WINDMILL

[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

AKIKO BUSCH

ELIZABETH HAIDLE

MITCHELL JACKSON

PAMELA PAUL

LINA MARÍA FERREIRA CABEZA-VANEGAS

CREATIVE NONFICTION | FICTION | ART | CONVERSATIONS

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In Memoriam
Dr. Jennifer Henton

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Editor's Note

Kelly McMasters

The Pythagoreans believed four to be a perfect number, symbolizing stability and a strong foundation. In the natural world, there are four seasons; four moon phases; four elements; and four cardinal points. And of course, the four-leaf clover promises luck!

We hope our fourth issue embodies all of these facets. Our goal was to build a collection that championed balance and beauty, while retaining our hallmarks of narrative depth and diversity—without losing the spirit of experimentation upon which this project was built.

Our year was marked once again by visits from amazing writers and thinkers thanks to the 15th annual Hofstra MFA Great Writers, Great Readings series run by Professor Martha McPhee. *Windmill* had the chance to interview literary superstars Mitchell Jackson and Pamela Paul for our pages, and their electricity and hope directed the issue's intention.

Paul's "By the Book" column in *The New York Times Book Review* also directed our copy; this issue introduces a new section, "The Grind: Questions on Creative Process." Here we ask the same nine questions to three disparate creatives: artists Elizabeth Haidle and Carol Paik, and poet Derek Pollard from *AMP* magazine, our sister publication focusing on poetry and video. The perspectives in this column underscored Paul's notion that books are "the genesis of ideas," regardless of an artist's medium or genre.

Along with this new section, the editorial team experimented with our treatment of art in the issue. We brainstormed about our identity—Modern! Unexpected! Hopeful!—and how to best communicate that to a reader visually. We wanted to reflect our commitment to dynamic narrative, vulnerability, connection, and the power of words.

Art Editor Maia Loy's hand-drawn images inspired by Jason Primm's "Rabbits" and Jenny Wong's "Cornish Hens"

add an element of whimsy and are examples of the very real ways our writers inspire our editorial team. And we had no idea when we solicited one of our favorite artists, illustrator Elizabeth Haidle, that she would return with an image so incredibly perfect for our cover. The mix of brain and beauty, along with the juxtaposition of quiet solitude and—in Haidle's own words— "grandiose thought processes happening inside," embodies exactly our deepest wish for our reader's experience of this issue.

Once again, our crack team of Managing Editors, *Wind*terns (thanks for coining that term, Claire!), MFA Fellows, and the entire capstone class worked together like (dare I say?!) blades of a windmill, churning through the air and creating magic out of the invisible. Thank you for making four my favorite number.

With such hope,

Kelly McMasters
Editor

A Q&A with Pamela Paul & Kelly McMasters

Transcribed by Claire Feasey

Pamela Paul might be the most powerful woman in publishing. As the editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, Paul oversees the most vital book coverage pages in the literary landscape. She previously served as children's books editor and features editor for the Book Review, and launched the popular weekly "By the Book" interview column in which historians, novelists, artists, and politicians share their reading habit and the literary life.

Paul is also the author of five nonfiction books, including *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony* (Villard, 2002), an exploration of failed first marriages, and *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (Times Books, 2005), which led her to testify on the subject of pornography before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Her sixth book, *How to Raise a Reader*, co-written with Maria Russo, publishes this fall.

Her love of books started early; Paul grew up in Port Washington, Long Island, in a house that once functioned as the town's original public library. At her event, Paul discussed her memoir *My Life with Bob: Flawed Heroine Keeps Book of Books, Plot Ensues* (Henry Holt & Co., 2017), which details her diary of books she's read for the past twenty-eight years and the way literature impacts her life.

Kelly McMasters, an Assistant Professor of English and Director of Publishing Studies, spoke with Paul after a reading co-sponsored by the Department of English and Hofstra Cultural Center during the 15th annual Great Writers, Great Readings series. Although this was her first visit to campus, Paul's father graduated from the Hofstra University; during her visit, she met with students, read from her new book, and talked about publishing, literature, and how books can alter a reader's daily reality.

KM: *My Life with Bob: Flawed Heroine Keeps Book of Books, Plot Ensues* is your fifth book, but your first memoir. What is the story behind the book?

PP: So, this book came out very distinctly from an experience of failure. I was essentially a failed teenage diarist. Like many children who knew that they wanted to be a writer, I knew what I'd have to do, which was keep a diary. That's what girls did. I would go out to the local stationary store with much ambition and pick out a blank journal-usually with a unicorn or a butterfly on the cover or a rainbow-and then I would go back and fervently write in it at the end of each day, and I had great hopes for this. I thought that one day these diaries would surely be discovered and there would be an announcement and they would be collected, perhaps published, and reach a wide readership.

The reality is that I would write in it fervently for a few days and then I would go back and read what I wrote, and what I read was terrible. First of all, the content could not have been more mundane. It was always fights with my friends, "Katie said she couldn't sleep over at my house, her mom wouldn't let her, and then I found out she slept over at Ingrid's instead." And the writing itself was terrible too. The prose was nondescript; it wasn't special. There was no sign of Judy Blume, and so I would put the diary aside and go to the stationary store and I would start again. And I realized finally at the age of seventeen that this wasn't working. There was no sign of a budding writer in here, and I decided to do something new, which was to keep a journal of, not what was going on in my life as I was leading it in my little town of Port Washington, but what was going on in a life as I wanted to lead it, and often as I frankly really was, which was in the world of books. So I started a blank book—listing a title and author only—when I was seventeen.

KM: Your *Book of Books*, or Bob, as you call it in your memoir. Did you stick with it starting from that moment?

PP: I kept this journal faithfully. I didn't particularly talk about it, it wasn't anything to show off about. As I point out in my book, when I was growing up, to be a reader was not a particularly coveted thing in a person, certainly not in a

child. You were supposed to do ballet or play the piano or do outdoor activities that require basic skills of coordination, which I did not have. No one said, "My child is such a reader." That basically meant [the child was] a loser. And so I didn't really talk about this diary much personally.

But, fast forward to 2012, at which point I was working as an editor at *The New York Times Book Review*, and we wanted to start up a kind of profile. We were trying to figure out, "How could we make a profile that would feel particular to the book review?" And the idea of "By the Book" was that you could tell the story of someone's life through the books they'd read: through the heroines the admired in books to the authors they cherished, through the books they couldn't finish and the genres they didn't like. The authors they would want to have dinner with.

In order to explain this idea, which kind of seemed obvious to me and to our readers, I decided I would write an essay about my book of books. The only way really to illustrate it was to actually show a page from my diary. And I have to say, you can imagine the kind of embarrassment of taking your diary and scanning it in at *The New York Times* and having it printed in *The New York Times* and posted online for evermore. That's kind of what I went through with this essay and it's reprinted in *My Life with Bob*. But it had things like Kafka, and it had Joyce, and it had Faulkner. But it also had things like a memoir by a roadie from The Doors, or the fact that I couldn't finish *Interview with The Vampire*, which I wrote a little inc for "incomplete" next to. But what was wonderful was when "By the Book" came out, and the accompanying essay came out, there was a huge outpouring of mail, emails from people and letters that came in through snail mail, and many of them were accompanied by photocopies from people who were showing me their own book of books. And I felt like I had found this hidden tribe of fellow dorks who did this thing.

KM: There is certainly a hidden tribe of fellow dorks, though that tribe feels like it is shifting, becoming more public, with Bookstagram and Booktubers. Reading has changed, especially in relation to technology, like e-books and audio books. How are we reading differently?

PP: I think there has been so much research and so much better understanding about this topic compared to when I grew up, which was in the era of benign neglect. But we grow up and we really understand the importance of reading to becoming an intelligent, well-educated adult actively engaged in the world. I think that is especially interesting.

My next book is called *How to Raise a Reader*. The fear is that people might not be reading anymore. I don't really share that view, but I do think now people pride themselves on reading or how much their child is reading. Now reading is seen as an important part of a child's life, whereas when I was growing up it was like—get your nose out of that book! I remember if you brought your book to recess you got in trouble. I'm like, I hate outdoor activity! I hated camp. I would bring a book and smuggle it in my backpack.

KM: You spoke earlier about how your essay that became your most recent memoir, *My Life With Bob*, also opened up this new column for *The New York Times Book Review*, called "By the Book." This is always the first place I turn in the Book Review because you can glean so much from people's relationships with books and it is so intimate. How did you decide to feature writers as disparate as David Sedaris and Madeleine Albright?

PP: I wanted to put that wide range of people because the idea behind By the Book is that it isn't just a recommended list of books. I thought about it as the red carpet for dorks. Instead of "who are you wearing?" and "who are you reading?" But I think there is also a subtler way to read that column. It's a portrait of a person.

Some readers will write in and they'll be like, *I can't believe that jerk didn't name any women writers!* You should make him name women writers! Well, first of all there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what a journalist does, which is not tell people how to answer questions when you interview them. But also, isn't it interesting that a person only named male writers? Isn't it interesting that the person only named writers who wrote before World War II? Or, isn't it fascinating that this person says she has twenty-seven books on her nightstand and that somehow they miraculously cover every single race, ethnicity, genre, and country of origin and

she just happened to have them right there next to her?

It really does tell you a lot about a person. And I think that, to me, is the more interesting part.

KM: Last year, my MFA Book Criticism class took a field trip to the National Book Criticism Circle awards. Margaret Atwood was the keynote speaker and it was exciting for the students to see how alive criticism is today. As the woman in charge of the most important criticism pages published today, how do you see criticism's current place in the world?

PP: First of all, I think book criticism is vital. Book reviews are really important. This is a service for readers. It helps authors and publishers. Criticism is essential for us to understand what's worthwhile, what works, and what doesn't. On the Internet there's a lot of talk around books, and enthusiasm, and I think that's all fantastic. But there's also a lot of promoting and a lot of log rolling and a lot of "oh my god I love that book." And you don't know that that's the reviewer's sister who wrote it. Or that the negative review on Amazon is written by someone's ex-wife. So frankly, we need criticism now more than ever with all that cacophony.

KM: How do you go about assigning a writer to a review?

PP: In serious book criticism, critics are vetted against conflict of interest to make sure there isn't some established friendship or enemy relationship between the two of them. When you read a book review, you can disagree with it, but you should trust it. You should know that it is coming from a person who took the book on its own merits.

I also think that book reviews in and of themselves can be lively reading experiences. It's its own art form. I mean, I read many, many, many more book reviews and movie reviews than I see movies or read books because I like reading them. It's a great piece of writing. You pick up Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker* and no matter what he's reviewing, even if it's a movie you would never in a million years want to see, you're generally going to be entertained and informed by what he's writing in some way. The same holds true for a number of critics including our own of *The New York Times*. So ideally what a book review should be is, first of all, engaging,

entertaining, informative, and enlightening. It should be something to be read in and of itself, whether you want to read the book or not.

We know that people don't go through the book review and read it cover to cover thinking *which book should I read?* They are reading them also so that they don't have to read the book! You can learn a lot about a book, or about a subject, just from a book review.

KM: You've described what a book review should do; what are the cardinal reviewing sins?

PP: I get asked this question a lot: what is a bad book review? First, it's not an op-ed. You're not using the book as an excuse to talk about some issue. It's not thumbs up or thumbs down. It's not a book report. You need a reviewer actively engaged with the material and again—review the book at hand, not the book they wish they had reviewed.

You know, in a really good book review you can go broader and deeper than the book itself in a way that reflects well on the topic at hand. So let's say your reviewing a history of Poland. You can touch on what else has been written about it: what other histories there are, what sort of historical issues are there? What does it mean for what we're seeing in Poland or Eastern Europe today? Is there any lesson that you could glean from this book about contemporary America? And then you can get into the writing itself. What's the background of the person writing it, what perspective are they coming from, what's the argument here and how is the writing? Is it mundane or is it novelistic?

KM: What's your feeling on negative reviews?

PP: I really do love the negative ones. You know, people say there are only so many reviews, why would you write a negative one? Why not just focus on the good books? Well, like anything, you need to experience the bad to know what the good is. And again, it's journalism. We're covering it and we're not going to kill a review because the critic didn't like it. That's part of the job.

KM: The culture of reading and book reviewing has changed

dramatically in the past two decades. What are your fears and hopes?

PP: *The New York Times* has the last freestanding book review in the country. The previous one was at *The Washington Post*, which folded Book World into Outlook in 2009. And the other one to go down before that was in 2005—*The San Francisco Chronicle*.

It used to be that you would have a book come out and you could expect that maybe a couple places would review it and a couple would talk about it or enthuse about it. Now you are lucky to get one. This has increased the power of the few places that do still exist in a way that I don't think is necessarily healthy. It's not helpful for readers—there should be a wide variety.

One of the great tragedies we're seeing across the world is the decimation of local news. The reason you have local news is so that local newspapers can highlight local authors and books of local interest and can bring a perspective from that place to that story.

The point of books is that books are for everyone. Books should be a mass medium and they should be covered in the same way that television and film are. And frankly, books are the source material for most good TV and movies out there. This is the genesis of ideas.

Claire Feasey *is a Publishing Studies major and Anthropology and Music double minor at Hofstra University. She was the* Windmill Journal of Literature & Art's *first "Windtern." Claire is President of the Hofstra English Society for the 2019-2020 school year, and formerly served as the Writing Chair.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Girl Detective

Shannon Mowdy

Then there is me at twelve, climbing onto the roof in only an oversized t-shirt. I regret now to say that she is probably ordinary, that perhaps most girls her age after some contemplation steal the skeleton keys from their fathers' bureaus, from those slim, top drawers filled with war medals, and baby teeth, and pornographic playing cards, and almost-empty bottles of cologne, and condoms, and the watches *their* fathers gave them with hands that don't move anymore. The girls jiggle the keys in the locks of their bedroom doors in their 200-year-old houses. The gears catch and turn.

The windows rattle horribly in their ancient frames as the girls work them open. It takes muscle, but also care. They imagine that the panes could shatter with their strength.

They are careful, too, to remember to prop them open with Nancy Drew Mystery novels. They arbitrarily select from the rows of yellow-spined covers, their second edition copies of #20, *The Clue in the Jewel Box*. Their mothers are collecting entire sets as they come across them in second-hand shops in the hopes that the girl detectives will read them belly down on their frilly pink spreads, dropping crumbs from peanut butter sandwiches on the pages and pushing the cats away. Like they used to do.

From the window jambs, a million Nancys shine their flashlights into a million caves. The girls will not lock themselves out on their roofs.

They climb, each with their own separate purpose, barefoot onto the asphalt shingles. Some of them thought of doing it only this morning. And for others, the idea came with the spring, something about the last day of school approaching, the budding of leaves. One girl, in particular, used to imagine herself standing tiptoe atop the highest branch of the tallest tree. Like a bird. Another remembers

being young enough to lie naked in the grass. Somehow it was softer then.

There is also, for inspiration, the sudden appearance one morning of sunlight, rays shining through the windows after a long dark winter. The dust particles and dog hair, floating like magic, become illuminated. The light is like water.

Clothes are flung all over their rooms, and pictures of famous boys clipped from magazines are taped to miles of peeling wallpaper. A chorus of mothers calls from below the stairs: wash the dishes, mind the baby, feed the chickens.

Each girl is born with all of the ova she will ever carry already inside of her. Millions of eggs that will wither and die. Most will pass through, lost in rivers of blood. Some will stick around. Of those, about half will grow into girls, each with their own millions of ova. Their longing will be immeasurable.

Shannon Mowdy *lives with her husband and their five children on Long Island. She teaches at Suffolk County Community College and keeps a blog about writing, parenting, and some third thing at https://blurghmom.home.blog/.*

Epigraphist

Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas

This is where the bus hit. And this, this is Paula, my older sister. And this is Bogotá in the summer. As if there were summers in the equator and not just one uninterrupted season of rain and sun and rain again, mashed into a single blur of continuous days that crash one into the other leaving parts and marks and scrapes in one another's backs and faces. Blurred and bright and bruised. And this is the license plate number imbedded like braille on my sister's hip.

This is Paula, after the bus hit, in a neck brace on the couch when I come home from school one day. And that's me laughing, because she looks a bit like a flipped over armadillo, in a neck brace on the couch, and when I chuckle she chuckles too. So I think it harmless and keep on laughing.

But that's Paula, earlier that day, flat on her back in the middle of an intersection. Breathless and cold while a driver considers the human dent she may have left on his front fender. So that's me, later. Beside her on the couch, not quite laughing anymore. Looking at bruises and scrapes and partial license plate indentations on muscle and skin. And me, again, listening to explanations of intersections and bus drivers circumventing unconscious bodies. Screeches and thuds and metal and meat.

This is the moment when bus meets sister and sister flies and driver drives.

That's me, staring at the yellow-purple etching of a fresh bruise that slowly appears like a 3-D painting you have to stare at cross-eyed for hours to finally see. Me, wanting to run my finger on the swollen grooves of what could be a "5" or an "S," trying to think in concrete numbers, like the ones I see pressed into her hip. How far did we run that time when she sprinted mad and angry and barefoot through a rain-wet street in Bogotá, and I trailed after thinking I could

keep her from falling into puddles and running into traffic? How many years between us? How many rooms did we share growing up? How many schools? How many days spent in games of destruction?

"Let's play slavery, Lina."

"Let's play apocalypse, Paula."

She tells me to stand perfectly still and because it's my turn to be the slave, I do. I put my hands behind my back perfectly aware we are too old for this game, her sixteen to my thirteen, her razor to my eyebrow.

I tell her the world is ending and even though she's nine and I'm six it is still my turn to pick games, so she agrees. We turn bunkbeds into bunkers, and she peeks out through a pillowcase curtain as I command her to narrate the burning of the world while I count supplies and survivors.

How many times will I let her shave off eyebrows and cut off eyelashes? How many nights arguing whether the door should remain open in case the devil climbed through the window, or closed, in case the men with guns should rush up the stairs? How many hours practicing extinction and belonging? How many times will she let me burn the world? And how many hands and fingers around my sister's purse and inside her pockets while a bus turns the corner and she lays on the ground—flat, motionless and flammable?

That's me walking through Bogotá, day and night in torn jeans and burnt tennis shoes with the bleakness and incandescence of adolescence dripping from my skin. So many times, I've lost track. Those are the strangers I'll never know, pulling my sister's unconscious body onto the sidewalk by the strap of her purse. And that's me a tired night in Bogotá, sitting on a curb with my head between my knees while a ten-year-old homeless *gamin* boy smokes *basuco* in the alley.

That rushed, blunt tingling, that must be the feeling of so many fingers hiking over my sister's body; pins and needles and spider legs checking for change, and wallet, and rings. And that must be what it feels like, finally, to wake up to a heart still beating under an Andean sun in the middle of a city that plays and kills and smiles with the same set of fangs and claws.

That's a two hundred peso coin I'm rubbing between my fingers, sitting on the curb watching smoke rise from a homeless boy's pipe. I feel the little ingrained *indigena* pattern with my fingertips and watch the cars drive through red lights and stop signs. That's what I give the boy smoking *basuco* beside me. Two hundred pesos, barely enough to buy two cigarettes from the newspaper stand in the corner. A piece of metal etched with a symmetrical pre-Columbian symbol and the words, "Republic of Colombia" around the edges. The emblems of meaning and ownership that make currency current only in one place and only in one time, and worthless anywhere and any when else. A coin in a doped boy's hand like the ones they hope to find in Paula's jeans when she wakes up suddenly in the middle of pulsing traffic with stranger's hands in her pockets.

