and one which he had worked so hard to earn, Sam moved his seat to his former table, a spot forlorn by his dalliance.

Well, at least the Professor can muster School Marm from his voice's repertoire. ¤



Notebook Drawings 2012

BY IRA JOEL HABER



Inverted

BY GENEVIEVE ANNA TYRELL

My mother sits in a rocking chair with her makeshift ice pack, a cold jar of apple sauce pressed against her abdomen. It is all she can do to relieve the pain and these days all she can keep down is applesauce anyway. Her breaths are tiny and wide-mouthed like a bird hit by a car. My family sits around chatting, tossing witticisms and short stories, belting out raucous laughter every few minutes, while I play on the floor under a table and some chairs with my newest stuffed animal. Everyone can't help but watch the storm forming outside along the coastline. Dark clouds blot out the sky quickly, growing larger with each minute, like those sponge animals you add to water. Our rental house has a sliding glass door view of the beach that's so large in comparison to my size, I feel exposed. This house is jumbled tooth picks standing tall where a dune should be.

* * *

These feelings have been coming in waves for about a year now. I am seven, horny, but I don't know what horny is yet. I know that I enjoy chasing after other little girls on the playground who squeal with delight, scared and frenzied fun. I'm not sure I have a girl crush on Carrie, but I definitely want to be her. She is blonde like my Barbie dolls. She oozes cute from her patent leather pink shoes to the ribbons in her hair. Cindy, our friend, has dark brown, shiny hair that always seems to be slightly wisped by the wind no matter if we're outside or inside school. Her lip inevitably bleeds everyday on the playground from the slightest contact. If I knew her now I'd tell her to get her collagen amino acids tested. I'd tell her to get a blood count and ask for a clotting factor test. I tell myself I chase the girls because I am the tallest and I can run like no other. By age eight running makes me short of breath, I have boobs and some pubic hair, and by then Mom is hospitalized.

* * *

I am an adult now and have my own reasons for being in the hospital. My research doctors say they're not sure why I went into puberty so soon. *Maybe it had something to do with your metabolic problems. Maybe that's what high levels of the amino acid homocysteine does.* They have no idea and no basis for this assumption, but are fascinated by the prospect if only for two minutes. I sit on my hospital bed, nodding in agreement, pulling at my bed covers. As the doctors discuss between themselves what new experiments to do on me, I think back on my classmate, Eric, who emphasized my chest size at the science center in Baltimore.

* * *

Eric and I are with other third grade students on a field trip. There is a display of four wooden cut-outs of family members: a mother, father, daughter, and son. The faces are missing so you can put your face in, so I instinctively go to the little girl cut-out. Eric snickers and says, "More like the *mom*," as he pulls his shirt out at the chest area, mimicking pointy breasts like Madonna's stage cones.

* * *

In the rental house, the adults' chatter hushes to a lulled hum. The Delaware Bay shimmers an eerie green-grey, as the sky turns black. At some point I doze off a bit, but Mom wakes me, excited. Everyone else has left the room but her, and for a woman half-dead she sure is lively.

"Look! Doesn't that look like a water spout?"

"What's a water spout," I say.

"A tornado on the water. Look there! Do you see it?"

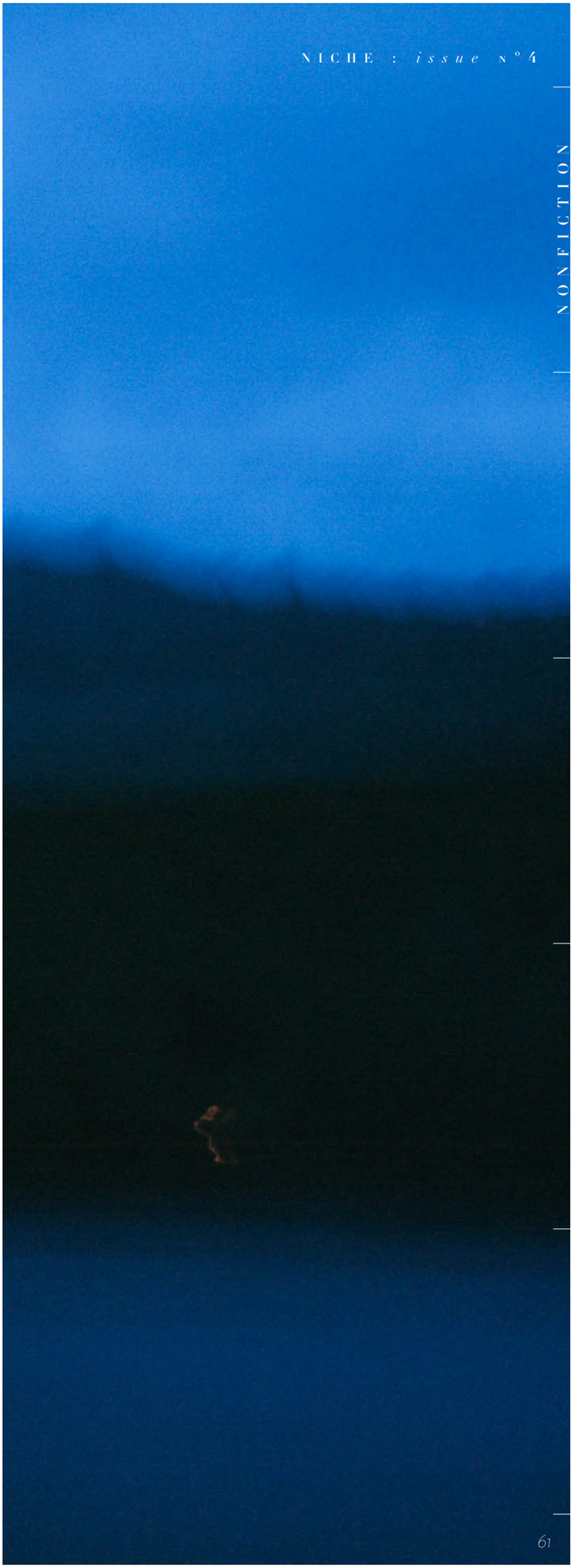
Our faces are pressed against the glass. I squint.

