



Salamander

2010

To Our Teachers.

“The self-taught man seldom knows anything accurately, and he does not know a tenth as much as he could have known if he had worked under teachers.”

—Mark Twain

Cover Art

Movement

Amber MacDuffie



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Anyways, A Story

The nurse left work at five o'clock. Or was it six? Let's make it five-thirty. She walked through the automatic and transparent glass doors of the hospital and into the brisk October afternoon. Well actually, it was evening, I guess.

Anyways, her high heels clicked on the cool sidewalk as she headed down the street. Most nurses don't wear high heels, obviously, but this one did, for some reason. The nurse was tall, blonde, thin, and had nicely shaped breasts under her tight-fitting nurse's outfit. Just pretty decently put together, on the whole, you know?

Anyways, as she was walking, she came upon a homeless man. No actually, a homeless woman. It looked like a man at first, but it wasn't. The homeless woman asked for change, and the nurse replied, "It is with regret and sadness that I must inform you that I, in fact, do not have any change at this time. I apologize, and wish you better luck with future pedestrians." Of course, the nurse could've just said, "No, sorry," but whatever.

Anyways, after this strange and, as some might put it, *serendipitous* little encounter, the nurse headed for a bar. It was happy hour. Well, actually, it was thirty minutes into happy hour, but that's basically the same thing. She walked into the bar, through the doors, which were not automatic like those at the hospital, and thus she had to push them open.

Anyways, the bar was cold and welcoming. Well, cold *but* welcoming. And I don't mean emotionally cold, but like, literally quite cold. Maybe the heat was broken.

Anyways, she walked up to the bartender and ordered a beer, I guess, but a light beer. She was trying to lose weight, even though she was already very thin. I'm not saying she was anorexic or anything, just very concerned with body image.

Anyways, as she was drinking her light beer in the literally cold bar with no change in her pockets and high heels on after a hard days work at the hospital down the street in October, she was approached by a man.

"What's your name?" she asked, inquisitively.

"My name's Matt," he answered, "I work for *The Salamander*."

Anyways, she found him immensely attractive. Sexy, smart, dashing, cool, and probably very caring and generous. And with a gaze that could melt ice in the freezer. Obviously, ice outside of the freezer would just melt on its own.

Anyways, the man ordered a vodka martini, shaken not stirred, and asked the nurse, "What do you do?"

The nurse was still in her nurse's clothes, which should have tipped him off, but she answered him nonetheless.

"I work as a nurse at the hospital down the street."

Matt leaned back on his barstool and looked as though he was about to ask a question, which he eventually did.

"Did you, perchance, happen to leave work at five o'clock?" he asked.

"Why no," she said, "In fact, I left work at around five-thirty."

Speak Easy Radio

Litterbug speaks easy
On a recyclable-safe, twenty first century phone she
Discusses Griswold's latest inclination
A simple premise—all letters and words that
When put together
Create potentially hazardous acts
Or so the Litterbug says
Her friend, the Marshmellow man—always the heavy investor
Wades through her constant chatter and moves
Wherever his fluffy mind can take him
And after Litterbug is done
Scattering phrases haphazardly
The Marshmellow man, with smooth acceleration asks
Where on earth
Did she hear this nutty, nutty stuff
The Litterbug, all peanuts answers
Always
Always
Always
On the micro-fiction radio

James Vanderpool

My Mother's Oven

Once,
or so I hear, a few green melons were placed
inside for storage. My aunt, just back from the
optician's, thought the shadows behind the looking
glass were a good roast and sensibly turned it on.
We didn't get rid of the smell for weeks, and my mother
swore up and down to Mary Anne that she was dead
if she did it again. She never went near
the oven after, and was always afraid to look at it.
since then, we've all had a few laughs at my aunt's
expense, and also, of course, the oven's.