That, over there, is the street where it happened. Over by the *Plaza De Bolivar* where so much has already happened. And those are the black stars cops paint on the road over the spots where meat has met metal and metal has won, and "Black stars are warnings where not to cross, because that's where people've died. Don't you know anything?" Like they've seeped into the city, all her dead. Struck back where they were struck. Like a dent on a fender, or a fender on a hip, or a spine against the edge of the sidewalk, or a dog pissing on a fence. Or a kid with a Sharpie walking through a playground of scattered toys, picking what he likes and writing down his name.

Try to avoid crossing where there are constellations and clusters and the paint is still wet.

Like imprints on a hip, patterns on a coin. Scabs and scars and black stars.

That's me, by the way, hopscotching between speeding cars on painted road stars. Kicking up dust and hanging from buses, trying to chase Bogotá down wet streets like she might run into her own traffic and fall into her own puddles.

And that's Paula, flying and falling and absorbing the shape of metal numbers and letters with her hip. And her, again, falling asleep in a neck brace while we watch TV. Me

too, falling asleep beside her. On a bench in Bogotá, in a bus in Iowa City, behind the wheel in Provo, in so many planes and so many waiting rooms—like Bogotá keeps chasing me into other people's traffic. Like moving is end, not means. Like I'm hardly paying attention while I turn the corner, which I never have, and never will. Like Paula, when we are kids, standing on the sidewalk, gripping my wrist and pulling me back so hard I feel it in my shoulder as I whip back around to the sidewalk, torn between her grip and the wind tunnel wake of a car speeding past me. A second late on that tug and the car would have clipped me at best, ripped me apart at worst, written its name on my ribs and skull.

Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas *graduated with both a creative nonfiction writing and a literary translation MFA from the University of Iowa. She is the author of* Drown Sever Sing *(Anomalous Press) and* Don't Come Back *(Mad Creek Books), and is the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology* The Great American Essay. *Her fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and translation work have been featured in various journals including* The Bellingham Review, The Chicago Review, Fourth Genre, Brevity, Poets & Writers *and* The Sunday Rumpus, *among others. A Rona Jaffe fellow, Lina has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes and been the recipient of the Best of the Net award and the Iron Horse Review's Discovered Voices award. She moved from Colombia to China, to Columbus, to Richmond, Virginia, where she works as an assistant professor for the Virginia Commonwealth University.*

The Shark

Samantha Moffett

It's off-putting.

I try to think of that day on the beach, of the granules of sand that were crushed into the creases of my pruned fingers, of the brackish water that made my overly damaged hair feel both brittle and flowing as I tossed it over my bare shoulder.

Back then I could have been mistaken as a mermaid,

my skin coated in the brine of the sea, hair cascading down my back, the split ends grazing the top of the black one-piece that covered my barely developed breasts.

But all I smell is shark.

We break into our lab groups: four to a table. One pair gets the instruments, gloves and goggles, the other two prepare the paperwork.

I knew its name before class even started.

Squalus acanthias.

When I was younger I used to be obsessed with sharks. I scoured through my father's worn down dictionaries and animal encyclopedias, passing pictures of the *Carcharodon carcharias*, of the *Isurus oxyrinchus* and the *Alopiidae* while glossing over the definitions of words like dorsal fin, panic, malaise, equator, valetudinarian, and orchestra.

I marveled at how sharks ripped things apart, at how their eyes rolled back and how their gills vibrated when they shook their prey through clouds of blood.

The sharks helped distract me from the counting, the checking, and the other daily routines.

My teacher unlocked the cabinet and brought them out one by one: vacuum sealed and congealed in a thick foggy liquid with its jaw tightly shut.

It happened when we sliced the bag open: an explosion of a noxious, salty cloud of science that reeked of precision, death, and the Atlantic.

As I dug the blade into its skin, the scent became even more alarming.

> I tried to think of that vacation on the beach but instead my mind drifted to when I, clad in that black one-piece, was flipped over by the waves on my boogie board and was dragged across the ocean floor, shards of broken shell and rock getting shoved into my back.

It happened so fast that the idea of drowning never even occurred to me.

While the water filled my nose and lungs the only thing I thought of was just how beautiful the sun looked from underwater: a shimmering disk, rippling with waves.

If I had died there, would I have still had the time to remember if I had finished my routines before heading down to the beach with my cousins? Did I even start them back then? If so, would I have smelled the shark?

After all these years it still comes back: that anomalous shark stench.

I smell it within the tiny bathrooms at school,
at seven in the morning when I have washed my hands and pencils for the fifth time in the
last three minutes,

when I write this,

my head ringing from the old painful habits and my skin burning from the constant douses of papaya-scented hand sanitizer that seeps into the mummified cracks of my skin.

I think about how I'd rather wade back into the ocean and submerge myself,

letting the sea and all of its debris sink into my pores and shoot up my nose than think about how I waited for you,

when you promised to show up but never did,

leaving me alone in a coffee shop for three hours,

feeling nothing but the wafting tendrils of bitter tasting coffee and shark tails.

It comes back when I check the lock on my back door eighteen times or when I think of all the different ways someone could break into my house while I sleep.

It comes back when I remember how I shivered underneath the shower head after I turned it off, waiting for those three specific drops of water to drip onto three specific parts of my face: between my eyebrows, on the center my forehead, which was always inflamed with cystic acne caused by rubbing my presumably feverish forehead against the dirty bus window twice a day in order to try to regulate my temperature, and finally on the top of my head.

If they didn't fall, I would wait,

still shivering,

my sister pounding at the door because it was

her turn to use the bathroom.

But it wasn't safe for me to leave yet.

I had to wait for the water.

There were consequences if I didn't wait for the water.

There were consequences if I didn't reread the same passages from the same two books four times or if I didn't flip back and forth between the pages twice or if I didn't focus on how the letter **t** in tell was darker than the rest of the letters in the sentence.

There were consequences if I didn't count the street signs or if I didn't slowly enunciate their names and balance them on my tongue.

There were consequences if I didn't turn the lights on and off

on and off

on and off

until it felt safe to leave.

Rinse,

repeat.

Listen for the ocean.

Back to class,

hold the scalpel.

It's a male, it has claspers.

I called them "routines."

Those are the external nares.

There's the pancreas,

the gill slits were crusted with fluid and had red peeking through them.

A small headache meant a gastrointestinal virus.

There's the pelvic fin.

Cut deeper. More juices seep out.

I had four years' worth of routines.

Its eyes are glazed over.

I count to six, chant to myself.

Use the scissors to snip open more skin:
you can pin back the flaps of muscle tissue if you need better access to the guts.

Observe the jaw.

If you saw me then, you never would have guessed it.

The shark is all over me now.

I have places to be.

I don't want to smell of muddy preserving liquid,

or of the fear,

or of the shame.

I'm tired of people giving me that look.

I'm tired of lying.

I slide my finger into the guts of the shark, my gloved fingernail brushing against the ripped cartilage and liver.

Rush of panic.

I can feel it.

If I wash my hands again, then I'll be okay.

Only then I can move on with my day.

Only then I can come back to shore.

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An Ordinary Heart

Cameron Finch

I must have had something wrong with me to begin with. During sessions of make-believe play with childhood friends, whenever I was given the choice of character, I always chose the injured one. The girl whose leg surgery went wrong, whose foot got sewn on backwards. The girl who played outside in the snow and whose brain got drilled by a wayward icicle. The girl with the horrific overbite, who wore headgear at all times. The pioneer girl who got consumption and died before Act Two. Maybe I didn't have something wrong with me, per se. Maybe I thought that life needed to be more messed up to become truly exciting. Maybe I thought that danger was directly proportional to interest.

> *Is it enough to love? Is it enough to breathe? Somebody rip my heart out and leave me here to bleed. Is it enough to die? Somebody save my life. I'd rather be anything but ordinary please.*

Avril Lavigne's voice sang through the car stereo. March 2003, I was in third grade. My parents had taken me to Montreal and Quebec City for spring vacation. I was a goody two shoes who so desperately wanted to be a bad girl, a sk8er grl, a complicated girl. So naturally I made them play Avril's debut album, *Let Go*, on constant repeat. When in Canada…

This particular song, "Anything But Ordinary," haunted me through the entire trip. I replayed the line, "rip my heart out and leave me here to bleed" over and over in my head. How would it happen—the ripping out of the heart? What kinds of tools would slice cleanly through all that flesh? A

box cutter? A bread knife? A saw? Bare hands? Once the chest was exposed, what would it feel like to have a slippery beating heart in your hand? As an adult I now think of *Dances with Wolves* heart-eating rituals. I think of the open heart surgeon using sharp tools to poke and prod. But as an eight-year-old, I could only think of terror. Pain. The worst imaginable. I can't remember now if the pain I felt was for the person holding the heart or the person dying on the floor.

Everyone I love has hurt. Everyone I don't know has, too.

Hurting is nothing new.

Hurt can come by accident, by curiosity, by surprise, or conversely on purpose.

Sometimes your own body wants so much for you to feel the pain. Naturally, it hurts to find this truth out. That your body was against you from the beginning, it feels like. That your body is ultimately trying to save you is more like it.

Hurt can be modeled. *I want to hurt like that, too, Mommy, Daddy.*

But neither of my parents could have predicted that I'd stumble on my own kind of hurt by age eighteen.

I hate to use the word accident, even though that's how I got into the predicament I was in. Am in still.

Let's start with a story my father used to tell me when I was growing up. This is how I remember it. In the tale, my father was a kid. Youthful. Able-bodied. A catcher. Glove stretched wide. He wanted to be a baseball player or an astronaut when he grew up. He became neither. Maybe he was thinking about his future, or Russia, or his math homework, as the pitch came at him hard through the brown dirt of the diamond, ripping between the mini dust bowl in front of home plate. The ball took a bounce a foot too soon and deflected directly into my father's jaw.

There was blood. There were stitches. All that cleaned and cleared away with time. The skin hides so much memory.

When he tells me this story, he always smiles at the same part. "I got to ride home in a police car." He flashes me his coffee-stained teeth, more brittle now than they once were. Flashes like those red and blue emergency signals. Alert with

dignity and danger.

When I was five, I had a friend named Allison. She was much taller than me and she knew it. To her, height was directly related to superiority. She was the kind of friend who asked me to help her tie a bow in her hair and when I couldn't reach the top of her head, she pushed me. "Get down on my bed," she said one day as we played in her bedroom. So I did. "I'm going to jump over you," she said. So I said, "Okay."

Our mothers were downstairs, having coffee and flipping through mom catalogues.

I remember laying my head on her pillow and looking up at this Amazonian five-year-old woman. I remember laying there thinking she was going to hop over my torso, left to right. Maybe she'd pick up both feet at the same time. Maybe she'd do more of a hurdle jump with one leg in front and one leg bent back behind her.

Allison did neither.

There she was hovering in the air above me, right above my face. Her fist was extended down, like a Superman pulled by gravity. She had not jumped left to right. She had chosen the long jump: from toe to head. Halfway in the air, it became apparent she had underestimated the distance. Her fist touched down on my mouth with enough impact to punch out my front two teeth. Baby teeth, but still.

I remember the blood in my hand, the long walk down the staircase, my mom's look of horror. I don't remember if I cried in pain. I don't remember if Allison said anything, but her mom's voice echoes still: "But my Allison wouldn't do that. She is a little angel."

That day was the last time I ever played at Allison's house. I haven't seen her since. As a five-year-old, I'm sure I thought our playdates had ended because of something to do with our mothers. Maybe they weren't friends anymore. You know, mothers and their mysterious gossip at the bagel shop. As an adult, I realize that by halting my exposure to Allison, my mother had her claws out, desperately trying to save me from getting hurt by this world.

"But, I wasn't deprived at all. My parents fed me so well.

No one on the face of the planet could complain about the amount of vegetables, fresh foods and balanced meals that my parents prepared for me each night of my childhood," I tried to tell the people staring at me in the whitewashed room. They were the psychologists in the Comprehensive Eating Program at Ann Arbor's CS Mott Children's Hospital that I was admitted to sophomore year of college, as a part-time patient while still going to all of my classes. I felt like I had to prove everything to them, these people who knew absolutely nothing about me, my past, or my disorder.

"We've diagnosed you with anorexia."

Um…no. You've got it wrong! Anorexia is for people who don't eat. I eat. I eat at every meal. Don't come at me with labels. I have Me Disorder. I'm unique. I'm my own person.

I explained to them the details of my Me Disorder. How I just loved vegetables. I loved the taste of them, the crunch, their juicy gem-tone colors, the way they made me feel after I finished them. Like I'd just given my insides a rinse with the purest vitamins in the world.

And it was true. Vegetables filled me up (from the sheer volume of them that I ate) and gave me joy. I thought vegetables were the healthiest things anyone could eat. I figured, I'll just eat a lot of them and I'll live for a very long time. Vegetables soon became my drug. I was addicted to them. When I went a meal without them, I went through withdrawal. I could not succumb to the weakness of all those *other* people who ate pizza and cookies and general processed crap. I was different. I *craved* to be different.

I had eyes. I could tell I was thinning down. I no longer had to cram tampons into my body, because there was nothing there to absorb. My period had stopped, due to amenorrhea. This is the part where the body flashes emergency lights at the mind, yelling "Initiating shut down mode." But my mind was not concerned. Instead, the premature end of all those painful cramps and all the ruddy messes that come with it was a godsend. Likewise, I could now wear the pair of pants from 8th grade that my mother uncharacteristically hadn't given away to Goodwill. With no muscles to speak of to fill out and dimple the material, the pants gaped off me and a pleasurable grin stretched across my face as I tightened my belt to the last hole. I was trimming the excess of my society. All of those people who eat too much and don't walk enough

and are ungrateful for what they have? I'm going to make up for them, I thought, as a kind of martyr. I'll endure the challenge that they are too afraid to shoulder.

Of course, one person can't really take off another person's pounds for them. I know this now. Nor should a person deplete themselves as penance for another person's sins. The only person it hurts is the martyr. And still, the martyr persists for the sake of the challenge. Just to feel the danger.

Sometimes I drive so fast, just to feel the danger, I want to scream, it makes me feel alive.

While I slurped down a milkshake at Beauty's Diner in downtown Montreal, my mother read aloud a passage from her guidebook about our next destination: L'Oratoire Saint-Joseph. The city's largest Catholic basilica is the resting place of Brother André, a saint who was canonized in 2010 and was credited with the ability to heal the sick. I slurped thousands of calories and sugar to the serenade of stories of worshippers riddled with arthritis and disease and pain, pain everywhere. Of worshippers who, upon reaching the church's steps graced by Brother André himself, threw their canes away with miraculous vigor and climbed the rest of the 283 steps on their healed knees. I had never been to church before and wondered if these stories were true.

My mother continued to read that stored in a separate area of the basilica called the Great Reliquary, visitors could view Brother André's heart, preserved in a clear glass case. I remember being terrified. For what purpose would a heart ever have to be outside of the body it came from? A heart was meant to be hidden. A heart was internal. My mother went on to explain that in the Middle Ages, as European pilgrims sought out these religious "relics," churches would share the holy objects with each other, often by dividing the remains, which here meant the entrails, of saints. All I could think of was the blood, the pulsing. Was this the heart Avril Lavigne spoke of on her album? A heart ripped from its source? The heart was very much alive in my head. The heart was its own beating body. *Where is the rest of Brother*

André? Doesn't his body miss his heart? I wonder what my eight-year-old self was wondering. Did she take a palm to her still flat chest, feel the beatbeatbeat, and say, *No one's gonna touch this heart.*

Let's go on about that time that my mom was a girl and decided to snort beans. The devil's beans. True, lima beans do look like boogers, but boogers don't begin outside of the body. Blowing into a tissue didn't work to extract the lodged legumes. At the hospital in my mind, I imagine blue-suited hands grabbing my mother's little body and placing her on a bed, holding her head in one hand and tweezers in the other, tipping her head back, saying *Don't sneeze, don't move, this may tickle.* Like Operation, the game, if it wasn't a game.

The moral of the story: curiosity can always kill you if you're not careful. Or if you don't have medical insurance.

I got lucky. The craft beads I stuck up my nose came out in the first tissue blow.

My mom had just told me the story of her past and I wanted to know how she had felt.

It's odd, isn't it, trying to imagine our parents as children? I don't know how to talk about their past with them. *Remember when you were stupid, too? Remember when you wanted to feel pain but you didn't know it was pain?* You can't just ask those kinds of questions to them.

At my thinnest, my mother seemed to indulge in making me feel bad about how small and unattractive I was becoming, and I hated her for that. Why couldn't she see that I was still the same person with the same bright smile and the same beating heart? She'd sigh and look at pictures of me from high school, when the seeds of anorexia were not yet germinated, and say, "You looked so beautiful then." She thought that recovery would be a quick fix. Just eat more, she advised. Easy for her to say.

Struggling with excess pounds since giving birth to me, my mother can still eat a bag, sometimes two, of Cheddar Goldfish in one sitting. Eating has never been a problem

for her; in fact, her problem quite often is knowing when to stop. She had no idea what it was like to be afraid and ashamed to eat because her issues were so flipped from my own. I obviously knew I was thin, and secretly loved it. If my roommate mentioned anything about my vegetable plate at dinner or the fact that I was probably the only person she knew who could "gain weight" for a New Year's Resolution, I took it as a compliment, a reinforcement that I was doing well. I was living up to the challenge.

My mother may have been blunt with me, but often her friends were not. They'd call her on the phone and mention that their kid, a fellow classmate of mine, saw me walking down the street and was worried about me. "She's looking a bit thin," they said. If they were so worried, why couldn't they tell it to my face? Because telling the truth is one of the most uncomfortable social interactions around. It's hard to confront someone else's problem. You can't sound too nosy, but you want to show genuine care. You don't want to offend, but you also don't want to do nothing while the damage continues. So you talk, but to the wrong person, as if your words might anonymously osmose through space and air and slip into the correct ear and say, "Pssst…here's a little friendly advice."

To walk within the lines would make my life so boring. I want to know that I have been to the extreme. So knock me off my feet…

I don't remember this, because I was just a baby, but my family tells me that my grandmother was carrying me after a bad Michigan snowstorm. She had taken me to the park for some fresh air. I was her only grandchild. Still am. Her foot slipped on slick black ice and she fell. Crack! She somehow got away with only a broken wrist. I wonder if I rolled. Rolled across sidewalk and snow and other people's bootprints. What happened to us, to our brains, in those hard seconds exposed to the elements? There were no icicles, but a fall can affect everything.

Still on a quest to locate the root of my obsession with restriction (was it in me all along?), I blame my knees for now.

Knees suck. They're nothing but a little hinge of cartilage and bone with a precarious doorknob attached to its top. It's no wonder that 200,000 ACLs (anterior cruciate ligament) are torn each year, according to the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at UC San Francisco. Soccer had been my everything. My social life, my weekends, three-fourths of my laundry. Then I tore both my ACLs, one year after another, and had two major intrusive knee surgeries.