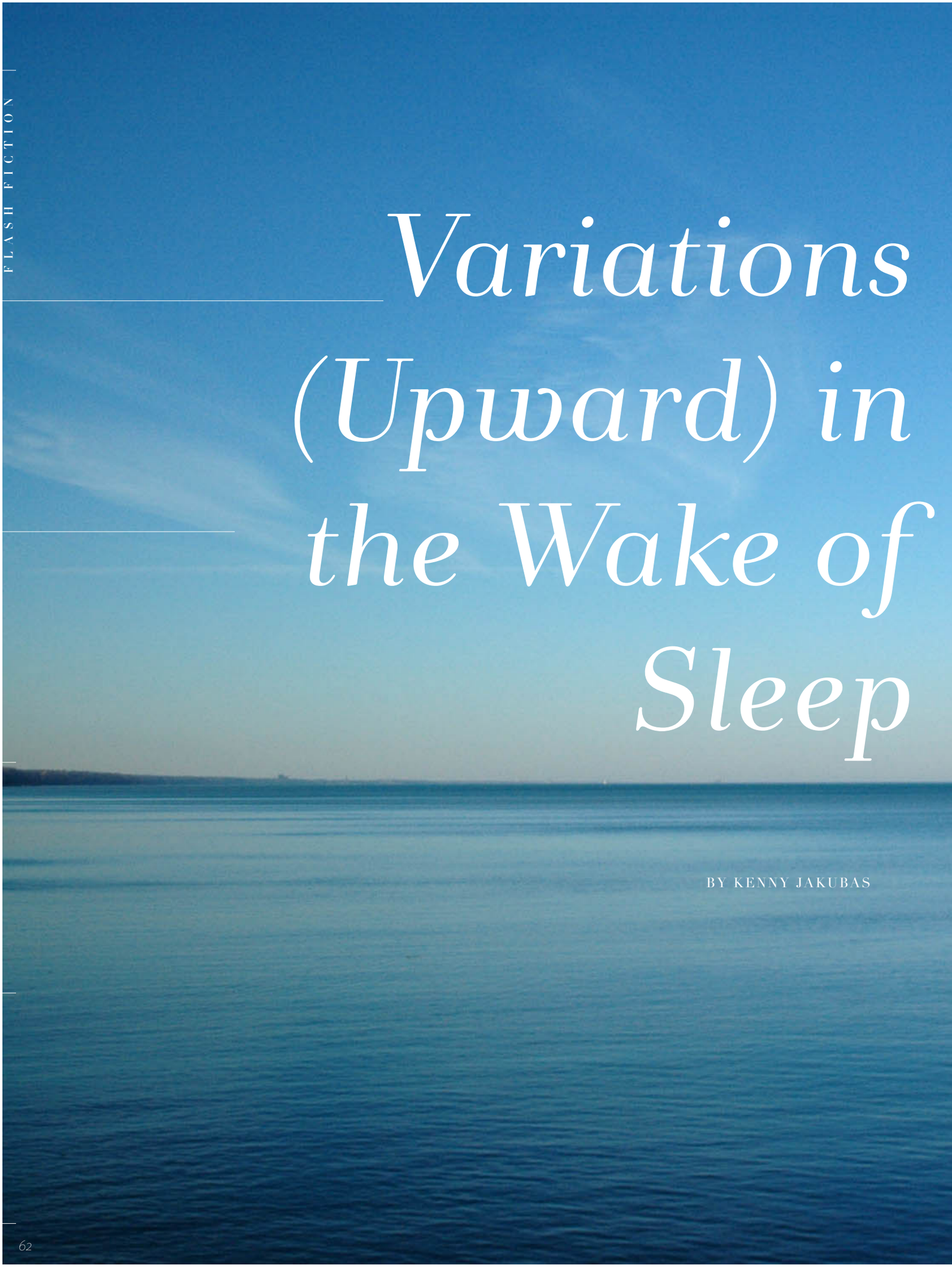
"Oh! That's a tornado!"

It is a dark V shape dancing over the water, darker than the sky behind it, but then sometimes the light inverts and the tornado looks lighter and the sky darker.

"It should be okay," Mom says. "We'll just keep an eye on it. Usually water spouts don't come on land."

I don't believe her. ¤





Variations (Upward) in the Wake of Sleep

BY KENNY JAKUBAS

Like tray tables and turbulence, or alcohol and turbulence, a long flight over the big pond can do some messy damage to our interiors. Losing sleep is probably a given, as is jet-lag, which waits until we've arrived to start its business. Even with the seat next to you empty, occupied during takeoff by the Spanish boy who smiled at your good English and went to sit next to his sister when the seatbelt tone went off, even with the knowledge of such space and time, sleep is only a slideshow when you're flying. Hold onto that thought.

*

Each lapse is an accident. I see my surroundings for the longest time, everything still but the air, the people with covers for their eyes, the time nowhere to be watched, the flat screen mouthing the words of a movie. When the old couple from Row D went to sleep, they covered their eyes with cloth and haven't moved since. I've moved in and out of this place. Maybe it helps them, maybe their eyes are finally given the blanket they need.

*

Roller coaster with a tunnel! *Do you know what ride this is?* Out screaming from the dark, there is a body of water below, a hill going upward first, then the body, carried with a smile from the stomach all the way up. The legs dangle from the bottom, bare. Suddenly, knowledge. Somebody is watching. Around the close green track of a barrel roll, you catch their eye. Impossible. His eyelashes were loose (he was in the middle of blinking!) His smile erased yours, even when the barrel rolls increased. That meant the end was near, the speed of the ride being harnessed, the hiss, the hair suddenly familiar and wrought. The people walking down the stairs are laughing. Suddenly you realize you didn't take off your shoes. They've been taken.

*

The plane shows its underside to the ocean. Eyes open, the flat screen's movie is over, replaced by a digital map, the cursor of a plane in front of so much blue. No, that person watching you...they weren't there for you. Can you bring yourself backward, can you remember? Is that possible?

*

That you were small and thought that you knew everything about flying. That you were in a plane headed for the largest island on Lake Michigan, the *beaver* in Beaver Island like the phonetic sound of excitement, the waves thin lines of chalk against any shade of blue from up there. The image of *you* watching *you*, the fact that as your flying, you're dreaming of such a flight. This slideshow, this rapid eye movement. The uncertainty of landing on water inside of an island, the turbulent movement of your Grandfather's hands bringing plane and water together—no, these are not far flights of the impossible. If you were offered the sky, what would you do? ¤

UNDERTOW

BY KENNY JAKUBAS

There will be a day—or if your lucky, several—when you wake up to a ceiling you know nothing about. Your mind will do the searching: check the view from the window with one eye, check the facts with another: yesterday, today's place, until the word for this room is found, the grooves of the keys matching. We all know the sound.