James Vanderpool

And a Happy New Year

I guess I never thought of how lonely it would be, being the black sheep at a family reunion. God I wish I hadn't left that flask in my work jacket. This eggnog would be so much better with a whiskey chaser. Who am I kidding, my life would be so much better with a whiskey chaser. I knew Christmas would be hard; I always feel alone around now anyways, but this time is different. This time I actually kind of have someone, but I can't be with her outside of the Motel 6 out on Route 5. Surprisingly, a girl you pick up with a cart full of malt liquor at the liquor store doesn't have the highest of morals. So I shouldn't have been shocked when she told me she was married as I zipped up my pants. Eva's loving and doting husband "Robert" can give her the security she needs. Apparently, the newly installed security system in my parents' basement isn't enough for her. I'm pretty sure I heard God laugh at me last night when I came out of the bathroom and realized she had booked it as soon as I was finished. That of course, didn't stop her from sending me that outrageous text during Christmas Eve mass, three hours ago. If it wasn't for my saint of a grandmother and her complete fear of my soul being trapped in hell for all eternity, I wouldn't have even been in attendance. There's something about an old Italian woman's guilt that can make you do anything. She brought two things over from Sicily, her mother's meat sauce recipe and the female gene for guilt trips.

God, you would think out of 100 relatives there would be at least one rebellious teenager out back, toking up. But nope, yet another disappointment for Anthony Mancini. When did Santa opt for broken hearts instead of coal for bad boys? Wait, didn't someone recently break a hip around here? Old Aunt Sally right? There has to be some stray Percocet in this house somewhere. I'm sure viewing wedding pictures of St. Bobby's wedding and having to make nice with my cousin's lovely new bride of six months will be more painful than breaking my hip.

They served up seven different kinds of fish at dinner, and no air freshener in the bathroom. Maybe Uncle Vito still has his gas mask from WWII up in the attic. No time, I need to raid this medicine cabinet. If only mom could see me now, "you have absolutely no motivation Anthony! You're twenty-six, can't you find something to fight for?" I beg to differ at this point, mother. My motivation to get that tiny pill in my bloodstream ASAP has left me fighting for air through this mustard-gas filled abode. It's a Christmas miracle! Pain killers, the first gift of Christmas. Two left. One for now and one for Christmas morning at my sister Maria's house. Five kids under the age of seven on Christmas morning calls for a Percocet cocktail too.

Each step down from the upstairs bathroom makes me happier and happier that my big Italian family loves to cook for 200 at occasions like this. Now all I have to do is find a nice comfy spot on the plastic coated sofa and camp out with my heaping plate till my parents decide its time to head home.

Good thing that couch is covered in plastic cause when I saw *her* standing there, the Perc really kicked in and my arms went numb. Too bad Uncle Ronnie isn't covered in plastic; calamari vodka sauce doesn't help bring his 70's leisure suit into the 21st century. But why is *she* here? Is this a joke? How many milligrams was that pill? No, she can't be a hallucination because she's just as shocked to see me. Her fully functional nervous system is just hiding it better than mine.

"Anthony sweet heart, have you met my new granddaughter in-law Eva? This is Bobbie's new wife. You'll have to look at the pictures since you were too busy doing whatever it is you did in Vegas to come home for the wedding." Aunt Sally's balance may be fading, but her bluntness is still sharp

as ever. Just as we were about to be formally introduced, Uncle Ronnie took this time to swear at me in Italian so the little ones wouldn't hear what he was really saying. Until I was 14, I thought "Merda Poco" was a fun little nickname Uncle Ronnie gave me. It wasn't until my high school Italian teacher gave me detention for saying it in class that I found out what Uncle Ronnie really thought.

"Robert" hasn't left her side all night until now. Looks like St. Bobbie has decided to play Santa this year for the little brats that have now taken over my plastic utopia. We make eye contact from across the room and we're off. She heads up the stairs and I follow at a safe distance behind her. How perfect, the distraction we needed came from "Robert," what a saint. Irony, the second gift of Christmas. By the time she reaches the bathroom at the end of the hall I have caught up to her. We reach for the door knob at the same time. That contact is all we need to break the ice. Adultery in your great aunt's bathroom, the third gift of Christmas.

As I pull my pants back up I decide its time for one of us to talk before we have to check out of the classiest place we have done it to date. But what do I say? She pulls out a tooth brush from her purse that she always has on hand and goes to town. All I get out is "Merry Christm-" when the knocking on the door freezes us like deer in head lights.

"HoHoHo, Babe you okay in there?"

"Yeah Robert I'm good, I'll be right out."

"How about I come in...I stole some missile toe from the door, I think you owe me a kiss."