I recovered mildly quickly and now have wicked cool scars on my knees, but no one considers the mental scarring. Contact sports fill me with so many painful memories that I can't even watch professionals without wincing, wishing for their own safety. In many ways, soccer has continued to leave a hole in my vision of myself. This identity I had for ten years of my life, ripped apart like pale pink crab meat. This identity had also been my exercise plan, which kept me fit and healthy. Suddenly, laid up for two months on the couch, I told myself I would not be able to eat the same as I had before. Never one for dieting, I told myself I was simply just being conscientious of my health. I scoured websites, meal plans, and biographies of Audrey Hepburn to memorize an easy eating plan that would be fresh and healthy, have minimal calories, and help me maintain my weight while not exercising as much as I would have liked. I had lost a lot of muscle in my legs due to the lack of movement after surgery and I loved the way they looked. I had control over my eating and it felt amazing. I might not have been able to control losing soccer, but oh, how rewarding it was to reject that piece of cake.

Is it enough to die? Somebody save my life. I'd rather be anything but ordinary, please.

I don't remember the heart. The heart of Brother André. The physical thing that once beat blood around inside him. Did I even see it? Did I enter the room with the relic?

If you don't see it, don't acknowledge it, is it even real?

[EKG Machine: calculating…calculating…murmur.murmur. murmur.]

The doctor at Mott Children's Hospital came in: a thin foppish man with colorfully striped socks and highwater pants. He sat down in the hushed dim room and looked at my mom and me, then at the results from my blood tests and the EKG heart monitor. He folded his hands. Pursed his lips.

"To be honest, you could probably be dead right now. Your heart is beating so low, and your body mass index doesn't even make the charts."

Sure, I weighed the same as a good-sized hound dog. But I ran 5Ks. I got all A's. How could I possibly be so close to death and feel so alive at the same time?

"So here's the deal," Mr. Sockman droned on without feeling. "You can either say no and we will hospitalize you, force-feed you, and make you skip all your classes. Or you can agree to participate in our Comprehensive Eating Recovery Program."

The scene from *Iron-Jawed Angels* came to my mind, when Hilary Swank gets a metal gadget shoved into her throat to end her hunger protest. Except I wasn't Alice Paul and I wasn't fighting for women's suffrage. I was fighting for control, which was really my life.

The silence that occurred in that moment was unreal. My mom was sobbing. I was shocked that this strange man had spoken to me in such a way. I was angry. He couldn't force me to do anything. It was my life. I was a student. I had classes that I needed to finish and get A's in. He couldn't put my whole life on hold just because my heart was reading a little low. I was not about to let Dr. Sockman wrench away my passion for school, but surrendering was the only way I would be able to continue attending my classes. So I nodded, but that wasn't good enough.

"Yes," I said, giving into the desired verbal submission.

Dr. Sockman released us to lunch before more mental exams were administered. My starving stomach gobbled up a Subway Footlong in the hospital cafeteria, while my mind

tried to stutter out, *Yes, I want to live. But not here.* Not at the hospital. The hospital was for crazy people. Therapy was not necessary. I didn't need to talk to people who didn't know me.

Then there's my grandfather. He's dead now. By dead, I mean his body no longer moves the way that my body moves. He doesn't have to move to see the world. That's what souls are for, I suppose. Little air periscopes, spying on the rest of us.

The last time I saw him was at his radiation appointment. He was plagued with cancer. They said in the lungs, but I think it was everywhere. The skin makes it so you can never be sure.

I wondered which lingering diseases I was ingesting as I breathed in the sour smell of the hospital waiting room and studied for the SATs. I remember not wanting to make eye contact with anyone else.

My grandfather's head, his mind, was an incurable injury. He asked me for a Snarkers bar. "You mean, Snickers? I didn't know you liked Snickers." No, a Snarkers bar. He was quite adamant. I remember thinking when he passed that maybe wherever he was now, there was a vending machine with an endless supply of Snarkers.

After the appointment, he came out with this hard white plastic mask that covered his face and shoulders. It had been molded to fit his and only his particular body. The plastic was made up of a crosshatched pattern. Much like a knight suited up in chain mail. I suppose, in a way, he was going into a battle, too. A battle against his own body.

> *Let down your defenses, use no common sense, if you look you will see that this world is a beautiful accident, opulent, turbulent, succulent, permanent…I want to taste it, don't want to waste it away.*

That last night in Canada, I fist bumped my eight-year-old self into a skater's sweat among the thousands of Avril fans in Montreal's performing arts center. Meanwhile, my parents shielded their hair from the punks beside them who waved

flaming lighters around in the air like they just didn't care. Walking the streets of the old city the day before, we had found a fluke flyer for Avril's show. My parents, bless them, bought tickets pronto. Reconsidering everything once inside the smokey arena, I'm sure they were thinking: *Should we really have brought our young girl to see a show with warm-up bands named Gob and Swollen Member?* The bodily innuendos were surely lost on me in the moment; an innocent girl swept away in her dream icon's ecstasy. I may have turned to my parents, sensing their fears of burning, of deranging their child. I may have taken their hands in my hands, folded their fingers into mine, said, *Everything will be okay. Your hair won't catch on fire. This is how you fist bump. See?*

A list: The long sunrise drives from Jackson to Ann Arbor (40 minutes). The mandatory parent-patient breakfasts (3 days a week for 2 hours). Watching a daughter observed by professionals as she swallows 2,000 breakfast calories in 2,000 minuscule bites. The hospital bills ($$$$). The hospital bills ($$$$). The '*hold me*'s. The '*everything will be okay*'s. The '*I know this is hard*'s without really knowing how hard. The hospital bills ($$$$). The *I'm crying now because you're crying*. The daughter crying because she has never seen her father cry like this before. The stories coming out of the cracks: *we were meeting for breakfast once and you were wearing these purple tights and I could see your knee bones shifting in place beneath them. I cried the entire drive home*, he told me. The stories coming out of the cracks when you are healthy enough to hear them. The *let me buy you groceries so I know that you are eating*. Four thoughts: that without my parents, I might have been swept away into a black hole, forever obsessed with restriction, or worse. That at one time in my life, I was convinced I was not the sick one, I was the healthiest Finch in the world. That I could have become the character whose lines cut off at the end of Act Two. That my liver once upon a time wasn't even healthy enough to become a relic, to preserve inside a streaky glass

case like André's blessed heart. The therapy bills ($$$$). The mental scars. The unconditional love from parents to a daughter and vice versa, no matter what the scale may say.

The number on the scale, my body shape, the doctors, they all say I'm okay. But "okay" in the dictionary doesn't mean tallying up daily calories after every meal, couldn't mean being afraid to sit down for extended periods of time, won't include looking into the mirror and seeing a body that doesn't feel like mine. "Okay" implies trust. *We trust that you can take care of yourself.* Try to say "okay" out loud at least once a day, I tell myself, as if okay is the hot new over-the-counter drug.

Through years and years of being "in recovery," I'm not sure there is such a thing as being "recovered." Maybe we just keep rolling the ball of clay that is us around and around in our palms: shaping and bending, breaking and pasting, tearing and scarring and carving. Trusting and loving.

I know I am not an anomaly. We are all anything but ordinary. Life makes sure to make ordinary obsolete.

To the ones who cannot answer, I ask: Do we return to ordinary once we are dead?

I cannot ask my grandfather. I cannot ask Brother André.

I cannot ask myself because I am still gloriously alive. I made it out of Avril's concert many springs ago without burning my hair off. I made it out of the cave that was my own obsessive ideal. Today, five years after completing the refeeding process, I stand at the mouth of that same cave. I have the rest of my life to journey step by step away from it. Some days, I may go backwards and that's okay. My parents stand guard at the foot of the cave, blocking attempts of reentry. I wave to them, press my hands to the heart in this body that is mine, and walk onward in the other direction. Onward because we can't sit alone on the edge of our bed, with the door and the window closed and locked, afraid to

go out there and make life complicated. Our skin is not a hardened plastic shell. See all those beautiful little cracks? Count them. Each one there to teach us the difference between pain and its opposite. To make us aware of the dangers in this crazy world. To make us feel alive.

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The Geography of Invisibility

Akiko Busch

Stories of an invisible population, known as the Huldufolk, have long proliferated in Icelandic folklore and persist today in many areas of the country. Social creatures with lives much like our own, the Huldufolk eat what we eat, wear what we wear. Neither enchanted nor magical beings, they are thought to be like us, though just a bit better, with finer homes, horses that run faster and more gracefully, cows that yield richer cream. At a time when the harsh realities of everyday life threatened human survival, the hidden people offered an alternative solace; their lives resonated with order, civility decency, prosperity. This essay is drawn from How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency *by Akiko Busch, Penguin Press, 2019.*

The comparative isolation of any island can result in what Oliver Sacks calls geographic singularity, a kind of separateness that allows not only for the evolution of animal and plant species that can be found nowhere else, but also for systems of thinking and belief that develop with limited external influence and intrusion; islands cultivate what is unique on this earth.

All of which may be why stories of the Huldufolk, Iceland's invisible population, have been absorbed so seamlessly into the country's contemporary culture. Oli Gunnarsson, a farmer in the south, points out for me an old turf hut adjacent to his barn. Today, its roofline is neatly folded into the sod beneath it, but it is generations old and was inhabited by a family of hidden people when his grandparents were alive, he tells me. After a winter blizzard had damaged the hut, the family moved into the adjacent farmhouse with his grandparents. His grandmother, inclined to enjoy a glass of sherry in the evenings, noticed the level

of the sherry bottle diminishing. “You’d better fix the roof on the sod house,” she told her husband, “so the guests will move out quickly.” Her husband repaired the roof, and life returned to normal. Oli laughs at the obviousness of the tale, but when I ask him if they continue to live here still, he says, “Yes, I think so.” He believes in them, he tells me. “I do not see them, but it is the way people believe in God, even though they cannot see him.” It is a relationship of respect, he says. His daughter played with several invisible children in a rock grotto when she was three, and he points to a fissure of stone at the foot of the grassy hill behind the farm. In the afternoons, she returned to the farmhouse and her parents only when the unseen children were summoned home by their own parents.

A farm woman in the north tells me these stories are more common in the eastern part of the country where she grew up. And as a child, she says, she was closer to the experience: “When you are young, there is less of a difference between what you see and what you believe. But most of us here now, we still have some belief in it.” We are speaking in her cottage in mid-July, and the countryside has been bathed in pale northern light for many days and nights. Illumination is unrelenting, shifting only in degrees from a soft, diffuse gray to an overcast pearly dusk. A dense fog has settled in around the cottage, however, and I can’t see a thing. Such are the conditions of visibility here. Ambiguous conversations about the unknown in Iceland are naturally reflected by what is going on outdoors.

A few days later, a desk clerk at the hotel tells me that her five-year-old son plays frequently with a young Huldufólk boy. “Often he wants to bring his playmate home,” she tells me. “But I tell him, ‘No, no!’” She believes her son’s stories but is not eager to have the elusive playmate in her house. “This is just something we live with,” she tells me. She lives on a farm with her husband, and there are rock castles where the hidden people live on the hill behind her house. As she speaks, I look out the window at the hill scattered with gray stones and ask her how she is able to identify those that serve as residences for the unseen. “It is just the composition of the stones,” she tells me. “Sometimes you will see a larger one, arranged just so with a smaller one. They stand there together. It is not unlike the way we build things ourselves.”

The tone with which she tells me this is beginning to become familiar to me, a combination of practical accommodation and pure, ancient belief. Later that morning, I drive to another hillside where the Huldufólk are said to converge. It is an ordinary hill, strewn with stones, sheathed in moss and grass. No other markers designate it as a place of any significance.

Adelgeir, a sheep farmer in the north, well into his eighties now, tells me through a translator about an encounter he had as a twelve-year-old boy. He was near a rock and met a woman dressed in blue clothing. She was friendly but she did not speak to him. It never happened again. But many farms have such rocks. It is part of ordinary life here. He gestures vaguely up the hill where the animals are grazing. His son, who has taken over the operation of the farm and speaks English, tells me he grew up knowing about the rock. "But really, that is all."

Our exchange reminds me of James Tate's poem "The Invisible Alligators," in which a man and a woman discuss the alligator the man does not happen to have. Their conversation is both absurdist and affectionate. "I'm the only one without an alligator," he says in the puzzling conversation about unseen presences, oddball companions, and how *seeing* and *understanding* are words used interchangeably. Tate's poems often read as clouds of small bewilderments, full of the ordinary perplexities of daily life and the innate beauty these can have, and the stories I hear now seem to have a similar quiet acceptance of eccentric and undecipherable personas.

When the rocks of the Huldufólk are relocated, it is done with respect and restraint. In the village of Breiddalsvík is something called the "Power Rock," transferred there from a nearby ravine by a local hotel proprietor for use at a strongman competition. Identifying himself as a psychic, the proprietor had asked the Huldufólk living near the 22,000–pound stone for their permission to move it. They apparently agreed, with the condition that the stone be used for its healing power alone. The eventual transport involved a lightning storm, apparitions, the glow of candlelight. Simultaneously weird and ordinary, the massive rock is now a village landmark and sits in the middle of town next to a picnic table where tourists can eat their sandwiches. A small

sign encourages them to absorb the rock's healing power through touch.

Of course, I touch the rock. In astrophysics, invisibility is sometimes used as a placeholder, a stand-in for unidentified knowledge; physicists know that the information is there, but not knowing just what it is, think around it. Dark energy is a placeholder. Dark matter is a placeholder; it neither absorbs nor radiates light. There is no meaningful analogy for explaining how the universe is expanding. There is no metaphor for its edges that is applicable. We do not have the information for this. And so they remain as placeholders for the unknowable, and scientists think around them. The invisible world is a place in which the human imagination has not yet found a clear path. So we use a chunk of rock or inert piece of lava, some fissure in the ground, some dark space or object that is reserved for the inconceivable. Then we think around them. Which is likely why to this day I carry in my coat pocket a little round black volcanic stone no more than an inch in diameter, which I picked up on a beach near this town, a souvenir of the dark energy of which I have some knowledge but no comprehension.

A few days later, I find myself in the fishing village of Bakkagerdi. Tucked into the far end of Borgarfjördur, one of the country's eastern fjords, it is a remote fishing and sheep-farming village. Gemstones are churned out of the earth on a regular basis, and the gift shop there offers bins of jasper, agate, and other assorted kinds of quartz. The village is known even more for its legends of the Huldufólk. A small white farmhouse at the edge of town is believed to have been the residence of a woman who lived among both humans and the hidden people, and local folklore describes her manner of negotiating life and marriage in these two separate realms.

Other stories suggest the kind of economy that villagers have entered into with the hidden folk, exchanges between the seen and unseen worlds that involve the transfer of goods and services, good fortune given in return for a pitcher of buttermilk or a prize ewe offered for the assurance of safety in a snowstorm. Themes of equitability in a harsh and inequitable world remain consistent. Writing about such lore and landscape in Nordic countries, Terry Gunnell, a

professor of folklore at the University of Iceland, suggests that legends emphasize

> *the often forgotten fact that people in the rural community regularly lived on the borderline between life and death of various kinds. They were well aware that something can come out of nothing, and that it can easily revert back to its original state. The world for them was a complex place of simultaneous being and nothingness, the visible and the invisible, something that, once again, few government documents from the time reflect.*

Set back from the town center is a rocky outcropping known as Álfaborg, believed by many to be a city of hidden people as well as the home of its queen, Borghildur. I climb to the rock's summit along a path that is strewn with buttercup, wild geranium, wild thyme, moss, lichen. The elevation of the rock is slight, not more than fifty or sixty feet, and confers on visitors a sense of removal—but just barely. To the east is the edge of the harbor, and to the north and south, towering snowcapped mountains. It is one of those places where one can feel both connected and disconnected. A community of shadow presences is said to exist here, and that may be so, but it is also one of those geographic features that generate a sense of affinity. The position of the rock in its little valley and its slight elevation make for a configuration of comfort, an order, a symmetry, a sense of belonging. It is easy to understand why residents of the village see it as so central to their lives.

Celtic tradition holds that the earth's geography contains "thin places." Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, the adage goes, but in such liminal zones, the distance is even less. Thin places are thought to be those areas where the temporal and spiritual converge, where the invisible and visible worlds coalesce. It could be a mountain or a river, some geographic axis, some threshold of rock, earth, or water, some pleat in the river or fold in the land that has the capacity to advance human spirit. It might be a place that becomes the site for a temple or monastery or shrine, but it could just as well be the snow settling on a frozen lake, an eclipsed sky, an unexpected conversation. Thin places refer

not simply to geographic features but to how these allow people spatial and psychic realignment. This small rise of stone, framed by mountains and the harbor to the east, seems to qualify as just such a place.

Not far away is a small hill where a large volcanic boulder is surrounded by many smaller stones. Local lore has it that the area serves as a crossroads for the invisible population, and, later that afternoon, I meet a schoolteacher in the village who speaks with a distinct pragmatism when she tells me of taking her students there from time to time. She gives me directions to the field of stones and with her pen traces the road there and circles it on my map. "Who knows," she says, shrugging. "There are so many things we cannot see."

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Akiko Busch *is the author of* How to Disappear: notes on invisibility in a time of transparency, *published by Penguin Press in spring 2019. Her previous essay collections include* Geography of Home, The Uncommon Life of Common Objects, Nine Ways to Cross a River, *and* The Incidental Steward. *She was a contributing editor at* Metropolis *for twenty years, and her essays about design, culture, and nature have appeared in numerous national magazines, newspapers, and exhibition catalogues. She has taught at the University of Hartford and Bennington College and currently teaches at Bennington College and the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been recognized by grants from the Furthermore Foundation, NYFA, and Civitella Ranieri. She lives in the Hudson Valley.*

Changing the Game: Brenda Elsey

Megan Byrd

Brenda Elsey is someone who has a keen eye for the stories that our general histories leave out. A Professor of History at Hofstra University, Elsey has also directed the Women's Studies program, and is co-director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies program, so it makes sense that much of her work lives at the intersection of gender and social justice. Her newest book, *Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America* (University of Texas Press, May 2019), co-written with Joshua Nadel, interrogates a missing piece of social history.

"I first became interested in Latin America as a place of political innovation," Elsey said. "As I traveled through the region, soccer was a constant. It seemed an obvious point of entry for a student of gender and class history. When I couldn't find scholarly studies, I figured I may be able to contribute to writing that history."

Elsey's first book, *Citizens and Sportsmen: Fútbol and Politics in Twentieth-Century Chile* (University of Texas, 2011) was entirely about men. Elsey attributes this to social issues occurring in Latin America at that time. "Women's sports is not used as part of national identity in the same way as men's is. In the case of men's soccer, I could use it as a lens to understand national identity, the government's interference in cultural affairs, and, depending on which government I was talking about, I could use it to think about professionalization, and ideals of masculinity," Elsey said.

Futbolera changes this notion, opening up an entirely new conversation about the role gender plays in both soccer and athleticism. In the book's introduction, the term *Futbolera* is described as: *a deceptively straightforward way to refer to a girl or a woman who plays football, or soccer. …They thus serve as metaphors for women's appearance in the historical narrative. When raised in public debate, the futbolera was*

shorthand for a woman who went "too far," a red herring, or a strange monstrosity.

"This idea that if sports, especially soccer, was useful in raising proper men then it must not be useful in raising proper women. That actually, it must compromise their ideal gender identity," said Elsey. *Futbolera* works to recast this idea.

Elsey and her co-writer, Joshua Nadel, confront not only the ideals of masculinity and femininity prevalent in the twentieth century but also the political implications they had to women's bodies in *Futbolera*. "The question is, why was it so threatening just to have women play soccer? It's unbelievable. It has to do with denying them access to leisure time, to public space, and to just general respect," said Elsey.