There will be days when you wake up in an uncomfortable room, maybe with a person you've grown uncomfortable with, and when the senses wake, when the sound of your mind saying *philosophy isn't here* works like the concerto portion of the upcoming song, don't bother with it. Do not disturb the popcorn ceiling, the person next to you sleeping (always sleeping, or imprinted in the bed, gone) when you are getting up. If you think you're too young to be this way, if it arrives in the shower like all that water, believe that what you think is always at least partially true. We all want to believe that.

You'll walk to the place where you need to be, you'll commit small acts of change for the sake of the idea (send flowers, fix the habits, control the threats), but there will be a day when all the acts end and the real change is still far, far away. It will not be lit through your phone's retina display or buried in any calendar you own or come across. We all know this.

If fear rests in anticipation, the realization of change—the feeling of it happening around you—might provoke defense mechanisms. Think of a large body of water, how the movement beneath constitutes the variations of the waves. Swim on a certain day and the riptide, which changes each day in its aggression, could pull at your chest—not so much a dragging as an extracting—smiling with a slight air of challenge for you to resist it. If you've paid attention you won't fight back; the water will change and let go its hold. Finally you'll know the humility involved with coming out from that water with eyes stretched as they're drying, the air of possibility existing deep inside like the one shipwreck gone unfound underwater—an undertow—never manifesting as vanity or credulity, but leaving instead a sense that some personal disclosure of your own discovery is evident and now so possible. Most of us don't know this: the word undertow gives the assumption that the sea will pull us under, not out. It isn't until we're in that water.

See, even I hear the quiet nostalgia of a lover whispering to me from that place of pain. In the morning she sleeps in her own bed; her voice is from the sand, the words moving word for word over water, the passable clarity of their pull saying *don't you wake me from this dream.* ¤

Wall of Leaves

BY KATHERINE ANDERSON

The leaves that form a high wall at the end of the field in front of Fi's house are like women in their late twenties. Fully grown but only just starting to harden. Fi leans in with her legs draped on the grass before her, staring at the leaves like a five-year-old watching cartoons from the floor. It occurs to her that trees look like human bronchi.

Into her left ear, from a suburban two-family to the west: *"Please don't stop the music bump bum boom bump bum..."* The song sounds wrong in the mid-day sun, like day-old Dunkin Donuts coffee. When she turns to see the house where the radio is playing so loudly, Fi makes out a snowman-shaped body sweeping the steps and a second slender version bent over the ground cover. Fi guesses a mother and daughter are making the best of yard work. She likes that idea but still, *rude*.

Meanwhile the wall of leaves before her shifts and rearranges itself in response to a breeze. Its movement eases into her right ear and then her mind. Half sickened and half baptized, Fi feels her right shoulder release. The grass' scratchy haircut vibrates the beginnings of dry green summer into her hamstrings and Fi kneels to stand.

Later a dusky seven o'clock hour hovers over Fi where she stands on her balcony, facing the same wall of leaves. The space between is filled with air that seems thicker than normal. She places one foot on top of the railing followed by the other. Crouches.

Fi leaps off the railing. She softens to fill the twenty feet of syrup air on all sides. As if she knew she could fly! Her young body rests, suspended and gestating in the dusky May breeze and she notices the radio is quiet. ¤

TEN POINTS

BY ERIN KELLY

1

I come home and find my wife on a dating website. She turns, looks at me, laughs, sighs, logs out, turns off the computer, says to me 'Well, let's have sex,' starts to cry when I say no, says that she's embarrassed, says that she never could lose the weight after Michael was born and begins to cook dinner.

2

We sit at the dinner table in silence. I start my lasagne, shake my head and wonder why she was on a dating website, ask her how her day was, nod my head without hearing, finish my lasagne, think about her body when we met, wonder if our marriage is over, wonder where the kids are, help clear the dishes and unset the table.

3

There is a new cooking reality show on that we like to watch. We sit down in front of the television, recline on our separate lounges, watch the screen, see people cooking, ignore the adds, see people crying, ignore each other, ignore more adds, wonder if we married the right person and if anybody ever does, wonder when the kids will be home, see people being eliminated, see credits and begin to watch the crime program that follows.

4

At midnight my daughter comes home. I wake up, rub my eyes, turn off the television, wonder where my wife is, wonder who she is dreaming of, wonder why she didn't make me dessert, cough a few times, then ask my daughter why she is getting home so late.