Did we seriously come from the same gene pool? At what point did his nut sack fall off? Before I know it Eva is pushing me into the shower and closing the curtain. The door creaks open and the fun begins. Vomit, the fourth gift of Christmas. Luckily, I have the sexual stamina in the family, so he doesn't last nearly as long as me. The two exit together; apparently it's socially acceptable to pee with your spouse on Christmas Eve. I stick around for a little while sulking in what my life has become, knowing that I'm not missed downstairs. I emerge just in time to pass uncle Vito in the hall, side stepping that mustard gas landmine. The awesome architecture of the house allows me to come down the stairs and be face to face with "Robert" helping Eva put on her coat.

"Anthony! Where the hell have you been all night! I wanted to catch up!" he says.

"Yea I-"

"Your mom says she has a feeling your seeing someone, she appointed me top spy and wanted me to grill you for information."

"Ha-ha oh really? I wonder what gave her that idea." Eva and I make eye contact and "Robert" picks up on it.

"Oh yea, Anthony, this is my wife Eva."

"Happy to meet you, Anthony."

"Same."

"Well we gotta get to her parents house. Your rents told me we're doing New Years Eve at your guy's place. I'll start my interrogation of you then about this girl!"

“Sounds like a blast, can’t wait...It was nice meeting you Eva. See you later Robert.”

“Robert? Since when do you call me Robert? Eva’s the only one who calls me that.”

So this what a stroke feels like. The scared puppy dog face Eva was giving off didn’t help the puzzled look on “Robert’s.”

“I told Anthony how cute I thought it was that she calls you Robert and not Bobby.” Never before have I been so happy to hear my sister’s voice. “You guys forgot the pound cake Aunt Carmella made for you.”

Eva’s shaky hands reach out for the cake, “thanks Maria.”

“No problem, now get out of here! We’ll see you on New Years.” Maria hurries them out and shuts the door behind them.

“What the hell is the matter with you, Anthony!” Maria asks as her oversized diamond ring smacks against my head. “Stoo-nod!”

“How did you know anything was even going on!”

“I’m your big sister. I know everything you do. I was helping Ma with the laundry last week and found lipstick all over a shirt and a bunch of Motel 6 receipts in your pockets. So I knew you were sneaking around with someone, but EVA!”

“Will you keep your voice down! You think I knew before tonight?! She told me her last name was Green! I had no idea until I saw her tonight that she was married to Bobby.”

“Well look Anth, just because your life is screwed up doesn’t mean you have to mess up theirs. You stay away from her!”

“Maria I think I love-”

“I swear to god if you finish that sentence Anthony Michael I will slap you so hard!” My puppy dog face stopped her mallet of a hand mid air.

“Look,” she says, “you need to get out of this slump and the only way you are going to do that is by finding a nice Italian girl who will take your shit and throw it back at you. You don’t need a girl like Eva. She’s going to murder Bobby’s heart some day and you cannot be anywhere near that crime scene when it happens. Now come on, Aunt Carmella made pastachotti.”

Only Maria could hit me and love me at the same time. I’ve never forgiven that husband of hers for giving that girl such a big ring. Maria’s hands fly around when she talks more than an interpreter for deaf people at a rock concert. She’s a danger to anyone within arms reach when she’s worked up. As we walked back to the kitchen I realized how right she was. Eva was no different from any other drug I’ve been hooked on. I need a girl to throw it back in my face, not wallow in it with me. I think I’ll be spending New Years in Vegas.

Peter Paris



Chittenango Infrared

Amy Kostine

Arise! Arouse! Awake!

Oh sweet face, dear face pillowed next to mine,
A face that time has only ravaged some,
And scattered here and there a gentle line,
Witness hoarfrost, vestige winter's almost come.
And here we are alone a-lounge at last,
The children circle varied on the wing,
And we our lives re-tempered and recast,
Come home again to you and I bonding.
Arise! Arouse! Awake! The crow caws from the branch,
And morning's long already lauded,
And passion cannot swell, nor love advance,
Except from hibernation you be prodded.
For what care I of John Donne's reverent plea,
I want not God but you to ravish me.

Sylvia O'Connor

The Cream in My Coffee

The thousand eyed monster always stares at me in the morning...

How does it keep its eyes open when I barely can?

Annoying little bugger.