While *Futbolera* explores mostly the histories of Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, it has a very universal appeal in terms of women's issues. From underground communities that formed under the suppression of women's sports to the broad history of the formation and funding of women's soccer teams, the ideas explored go beyond the borders of Latin America.

Elsey recently extended the conversation in March 2019 when she hosted "Critical Sports Communities: New Directions in Sports Scholarship, Journalism and Activism", a two-day symposium co-presented by Hofstra University and Columbia University. Inspired by the NFL anthem protests and activism within the WNBA, Elsey and symposium co-director Frank Guridy sought to push the topic beyond the sports pages, bringing together scholars, journalists, and activists to discuss the recent revolution sports has undergone and its potential for a space of inclusivity and social change.

Elsey has become a leading voice on the subject of women and sports. Elsey was awarded a Fulbright in Argentina for 2017-2018 to research women, gender, and sexuality in Argentine football. She is also co-host of the podcast "Burn It All Down," which discusses the intersections between sports and feminism. Her articles have appeared in *Vice*, *The New Republic*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Guardian* and more, covering topics like #MeToo allegations against the athlete Cristiano Ronaldo, trans athletes, and equal funding of women's soccer teams in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Having a background

in Latin American history gives Elsey an unique perspective of the condition of women's sports there today.

There is an exclusivity to the themes of *Futbolera*, but only in that they concern mostly women's history, which is already a minority subject. It's noted in the book's introduction that: *much remains to be researched on the multiple ways in which class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality shaped the meaning and experience of women.*

This uncharted research is what continues to propel Elsey—and her work. Her symposium covered topics on women in sports that most publications either gloss over or don't recognize at all. Her articles deal with stories only someone with a deep knowledge of the culture of Latin America and soccer can approach. And *Futbolera* ventures through territory no other history book has touched. Through her research and writing, Elsey champions the mantle of *futbolera*, as someone who pushes; someone who doesn't just study change, but makes it happen.

Megan Byrd *grew up in Taylor, Texas and now studies Creative Writing and Fine Art at Hofstra University. Her work has been published in* Newsday, Plain China, Font, *and* Growl.

ART

From the Desk of the Art Editor

This year's issue of *Windmill* seeks to bring intensely human narratives front and center, exploring our vulnerability and weaknesses as people but also our potential for growth. It was first through the fiction and creative nonfiction selections that our team crafted this tone, but the visual artists' work is what drives our point home. Our goal while putting this section together was to include pieces that possess beauty and intrigue to be sure, but also the intrinsic quality that allows some works of art to "speak" while others might remain silent.

We are fortunate enough to be able to showcase a variety of media, perspectives, and artistic styles, but the thing that ties all of these pieces together is the element of storytelling present in each. Judith Skillman's serene, nearly symmetrical landscape with its gentle, broad strokes of color, presents us with a great deal more to consider than just the subject matter. The more abstract, nonfigurative works, like *Assault on the Queen*, prove that art does not necessarily need to contain identifiable figures or images to express emotion and offer us a story. As is the case for this piece from Walter Savage and others like Jim Ross' *They Call Him the Mayor*, the titles each of the artists bestowed made our team more deeply consider their works' meaning and confirmed for us that they belonged in this year's issue. We encourage readers to take special note of each piece's name as they consider the following works, as they most certainly contribute a great deal to one's experience viewing them.

Each work of art we feel has something to offer Windmill's audience, but when it came to determining which would be the best fit for the cover of this journal, we needed a piece that would reflect our focus on narratives and introspection as a standalone work, rather than in tandem with others. The talented Elizabeth Haidle was our saving grace. Her playful watercolors possess the precise balance between beauty and depth that we wish this year's issue to express, and when

Haidle's blue-painted figure with hair traveling up and out like branches of thought was proposed as a cover design it was met with a resounding "yes" from the team. Here in the artwork section, another of Haidle's paintings, *Pile of People*, presents us with a most appropriate "pile" of emotions and stories through its many figures.

We hope you enjoy this year's collection of art as much as we did and find that it adds to your appreciation of the written work you may find here. The *Windmill* team is incredibly grateful for your consideration and support.

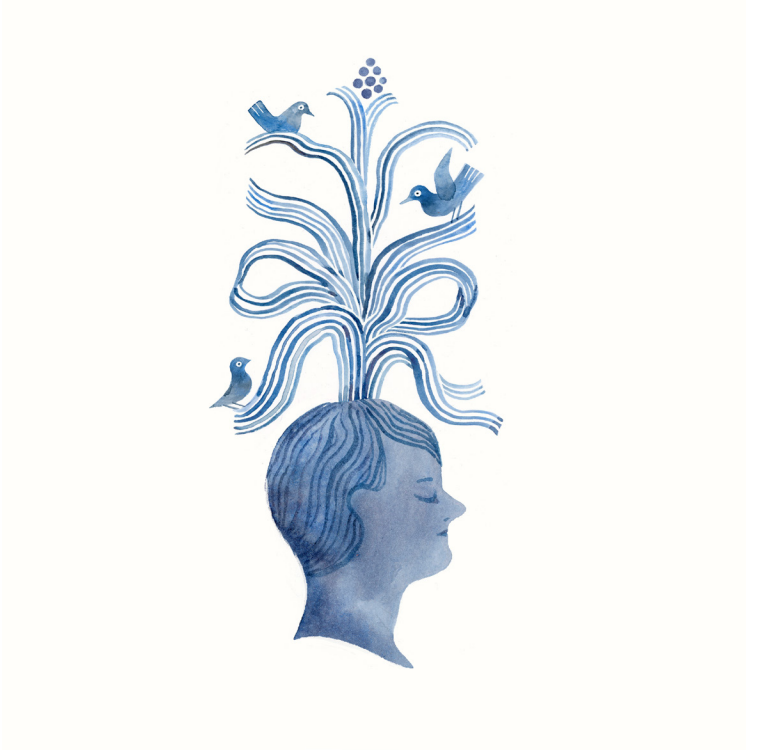
Sincerely,

Maia Loy
Art Editor

Whereabouts, Louis Staeble, photograph

From the Ferry, Judith Skillman, oil on canvas

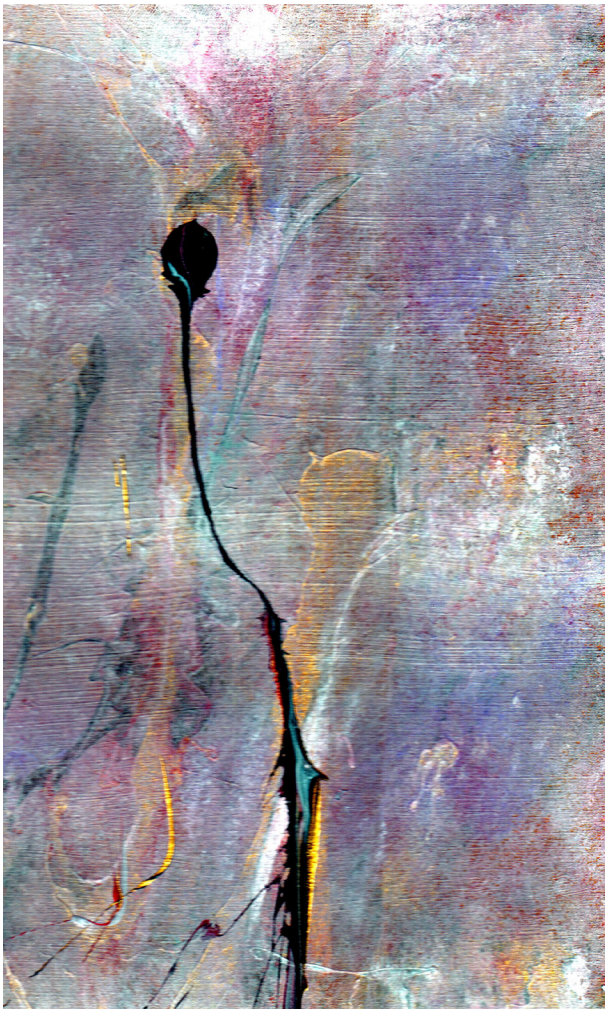
Glimpse, Judith Skillman, oil on canvas



The Conviction of Being Unique, Elizabeth Haidle, watercolor

Pile of People, Elizabeth Haidle, watercolor

Assault on the Queen, W. Jack Savage,
acrylic on acrylic paper



Growing Alone, W. Jack Savage,
acrylic on acrylic paper

They Call Him the Mayor, Jim Ross, photograph

A Q&A with Mitchell Jackson & Ashrena Ali

Ashrena Ali

Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, Mitchell Jackson endured a harsh childhood and family life ravaged by drugs, prostitution, gangs, and imprisonment, which serve as the recurring foundation for his critically acclaimed work. His debut novel, *The Residue Years* (Bloomsbury, 2013), explored autobiographical strands through provocative prose, underscoring Faulkner's most famous lines: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Jackson is adamant about placing his history on paper, committed to digging up the memories of his formative years in a poetic and memorable fashion.

He continues this style in his newest nonfiction book, *Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family* (Scribner, 2019). Jackson showcases his talent by incorporating his former lifestyle in a multitude of genres, including a documentary based on his novel that he co-directed, wrote, and produced.

Jackson, a Clinical Associate Professor of writing in Liberal Studies at New York University, holds a mass of literary awards and prizes—including the Whiting Award, the Ernest J. Gaines Prize for Literary Excellence, the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction—as well as fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the Ford Foundation, PEN America, TED, NYFA, and The Center for Fiction. Along with his writing, he is a social and criminal justice advocate. Jackson is a formerly incarcerated person and he visits prisons and youth facilities in the United States and abroad as part of his advocacy work.

Ashrena Ali, an MFA in Poetry candidate at Hofstra University, spoke with Jackson during his visit to campus for the 15th annual Great Writers, Great Readings Series held

during the spring semester of 2019. She spoke with Jackson about his new book, his past, his passions, and his potency as a writer.

AA: Your newest book, *Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family*, comes out next month. You retrace some of the same threads you included in your first novel, *The Residue Years*. What was the starting point for telling this story in this way?

MJ: I wrote an essay for *Salon Magazine*, probably in 2011, and it was about a time that a guy had threatened to shoot me and what I did to avoid that moment. In that piece, I started thinking about other times in my life that I had felt threatened in what I did and that's when I birthed this idea about the math that it takes to survive. *Salon Magazine* actually retitled that essay…I gave it to them as "Survival Math" and they published it as "Growing Up Black in the Whitest City in America." I was like, *why would they do this?*

Around that same time I had an essay called "Matrimony" about my mother's addiction and how I kind of dealt with her addition. So, I had those two themes and when *Residue Years* was coming out, I was anxious because normal lead time in a major publishing house is like sixteen months and so I was like, *damn I have to wait that long to be out in the world*, and I had already worked on it for thirteen years so I was anxious. I asked them if I could self-publish a book and they said they didn't know, maybe it would work like marketing.

I took those two essays and two other short stories, and I wrote a couple of new things and I put it together and self-published it. People reviewed it well and my publisher came back and said they would buy that book and republish it. So that was the genesis of *Survival Math*, though it took a lot of different turns. That [first version] was both fiction and nonfiction and this is only nonfiction, but that was the genesis of *Survival Math*.

AA: I love how multi-genre you are; you have a documentary, you write nonfiction and fiction, you dive into poetry. How do you know what genre to go into when you start a story?

MJ: Well, it's easy because it is the story. So it's like, I'm just going to go in there and tell the truth. Now I can say I can tell the truth through fiction or I could tell the empirical truth through nonfiction but it really comes out of the same impulse.

The difference between *Survival Math* and *Residue Years* was that *Survival Math*, in a sense, was like a rebuttal to what I felt was the kind of critical shade that they were throwing at *Residue Years*, but as it turns out it was more cultural shade. The way that the literary world talks about work from writers of color is to talk about the content first and the craft second. So they'll say, "Oh, it's honest and this and this," but when they talk about white writers, they say, "Oh, did you feel lines on this level and how it's so culturally astute?" So I was like, that's how they do that in fiction and there is space to do that, but with nonfiction it's hard to do because they have to reckon with an idea or argument at the heart of an essay.

So now I know how to get them to pay attention to the way that I think, I'm just going to write some essays. But they still end up doing the same shit *[Laughs]*.

AA: And attention needs to be paid, to both the writing and the subject. So much of your work is also a kind of advocacy.

MJ: Part of my bio is criminal justice advocate, which is probably why I'm sitting in this room right now, and I am, but I don't see mass incarceration, I don't see the prison industrial complex. What I see is my cousin, who's doing ten years.

So, on the one hand, I think it's important for us to recognize the system, interpret the data, and theorize, and on the other hand, I think it's as much or even more important that we don't forget these are human beings and they have lives and they wanted to do this but did this instead, or grew

up like this and did this. So I think my job is to make these stories real but also if I speak about it, I need to know how this is being framed in a larger narrative. I don't do well with political speak.

AA: In my perspective, your work is geared towards how can we change the American prison system or how can we rectify the wrongs that these individuals go through.

MJ: Well, yeah, but I'm always telling a story. I end up speaking to that because they are the casualties of the systemic problems. If you just said, and I don't remember the cultural make-up of this room, but if you wrote about the cultural makeup of this room, you would also be speaking about the value system at Hofstra and who they let in and who they don't, what the professors look like. But I wouldn't have to explicitly write any of that, I could just say we were in a room and here's who asked questions, here's what it looked like. People would take that and think whatever they want. I'm always trying to get to the most intimate so that I can to speak to the broadest audience.

AA: You speak to a lot of student groups of writers. What were you reading when you first started writing?

MJ: The first serious book I remember reading was James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. I think another book that inspired me was John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, which is nonfiction. You know, by the time I started serious reading, we're talking like 2000 or 1999, I was reading a lot of contemporary writers. Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City*, Junot Diaz's *Drown*…I love the voice in *Drown* but I also like the aesthetic of no quotation marks.

AA: Yes, I see that influence in some of your previous works!

MJ: Yes, so that was influential to me and also reading Amy Hempel, coming to Grace Paley, those are other people that did it on a line level. And there's no cultural connection

between me and Grace Paley, but I really love her sentences and how she takes the Yiddish and blends it in. So there's Ralph Ellison who was really resisting the notion that he was a literary kin of Richard Wright and he made this claim that you can't help who your literary relatives are but you can help who your literary…what did he call it…I can't remember the term he used but he was saying that people outside of your ethnic cannon can be your influences. So people like Grace Paley are influences but you wouldn't necessarily know that by reading me because so often when someone says "I'm a black writer," then usually, "Oh, I love Toni Morrison, I love James Baldwin, I love Ralph Ellison," and I do, but I'm equally enamored by Joan Didion.

AA: What are you reading currently?

MJ: I'm reading *There There* by Tommy Orange because I'm teaching it. So, I really read during the school year what I assign and I usually assign three or four contemporary books that I want to read. But I found myself, while I was composing *Survival Math*, reading a lot of poetry.

AA: Oh, yes, a lot of poetic influences to note in *Survival Math*. Who are your favorite poets?

MJ: My partner is a poet, her name is Safiya Sinclair. I really love Terrance Hayes, Natalie Diaz is one of my favorite poets and Rickey Laurentiis, Jericho Brown, lots of poets of color. But I also like Lucie Brock-Broido; she died last year and she was a Columbia Professor and her stuff…I love it, it's so lush. Let me pick one more person…Catherine Barnett, who's at NYU too.

AA: What would you caution young writers against?

MJ: Leaning into the current popular thing. Like, people see a book, let's say Tommy Orange, right? So, he's a distinctive voice; he's writing about Native Americans. There's only one other popular writer that I know of who writes about that

and it's Sherman Alexie. I think it would be easy for another Native or person from a marginalized group to look at Tommy Orange's success and say, "I'm going to write something like that," but the thing about the publishing industry is that whatever we're seeing was something they thought would work two years ago. So if you see something that is new and try to write something like that, by the time you finish, they're well down the road to something else.

And really, when you talk about major publishing, you're actually talking about what white people want. If you get down to it, you're actually talking about what white women want because they run publishing. If you look at the kinds of statistics of how many people of color are in publishing, everyone says they have an initiative to diversify and inclusion but it's still not happening. So, you're appealing to the taste, if you think about it, of white people in general but especially white women. That can become a hegemony over what you think you should write but I would say to resist that and write the thing that's nearest and dearest to you, and then find the people that are going to champion that. Not like, "they're writing this now, I can write that kind of thing, too."

AA: Trying not to lean, you put that so eloquently. When was it that you learned language had power?

MJ: I'll say that one time I remember thinking, "wow, this is powerful," is when *Residue Years* came out and I noticed the language they were using to describe it and me. And the way that the people responded to that and the kinds of questions they were asking made it seem like this sliver of my life was the definition of my life. So I realize that I need to be part of shaping whatever is presented about me, to be part of a larger initiative to be very vigilant in how I shape what is happening, and not necessarily just for me, but for the next person that is coming along.

I actually had to have conversation this with my publisher, and they're on my team! You know, they're supportive but they're white people and they can't see it and I have to call

them on it and they're going to have to change it.

AA: That's harsh!

MJ: It can be, but you got to wait until you can do it. You got to feel comfortable and confident enough in the space where they're going to listen to you.

AA: When you feel discouraged or unmotivated, how do you get yourself out of that mentality?

MJ: Early on I would say, "Well what the hell else am I going to do?" It felt like I didn't have any other options but now it feels like an imperative, like a necessity.

So, I haven't written anything for a few months, but I know it's still in my mind. I'm still writing ideas down and scribbling things and notes in my head. I know I'm going to get back to it because it's part of who I am and how I see myself in the world. If I'm not doing it, then I feel like I don't have purpose. Well, I have purpose first as a father and then as a professor, and partner, but I'm not making any difference out here on a scale outside my immediate circle.

I feel like I have a certain talent for this and I don't want to squander that.

Ashrena Ali *is an MFA student at Hofstra University. She's a native of Queens, where she lives with her mother, step-dad, and younger sister. After graduating from Queens College in 2016 with a Bachelor's in English, she traveled and explored different countries including Japan and Cuba, drawing inspiration for her initial set of poems. Currently, she is at work on a new sequence of poems about childhood, family turmoil, and loss.*

THE GRIND
QUESTIONS ON CREATIVE PROCESS

Elizabeth Haidle is a freelance artist based in Portland, Oregon, and created the amazing artwork featured on this issue's cover. She received her MA in illustration from Savannah College of Art & Design and is known for her surreal figure drawing, nonfiction comics, and book illustration. Haidle is the creative director and regular contributor at *Illustoria* magazine, a print magazine for creative kids and their grownups. She worked with author Deb Olin Unferth on the gorgeous graphic novel *I, Parrot* (Catapult, 2017), collaborated with children's book author Alice B. McGinty on *The Girl Who Named Pluto: The Story of Venetia Burney* (Schwartz & Made, 2019), and has several nonfiction comic series in the works. You can follow her on Instagram at @ehaidle.

What inspires you?

Recently, I've been thinking about collaborations a lot. As a kid, I had this best friend in fourth grade who moved to my town, from Israel, for just one year. Our families and lifestyles seemed to have nothing in common and yet—we made art projects, wrote books, acted out plays...constantly together.

Sometimes we had our own world, sometimes we would do all this extra research for extra-credit projects and turn them in at school, and sometimes we'd perform the plays. It was wonderful and I recall this sense of fearlessness about diving into any idea that came into our heads.