5

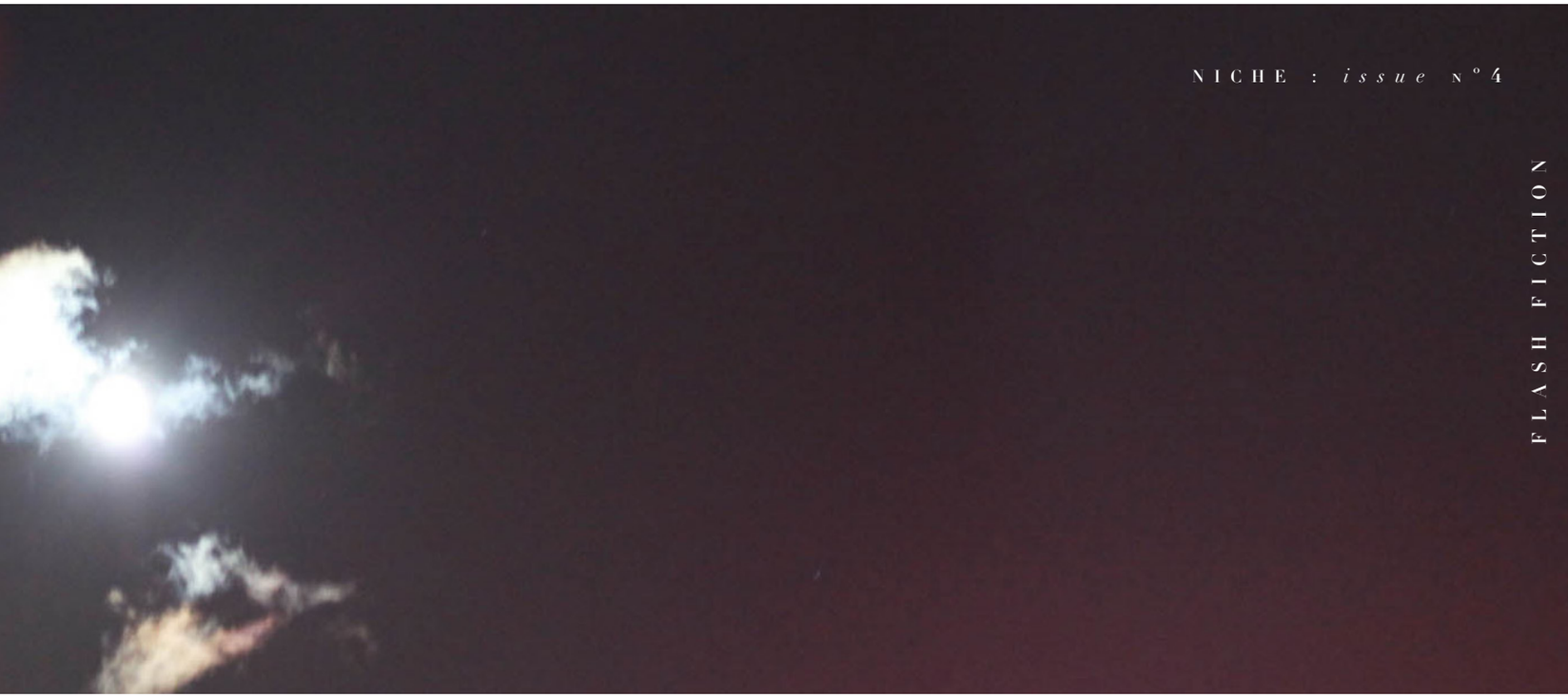
My daughter sways in the kitchen, holding on to the bench for fear that she might fall. She tries to talk, slurs, smiles, see's double, laughs at me, tells me she loves me, starts to cry, tells me she's drunk, asks how I know when I say "no shit," tells me she hates me and disappears into her room.

6

I get into bed and sleep next to my wife. She snores softly, dreams, rolls, kicks her feet and murmurs my name over and over and over and over until it morphs into my alarm at six.

7

I click through the PowerPoint slides and this is three months' worth of work in three minutes. I smile, sweat, gesture, talk too fast, count three colleagues yawning, ask for questions, say 'I don't know actually, but that's a good question,' realize I went wrong about a month and a half ago, and realize my department won't get funding.



8

During my lunch hour I drive to a pet store because I know a new dog will change everything with my wife and daughter. The dog is small and cute; it plays with the kittens, wobbles its oversized head, struggles as I lift it, nestles into my breast, pokes its snout into the breast pocket of my business shirt, looks at the outside world with bewilderment, sits in the car patiently, and yawns like my colleagues.

9

Get halfway home and realize the dog is a bad idea. Do a sharp U turn, try to save the cage as it slides off the passenger seat, sooth the dog with loud music that drowns out its yelping, arrive at the pet store, assess the damage, say I'm really sorry to the dog and the cashier, laugh nervously, look around and get most of my money back.

10

Get in my car and tear my shirt off because it smells too much like the dog and this morning's presentation and the person who ironed it. The hours pass as I shuffle between gears five and six, watch as the lights on the freeway flick on, shake my head, watch the moon rise, wind all the windows down, nod my head, turn the music up to drown out myself and my phone, and drive as far and as fast as I can, anywhere but where I've been. ¤

phone call

BY KATE LADEW

yellow chair

BY KATE LADEW

Things We Don't Know About The Green Man

BY JOLENE BRINK

"Rather than alienate their new converts,
early Christian missionaries would often
adopt local gods, sometimes turning
them into Saints."
— Albert Dufourcq

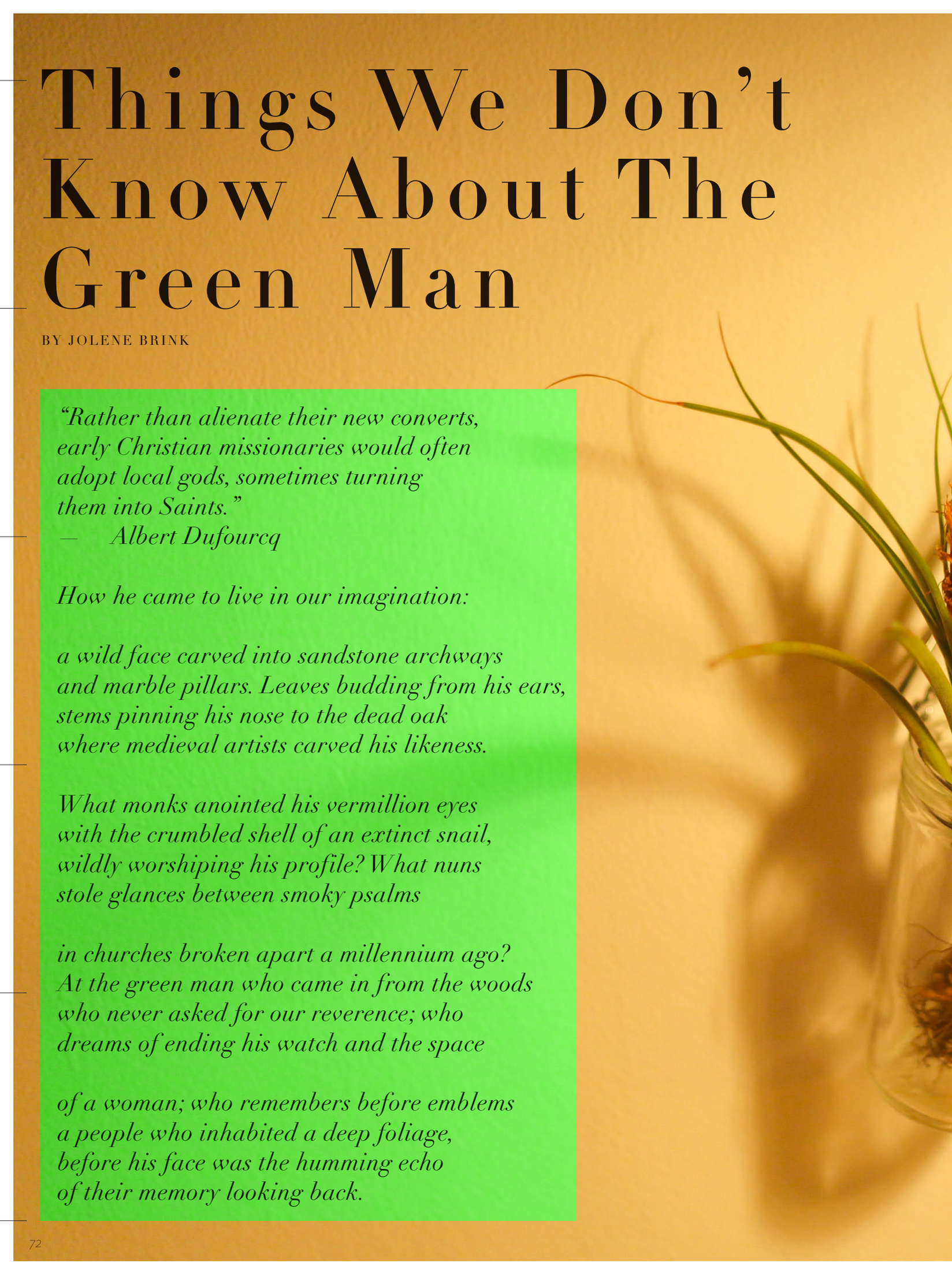
How he came to live in our imagination:

a wild face carved into sandstone archways
and marble pillars. Leaves budding from his ears,
stems pinning his nose to the dead oak
where medieval artists carved his likeness.

What monks anointed his vermillion eyes
with the crumbled shell of an extinct snail,
wildly worshiping his profile? What nuns
stole glances between smoky psalms

in churches broken apart a millennium ago?
At the green man who came in from the woods
who never asked for our reverence; who
dreams of ending his watch and the space

of a woman; who remembers before emblems
a people who inhabited a deep foliage,
before his face was the humming echo
of their memory looking back.



A Daughter Reads a Cavafy Poem that Could Be Speaking to Her Father

BY JOANNA ELEFTHERIOU

I'll go to another country, to another shore, find a better city
C. P. Cavafy, "The City"

By the end of the poem the speaker knows:
the city will follow you. There is no leaving.

It started with the school up on the hill. First, a stone room—another world—
Sfikas, ***Mr. Wasp***. A slate, a little chair, and history lessons. You, a Greek, were
subject, also to the British crown. Second, the high school, in town.
Your father paid the fees, and you rode, five hours by donkey, or four by mule.
Two by bus. Summers you dreaded, back in your little town, nothing
to do, no one to see, but villagers, long hours in the sun, in the fields, no
reading. Your high school transcript lists the ancients that you read
Cyrus, Herodotus, Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Thucydides, Homer, Plato,
Sophocles. But under ***Modern Greek*** only your grade, a B, no writers,
as if Cavafy, Sikelianos, Ritsos were too new to name.

After high school, Australia. You hoped. Then, America. Papers
came through. You are dancing with Maria, riding your bicycle with Andros, mind
on America. I will never know who you were reading, if you read Cavafy's "City."
If you had would you hear what it said to you? That leaving for America
isn't really leaving.

Cyprus America, America Cyprus, Cyprus America
were ghosts? ***There is no ship for you, there is no road***
Would you hear Cavafy tell you this searching isn't new?
The mind moldering isn't a matter of where you are
but who. ***You will walk the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods.*** If you'd read this as a teenager would your dreams
have gone gray? ***In these same houses you'll turn gray***
Or would your youth have said this was true of other lives, not
yours? ***For as you destroyed your life here, in this small cove,***
would you hear yourself? ***in all the world you wasted it.***

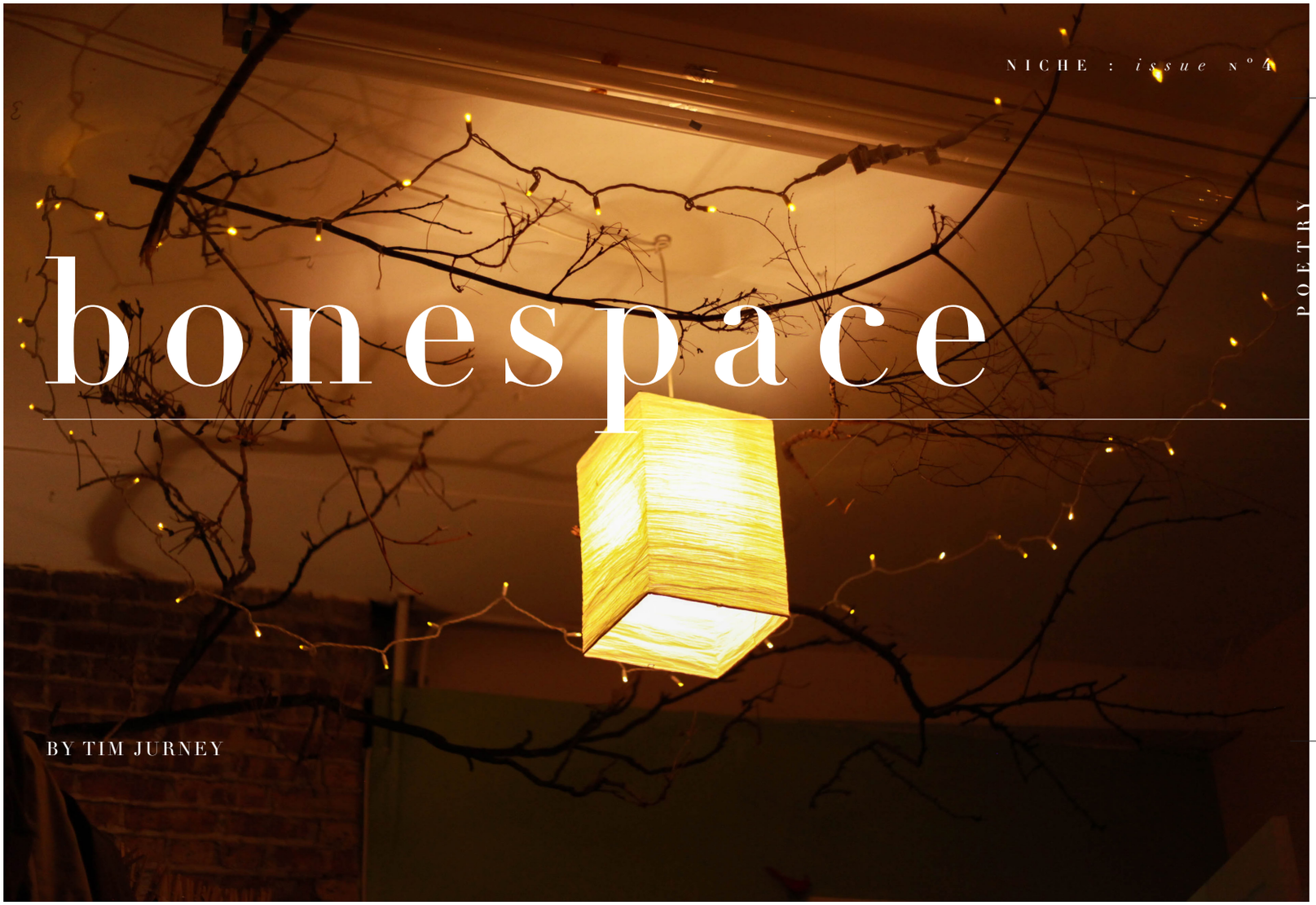
I am asking you about me, father. What about me?
I who ***don't hope for an elsewhere*** do I know more?
I went back and forth, America Cyprus America Cyprus
Like you but stopped in America. Will stay.
Like Cavafy, I am gay. In America I must stay.
But is it wisdom to beware of everywhere and think ***the black ruins of my life*** will spread at last before me ***Wherever I turn, wherever I look?***
Do I stay out of wisdom, or am I afraid? Is there a way
around this fate, this poem's sentence:
Just as you've destroyed your life here, here in this small corner, so you've wasted it through all the world.