[sip]

It still has a billion eyes--a thousand pearl beads.

You know those vegans who won't eat animals with faces--but eat eggs? Hypocrites.

I should be a coffee vegan--I won't drink coffee with eyeballs.

[sip]

Too late.

I guess that's what makes a person wake up after drinking coffee--the extra eyeballs

--brains not included.

Reminds me of Argos--the hundred eyed monster who the goddess Hera killed
--then she moved his eyes on her peacock. Grotesque really.

So, I'm drinking a coffee peacock...[thinking about it] <sip> [smiles]

...awesome....

Joy Messersmidt

Rocky

The lake was beautiful. I was standing out on the balcony of my Great Aunt and Uncle's rather large house overlooking Cayuga Lake. It was a nice place. There was always a breeze. And it's all mine, at least for the weekend. How I understood it was some distant cousin or something was graduating in Maine and my Aunt and Uncle were going. I wonder if they'll show at my graduation. In their absence they left their little wiener dog, Bubbles, home alone. Someone needed to dog-sit. That's me. Life was good. I had this beautiful house, sitting in front of this beautiful lake, all to myself for three days and two nights. I was trying to get my girlfriend to come over. I almost convinced her. I was going to send her another text in a couple of minutes.

I wandered back inside and grabbed an apple off the counter and took a big bite. I grinned. Bubbles came scampering into the kitchen and yipped at me.

"What? I already fed you."

He kept barking and ran out through the living room and down the hall. I followed.

"Is Timmy in the well again?"

I wandered after him and noticed all the pictures on the walls. Most of them were of people I don't even know. There was one of me and my Dad in frame that was taken about sixteen years ago. I was five. I heard the dog alternating between yipping and what I assumed was supposed to be a growl, in the bathroom. He was staring up into the vent. I was not amused. "Yes, that's called a vent. Dumb ass." Then a terrifying screech let out of the vent. I nearly crapped myself. It sounded like someone was murdering a cat and a ferret. Trying to amuse myself, I quoted Schwarzenegger, "What the hell are you?" I stood up on the toilet and used the light from my cell as a lamp. I held it up to the grate. I saw two beady little eyes and bucked teeth in the dark. When he saw the light he let out another screech. I wasn't expecting the volume of it and it knocked me off balance. I slipped off the toilet and fell sideways into the shower. I grabbed the curtain and ripped it off and fell ass first into the tub. Bubbles stared at me. If dogs could grin, this one did.

"We will not speak of this. Ever. Again."

I contemplated trying to get the vent open and let the little bugger out, but there was no visible way to open it. No screws or any kind of latch. I'd probably break something and get yelled at. I decided that it wasn't worth the aggravation. Tough luck for Rocky. After sitting on the porch for twenty minutes having a couple of beers I got a text.

Just talked to Jared. You got some 'splanin' to do. – From Sarah

"Oh shit."

Two weeks ago was six months since we had started dating. I told her I had a family thing in Montana and went to Virginia Beach with Jared and a couple of other guys. *"I'm cooked. Damn it*

Jared! Why the hell did you tell her? Idiot. Crap. Crap. Crap.” I didn’t know what to say, but I needed to respond relatively quickly because I knew she was waiting for a reply. I decided to call her. It rang eight times before she picked up. She was trying to make me sweat.

“Hi, honey,” I said cautiously.

“What. The. Hell.”

“Look, babe. I’m sorry but it was a spur of the moment thing. I—“

“It was our anniversary, Ray. Doesn’t that mean anything? We’ve only got a couple of weeks before graduation and then poof, we’re going to college.”

“I know, listen, honey I didn’t think it was a big deal it was only—“

“Our six month anniversary.”

“Yeah. Gotta say, that’s not very high on the special list. My measuring stick goes by years, so... to me it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“It’s not about that. This was special for me.”

“Well not to me.”

“Oh really? Well I don’t think this relationship is very special to me. Goodbye.”

“Sarah don’t!”

She hung up on me. “*Damn it!*” I threw the phone through the open door and into the wall. The damn thing broke into pieces. “Oh fuck!” Now I couldn’t call her and she couldn’t call me. I was stuck there for another two days without a way to smooth things over with my pissed off girlfriend. I sat on the couch and held the two pieces of my phone. The phone itself was fine. The battery was dented just enough to not fit into the phone. I stared at them, hoping it would fix itself.