And we all know what happens next: adolescence hits, and all the inhibitions that come with that (sadly, my friend moved back to Israel), then adulthood, with responsibilities and bills and louder inner-critic voices...etc.

After working a variety of jobs, teaching, freelance, I recently returned to the idea of collaboration—co-illustrating a book with my younger brother. It was such a joy. We almost felt we

were getting away with something we shouldn't. All of the fears and intimidations associated with a long term project were just shrunk to a bare minimum, especially since we had two brains to solve all the problems. And whenever one of us ran into a wall on an idea or image...the other one would pick it up and return it with a brilliant solution. We are planning to do another collab already!

What book impacted you most as a child?

The first book I remember loving was *Miss Suzy*, illustrated by Arnold Lobel. It has rather outdated gender-role type stuff in it, but I didn't notice that part and instead, reveled in Miss Suzy's treehouse she's built for herself, living alone happily and just as she pleased. When she was ousted from her place, by circumstance, she moved around but managed to make herself at home wherever she was. I think I was attracted to her sense of adaptability and independence. Plus Arnold Lobel is always wonderful.

My favorite illustrator: Lisbeth Zwerger...I read everything she did. Also, Bill Peet was a close second, especially his *The Whingdingdilly* book about a made-up creature.

Is there a book you think everyone should read? Why?

Hmmm...well, I know that *Non-Violent Communication*, The *Four Agreements*, and Eckhart Tolle's work have made the most impact on me in terms of improving my capacity to not absolutely trash long-term close relationships that make my life the most worthwhile! They've all three been enormously helpful in my parenting life, too. My son and I are able to enjoy each other's company more, when I'm remembering to apply the wisdom I've gleaned from these sources.

For the imagination...I think everyone could benefit from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

Let's say you're going on vacation…what literary character do you invite along and where do you go?

I think Pippi Longstocking would be a riot to hang out with. We'd climb a tall tree together, of course.

What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

Short stories by Deb Olin Unferth in *Wait Till You See Me Dance*, stories and essays by David Foster Wallace in *Consider the Lobster*.

Also, *Crawl Space* by Jesse Jacobs and reading/rereading all of Brecht Evens' books (a Belgian artist doing long-form comics).

Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters?

I'm just going to list the first ones to come to mind: Jane Eyre, Tintin, Curious George. I like anyone who's endlessly inquisitive.

What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

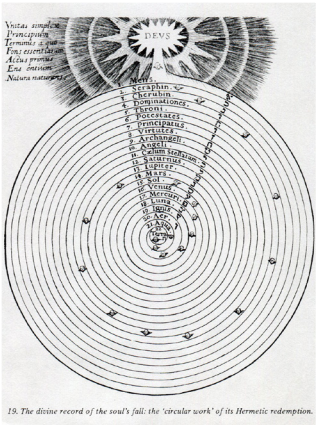
I don't know if I've ever felt guilty reading. I feel more guilty when watching any crap TV or sub-par movies. I'm pretty good at avoiding that these days. Though I am a sucker for long binges of David Attenborough, and that's kind of a guilty pleasure because I'm often watching it in order to feel a certain way, sort of calmed down, like it's easy therapy or something. It feels like a shortcut. I am not sure how to express!

Advice for younger self?

Experiment more, don't worry so much about the outcome.

Do you have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

Try collaborating, build a wide support network, and try to lift each other up in any way that you can.



19. The divine record of the soul's fall: the 'circular work' of its Hermetic redemption.

Derek Pollard is a poet and multimedia artist whose work has been performed and exhibited throughout the United States. His writing is featured in the most recent issue of *AMP* magazine (amp.hofstradrc.org), *Windmill*'s sister journal at Hofstra University that focuses on poetry, experimental and short prose, innovative and hybrid (cross-genre) texts, and video poems. He founded the Barrow Street West Reading Series in New York City, and his poetry, creative nonfiction, criticism, and translations have appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *Pleiades*, *Six-Word Memoirs on Love & Heartbreak*, and *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing*. He holds a PhD in English from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is a professor of English at Keiser University in Florida. His work is playful and imaginative, and is inspired by everyday life and archival objects, including this example from an alchemical text (*The Divine Record of the Soul's Fall*) Pollard studied while a student at the San Francisco Art Institute. More information can be found here: dpollard.squarespace.com.

What inspires you?

The world in its worlding, as Heidegger has it. Am I able to write under the aegis of that inspiration? Not nearly as often as it strikes me; but then, I frequently find that writers are, when in earnest, writing toward a silence (each to each, each to her or his own), so I'm much less bothered these days by what others might deem a lack of productivity than I was when I was younger and it seemed imperative to be making art with every breath. Now, I let the poems play across the field of my attention in an attitude of wonder and pleasure. When compelled (the activity of every good and meaningful poem), I bring them to the page or into another performative space.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Pay much closer attention to the fact that very few people remember the poem Tristan Tzara "wrote" when pulling words out of his hat than the performance itself. Poetry and art are activities not products, much less by-products, of witness or of anything else. At its best, poetry is something outrageously, wondrously autonomous and non-utile.

What book impacted you most as a child?

The Giving Tree, then *Watership Down*.

Is there a book you think everyone should read?

That list might just be endless. *Beloved*. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Tender Buttons*. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. *Leaves of Grass*. *Self-Portraits* (Osamu Dazai), *The Glass Menagerie*. *Lunch Poems*. *Arcady*. Why? Magic and loss, as Lou Reed said.

Let's say you're going on vacation...what literary character do you invite along and where do you go?

Egads, certainly not Jack Dulouz...

What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

Marjorie Perloff's *Edge of Irony* and Donald Revell's *The English Boat*. My current reading line-up? I'm a practitioner of *tsundoku*, so that, too, is a perilously long list.

Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters? What do you think makes them so compelling?

The Durrells, Margo especially, have risen rather high on that list of late (although Lawrence had long been near the top), primarily for their wit and their shared passion for life. Henry Valentine Miller for the immediacy of his intellect and his caterwauling devotion to books, writers, and writing. The narrator of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, along with the Rimbaud of popular imagination—Verlaine's Rimbaud—who both guided me during my own season in Hell.

What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

I find that I'm long past the point of feeling guilty for any of my few remaining vices. I return to the work of Agatha Christie, Edgar Allan Poe (the poetry, which is still, Jerome McGann and others notwithstanding, largely overlooked), and Kahlil Gibran without any need to hide their books behind the covers or dust jackets of others.

Do I have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

Read. As loudly, as voraciously, as passionately, as critically, as playfully, as jubilantly as you can. Your writing will, if you're committed to it, become part of such a large, broad, meaningful conversation. Listen carefully to the other voices you encounter, and always be willing to engage them, whether in support or as a challenge. Your play with language will help to shape what T.S. Eliot refers to as "the tradition." Revel in that opportunity. It has incredibly far-reaching ramifications.

Carol Paik is a writer and artist based in New York City. Her essays have appeared in *Tin House*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Fourth Genre*, among others, and her first play, *Pear*, was nominated for Best Play in the Strawberry One-Act Film Festival. In 2017, Paik started a project called Resting Stitch Face NYC with her daughter, Meredith Slifkin, a photographer and filmmaker. Inspired by boxes full of scrap material she'd saved over the years, Paik began sewing dolls called "stitch faces" and building narratives and personalities for each creation, then capturing them *in situ* in New York City (though they broke this rule twice when *Claudia* visited Rome and *Sally* spent New Year's in Antarctica), and cataloging their exploits online in visual diaries. There are now more than sixty-two dolls in existence, and in 2018, five of Paik's stitch faces were featured in a group show at the Ceres Gallery in Chelsea, NY. Find more information here: restingstitchfacenyc.com

What inspires you?

Navigating New York City on any given day. I can be inspired by the midtown skyline, a yellow leaf on a manhole cover, the things people say to their dogs in the park, a shouting match between strangers on the subway, or an elderly woman on West End Avenue in a polka-dotted coat, hat, and tights.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Be braver, and don't worry about how your nose looks in profile.

What book impacted you most as a child?

D'Aulaire's Norse Gods and Giants. (I looked it up recently and it seems to now be called *D'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths*).

I found it in the library while browsing one day when I was very little, and I became obsessed with it and checked it out repeatedly until the library said I couldn't. Finally my parents, who did not believe in spending money on a thing you could get out of the library for free, actually bought it for me. I also liked *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*, but not as much as the Norse.

Is there a book you think everyone should read? Why?

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards, and I think everyone should read it because it says on page 4: "Drawing is not really very difficult. *Seeing* is the problem."

Let's say you're going on vacation…what literary character do you invite along, and where do you go?

Does this only mean fictional characters? Can I choose Michelle Obama? We could go around the corner and have coffee. I honestly can't think of a "literary" character that I would want to invite on a trip. Most of them are too self-absorbed.

What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

I'm in the middle of Michelle Obama's memoir. On my list are: *Memories of the Future* by Siri Hustvedt; *Late in the Day* by Tessa Hadley; and *Fabric Blooms: 42 Flowers to Make, Wear & Adorn Your Life* by Megan Hunt.

Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters? What do you think makes them so compelling?

I really liked Laura Ingalls Wilder when I was a child, but since I became a mother I'm much more interested in her Ma. We never get inside her head. She frequently speaks in platitudes when she speaks at all. She's rigid and small-minded in many ways, but she calmly handles life-threatening crises and also cares about fashion.

What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

Do you mean what do I read that isn't worth reading? If I derive pleasure from reading something, then it's worth reading. If I want to do something pleasurable that makes me feel guilty I'll play Candy Crush.

Do you have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

GET OFF THE INTERNET and take a walk. Listen to yourself but also pay close attention to the world; have confidence but also just a little tinge of doubt; and create something—even if it's only a very small something—every day.

FICTION

Embraced by Every Atom of the Universe

Ace Boggess

Seth counted the pages remaining in his journal: thirty-two. Double-sided, ruled. They formed a countdown clock. At one page a day, he'd have two blanks left when his stint in rehab ended. Thirty days, thirty pages, home.

One of the counselors, Ms. Justine—the blonde, the chubby one—gave it to him on his first day and told him to chronicle his feelings, emotions, memories, and experiences, so he could reflect. Seth did, willing to comply with any of the counselors' demands. Ninety days in rehab beat the hell out of any time at all in jail. The judge could've given him a year behind bars but decided rehab and probation would be the better choice.

Seth was grateful. Now, he ran his hands over the cool, smooth page in front of him. He imagined he could feel the blue lines as if they were ridges, as if they might sand down the nicotine jaundicing his fingers. That paper soothed, sending him into a drug-like calm.

Drug-like calm! The phrase made him wince. It hadn't seemed true in years. Serenity that used to overtake Seth whenever he snorted that first line of Oxy didn't come around much anymore. Lately, he felt more of a drug-like frenzy as he scavenged his apartment for something to pawn, or a drug-like panic once the daily ritual of withdrawal began.

That panic rippled through him the morning he crashed his fifteen-year-old Cavalier into the back of a stopped school bus, the car's cobalt frame scrunching like paint from a tube. He wasn't technically high at the time—he'd made a purchase and snorted forty milligrams less than five minutes earlier—but by the time the cops arrived, his head swirled too much for him to hide his joyous onrush of relief. Try explaining to a deputy sheriff that it wasn't a DUI because the dope hadn't kicked in yet. Good luck with that.

Yet the judge had a little leeway and gave him a break. The crash occurred at midday, and the bus had no one on it except the driver. Nobody got hurt. What otherwise could've been a DUI causing death or, at minimum, DUI with injuries, turned out to be first-offense DUI causing accident. Seth got lucky, except for one detail: it was a school bus, so it made the news. "Intoxicated Man Crashes Car into School Bus"—that never sounds good, no matter how you spin it.

The prosecutor didn't bother offering a deal. Seth pleaded guilty and left his fate in the judge's hands. The judge said rehab, and Seth nearly fainted in the sweaty, humid courtroom.

The Jaspers Center was a twenty-bed lockdown, hidden off a side street right in the gritty adult-stores part of town. If Seth walked out the front door and went two blocks, he knew he could find someone to sell him dope. He thought about things like that while in residence, although he never wondered who Jaspers was or why he had a facility named after him.

Time at the Jaspers Center was structured around groups, meals, counseling, and cigarette breaks. At night, there were twelve-step meetings, during which Seth sat in the back, said his first name and last initial, R., when the time came, and admitted he was a pill junkie. The rest of his day he spent drinking black coffee, playing Ping-Pong with other patients, and writing in his journal. He told his journal everything. It was his friend with benefits, welcoming a little pillow talk. He stroked it with more tenderness than any of his girlfriends. He whispered to it when he wasn't writing. He confessed his minor crimes and more intimate secrets. He journeyed with it through his past.

Ms. Justine told him, "You're doing a wonderful job," whenever she sat across from him, her glowing bangs falling over her eyes until she had to brush them away in a gesture that seemed at once flirtatious and disarming. "Brutal honesty. That's what recovery's all about."

"If you say so," he replied each day during his session. Seth didn't know anything about recovery. Sure, he'd admitted powerlessness, taken moral inventory, and written out a list of the people he'd harmed, certain he would never

find time to make amends, but he didn't believe in any of the cultish AA/NA mumbo jumbo. He figured it probably worked well enough for others in the program: doctors, lawyers, retirees on SSI. They could return to normal lives, proud of having taken control of their problems by admitting they had *no* control. But Seth was a 26-year-old college dropout (two years, Duquesne), with no money, a shitty apartment, and a job at Home Depot that he lost the first time his story hit the papers. Recovery wasn't for people like Seth. He couldn't *buy* a normal life. He couldn't even afford to make bail.

Yet the journal was something he could believe in. He sensed relief as he wrote. He scribbled down a couple lines at a time, forcing himself to finish both sides of one full page each day—sixty down, thirty to go, and two to spare.

What should he write about today, he wondered. Seth kept a lot on his mind: how his clothes touching his skin no longer felt natural, how his most recent girlfriend, Shayla Rae, hadn't come for a single Saturday visit (he knew how it was: she had her own habit to deal with). He thought about jotting down details from his session earlier with Dr. Gunder, the staff shrink, who'd once said to Seth, "Well, there's nothing *textbook* wrong with you," but today's hour didn't produce anything absurd or cathartic.

Temporarily stumped, Seth flipped the journal open to a random page (day twenty-three) and read a paragraph:

> *I couldn't move. I lay on the bunk, sweating and trembling, while this bright light filled the cell. I thought someone had blown up the jail. Just like in movies, I knew these weren't real Martians. They were shadows of men, tall and thin, with long, stretching arms and fingers. They stood around me, even in places they couldn't have been, like inside the wall beside my bed.*

Goddamn, Seth thought. Reading that brought back the panic he experienced that night while he detoxed in a medical isolation cell at the regional jail. At the time, his senses had him believing he was about to be abducted by aliens, although even then he understood that the opiate withdrawal was tormenting him to the point of insanity.

The day he wrote this, he'd sat through a session with Dr. Gunder and forced himself to talk about that night.

"Probably what's known as sleep paralysis," Dr. Gunder told him. "That's what causes many of these alien-abduction fantasies. You're not quite asleep but not fully awake. Your body feels as if it's being held down by some terrifying force. You have visions of men in the room. Or, well, whatever. Anyway, it could be the result of a breathing problem, which may well have been caused by your detoxing. The partial awareness and sense of restraint set off a panic attack in your body. Your heart races. You hallucinate. Intense." The shrink spoke in a slow, hypnotic tone that reminded Seth of Cecil Turtle from the Bugs Bunny cartoons. Every word sounded as if it took an hour to say. Dr. Gunder also looked a little like Cecil with his bald, sloping head, flat nose, and oddly greenish skin. "If that happens again, you might want to get checked for sleep apnea … *rabb-it*." Seth added that last part in his mind, and now heard the word punctuating every sentence the doctor spoke. ("There's nothing *textbook* wrong with you, *rabb-it*.")

Oh, but reading this now, he didn't laugh. It returned him to those three horrible days and nights. The jail nurses refused him methadone or suboxone that would've eased his symptoms. The strongest pill they gave him was a stool softener, which he now realized he should've appreciated more. He spent the better part of his time sitting on the cell's steel toilet…or bending over it. He trembled and twitched, sweated and chilled. It was like the worst flu he ever had, but twenty times stronger. He paced the cell from wall to wall and bunk to door, unable to sit still for long without wallowing in his suffering. He stared at his fuzzy, disheveled appearance in the mirror that wasn't a mirror at all (no glass allowed) but a rectangle of polished, scratched steel. It had a funhouse effect. Seth's unkempt sandy hair looked like a ball of amber, and the purple bands beneath his eyes could've been punching bags. He didn't think about his appearance for long. He quickly quit the mirror and returned to puking up the bland jailhouse food while wishing he'd died in the wreck.

Adding to his misery was the boredom. He lacked the usual distractions like TV and smart phones with Facebook or Pandora. He couldn't even write Shayla Rae because he

hadn't been locked up long enough to receive an indigent pack with rubber pen, legal pad, and stamps. The staff wouldn't talk to him either, although he pushed the call button every few minutes and begged for a book to read. Mostly there was silence on the other end, but once a guard buzzed back and told him to shut the fuck up. Without anything to do, Seth focused on his symptoms and how awful he felt, which worsened his panic until every minute took an hour to pass.

Late on the second day, one of the nurses showed pity. "Here," she said. Her voice came from under that steel sliding door, so he couldn't see her and thought he'd hallucinated that ghostly word. But then she slid a book through the crack. It barely fit.

Seth lunged for the book as if a bottle of pills. It was a spinoff novel for one of those TV crime-scene shows. He hated that shit, but didn't care at the moment. He lay back on his bunk—twitching, aching, sweating—and began to read.

"Don't want to go through that again," Seth bellowed, reliving it. Then, realizing he'd spoken aloud, he looked through the doorway and down the hall, making sure none of the patients or staff heard him. Relieved to find none around, he returned to his journal, whispering, "Not again," which he meant, but as with all recovering junkies, knew to be a lie just the same.

Turning back to today's page in his journal, he lifted his pen and wrote:

> *I hate CSI shows. I hate books based on CSI shows. I hate that at one point in my life, reading a book based on a CSI show was my best option. Another good reason to stay sober.*

He drew a line under that and went back to probing his brain for whatever emotions might've been stirred up. Seth experienced a lot of them these days, and it often seemed difficult to hone in on specific ones. So, he scanned the back of yesterday's page. After a paragraph about playing Ping-Pong with other residents and a line for which he'd already forgotten the context—"*I wonder if Dr. Gunder despises all pillheads or just me.*"—he read his take on yesterday's group session with Ms. Diaz. It wasn't much.

Interesting group today. Ms. Diaz gave us paper and paints. She told us to show an image we associated with our addictions. I painted my old guitar. It came out pretty good.

Ms. Diaz was the cool counselor, the dark-eyed Latina so laid back she'd let you get away with stuff like grabbing extra bacon at breakfast or having a puff in the bathroom after the smoking-area door was locked at 11 p.m. Under the indoor fluorescent lighting, her hair appeared polished and glossy like coal. Her tiny hands flew about like hummingbirds as she discussed the stories of Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the AA founders. She passed along the energy of her smile whenever she proposed some creative therapy, like writing poems or describing emotions by jotting down a list of song titles. Yesterday, it was painting. "You're not trying to be Picasso here," she said. "It's not about beautiful art. Just think of a scene that calls up your experience in some way. It can be anything: a crime you committed, a person you hurt, whatever. Just picture it in your head, paint it as best you can, and then we'll talk about it."