How to Get Lost in the Rust Belt

BY RYAN HAVELY

Do not go to Pittsburgh.
They're in the business
of building rivers—
a kind of renaissance
born in North Side
spaghetti houses
and West End brew works.
The skyline is too crisp
at sunset for good,
wholesome depression.
Instead, hop some coal
barge jogging downriver
like a clot in America's artery,
float the veins of Ohio
to Wheeling, and swim
to shore making sure
you nearly drown.
Do not dry
your clothes on the rocks.
Wander damp and angry
up Market Street
(after the moon has gone out)
past the café bone yards,
the old store windows
with no stores behind them
that peer out at sleepy traffic,
faces with the eyes scooped away
or boarded shut
or painted over. You must learn
to see ruins
from the tops of bridge piers.
You must learn to look
how the eyeless do,
you must learn to see
an ashen haze
like a scarf on your life.
Do this
and you will never make Flint.
But who needs Flint?
You can break down
anywhere you like.
There is nothing here
to keep you whole.

bonespace



BY TIM JURNEY

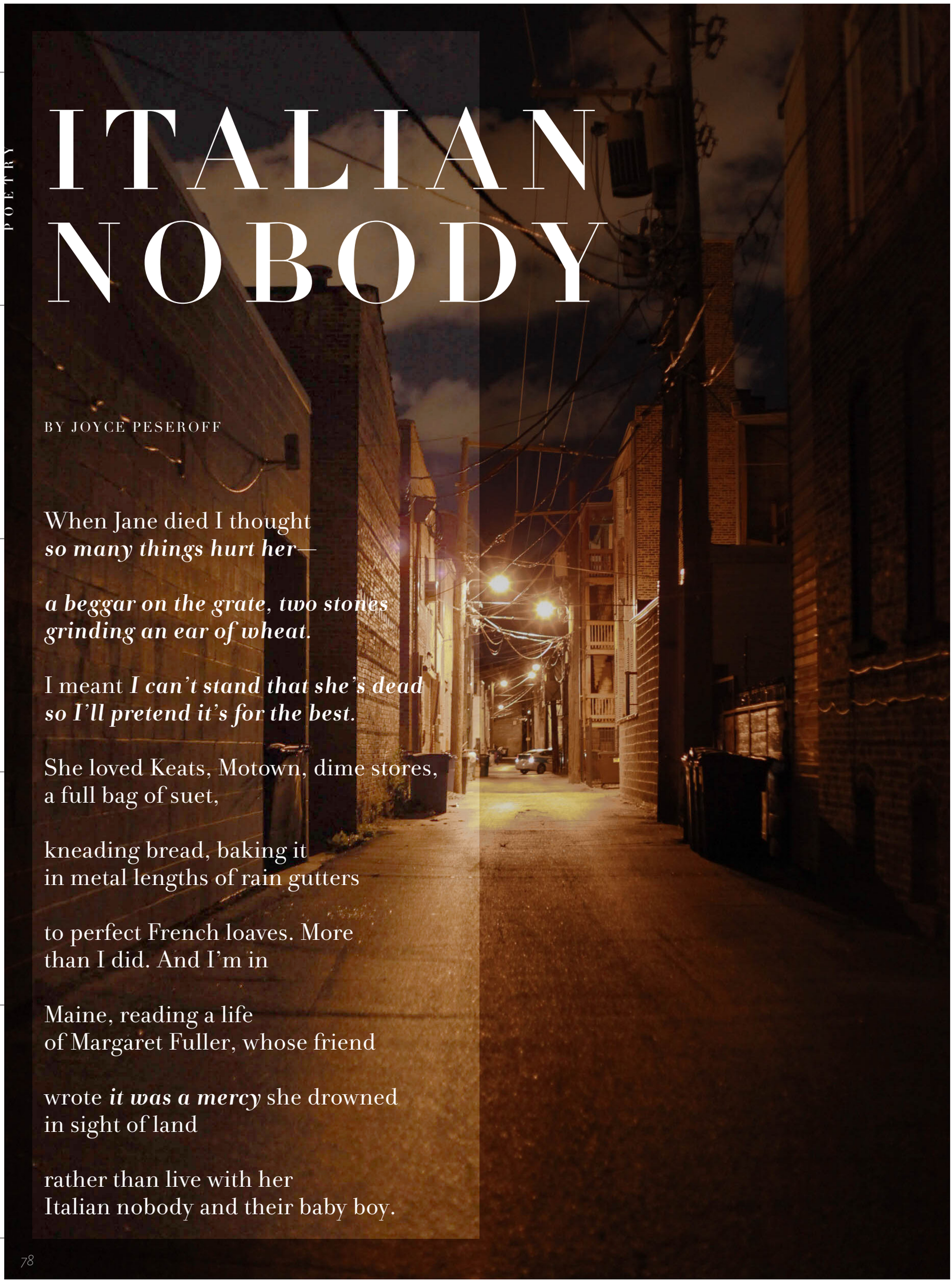
there are sandbags of empty
keeping me company
there are bones in my body but
they should be thick

with a thud they instead
hollow heavy into the space
where you should be

i lay flat and next to me
crushing
is the weight of my chest

ITALIAN NOBODY

BY JOYCE PESEROFF



When Jane died I thought
so many things hurt her—

a beggar on the grate, two stones
grinding an ear of wheat.