“Where the hell’s MacGyver when you need him?”

The squirrel cawed at me again. I guess the shouting woke him up.

“Shut up Rocky!”

I watched John Carpenter’s “The Thing” to try and get my mind off things. I was at the part where Keith David was blasting the dog monster with the flamethrower. The whole time Rocky wouldn’t shut up. “I’m not gonna save you! I got enough problems of my own.”

CRAW! CRAW!

“My problem? Thanks for asking. My girl’s pissed for my honesty and probably ripping up the photos of homecoming right now.”

After hearing my voice he went into full panic mode, screeching.

“Hey! Don’t give me attitude. Girls always say they want honesty. I gave her honesty. She can deal with it.”

Getting tired, the little thing let out a quiet squeak.

“Thanks for the sympathy. But I’d rather you’d shut up and let me watch the movie.”

Silence.

“Heh. Thank you.”

The dog was staring at me.

“Yes. I’m talking to a doomed squirrel. Got a problem?”

I must’ve fallen asleep after a while because next thing I knew the movie was at the end where they set the base on fire. Rocky was still screaming at me. I rubbed the bridge of my nose and got up slowly. There was no point in ignoring the rodent.

“Don’t you say anything else?”

At this point I should have learned that if I’m quiet then he’ll shut up. But I didn’t, and neither did he.

“Okay, so maybe I’m an asshole. But... can’t she see things my way for once? Hell, can’t anybody see another perspective?”

I wandered down the hall and to the bathroom. I looked up at the grate and sighed. Rocky knew I was there, he was scratching more violently. I stopped and thought for a minute.

I went into the closet and grabbed a screwdriver out of the toolbox. I grabbed a chair from the dining room table and dragged it into the bathroom. Then I tossed some pillows into the tub just in case. I stood up on the chair. I started to pry at the grate. Rocky started screaming louder and more rapidly.

“SHUT UP!”

Rocky fell silent.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

I kept poking and prodding the screwdriver at the edge of the grate and managed to slip it in slightly. I slowly started to pry it open. Rocky started up again. I had it open half an inch and it felt like it would break.

“Rocky, when you jump down do not claw my face. I swear to God I’ll...”

The grate popped open and Rocky jumped on my face and I fell into the shower again. This time, it was a much softer landing. Rocky scurried out of the room. Bubbles chased him to the balcony but stopped just short of the door. I climbed out of the tub and saw Rocky on a tree for a second before he “took flight,” spreading his limbs and gliding through the air.

“Figures you’d be a flying squirrel.”

Stefan Rivet



Church

Annika Carbacio

Instant Gratification

I want instant gratification-
A perma-grin that pours from one too many Captain and Cokes,
A razor blade edging more than just an eight ball
Your body pressed up against mine
In an elevator on its way down to hell.
I want to be Lilith,
Sinner,
Temptress,
The premiere Bitch in a short black dress and a knife strapped to her thigh-high.
I want to be Demeter,
Mother,
Lover.
The 1950's Stepford wife in an apron-
Nothing but the apron.
Sunning myself on the bank of the River Styx,
I want that fucker Hades out.
I want them all out because I can do better.
Better at coveting life and not living it,
Better at making a home for the unwilling,
Better at spilling blood they haven't even realized they've lost.

Alice Chanthasensak

Landscape at 2 a.m.

Puffy, dark Titans
Ate the stars and
Devoured the moon.

I watched them.

Their burps sift
Towards the ground
Winding through tree roots.

They want in
I know they do.

Spindly hands scrape
At the window.

I duck.

A ready silence seeps out
From under the closet door.
The shadows have stopped snoring.

Eyeing the wooden planks
I make the flying leap.

Landing in patchwork,
A sigh of relief.

Alice Chanthasensak

Expectations

I don't like to go on dates that don't end in sex. And it's become increasingly easier to see the likelihood of this outcome with each passing date. You can usually detect the possibility of sex in the first five minutes and, with practice, sometimes even faster. The willing lady will pick up a scent she likes and start talking excitedly but unclearly about a hobby, her hometown, or the details of her day. My job, I've discovered, is to manipulate this openness into a prolonged demonstration of intimacy-on-speed. With practiced facial expressions and vague philosophic advice, by the time I've paid the bill the little fawn feels so exposed and vulnerable that even a grazing of hand over knee is ample confirmation of my true and deep understanding. This elicits the greatest returns in the shortest amount of time. I don't like to commit to eating a decent meal with somebody who needs too much coaxing. It spoils my appetite. And already I was losing my appetite.