The artwork covered a wide range of images. Roy, the shortest guy in the room, painted a cartoon blonde with a black eye, and everyone knew what that meant even before he explained it. Juju inked a gray knife splashed with shiny red blood—the others knew from hearing him talk in meetings that he'd once stabbed himself in the arm so he could go to the emergency room and get pills. Then there was Jason, the jock, who sketched pink stick figures with circles for boobs. "I had a lot of sex," he said. "What? You didn't tell me it had to be something bad."

As for Seth, he used brown and black with a touch of gold to depict his acoustic/electric Takamine guitar. It was one of his biggest regrets. He'd owned that guitar for ten years until he pawned it for enough cash to cover one large olive-colored pill. He never paid the ticket to get his prized possession out of hock, and now he'd lost it for good. Though not an artist, Seth spewed all his hurt on that cheap canvas, inking his instrument's finish that resembled a hardwood floor.

His painting now hung in the main hallway with the others like a child's drawing stuck to the fridge by magnets. Every time Seth walked by, he saw it and winced.

Nodding, he wrote in his journal:

> *I miss my guitar. I named her Mina. I gave Mina up for an 80.*

In his head, he added, *another reason to stay sober*. How, he wondered, could he hope to make amends to himself for what he'd done?

That's something else Ms. Justine told him: "Everything you write down is another reason to stay sober." She had a way of turning any scene around so it became about sobriety. "Child Protective Services took your baby?" she'd say. "Another reason to stay sober. You nearly burned your house down when you passed out holding a lit cigarette? Another reason to stay sober. You overdrafted your bank account until it had to be shut down? Yep, *great* reason to stay sober." But it wasn't just the bad parts of an addict's life. If one of the patients said he enjoyed the latest *Spider-Man* movie, Ms. Justine would reply, "Now, *that* is a reason to stay sober. If you were drunk or drugging, could you afford to see the movie? Would you have the time? Would you even remember it after?"

Yes, to Ms. Justine, everything in Seth's journal would be a good reason to stay sober. His girlfriend who'd probably left him for some other junkie? Sure, because sober, he wouldn't have gotten arrested, and sober, he'd have dated a girl who was sober, too, and sober, he wouldn't be "limp-dicked and desperate (*rabb-it*)," as Dr. Gunter put it. The pawned guitar? No doubt, Seth wouldn't have hocked it, or if circumstances forced him to, he would've paid the ticket eventually. The puking, shitting, shaking, sweating, and aching? Obviously. The time in jail with no money for bond? Some things speak for themselves.

He struggled to look back, agonizing over a history he survived as much as lived. He described the lows as if they were biblical plagues. Now, on his sixty-first day, he found himself writing from a weirdly detached, almost spiritual

calm, an easiness inside him. He wanted to hold that, to keep his head clear and hopes high while feeling at peace with his past as if God-touched, as if loved and embraced by every atom of the universe.

"*What I write keeps me sober*," he wrote. "*I write about hurt, and I heal. I write about healing, and I almost cry.*"

He hesitated, then drew a line.

The journal brought new worries as well. Seth understood his nature, his desires and hunger.

Seth leaned his pen against the page as if it were a guitar resting on its stand. He wanted to make music with it. Instead, he wrote: "*What will my story be when the journal's finished? What will I write on those last two pages after I've left here?*"

That's the trouble with journals, diaries, and personal blogs. They capture moments, and not all those moments are glorious. Many are ugly and predictably awful. Most aren't even interesting. At times, the scribe of self will lie to make himself feel better looking back.

What would Seth do with those last two pages? They waited for him like average parents: loving, scolding, condescending, but always embracing no matter what came before. How might they receive him? What would he share?

Straightening his wrist, he wrote, "*I'm sure of one thing. Whatever happens, I won't leave those final pages blank.*"

Ace Boggess *is author of the novels* A Song Without a Melody *(Hyperborea Publishing, 2016) and* States of Mercy *(forthcoming from Alien Buddha Press). His recent fiction appears in* Notre Dame Review, Lumina, *and* Superstition Review. *He received a fellowship in fiction from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.*

Impressionism, In Effect

Katie Whisler

The night air is cold against Nick's face. Almost freezing really. Even the wood of the porch railing is cold as he leans against it. Nick can't see the lake from here; this makeshift downtown area that Valeria hosts isn't exactly a seaside pier. It's just a few buildings and some cracked pavement and not enough parking.

That's what this porch is looking out over. The back parking lot behind the gallery. Filled with sensible cars: Priuses and Hondas and Buicks.

His gaze drifts upwards. The sky is clear enough here that Nick can make out dozens, hundreds, thousands of stars twinkling above his head. Constellations whose names he doesn't know, has never taken the time to learn. He can't see the stars in New York. There are always too many lights glistening.

"I almost didn't believe Izzy when he said that there was someone named Nick here tonight. I thought maybe he made you up. I thought maybe *I* made you up."

Nick closes his eyes. Just for a second, letting the sound of a voice he hasn't heard in two years wash over him. It's soft, but there's a layer of steel beneath that didn't used to be there, rendering the voice almost expressionless.

He hates that he's the one to make that voice sound like that. Hates himself for it.

Nick lets his eyes flicker open, turning over his shoulder to look at the open doorway behind him, blinking as the bright lights from the gallery's interior spill out into the darkness. There's a familiar silhouette leaning against the doorway. A mop of curly brown hair, narrow shoulders that taper into an even narrower waist. Looking elegant in a neat, navy blue suit. A wine glass held carefully in one hand.

And in the darkness, with the shadows from the light behind him rendering his features little more than a

silhouette, he looks exactly the same as he had two years ago.

"*Percy*," Nick says, little more than an exhale of breath.

A little over two years ago, Nick had walked into the art gallery that was across from the tiny piano bar where he worked.

He had entered for a reason, had a purpose for going, but that had been forgotten completely as soon as he saw the tour guide leading people around the tiny rooms—really, the gallery was small enough it didn't need a tour guide-—pointing out the different paintings.

There was an exhibit on, for the summer. Impressionism, in Effect*, a handful of paintings some guy had done all in the style of Monet. And displayed amongst them was Monet's own* The Custom House, Morning Effect. *The name of the exhibit was supposed to be a play on how often Monet's paintings were only differentiated from his other paintings by the effect being used to describe them. Sunlight effect, fog effect, rain effect.*

Nick had wandered into the room where the tour guide was explaining the exhibit to the family, drifting just close enough to catch glimpses of a smooth voice. Almost lyrical.

Nick had taken one look at a boy around the same age as himself, dressed in a pale blue dress shirt with rolled up sleeves and with his name tag and security pass hanging from a lanyard around his neck, with a flop of brown curls that hung over into his eyes—and, oh, his eyes—the sides shaved shorter, and decided that he wanted to know everything about this boy.

He had the most beautiful eyes that Nick had ever seen. Nick could tell that even from halfway across the room.

Nick hadn't believed in love at first sight until that moment. Would never admit to looking it up later. Apparently Cancers and Aquarians are often one of the zodiac pairings which lends itself to relationships beginning with love at first sight. It sounded too much like a fairy tale to be true. Which was just his fucking luck, really.

Later, once the family of tourists that he had been speaking to had left, the tour guide drifted over to where Nick stood in front of Monet's The Custom House *and said, "I don't know why, but I'm kind of glad. I like the waves. It looks peaceful. Like someplace that it might be nice to live in."*

And Nick had thought, god, I'd live anywhere with you. Which really wasn't like him at all.

Nick finds himself drifting closer to Percy without actually making the decision to move. Which is how it's always been between them, orbiting each other's spaces like the universe would implode if they got too far apart.

(Which it hadn't, even with the dozens, hundreds of miles between them. Except, it kind of had. For Nick, it kind of had.)

Close enough that he can make out the differences that two years had wrought on the boy whose body had once been more familiar to Nick than his own.

He looks the same, almost. His features seem a little sharper, more angular, than Nick remembers. Whether because his own memory has failed him or Percy really has changed, Nick isn't sure. He isn't smiling. Which is new. Percy was always smiling, before. His hair is the same, a mop of unruly brown curls that he never knows how to style so they just hang in his…

Nick flicks his gaze downward. Takes in the silver ring that has been pierced through Percy's nose. That's new, too.

"Nick," Percy says, and Nick tears his gaze away from Percy's nose to finally, *finally* look him in the eye. "Why did you come here?"

"I got an invitation," Nick says, a bit stupidly, perhaps, but he's distracted by the blue, blue, *blue* and grey of Percy's eyes.

Even in the darkness, Percy's eyes are still the most beautiful thing Nick has ever seen. More beautiful than any painting in any gallery in any city. Monet's *Houses of Parliament, Sunlight Effect* come to life. Blue grey waters, shining with gold when the sun reflects off them. It's too dark for Nick to see the ring of gold that he knows is around Percy's iris. He tries to search for it anyway. One last time.

He just wants to see those eyes one last time. If this is all he can have…he thinks maybe he could live with that.

Percy looks slightly surprised by that, his eyes widening, even though he surely had to be the one who sent the invitation in the first place.

"You're back in New York?" he asks. "When did you go back to New York?" Then he shakes his head. "Never mind, don't tell me that. I don't…I don't think I want to know."

"I went back to your apartment," Nick offers, because even if Percy claims he doesn't want to know, it still needs to be said. "You weren't there."

"I moved home, after you left. Wasn't much point in sticking around." The words are sharp, designed to hurt, and they do. Nick feels them like a physical blow to his chest.

When had Percy stopped thinking of New York as *home*? Probably around the last time they saw each other, Nick reckons.

Percy fidgets, pulling away from the doorway slightly. It's a small motion, but one Nick catches immediately. Percy's never liked confrontation, never liked hurting people or being rude. Even when he has every right to be mad, Percy is still uncomfortable with his anger.

"Seems like it worked out okay, though," Nick says, even though the words feel like daggers in his throat. Like he has to hurt himself to say them. "This is what you always wanted, right?" He ends the question with a useless wave of his hand. In the direction of the gallery, maybe. Or the direction of Percy, himself. With his smart blue suit and his wine glass and his nose ring and the tension in his shoulders that never used to be there.

(Did Nick put that there? Is that his fault too?)

Percy's eyes dart back towards the gallery. "I guess," he allows, and his voice sounds almost wistful. "Did you see the exhibits?"

"I saw the ones downstairs. I haven't made it to the second floor yet."

Because you were there, Nick thinks but doesn't say. *And even after two years, even though I thought I was, I still wasn't ready to see you again.*

"You should. See the second floor, I mean," Percy says. "I think you'd like it."

"I liked *Untitled 73*. It's more depressing than the other art. I understand why you hid it in the back corner," Nick tells him, because he needs Percy to understand that he really did look around the exhibit. Tried to understand everything that might have happened over the last two years, in the only way that he was able to.

A half-smile, a mockery of a smile, twists at the corner of Percy's lips. It's nothing, *nothing* compared to the way he used to smile at Nick, full toothy grins and shy smiles and smirks and amused twitches of his lips when he thought Nick was being funny. But it's the first emotion that Percy has shown since they started speaking, and Nick absorbs every detail because he had thought Percy would never smile at him again.

And even half-smiles are better than nothing.

"I knew you would like that one," Percy tells him. "I begged this gallery in New York to loan it to me, just for a little while. I could picture you looking at it, and turning to me and saying 'this is the most *fucking* depressing skyline of New York I've ever seen. You have to get it for the gallery.'" Percy shakes his head, the smile fading as his eyes drift back towards the inside of the gallery. "How fucked up is that?" Percy asks, making Nick wince.

Percy never used to swear, either.

(Another thing Nick can probably blame himself for.)

And Nick wants to say, *You still think of me?* And, *you thought about me while you were planning your gallery?* And, *I still think about you.*

He wants to say it so, so badly, that it takes him by surprise when the words actually start tumbling out of his mouth. "You still think of me?" He hears himself ask, and his voice sounds very small. "You thought about me while you were planning your gallery?"

Percy's gaze flashes back over to him. But Nick can't read it, there's a mask slid over Percy's expressions. And that's new, too. "You should see the second floor," Percy tells him. And Nick's not sure whether that's supposed to be an answer or not.

It is.

An answer.

Percy had led him back in to the gallery, up the wrought iron stairs to the second floor. It had the same, open plan of

the first. The same kind of walls added for additional display space. All of it too white with gleaming wood floors and it makes sense, perfect sense, that the building used to be a dance studio.

"Oh," Nick whispers, letting out a shocked breath as he stops in front of the center painting, the one that takes up the most space in the room. In more ways than one. It's a reproduction, but at least three, four times larger than the original painting had been. So that it takes up one whole side of the wall cutting across the center of the room like a knife.

Monet's *Houses of Parliament, Sunlight Effect*. With the purple-grey of the fog and the blue-grey of the water and the perfect gold of the rays of sunlight that just barely break through the cloud cover in order to sweep along the tops of the waves. The artist has added their own flourishes to it, of course. It isn't a perfect copy. And then there's the size.

Nick blinks, and then, "That's the New York skyline." He whips his head around to stare at Percy. "You had the artist *change* it?"

Percy takes half a step forward, like the painting is a black hole and he's caught in its gravity. "It was the first thing I commissioned for the gallery. So, yes, Nick. The answer to your question is yes."

"What's your favorite painting?" The tour guide had asked, his eyes, his blue, blue eyes were wide and earnest. Like he wasn't quite ready for the conversation to be over yet.

He was probably talking about Nick's favorite painting of all time, not his favorite painting from this collection and not his favorite Monet painting.

And the answer to that was simple. Starry Night Over the Rhône *painted by Van Gogh. Because of the way that the impossible darkness of the night was brightened by just a handful of stars.*

An answer to a question Nick had been asked a handful of times before. And the response was ready on his tongue, but

then the tour guide shifted, so that they were close enough that their arms could brush against each other and it could still be considered an accident. All it would take was for Nick to take one step closer...

*"*Houses of Parliament, Sunlight Effect*," Nick had answered, the words surprising even himself. Mainly because it wasn't true.*

Or, it hadn't been.

He had never been much of a Monet fan. Too many florals. The seascapes were nice, though. But he preferred paintings of dark skies or city outlines. Coursing rivers or raging oceans. Paintings that made him feel something.

Monet had never made Nick feel anything before.

But staring into that boy's eyes, that stranger's eyes, Nick had blurted out the first painting that had come to mind. And just like that, a Monet painting made him feel something.

Because the tour guide's eyes were the perfect storm of blue and grey, a slightest hint of sunlight behind the clouds.

And in that moment, Nick's favorite painting really was a boring study of the Palace of Westminster.

And he had thought that maybe he wouldn't mind if it were true.

Maybe.

Katie Whisler *is a college sophomore from Northeast Ohio where she majors in both History and English and minors in Classical and Medieval Studies. She was awarded first place in the fiction category of the Echo Student Literary Competition for her piece* Impressionism, in Effect, *featured here.*

Cornish Hens

Jenny Wong

Four Cornish hens lay side by side on an aluminum tray, waiting for the oven to preheat. Their pink carcasses are covered in ugly bits of herbs that bristle like a five o'clock shadow across their raw stubbly backs. Lucy is experimenting with a new poultry rub. If all goes well, it'll be next week's featured special on the restaurant menu. So far, she's not impressed.

She can almost hear the young little hens, their cluck of disapproval, as they wait with their chilly naked skins and salmonella spaces between their legs. Their backs turned up in disdain at the countertop's protective layers of cling wrap, her old handwritten recipe book, and the bottles of dried up herbs in the spice rack, alphabetized, tops on, screwed too tight.

Lucy rinses her hands and starts to grate a knob of ginger. Steffi's coming home for dinner tonight with some friends. Lucy presses harder. The ginger shreds faster against the eager metal teeth. One of the few good things that's come out of her daughter's never-ending university career is the steady visitation of starving students. Her own personal culinary guinea pigs. Although, that loud mouthed economics major with the wispy man bun comes by a little too often these days. Milton? Morton? Moron. Lucy's certain he's gay, but she can tell by the seductive hooks of mascara around Steffi's eyes that her daughter thinks otherwise.

Lucy hisses, sending the grater and a speck of ginger clattering into the sink. A thin bit of skin dangles from one of the grater's biting edges. The place on her finger where the skin used to be is bright red with pricks of blood.

She heads to the bathroom and flicks a switch. The vanity lights hit her straight on, interrogation style, highlighting the grey roots in her hair and the latest of wrinkles around her eyes. She opens the medicine cabinet. Her own personal

pharmaceutical chaos. Unused samples of eye cream, waiting bottles of Vibrante hair dye, and expired tubes of travel toothpaste are among a few of the things that stare back. She grabs a few items and looks away.

The scrape is washed, then dabbed with a few drops of tea tree oil for disinfectant. An ugly bacon-shaped bandaid garnishes off the wound. Steffi gave her a whole box of them for Christmas last year. Lucy wedges the remaining bacon bandaids back into the cabinet, next to a jar of old plastic kiddie barrettes. Steffi used to go everywhere with one clipped in her thin flyaway hair.

Lucy sighs, staring at the plastic image of fatty pork wrapped around her finger. There is no recipe for growing up. No way to pinpoint which influential ingredient of childhood to hold back, to keep her daughter from substituting a love of bunny-shaped barrettes for push-up bras and boys that just didn't fit.

The oven beeps, echoing from down the hall. Preheat done. Lucy heads back to the kitchen and slides the tray of unappetizing little hens, headless end first, into the oven. They just need some time. 65 minutes. 350 degrees. They'll come out perfect.

Jenny Wong *is a writer, traveler, and occasional business analyst. She resides in the foothills of Alberta, Canada and is currently attempting a sci-fi poetry collection, Brazilian jiu jitsu, and electric skateboarding. Her publications include* 3 Elements Review, Grain Magazine, Vallum, Sheila-Na-Gig Online, The Stillwater Review, Glassworks Magazine *(forthcoming) and elsewhere.*

The Game

James R. West

I woke up in my childhood bedroom at 4 a.m., my internal clock still on East Coast time. I crept to the living room in the dark, a middle-aged burglar, trying not to make the stairs creak. I hadn't visited for twelve years, but my parents' 50th anniversary celebration had brought me back to the modest house on the bench of Utah's Wasatch Front where my dad had moved us in 1976.

Simple things kept recalling my youth, like the view of the Francis Peak radars we used to call "King Kong's balls," the smell of salt dust from the road, and the Mormon Church across the street, the epicenter of the community and my childhood. And now, at the front window, I watched snow falling through the glow of the illuminated church steeple. It made me drift nostalgic, and I could not stop the memories.

Remnants from a long-time smoking habit forced my hand into my shirt pocket for the pack of nicotine gum. I took two. "Hell of a time to give up sniffing glue," I said, and then froze, listening for any noise from my parents' room at the back of the house.

Across the street, the Burnett's house looked the same. Once, from behind that fence, I nailed a Camaro with a snowball, and two guys chased my best friend Pete and me—but couldn't catch us. I raised my fists in the air, whisper-yelling. "You're fucking dead, you little bitches!" While we were running away, I swallowed the Redman chew Pete had given me and threw up for hours afterward.

I leaned forward to look down the block at Pete's old house. When I leaned back, my reflection startled me, as if I'd been scared by a friend. Chuckling, I sat in my dad's Lazyboy. It was a real Utah winter: snow shoveling, sledding, snowball fights, and frozen pant legs. Every memory included Pete.