I meant ***I can't stand that she's dead***
so I'll pretend it's for the best.

She loved Keats, Motown, dime stores,
a full bag of suet,

kneading bread, baking it
in metal lengths of rain gutters

to perfect French loaves. More
than I did. And I'm in

Maine, reading a life
of Margaret Fuller, whose friend

wrote ***it was a mercy*** she drowned
in sight of land

rather than live with her
Italian nobody and their baby boy.

Primitive Streak

BY HOLLY SIMONSEN

she looks

down

through her hair
and decides to eat
the garlic clove

whole

coven

clovis

in an earlier period
she would have regretted this
--drawing earth
into the night

but it's late
and she won't ever bear a son

Lament

BY MÜESSER YENİAY

To be a woman
means being invaded, O mum!

they took of my everything

a woman took my childhood
a man, my womanhood...

God should not create woman
God does not know how to give birth

here, the ribs of all men
are broken

our neck is thinner than hair

men are carrying us
like a funeral on their shoulders

we have been under their feet

light like a feather
we flew from a world to an Adam

and my words are, oh mum!
their footprints....

staff

Special thanks to **DIVYA KIRTI** and **LUCY LOCKE GRAVES** who helped read through the poetry submissions for this issue.

KATYA CUMMINS earned a B.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her book reviews and other short pieces have appeared at Inside Higher Ed, Prick of the Spindle, Sleet Magazine, Six Minute Magazine, The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, and Under The Gum Tree. She is the founding and managing editor of Niche, and is currently enrolled at the MFA Program at McNeese State University where she serves as the fiction editor for The McNeese Review.

MARIA SURAWSKA is a UX designer and photographer who wears glasses and has brown hair. She lives with a little white cat in Chicago, IL. Google her name for more work.

SHANNON HEWSON graduated with honors from the University of Iowa, where she received B.A.s in both Studio Art and English Literature. She has spent the last two years working in publishing, as a book editor and lead art editor in Austin, TX, and as a transcriber in the staggeringly beautiful city of Flagstaff, AZ, where she presently lives with a small calico monster commonly mistaken for a cat. Her free time is mostly spent immersed in personal art projects, books, and when life allows, freelance illustration.

KATIE CANTWELL studied at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and graduated with a B.A. in Classics. In addition to reading Latin and Ancient Greek, she writes reviews, short fiction, and poetry. She is one of the poetry editors for Niche, and is currently writing about Sapphos' and Homers' influence on modern literature.

ROCHELLE LIU would like to say she is a vivacious, optimistic sucker for long walks on the beach, but she'd just be disillusioning herself. She graduated the University of Iowa with a B.A. in English Literature and minor in Chinese. She is currently teaching English in Taiwan after having taught a year in Thailand. Other than having her time monopolized by her students, she enjoys writing short fiction, poetry, and the occasional book review, and is currently working on several pieces of experimental fiction to pass the time.

MARY KEUTELIAN is Niche's media coordinator and fiction reader. She works as an SEO copywriter and editor for a Fortune 500 company and is earning her MPS in Publishing through the George Washington University. When not working or studying, which is very rare, Mary likes to read and collect Joyce Carol Oates' books.

contributors

A R T

SAVVY GULIA is a freelancer who decided to pursue her dreams of being a travel photographer. Lack of mission and no ambition in earlier days made her pursue something she was not sure about. And after putting in years into studying Accountancy, she opted out at the time when she recognized her love for nature. Although it was a tough call but ever since then she challenges to discover the beauty of nature around her and puts her heart and soul in it. Most of her images are about people and around capturing and absorbing life.

IRA JOEL HABER was born and lives in Brooklyn. He is a sculptor, painter, book dealer, photographer and teacher. His work has been seen in numerous group shows both in USA and Europe and he has had 9 one man shows including several retrospectives of his sculpture. His work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum & The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Since 2007 his paintings, drawings, photographs and collages have been published in over 160 on line and print magazines. He has received three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, two Pollock-Krasner grants, the Adolph Gottlieb Foundation grant and, in 2010, he received a grant from Artists' Fellowship Inc. He currently teaches art to retired public school teachers at The United Federation of Teachers program in Brooklyn

KATE LADEW is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Arts.

PEARL HODGES is a 20-something Californian Theater Artist and Freelance Illustrator. A Theater Arts graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz, she has primarily pursued artistic development on her own. She finds inspiration in wild and strange mythology, both authentic and personally invented, as well as down-to-earth motifs of bones, rust, metal, and other practicum of day-to-day life. A portfolio of her work is viewable at her website www.featherwurmgraphics.com.

MARIA MADDOX Born in the Lake District in Chile, Maria came to the U.S to complete a M.A. in Spanish Literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is currently a PhD student, a collage artist and a poet in the Denver Metro area.

FICTION

LAURA GOLDEN BELLOTTI is a writer and developmental book editor living in Los Angeles. Her short story, "It Will Be Sweet" was published in *WEST,* the *Los Angeles Times Sunday* magazine, having been selected by their Literary Editor, Amy Tan. Her story "Fighting the Bulls" appears in the anthology, *Literary Angles* (Sybaritic Press). *Holy Triangle: Stories of Pico-Robertson* is her first collection of short stories. Laura's poems won Honorable Mention in the National League of American Pen Women, San Francisco Branch, Poetry Competition, and her poetry appears in *Poetic Medicine*, by John Fox (Tarcher/Penguin) and *Essential Love*, edited by Ginny Lowe Connors (Poetworks/Grayson Books), as well as in a number of literary journals. Ms. Bellotti is the co-author or collaborative writer of a number of nonfiction books, including *Parents Who Cheat* (HCI); *Latina Power!* (Simon & Schuster); *You Can't Hurry Love* (Dutton); and *Emotionally Healthy Twins* (DaCapo).