Laura had set me up with one of her friends. As it was, I had already had sex with Laura. In fact, we had eaten in this very restaurant before we had sex. Some girls, like Laura for instance, are so enamored by a guy who will buy them anything more than their favorite mixed drink and call them "beautiful" before "hot" that they feel what they think to be love but can't understand fast enough to really identify. It's a virtual hypnosis broken only by unreturned phone calls days after the event. Of course I let Laura down with a bit more tact. She understood in some deluded, romantic way that "it just wouldn't work out" with us. We remained friendly and this had granted me access to all those she knew who were presumably just like her.

It was a Japanese restaurant on the strip. The building was dressed with paint-stroke letters that looked more or less oriental. The music played low in an undetectable meter and the lighting was one shade above total darkness. Lisa was pretty. Great breasts. But she wouldn't take. We were stirring our food and glancing at our phones in thinly disguised ways every time the chef put more food on the open grill. I was trying to understand where my good sense had failed me.

"So did Laura tell you where I did my undergrad?"

She smiled amusedly, took a slow sip of her wine and brushed her bangs.

"Yes, Laura told me where you went to school. New Haven must have been darling."

I'm pretty good at recognizing insincerity. Even in dim light. Admittedly, I became a little flushed. "It was really a wonderful experience. You should visit if the opportunity ever arises."

She chewed a few grains of rice, nodded and didn't look up. With each empty second my embarrassment multiplied. I hate to be embarrassed.

"You know, I never asked. What is it like at State these days? I hear the physical therapy program is just blossoming."

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s a good place for a second shot, right? Economical too, I hear.” Her chopsticks made a dull thud against the bamboo tabletop. At about this time I was ready to give up the charade, mark it up as a loss. I rolled my neck and sighed with resignation. “What do you think of me anyway?”

“Think of you? What do I think of you?” She scoffed. Her eyes did a quick up and down. “I think you *look* like an asshole. And really, you should probably button that top button. Chest hair isn’t the aphrodisiac you seem to think it is.”

Filled with a toxic swirl of denial and testosterone, I became aware of the sweat on my palms. “You know, Laura said you’d be easier than you look.”

“You know, you said this place would be authentic Japanese but I still wore a sweater and not a kimono. Do you know why?”

I tossed my hands up. “Why?”

She stood composedly and straightening the bottom of her blouse above the waste of her skirt. “Because this isn’t fucking Japan.”

Two twenty dollar bills tumbled down from her purse onto the table. She picked up her chopsticks, pressed them between her hands, took a bow and walked out the door.

Corey DiBiase

Victim of Childhood

Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease
but we keep on walking the rail
watching the roofs go by,
searching for the remedy,
a voice that sounds like home.

If you choose to go to the moon
they'll put your soul up for sale
before organs fail.
And in the park,
at auction,
the candy man can't conjure up
a licorice for the blues.

We are exactly what librarians hate
and it's a wonder they admitted us
in the first place.

Stephanie Whitemore



Fashionista
Ashley O'Mara

Ode to a Box of Crayons

A golden box, a treasure chest
Opens on gleaming wedges, cut like jewels.
I breathe the new wax on smooth cardboard.
 Spring green, caterpillars munching on milkweed.
 Macaroni and cheese, which does not taste like dinner with Dad.
 Tickle me pink, and my belly giggles as if scribbled.
 Cerulean, sounds of ocean water lapping my toes under the moon.
I pinch the top of one; the plastic edges press into my skin.
This is my only opportunity—
Once I take a crayon from its crevice
 The tip will round
 The paper will fray
 The cardboard will wrinkle like a treasure map.
I slide a finger across the rows
And pick one.
Wild Blue Yonder.
I glide it up, a rocket rising into space.