The winter of '82 was extreme. We were a bunch of bored kids confined inside. Rumors were that's how the game started. There should have been a better name for it, but everyone just called it *Pass Out*. It started in 8th grade, just before Christmas break, and lasted until the end of that winter.

At South Junior High, the game would usually happen at lunch at the end of the 9th grade hallway. There were large box-like riser steps that served as a stage where the choir practiced. At lunch, it became a coliseum where the game was played.

We were fascinated by the game. Neither of us had played yet, and for the time being, we were content to be in the crowd of nervous observers. Our fascination was more than not knowing the result. We wondered what the person was experiencing, and hoped, like everyone proclaimed, for some information from the beyond.

There were two ways a person got to play: either you were wrangled up and dared by the gang of 9th graders trolling the hallways, or you could volunteer.

The rules were simple. The player kneeled and crossed their arms over their chest. When they were ready, they began huffing, taking frantic breaths, in and out. After 30 seconds, the "choker" would cut off their air supply until the player's face turned purple. There was always a collective cringe from the crowd as the player passed out, eyelids slowly closing over bulging eyes.

Official time would start when the player's arms went limp. Either the choker or a friend would try to lay the player down so they wouldn't break their nose (like Martin Dillard) or chip a tooth (like Sophie Smith). A real injury would get us caught.

The crowd gathered in a circle around the passed out player, and the thick, adrenaline buzz would build as we counted the seconds until the tremors began. Either a foot would shake, or the face would twitch, but if the crowd was lucky, the entire body would go into a violent seizure. The longer, the more violent, the better. They always woke up looking like a boxer that had just been knocked out: dazed, off balance, and struggling to regain consciousness.

There were incentives. Those that played earned bragging rights. There was a record to beat, held by Jason Wellington: fifty-six seconds. He received high fives as he

staggered through the crowd like a drunk sailor. All players hoped for the easiest result which was to simply wake up and stumble away.

There were huge risks. Some kids woke up crying. Some woke up talking gibberish, flailing their arms. One kid flopped around until he ended belly down, creating a rug burn on his face that lasted for two weeks. Greg Chatman, star football player, woke up with a boner. He stood, dazed, in front of us all.

"What?" he said. "What are you staring at?"

It earned him a nickname, *Boner Boy*, for the rest of the year.

Pete and I would argue about the best possible outcome. Some told us it was like a never ending dream while others said it felt like sleeping for hours. One kid said it was like falling forever. We held out hope someone would wake up and say they'd seen a vision or visited heaven. Or met the devil.

"Dude, when I play, I hope I get transported to the future," Pete said.

"I hope I get to go to outer space like a colony on Mars or something. That would be rad." I said.

"I'd go anywhere," Pete said.

I'd known Pete Stakeman since fourth grade when my family moved into the neighborhood. I was short and wiry, with glasses and buck teeth, and Sears *Toughskin* jeans that were either brown or black. Pete was taller, lanky, had red hair and freckles, and a high-pitched laugh. We were equally awkward. Easy targets.

Our mothers met at church, in the hallway waiting for our dads, who were attending after-church meetings. They sized us up in an instant, comparing us like recipes, and concluded that we *must* become friends. The following Monday I was dropped off at Pete's house, and his mom told us, "Go outside and play."

We became inseparable. We moved through grade school to middle school, built forts, and spent summers together. We debated whether or not Boba Fett could kill a Jedi and who we wanted to get our first blowjob from: Cheryl Tiegs or Brooke Shields. We complained about how shitty the Boy

Scout uniforms were, and hated the lucky kids whose parents didn't make them wear the uniform. We both got beat up at school and at church, pushed around at Scouts, and teased at camp. But we looked out for each other, and escaped to our own world whenever we could.

In seventh grade, our winter break was hijacked by a merit badge bootcamp and thanks to both of our dads, we were signed up to take the test for the swimming merit badge. On Saturday morning, we walked to the high school indoor pool, both of us pissed off. I had to wipe the steam from my glasses as we signed in with the swimming instructor.

"You're late, slackers," the instructor hollered. "Get your trunks on."

We ran to the locker room. I changed quickly and went to the pool and stood in line with the rest of the scouts.

The swimming instructor waved me over. "Well, where the hell is Stakeman?"

I shrugged.

"Go get your goddamn friend out of the locker room."

Pete was in a bathroom stall with the door closed when I went back in.

"Pete," I said. "What's up?"

He opened the stall door. He was fully dressed.

"I can't," he said.

"Can't swim?"

"No. I just can't."

He lifted his shirt. It was a quick glance. A split second. I tried to register what would make those marks across his stomach. The look on his face, one that I had seen before, told me not to ask.

"Fuck swimming," I said.

Pete was waiting for me to dress out at the entrance of the locker room.

"Dude! Hurry up," he said. "He's coming!"

The door to the pool opened and the instructor saw me tying my shoes.

"What the hell!" he yelled. His voice echoing throughout the locker room, terrifying me. I ran as fast as I could, shoes unlaced, trying to catch up with Pete. He had bolted out the front door at the first sound of the instructor's voice. Three

blocks away we both collapsed in the snow, laughing and gasping for air.

We read magazines at 7-Eleven for a couple hours and then walked home. A week later, our parents found out we'd ditched the merit badge class. I only had to tell my dad I hated swimming, and that was the end of it.

Pete got grounded for two weeks.

One Easter Sunday, I sat with my family in a church pew, restless, trying to sneak jelly beans into my mouth. Pete's dad sat among the church leadership in a row behind the pulpit. His hands were folded, resting on the top knee of his crossed legs. His pants were drawn up mid-shin revealing black socks with little yellow Easter bunnies. He showed no sign of discomfort in a full suit, starched white shirt, and a red tie with a tight, crisp knot. He had a stern smile, full of hope and concern, as he nodded to the tempo of each youth speaker.

One of the Wilson girls, the 8-year-old, made her way to the pulpit. She climbed on the booster steps and mumbled into the microphone. She began to cry and crumpled the yellow stationary covered with handwriting against her face.

Without hesitation Pete's dad moved to the pulpit. He put one hand on her shoulder and gave her a hanky. He whispered in her ear. She stopped crying. Pete's dad repositioned the microphone, and it picked up the girl saying, "Okay."

Pete's dad smoothed out the yellow paper. He read the first sentence. The girl read the next. They alternated, reading each line until the talk was completed.

"Amen," said the congregation.

As the little girl returned to her seat, Pete's dad stood steady at the pulpit, his silence forcing all attention upon him.

"I want to talk about the bravery we have all just witnessed," he said.

For the next twenty minutes, he wove a series of memorized scriptures and other religious anecdotes into a shifting personal manifesto. He closed with a storybook version of the Resurrection. When he finally sat down, my mother was weeping into a tissue.

The summer before eighth grade, Pete and I started using the church roof as our hang out. It was a flat gravel-covered roof that was so big that we could stand in the middle of it during the day and no one could see us. At night we would walk to the edge and look down on the entire neighborhood. We had dragged up a couple of sofa cushions and placed them next to the AC unit. Our "fridge" was a milk crate where we kept our supplies: we were down to three cans of Schaefer beer, a rain-weathered Playboy, and a plastic bread bag where we kept binoculars and a knife.

One Friday night, Pete could barely make it up the drain gutter to get on top of the roof. I pulled his arms as he swung his leg over the gutter and rolled onto the roof. His shorts rode up revealing a large bruise on his thigh that looked like the state of California.

We sat on the cushions leaning against the AC unit looking out over the neighborhood. The beer was hot. I took a sip and passed it to Pete.

"Eighth grade dude," he said.

"Yep," I said.

"I wonder if Cassy Miller got her tits this summer."

It started a debate about breasts and what type of car we were going to get when we had real jobs. But I couldn't stop thinking about the bruise that looked like California. I was ashamed to know it was there. It felt as if I'd been duped. Like the time my grandpa promised me five bucks if I could find a grasshopper with green eyes, only to realize much later that there was no such thing, and that all along what he really wanted was for me to get out of his house.

"Fuck that bastard." I said.

"Huh?" Pete asked.

I pointed to his leg.

Pete pulled at his shorts. He took another drink. "Technically, he didn't mean to. He got mad. I cussed. He threw me down the stairs. Ba da bing, ba da boom."

I grabbed the Playboy.

"It's bullshit," I said.

"I'm good this weekend though. The asshole is out of town."

I flipped the worn pages of the magazine, pretending I hadn't seen the pictures a thousand times before. The bottom half of the centerfold fell out.

"Hey, she's going to need her legs," Pete said.

"He's going to kill you."

Pete took the magazine and replaced the centerfold's legs.

"It won't happen," Pete said. "My sister would be next."

On the first day of eighth grade we had class photos. Pete had a bruise on his forehead. When he sat for his yearbook portrait, one of the teachers used some makeup to cover the bruise. Some kids in line laughed while she applied the makeup. Someone yelled, "What a fag."

By mid-winter of eighth grade, the game of *Pass Out* happened nearly every day. Pete and I were getting up the nerve to play, although I'd lost my motivation when Patrick Selmy played and peed his pants.

That January, a storm dumped two feet of snow overnight. The next morning I cut a path to Pete's house, my breath billowing into the freezing air. Pete's dad had plowed half the driveway, and he was refueling the snow-blower.

"Pete!" he yelled. "Your girlfriend is here."

"Good one!" I said.

Pete's dad whirled around. He marched up to me, pulling off his leather gloves.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, sir. I just laughed."

He stared as he put his gloves back on. "That's what I thought." He yelled for Pete again.

Pete had his snow coat on and a scarf I'd never seen before. A block from his house, I pulled the scarf.

"What's up with the scarf? You look like a pussy!" I jumped on Pete's back.

Pete screamed and flipped me into the snow. He bent over. He was crying. On the side of his neck, there was a distinct, red imprint in the unmistakable shape of a belt buckle.

"Oh fuck, Pete. What happened?"

He was still bent over, gasping. “What the fuck do you think happened?”

I handed him the scarf, and we walked a couple blocks.

“Sorry I called you a pussy, dude.”

“I would have done the same to you,” Pete said. He’d stopped crying. He tugged at the collar of his t-shirt. “Can you see it?”

The t-shirt covered most of the welt except for a corner that looked like someone had drawn a “7” on his neck.

“I’m sure no one will notice,” I said.

“You’re right,” Pete said. “Scarves are for pussies.”

He threw the scarf onto the snow, and we walked the rest of the way to school.

In history class, fourth period, I told Pete that I was going to play the game.

“We agreed I was going first,” Pete said.

“Well, douchebag, you haven’t gone yet. I’m tired of waiting.”

“I’ll go. Just give me a couple days,” Pete said. “I’ll do it. I swear.”

“Nope,” I said. “It has to be today.”

At lunch we waited on the riser steps. Mark VanVleet, one of the ninth graders, called for players. “Who’s up for *Pass Out*?”

Pete and I both looked down, avoiding eye contact. I elbowed Pete. “Well?”

Mark repeated his call.

“Fuck it,” Pete said. He stood up and waded through the crowd. My breath caught in my chest. I wanted to hold him back, but it was time. I followed him, ready to make my move.

Pete looked straight at me as he crossed his arms.

Mark stood behind him. “You ready?”

Pete began huffing. I winced as he was choked out. His eyes rolled back and closed. His arms fell to his sides.

I crouched in front of Pete, and he fell into my chest. Reaching around his waist, I grabbed him on both sides by his shirt. It was tucked into his belted jeans, and I jerked at

it until it came free from his pants. I continued to pull at his shirt until his entire back was exposed, and then I eased him onto the floor, face down.

Bruising takes on unique shapes as it forms around scar tissue. The scar lines across Pete's back overlapped the cloud shapes of the bruises, appearing on both sides, only to be intersected by another scar. There were several purple two-inch strips merged into black. Only a few patches of pale white skin hadn't been absorbed by the purple, green, and blue.

The crowd went silent. Mark mumbled, "Holy fuck."

In my best Boy Scout CPR-trained voice, I stood over Pete and pointed to a group at the back of the crowd. "You! Go get help! Get the school nurse!"

A few kids sprinted away to the offices.

The school nurse, a counselor, and one of the teachers were running toward us when Pete began to wake up.

"I don't know what happened," I told the nurse. "I think he had a seizure."

They gasped when they saw Pete's back. He began moving and pulled himself to his knees. The counselor was cursing under her breath. The nurse pulled Pete's shirt down to his waist. They helped him to his feet and walked him to the nurse's office. The counselor started yelling at the crowd. She pointed at Mark VanVleet.

"Did you do this?"

"No. I don't know what happened," Mark said.

I sat next to the cot in the nurse's office. Pete's eyes were glossy, and he blinked slowly. I could see through the door window. The nurse, principal, and another secretary were huddled together, talking with their arms crossed.

"Dude, how'd I do?" Pete said.

"New record," I said. "You're the new champ!"

"Who narced us out?"

"Some seventh grade bitch ran and got a counselor just as you went out."

"Damn, I'm dizzy." Pete said.

"Just relax, dude. Everything will be alright."

Police officers arrived. Two of them came into the nurse's office and made me leave. I stood outside the door with one

of the officers and a counselor. Someone pulled down the curtain over the window in the door. There were camera flashes. My mouth went dry as I saw Pete's hunched shadow illuminate against the curtain.

Pete's mom arrived first. She was wearing a kitchen apron and didn't have any makeup on. The school secretary met her in the hallway, gave her a hug and discreetly said, "Let's get this off of you."

Pete's mom's hands were red and shaking trying to untie the apron knot. "Oh, dear," the secretary said, and ended up untying it for her.

An officer led Pete's mom to the nurse's office.

Another police officer met Pete's dad at the front of the school and walked him to the principal's office. Pete's dad had come from work. His suit was immaculate, but to me, it seemed out of place. Then I realized he was wearing the same suit he wore at church, except here, in the hallway of the junior high school, he looked like a common salesman.

An officer and Pete's mom stepped out of the nurse's office. He held her by the back of her arm and walked her to the principal's office.

A half-hour later, Pete's dad came out. He was handcuffed, head down. The police escorted him out of the building. Pete's mom didn't seem to know what to do with her hands as she watched them walk all the way out the front door of the school. She crossed the hallway to the nurse's office. She stopped and placed her hand on my head.

"Hello, Jake," she said.

"Hello, Sister Stakeman," I said. I looked away when I could no longer control my eyes from welling up.

She hugged me and kissed my forehead. Then she opened up the door to the nurse's office. Pete was sitting up and waved at me. The door closed before I could wave back.

The counselor told me to go back to class for now. I would have argued with her if I had known that was going to be the last time I would ever see Pete.

The local newspaper ran a story reporting that the game was an "initiation type craze involving students that were attempting to reach out to the supernatural." The article prompted the school district administrators to threaten

expulsion if anyone was caught performing initiation rituals. It also prompted our church teachers to reteach lessons: don't seek out the Devil, don't play Ouija board or D&D, and by all means, don't listen to AC/DC or Ozzy Osbourne.

All that didn't stop kids from playing. They played at T.H. Bell, and North, and at sleepovers, Scout trips, and after church. I never played the game. Pete was gone. He and his sister had been sent to his grandma's house in Idaho. I had hoped he would move back, but later that spring, Pete's house was sold.

I continued to stare at Pete's house from the front window, my throat tight, pained again by the abrupt loss of our friendship. I tried to focus on the snow, and the bushes that now looked like giant marshmallows. It didn't help.

"Where are you?" I said to the empty room, and sat down in my dad's recliner.

I succumbed to my urge, after all these years, to try and reconnect. I opened the Facebook app on my phone and sifted through several Peter Stakeman profiles. I was surprised how easily I found him.

I scrolled through his profile and posts. He was living in Nashville, Tennessee. Had graduated from Boise State and was a nurse at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Two kids, divorced, in a relationship, likes hunting, fishing, and dogs. I continued to scroll, looking at his life through his photos.

In one photo, two boys in their twenties hold one end of a cord strung through the gills of several large fish. Pete is holding the other end of the cord. I can tell the fish are heavy because I can see Pete's bicep flexing to hold up his end of the cord. He is still lanky and is sporting a thick red beard.

Pete's dad stands between the two boys and Pete. He has aged, is pale and thin, and is wearing a Utah Jazz NBA Finals hat. A fishing pole is in his right hand, his left arm wrapped around Pete's shoulders.

Disgusted, I stood back up and looked again at Pete's house. I gripped my phone wanting to crush it in my hand. A snow plow pushed its way towards our houses, its yellow flashing lights dismissing the peaceful street. I

watched the cascade of snow billowing from the plow. It churned and coughed up waves onto the already submerged neighborhood. The engine snarled against the weight. The plow blade groaned as it scraped against the road, heaping it all upwards to then avalanche the cars, the walks, and driveways. I wanted to take the photo of Pete's family, his dad, and even Pete, and bury them all beneath the cascading snow.

James R. West *is a Gulf War Veteran, USMC, and studied creative writing at the University of New Mexico. He is currently working on a collection of coming-of-age short stories set in his home town of South Ogden, Utah. The first story in the collection is published in the anthology* Utah Reflections: Stories from the Wasatch Front. *For the past 23 years he has worked for Native American Tribes and currently resides in Leesburg, Virginia.*

Rabbits

Jason Primm

A year after Carol died, I put the ad for the apartment in the *Fort Lee Examiner*. It stipulated that cats and dogs were forbidden. Instead of discouraging pets in general, the ad attracted people with unusual pets. In the first week, I turned down a couple with a pot-bellied pig, and a man with a tattooed lip and six yellow pythons. That night I had a nightmare: a yellow snake, thick as my arm, coming up through the toilet and slithering down the hallway towards my bedroom.

I was relieved when someone from the neighborhood called. When the doorbell rang, I looked at Cassie through the peephole. I didn't see any piercings on her face or any tattoos on her arms or shoulders. And though I knew she could be riddled with them in places I couldn't see, she looked like a nice young woman.

I had gone to school with her father. Bob McHenry was in the band with me. He played a beautiful trumpet. He could have been a musician, but the boys in his family went into construction and became rich. The girl was half Bob and half trophy wife. A little better built than Bob, taller, but she had his warmth around the eyes and nose.

I opened the door and shook her hand.

"Hello, Cassie."

"Hi, Mr. Archer. Thanks for showing me the place."

"No problem. I'm glad to show it to someone I know."

I walked around to the side entrance and showed her the security light with motion sensors. I pointed out the table and the gas grill on the backyard patio.

"Feel free to use the table. My wife liked to sit out here in the mornings sometimes."

"I was very sorry to hear about Mrs. Archer."

"Thank you."

I opened the door and led her into the apartment. The door opened into the kitchen and beyond that was a modest-sized living room and doors that led to a bedroom and bathroom. The wood floors still shone from the polish.

"Everything is brand new, the appliances, the carpet, the fixtures. You would be the first tenant."

Cassie ran her hand along the surface of the new marble countertop.

"I love it."

I asked her about her parents and that's when I learned about Bob. Lung cancer. I felt so bad about his death that I knocked a hundred dollars off the rent.

"I have to show you something, Mr. Archer."

She held her phone up to show me a picture of a rabbit, fat and fluffy, white with a black button nose.

"This is my rabbit, Balboa."

I sighed. Because of Bob, I couldn't say no. I thought that she must have been even lonelier than I was.

"Balboa doesn't bark. He's house-trained."

"I didn't know you could train a rabbit."

"Yes, they are smarter than dogs."

She wasn't just trying to talk me into something. She believed it.

"You named him after Rocky?"

"No. I name all my rabbits after explorers."