LOU GAGLIA'S work has appeared in *The Cortland Review, Eclectica, The Brooklyner, FRiGG, JMWW, Hawai'i Review, Oklahoma Review*, and elsewhere. His collection of short stories, *Poor Advice*, will be available in 2014 from Aqueous Books. His story, "Hands", published by Waccamaw, was a finalist for *storySouth's* 2013 Million Writers Award, and his story, "Little Leagues" was a finalist for the Jim Palmer Award sponsored by *Cobalt Review*. He lives and breathes in upstate New York.

AMANDA LEWAN is a Detroit based writer and storyteller. Her work has been featured in *The Offbeat, About Place Journal, Wayne State Literary Review,* and *The Nation*. Follow her online at www.amandalewan.com.

M CID D'ANGELO's short fiction can be found in various literary journals, online and in print. He's been published by *Aoife's Kiss, Eureka Literary Magazine, decomP magazinE, Midway Journal,* among others. "The Road from Tahlequah" is a short story especially close to him; the author is proud of his Cherokee roots and the ongoing struggle of Native Americans trying to adapt and survive in a vastly changing world.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

KATHERINE DUBKE is a student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities with an emphasis in Creative Writing at Concordia University Irvine. She enjoys writing about "everyday life" in both nonfiction and poetry because she finds beauty encompassed in the routine.

JUANA M. ORTIZ recently graduated from William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. He received a bachelor degree in communication with a concentration in print journalism and a minor in English and is currently working on his first book. His poems, articles, haiku, personal essays, and translations have appeared in *Paterson Literary Review, Quit Mountain Essays,* ThisAbledNation.org, and *Mi Revista,* a Spanish language monthly published in the Dominican Republic.

J. E. ROBINSON is the author of the novel *Skip Macalester* (2006) and of *The Day Rider and Other Stories: a Collection* (2013), which is available at www.givalpress.com. A three-time Pushcart Press nominee, he has had his essays appear widely and they have received the Illinois Arts Council Literary Award. He teaches history at the Saint Louis College of Pharmacy and lives in Southern Illinois.

GENEVIEVE ANNA TYRRELL finished her MFA in creative writing at the University of Central Florida. She is a current nominee for the Pushcart Prize and received an honorable mention in the *Hot Street* Emerging Writers contest. Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Creative Nonfiction, Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine, Hippocampus*, and *Carve Magazine.* Her art has appeared in *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Animal.* She lives in Oviedo, Florida, and has taught both composition and creative writing in the Orlando area.

contributors

POETRY

JOLENE BRINK is a writer and publicist for the University of Minnesota College of Design. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *dislocate, Post Road*, and *Camas*. For more information, visit jolenebrink.tumblr.com.

JOANNA ELEFTHERIOU was born in the US but spent her adolescence in Cyprus, returning later to earn degrees from Cornell and Old Dominion University. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri, and have published in such journals as *The Green Tricycle, Chautauqua, Apalachee Review* and *Crab Orchard Review*.

RYAN HAVELY earned his MFA in Fiction from Minnesota State and his BA in English and Creative Writing from Ohio University. He teaches various forms of writing at West Virginia University at Parkersburg. His work has been published in such literary magazines as *Midwestern Gothic, Mobius, New Plains Review, Dappled Things* and the *Columbia Review*.

TIM JURNEY is a native to Minnesota and is an undergraduate Spanish and Humanities double major at Kenyon College in Ohio, where he serves as an associate at the *Kenyon Review*. He has poems in upcoming issues of *Stone Highway Review, Agave, The Unrorean*, and *Dark Matter Journal*, and his poetry has been published in the *Monongahela Review, HIKA*, and *Persimmons*.

JOYCE PESEROFF's fifth book of poems, *Know Thyself*, will be out from Carnegie Mellon later this year. She teaches in the MFA Program at UMass Boston.

HOLLY SIMONSEN lives and works in her native Utah landscape. Primarily, her work explores the relationship between language and ecologically disrupted environments. She earned her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her recent work has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review, Cutbank, Ecotone, Yew*, and elsewhere. She was a recent fellow at the Vermont Studio Center and at the Djerassi Resident Artists' Program. To learn more, please visit her website, hsimonsen.com.

MÜESSER YENİAY was born in İzmir, 1983. She has won several prizes in Turkey including Yunus Emre (2006), Homeros Attila İlhan (2007), Ali Riza Ertan (2009), Enver Gökçe (2013) poetry prizes. Her first book *Dibine Düşüyor Karanlık da* was published in 2009 and her second book *Evimi Dağlara Kurdum* is a collection of translation from world poetry. Her latest book *Yeniden Çizdim Göğü* was published in 2011. She has translated the poems of Persian poet Behruz Kia under the name of *Lalelere Requiem*. Lately, she has published *Contemporary Spanish Anthology* with Metin Cengiz and Jaime B. Rosa. She has also published a book on modern Turkish Avant-garde poetry *The Other Consciousness: Surrealism and The Second New* (2013).

FLASH FICTION

JOLENE BRINK is a writer and publicist for the University of Minnesota College of Design. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *dislocate, Post Road*, and *Camas*. For more information, visit jolenebrink.tumblr.com.

KATHERINE ANDERSON is twenty-five years old. *The House of Leaves* is her first publication.

KENNY JAKUBAS graduated with honors from Western Michigan University, where he received his BA in Creative Writing. While there, he appeared in the literary journal 'The Laureate' and was the winner of an award. He currently has creative non-fiction forthcoming in 'Niche' lit mag, and in a few months, he'll be attending graduate school. Colorful bouquets aside, Kenny is delicate with white eyebrows and a wrist with staple scars. There is speculation about his abilities.

ERIN KELLY is a wannabe retiree who enjoys napping and waiting for the kids to call. Her interests include shopping, talking over the fence with Jenny Hilton, and writing. Erin's work can be found in print and on the screen at or in *Word Riot, Out of the Gutter, Hypallage* and *Regime Magazine*.

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Niche