Ashley O'Mara

Seagulls

It was excruciating. The clock did not want to move, even though its only purpose was to march onward. The second hand went at its own ease. No matter how much mind power Simon exerted, no matter how piercing his gaze, the clock just would not move fast enough. It made its own time, regardless of the wishes of a twelve year old boy.

However, Simon was not as frustrated as he might have been on other days, because on this day, he had other things to occupy his eyes and mind. He tried to keep his eyes faithfully focused on the master of time on the wall in the front of the room. However, on this day, those treacherous eyes would inevitably wander. They would always end in the same place. His eyes would trace their way down from the lazy clock, across the chalky blackboard, past the droning teacher, and onto the shimmering golden hair of Laura Varner.

It was the general consensus of all of the sixth grade boys (and most of the seventh graders for that matter) that Laura was one of the most beautiful girls in the sixth grade. For Simon, there was no other competition. Laura had the glowing blonde locks with those ocean blue eyes that made Simon's mouth go dry whenever they passed his way. Simon and Laura had been in the same classes in fourth and fifth grade, and they even lived in the same neighborhood a few blocks from the middle school. Yet Simon was never able to express his undying love for this unearthly angel. This was the perfect girl, one that Simon could only dream of talking to, let alone dating. However, on this day, it seemed that Simon's dream was coming true.

Earlier that morning before classes started, Simon finally got the nerve to approach her. Simon was no longer a little kid. He was in a new school in the sixth grade. He was a young man who was not afraid to brave any danger, to approach any girl. That morning, Simon steeled himself and finally made his advance on Laura. He had in his arsenal a wrapped present that he had spent hours looking for in the mall. It was a small wooden sea gull that was supposedly hand carved out of ebony. It had cost him a fair portion of his birthday money, but he knew it was worth it. He remembered Laura's report in the fourth grade on her favorite animal. She said that she loved that seagulls had the freedom to go wherever they wanted over land or sea. They could soar above all the problems on the ground and survive almost anywhere.

Simon had the wooden seagull gift wrapped in green and gold wrapping paper at the mall service center. The gift even had a nice gold bow on top of it. Simon had pulled out all the stops in this grand venture. He had it all planned out; he would approach Laura and give her the gift while saying something really witty and cool. Then he would watch the delighted smile play across her beautiful face as she opened the gift. Then she would be his.

There she was, with that shimmering hair that could belong to no other. She had her back turned to him as she attempted to wrench an oversized textbook from the overstuffed crevice that was her locker. Simon made his approach, heart pounding but confident that by the end of the day, the most beautiful girl in the sixth grade would be his girlfriend. He tapped her on the shoulder and she turned those mesmerizing blue eyes on him. This was the moment. Simon handed Laura the gift-wrapped box and with the utmost eloquence said,

“This is for you.”

That was all he could get out. The pressure of those eyes and that half smile was too much to bear. Having said all that he could say, Simon quickly scurried away without even bothering to watch her open the present.

Failure, utter failure. He knew that Laura had probably just thrown the stupid thing away. How stupid could he have been to think that Laura would like a little wooden toy? How could Simon ever expect a girl like that would ever go out with him? Laura was probably laughing at him with her friends at that very moment. Simon's life was officially over; he would not be able to survive as the laughing stock of the school.

Simon was in a haze for the first two periods. Math was a confused jumble of lines and squiggles, and gym was a sequence of air-ball after air-ball. After gym came recess, when Simon planned to simply get his books for English and loiter in an out of sight corner somewhere. He walked despondently to his locker and managed to get the right combination on the third try. As the locker squealed open, Simon saw that there was something unfamiliar inside. Set against the backdrop of the sickly orange of the metal locker and the mishmash of whites, blues, and blacks of his books was a color that normally did not belong in any twelve year old boy's locker, pink.

It was a note on a slip of pink paper. Somebody must have slipped it through the air slits at the top. On it was a message that changed the world:

Meet me at the picnic tables after school –L

Simon was resurrected. Here was his chance. He had known all along that Laura would love that seagull. It was totally worth his grandma's birthday check for a chance with Laura Varner. Simon was ecstatic. He prayed that the time would speed by until finally, the ringing of the bell would release him from his captivity. Of course, cruel fate managed to make every minute seem like an hour. In science class, Simon almost threw his textbook at the clock because he had glanced up at it three times and it had not moved.