She smiled at me, and I cursed myself silently and tried to save a little face. "There will be a pet deposit."

"Yes, of course. He's no trouble. You'll see."

The tenant had been Carol's idea. She had a vision for our golden years. We couldn't have children, so we didn't have to stay close to anyone. Her idea was that we would turn the basement into an apartment and travel on the rent money. She handled the contractors and the permits. She picked the carpet and the fixtures. A week before the work was done, she found a lump in her right breast.

Carol was right about it being no trouble. Cassie and her rabbit were so quiet that I forgot that they were there until the first rent check showed up in my mailbox. I realized that I hadn't talked to her since that first day when I gave her the keys. The next day I stopped by to welcome her. She opened the door the chain's length.

"Yes, Mr. Archer?"

"Hi, just making sure you had everything you need."

She was a few inches shorter than me, so I looked over her head to see why she wouldn't open the door. Nothing looked amiss. I could see the rabbit cage next to the television. I even recognized the rabbit.

"I do. Thanks so much for renting the place to me," she said.

I didn't like standing like a stranger on the doorstep of my own house, so I kept asking questions.

"How's the rabbit like it?"

"He likes it very much. At the last apartment, there was a loud dog. It frightened him."

"Let me know if you need anything."

"I sure will."

I didn't find out what she was hiding until the boiler went out. It needed a repairman, and the only access was through her apartment. I called her at work to let her know what was happening. There was a long pause after my explanation. When she answered, the words were spoken quickly as though she were running out of breath.

"Can't this wait until the weekend when I can be there? The rabbits get nervous around strangers."

Her panic was troubling. She didn't want me in the apartment. I wondered what I would find.

With the repairman behind me, I opened the door slowly. The cage was open and empty. In the corner, there was a litter box sitting on a plastic drop cloth. The rabbit came out from the kitchen and ran across the living room into the bedroom.

"Was that a rabbit?"

"Yes, careful with the door. I don't want that thing to get out."

I showed him the stairs that went down to the boiler and sat down on the couch. It was then that the second rabbit came out from behind the couch and nuzzled my calf. It was nearly the negative image of the other, a black coat with white splotch on its face. I called Cassie when the repairman left.

"Hold on, Mr. Archer. Let me shut the door to my office."

"I met your other rabbit."

She didn't reply right away. I waited. I wasn't going to make this conversation easy on her.

"I'm sorry. I really needed the apartment. I knew you wouldn't rent it to me if you knew I had more than one rabbit. Rabbits are social. You have to have at least two or they will try to kill themselves."

"How can a rabbit kill itself?"

"They stop eating. I have a note from the vet about it."

"What's this one called?"

"His name is Henry Hudson."

When the rent showed up in my mailbox, there was an extra check, another pet deposit.

I met the third rabbit at the cemetery. I hadn't been since Carol's funeral. I had let myself get lonelier than I should be, and I missed her. I resolved to go on Thanksgiving. She had loved the Thanksgiving Day Parade. She dragged me into the city every year to watch it.

After Carol's death, a few old friends invited me to dinners or to parties. I accepted their platitudes and grilled meat and seven layer dips, but I didn't have anything to offer in return. With the exception of a few divorced people, our old friends were couples. I realized that I had slipped below the divorced people in status. They had stories of dating to peddle. As a widower, I only had one story, and I was tired of telling it. The men, especially, didn't want to hear anything about death. Without Carol to nourish those friendships, the invitations dried up.

The streets were empty on the drive over, but the cemetery parking lot was nearly full. I would have come another day had I realized how busy it would be. The cemetery was arranged like a suburban neighborhood. I took the Primrose Path and merged onto Lily Way. Her pink marble marker was in a clearing next to a weeping willow. She told me the pink marble was too expensive, but I knew she liked it. I stood in front of the stone. I had a lot to say, but I felt foolish. I didn't want to be overheard.

I reached down and brushed a few leaves off the top of the marker. I knew I was only talking to myself, but I put my hand on the stone.

It's the parade today. Really windy so they will have to hold on to those ropes tight. I rented the garage apartment. To Bob McHenry's kid. He's been dead five years. Can you believe that? Of course, you can. Sorry.

I went back a different way for the walk, continuing up Lily Way until it hit the Reflecting Lake Path. I walked around the artificial lake and looked at the fountain in the center of it. Turning back towards the entrance, I saw Cassie on the hill looking over the lake. She was sitting on a small blanket with a pet carrier. She opened the door to the pet carrier and three rabbits came out and hopped around the tombstone once or twice and settled onto the blanket with her. She set out a bowl for them with cabbage leaves. I wouldn't have said anything, but she saw me.

I walked up to her and looked at Bob's stone. They had gotten a nice one. It was a foot taller than the surrounding ones and topped with a statue of the angel, Gabriel. Bob finally had a trumpet again.

"Hello, Cassie."

"Hi, Mr. Archer."

She picked up a rabbit that I had never seen before, a brown one, older than the rest. The rabbit's eyes had thick gray cataracts.

"That was my Dad's rabbit."

I nodded.

"He likes to come here."

"Aren't you scared that they will run away? Or a hawk or something will get them?"

She took a quick scan of the tree line.

"No. They won't get far from me. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about my Dad's rabbit. Do you want another pet deposit?"

I knew I should have evicted her after the second rabbit. What's to stop her from filling the apartment with them?

"I guess so. Do you come here a lot?"

"Every Sunday. Is Mrs. Archer here?"

"Yes. Do you always bring the rabbits?"

"Until it gets too cold."

"What's this one called?"

"Dr. Livingston."

The brown rabbit stood up on his hind legs and extended his front legs to the gravestone. He rested his head against

the marble and made a sound like a cat purring.

"What's he doing?"

"He knows his father is down there. Rabbits dig. They know what's in the earth."

I wouldn't have believed it had I not seen it myself. I wished that I could tell Carol about this. It was probably something with how the stone felt. Maybe the rabbit had fleas.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Okay."

"Why do you like rabbits?"

"Dad kept them, but when I was growing up, they were just another chore to do. After Dad got diagnosed, I was really depressed. You know how it feels."

"Yes."

"I ended up in front of the pet store looking at my bunnies. They didn't beg like the puppies. They nodded at me and went back to what they were doing. They weren't trying to get out of that cage. They didn't know that they needed me. I knew at that moment I could make something end happily."

That night, I googled rabbits and tombstones. From that, I found the blog of a woman in Arkansas who claimed the dead could speak through her rabbits. She had fashioned a room-sized ouija board. If you brought some part of the deceased, a hair, a tooth, a wooden leg, and paid a fee, the rabbits hopped around the object and the woman interpreted it. I watched a YouTube video of it. Another article said using animals to speak for the dead was not an uncommon practice.

I don't know why I did it, but I wrote the words, "Yes," "No," and "Maybe" on three sheets of paper. The next day when she went to work, I called her and told her that the repairman needed to look at the boiler again. This time, she sounded relaxed. Her secret was out.

When I came in, the rabbits all ran in from the bedroom. They must have thought I was Cassie. I put the piece of paper that read, "Yes," in the middle of the room. The two younger bunnies sat on it and looked back at me. Was it an affirmation of their abilities? Or were they were putting a

question mark behind it and asking me what I wanted? Was it just a nice texture to rub their butts on?

I put the piece of paper that read, "No" next to the first one and they all ignored it. When I put the paper with "Maybe" on it, the blind rabbit, Dr. Livingston moved from his spot and sat on top of it. Henry Hudson left the "Yes" paper and began to hump my leg.

"Aren't you fixed?" I asked.

That broke the spell. I felt ashamed that I was in this young woman's apartment. I was sure I was breaking a law. I went down to inspect the boiler just to make the lie that I was telling her more plausible to myself.

Leaving the apartment I realized that I had forgotten to ask the rabbits a question.

That day I filled three wardrobe boxes with Carol's clothes. I started from the front of the closet with her current clothes and worked my way back in time. There were dresses I hadn't seen in decades. Things bought for vacations. A sundress from a summer that we rented a cottage in the Hamptons. A lei of plastic flowers by itself on a hanger. Stodgy business suits from when she worked at the law firm—the summer I was out of work—and we were poor.

When it was empty, I saw my paltry clothes and in the back, a tuxedo that I had worn once. Why didn't I enjoy this life more? Why didn't I enjoy her more?

I loaded the boxes in the back of my SUV and drove to Goodwill. They had too many clothes and the ones I brought were too old, too out-of-style. The cashier picked up a few of the flashier items and suggested that I try the vintage clothes store on Main. I did. A young woman in black leggings and a Guns N' Roses t-shirt told me that they couldn't sell them. She pointed to the fabric-recycling dumpster across the street. I left them in the back of the SUV. I couldn't throw her clothes into a dumpster. Many of them were still in the plastic of the dry cleaners. They were meant to be worn again.

It was Christmas Eve when I saw Cassie again. My brother invited me to come to Florida for Christmas, but I didn't feel like leaving town. I was drinking my fifth beer and flipping through the channels when I heard the knock. I looked

through the peephole and saw Cassie in the cold, without a jacket, shivering, holding the brown rabbit.

I opened the door.

"Can I help you?"

"It's Dr. Livingston."

"Who?"

"My rabbit. I need to take him to the hospital. My car is in the shop. I can't take him on the bus like this."

I looked at the rabbit. Its breaths were quick and shallow.

"Okay. But you have to drive." I gestured to the beer cans on the table.

I gave her my extra coat and my keys. I sat in the passenger seat. She handed me the rabbit wrapped in a New York Giants blanket, and I settled him on my lap. I looked out the window as she drove to the Fort Lee Animal Hospital. I put my hand on Dr. Livingston's back and felt its rapid heartbeat.

"How's he doing?" she asked.

"Fine."

I lied. I wasn't sure if the rabbit would survive the drive. When we reached downtown, Christmas decorations arched over the main street. We pulled up to the storefront, and I could see the veterinarian waiting behind the plate glass window. Cassie rushed around to the passenger side and took the bunny. I went around to the driver side to shut off the car and get the keys. By the time I was in the waiting room, Cassie and the veterinarian were already in an examination room. Despite the large framed posters of dogs and cats, it felt like the rooms I waited in with Carol. The door to the examination room was slightly ajar. I couldn't make out the words, but I could hear the somber tone. Twenty minutes later, she walked out carrying the rabbit in the blanket.

"Dr. Livingston is dead."

"I'm sorry."

She started crying.

"I know you just lost your wife, and it must be weird to see me cry about a rabbit. He was my Dad's."

"I know. It's okay."

"The doctor gave him a shot, so he wouldn't be in pain anymore."

"That's good."

She leaned close to my ear and whispered, "We have to go right now. She's trying to talk me into leaving him here. Something about a state law. I had to tell her that you needed to say goodbye just to leave the room."

"Okay."

I gave her the keys. She passed me the dead rabbit. We were in the car by the time the vet reappeared in the lobby, gesturing for us to come back. I waved.

"Where are we going?"

"Do you have a shovel?" Cassie asked.

Because it was Christmas Eve, the roads were empty. There was no one to see us turn into the empty cemetery parking lot. Cassie had been to her father's grave so many times that the darkness wasn't a problem. I was carrying a shovel and following the light from her phone. She carried the rabbit tucked under her arm like a football. It was hard to keep up with her. She was young and in shape. I was old and still a little drunk. I desperately wanted to take a piss, but I was afraid that I would lose her in the dark.

Finally, we were back on the hill at Bob's grave. The moon was full, and if there was a security guard in the cemetery, it wouldn't take long to find us. I excused myself. I found some bushes and closed my eyes so I wouldn't see the names on the tombstones.

I walked back and watched her. Cassie was wild in her grief, the shovel swinging high. I wondered what we would be charged with if we were caught. They would probably make her go to a psychiatrist, but no telling what they would do to me. She started to slow down, and I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Rest a moment," I said.

Cassie sat next to the rabbit and opened the blanket and began rubbing its back.

I dug. Once I got past the roots of the grass, it was soft earth, like the soil in a garden. It went quickly. I stopped digging when I began to feel dizzy. Cassie took over and I walked to the other side of the hill where I could see my wife's final resting place. She was buried in the new part of the cemetery. There wasn't as much landscaping, and there

were none of the grand old monuments from the last century. Death is plainer by the highway.

Cassie was nearly done. She was standing in the hole. I handed her the rabbit and gave her a hand getting out. We both stood at the edge and looked down at the rabbit. She wanted me to say something, because I knew her father. I didn't have any comforting words. I knew what she wanted. Heaven. A dream with Dr. Livingston in a green field with his long ears open wide listening to Bob play the trumpet, and Carol waving at me like I was taking her picture. I didn't believe in any of that. I looked at Cassie looking at the rabbit.

"This rabbit was loved," I said, "by my friend, Bob, and his daughter, Cassie."

I nodded towards her, and she wiped her eyes. I threw the first shovelful of dirt in the hole and after a few minutes, Cassie took the shovel back and finished it. She used the flat part of the shovel to smooth the dirt out. Watching her, I knew what I should have asked the rabbits and that the answer wasn't on my pieces of paper. I wanted to know why Carol had to die.

I heard the security guard whistling. Looking down, I saw him on path below.

"Hide," I whispered.

Cassie took the shovel and hid behind a tree. When the guard got closer, he waved and smiled. He was my age, wearing a black jacket with the word, "Security," in reflective yellow letters. He looked tired.

"Your friend can come out. Nobody is in any trouble here."

Cassie came out from behind the tree she was hiding behind and walked over to me. I was relieved to see that she had left the shovel where she had been hiding.

He addressed us both, "Folks, the cemetery is closed. I'm not going to call the cops, because it's Christmas Eve. If you follow my light, I'll walk you out to the parking lot."

I recognized his voice. He was another Fort Lee High band member. A trombonist.

"John Calandro?"

"Paul?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"It's good to see you, Paul, but I have to ask, what are you doing out here?"

"John, this is my tenant, Cassie McHenry. Bob's daughter."

"I see."

He held out his hand, and they shook. We were lucky that John had turned off his light. Our hands were covered in dirt.

"I was so sorry to hear about his death, Miss." He looked down at Bob's stone. "He was a really nice guy."

"Thank you."

"Sorry to disturb you, John. Especially on Christmas Eve."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you weren't a bunch of teenagers. And Paul, I heard about Carol. My sympathies. I always thought she was cool."

John went out with her a few times before she started dating me.

"She's here, too."

"I know."

We followed his light off the hill.

"How long have you been doing this, John?"

"About five years. Ever since I retired from the force. I do security for all three of the company's cemeteries. I live on the grounds."

He pointed to a cottage, just to the left of the parking lot.

"I saw you come in, and when you didn't come out, I had to see what you were doing."

"Do people come here a lot when it's closed?" I asked.

"All the time. I used to make a bigger deal about it, but after my brother died, I mellowed out. The main thing I do is make sure that nobody trips over anything on the way out. The company is paranoid that someone will sue."

We took the right towards the new part of the cemetery and the parking lot. When we were passing Carol's grave, he stopped and walked right up to it. He held the light above it and bowed his head for a moment. I noticed that most of the graves had poinsettia plants. I felt ashamed that I had not bought one for her.

"I know where all the people from the old neighborhood are."

"I guess so."

Almost too late, it occurred to me that I should ask about his family. I remembered that he married a girl from high

school and that they had a son. Years ago, Carol and I went to the boy's christening.

"How's Jenny and your son?"

He straightened up. Maybe he wasn't used to anybody caring what he said.

"Michael is doing great. He's got a couple of kids and a big house with a pool over in Montclair. As for Jenny, you'd have to ask the guy she left me for."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Happened about ten years ago. The guy she left with was fifteen years older than her. Already retired. Rich I guess. I was working. The neighbor said he pulled up in an RV in the middle of the day. They don't have an address. They just drive around all year like gypsies. He has to be about dead by now."

John looked out over the grave markers, and I imagined that he already had a place picked out for this man.

"You're lucky to have Carol," he said.

"Yeah."

I wondered about the cosmic math, whether it was better to have lost a loving wife than to have a faithless one that you will never see again.

"You didn't want to hear all that," John said, "I get batshit crazy when I haven't talked to anyone in a while."

He turned to Cassie. "Did you ever hear your father play the trumpet?"

"No. I knew he was in the band, but he never talked about it."

"I have something that you should hear. Both of you."

He didn't wait for an answer. He turned towards the cottage and gestured behind him for us to follow. Something in his manner pulled on his years as a cop. He was in charge.

The cottage was as old as the cemetery itself. There was a small living room with an old couch. Above the couch was a large oil painting of a man in his fifties in a gray business suit. In his right hand he held a pocket watch and his left was resting on a globe.

"Who's that?"

"Hell if I know. The place came with all the stuff. I'm not allowed to get rid of any of it. I guess I'm guarding it."

He handed us coffee cups full of Bailey's.

"Merry Christmas."

I looked up at the clock on mantle above the fireplace, and sure enough it was midnight. John had a milk crate full of records like a college kid. He took a record out and handed me the orange and blue sleeve, the colors of Fort Lee High School.

"I forgot all about that," I said.

It was something that the band department had made as a fundraiser, a kind of audio yearbook. He put the record on. The track was a solo arrangement of "Yesterday."

Cassie knelt in front of the turntable. She put her head on her knees, hiding her face. In that pose, she looked like a rabbit trying to blend into the brown carpet. John's eyes were closed, his foot moving, his right hand fingering the notes.

She was thinking of her father, and he must have been thinking of his wife. If Carol were here, I could ask her how I got there and give her the signal that I wanted to go. I thought about her in the basement apartment with her hair wrapped in a bandana, standing on a step ladder, singing along with the radio, running a paint roller up and down the plain drywall, planning our future.

"You know our wives are on this too, with the girls choir."

"I can't. Too much."

"Yeah."

"Jesus," Cassie whispered to herself.

She picked up the record jacket and found the track. The voices filled the room, the girls who walked the halls of Fort Lee High School, who tormented us, who held our hands and danced with us, who stood in backyards and sat on roofs with us passing joints, who formed brief alliances with us against the future and finding them no help, found new partners. And the two that stayed and then left us alone. It was an illusion, but I thought I could hear Carol's voice, rising above the choir. I looked over at John. He didn't seem angry or sad. He must have heard the same thing.

When the song was over, we gathered ourselves as best we could. Holding a fresh glass of Bailey's, John walked with us to my car. As Cassie got in, he pulled me back.

"I don't care what you buried out there. If you want your shovel back, come by tomorrow afternoon."

I did, and we drank whiskey and talked about the past. He remembered it better than I did, and it was nice to be told these things I had forgotten. I didn't see Cassie for a few weeks. She rang my doorbell on a Sunday morning.

I opened the door, and she handed me a gray rabbit.

"I didn't want to lie to you about this one."

"What's its name?"

"I'm not doing explorers anymore."

"Yeah?"

"Carol."

This was a stage of grief that no one had warned me about, your loved one near you all the time, warm and silent. I held the rabbit up in front of my face, so I could see it's eyes. They were almost all shiny black pupil with a ring of reddish brown. It wasn't scared. It seemed used to me already, like I was something familiar in its landscape. I thanked Cassie, handed her the rabbit, and closed the door.

Jason Primm *pursues modest goals in a coastal city. When he isn't writing, he can be found sharpening his slice backhand. His work has most recently appeared in* The Adirondack Review, Five on the Fifth, Atticus Review, Zone 3, Stoneboat, *and* Bridge Eight. *He maintains a blog at jasonprimm.wordpress.com.*

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