Somehow, he made it to the last class of the day. He shared history with his golden haired goddess. And so, Simon's eyes had a competition over what they could look at the most, the clock or the love of his life, Laura. Then came the glorious sound worshipped by students everywhere, the harsh ringing of the bell. Simon got up and raced for the door, prepared to make it to his locker then out to the picnic tables in record time. However, just before he made it to the door, the voice of authority called Simon back. Mr. Smolensky wanted to discuss the progress of his report on the crusades. While Simon was stuck talking about King Richard and Jerusalem, everyone else made a clean getaway.

After what seemed like decades later, Simon was able to escape the clutches of history and very quickly turned to the business of the present. He sprinted for his locker and tore it open. Simon quickly snatched up his backpack stuffed it with books and flew to the nearest exit. He burst out of the side entrance of the building, and there she was, across the parking lot sitting on top of one of the old wooden picnic tables by that old oak that everyone likes to write on and climb. Simon leisurely walked across the parking lot, threw his backpack on the ground next to Laura's, and jumped up on the table. Laura was just lounging there, sitting on the table with her feet on one of the seats, fiddling with the little wooden seagull.

“It’s very pretty” she said, “How did you know that I liked seagulls so much?”

Not wanting to appear too desperate by letting Laura know that he remembered her report from two years ago, Simon decided that lying was the best option.

“I didn’t, I just really like seagulls, how they have the freedom to go wherever they want to on land or on the ocean, and how they can just fly above any of the problems that we have.”

“I love them too” Laura exclaimed, “That’s why I come here on my way home. I just love laying back on this table and watching them fly above me. They are so majestic”

Personally, Simon did not see what was so great about seagulls, nor did he know what “majestic” meant. His father usually swore at them and referred to them as “flying rats” whenever they shit on his car. Simon tended to agree with his father because he was the one that usually had to clean the shit off. Of course there were always seagulls flying above the parking lot, hunting for scraps and bombing people’s cars. Simon thought that they were some of the dirtiest animals in existence, but Laura did not need to know about his true feelings for her beloved birds.

“Come on, lay back on the table and look up. You can just see them and the sky and nothing else.”

Simon was certainly happy to lay back next to the beautiful girl in the sixth grade and even happier after she said, “We should come out here every day after school and just watch them fly around.”

“Yeah, that would be pretty cool” Simon muttered, not wanting the thrill he felt to carry into his voice. He was going to be able to spend time with her every single day! He was so lost in the thought of this glorious situation that he did not even hear what she had said.

“What?”

“I said what do you think about the birds?”

Simon’s mind raced frantically to find something interesting to say, and as the seconds ticked by, he got more and more desperate. He needed to find something quickly. What is cool about the flying rats? Something, anything! The silence was becoming awkward, so Simon finally just blurted out the first thing that would come to any boy’s mind.

“They blow up!”

After a few seconds of bewildered silence, Laura responded.

“What?”

“I mean yeah, seagulls can blow up.”

“You’re lying to me, seagulls don’t just blow up.”

“Yeah they can, my brother Sam and his friends did it one time.”

“Your brother was probably lying. How could he make a bird blow up?”

“He didn’t lie to me, they really did it. They took some bread and some of my dad’s antacid medicine that he puts in his glass after dinner. They put some of the pills into pieces of bread and threw them to the birds. After they ate them, they would blow up.”

“That’s terrible! How could you let them do such a horrible thing?”

“I wasn’t there, I am just telling you what Sam told me. If I was there I would have stopped them!”

Simon knew that he was lying through his teeth. Even had he wanted to stop Sam, which he probably wouldn’t have, there was no way that Simon was going to be able to stop his older brother from doing anything. That was another tidbit of information that Laura did not really need to know.

“Good” Laura replied, still a little hurt but mollified, “You shouldn’t let anyone hurt those beautiful birds.”

As he lay back in the subsequent silence, Simon knew that this was his chance. He lay there staring up at the birds in the sky, but listening to the sound of her breathing. Slowly, ever so slowly, his hand began to move. He felt his hand slide slowly across the rough and splintered wood. He had no control over it. His heart began pounding in his ears, and sweat rolled down his forehead. Simon thought that he was right next to Laura, yet his hand seemed to travel for miles across a vast terrain of dry, spiky wood.

Finally, after endless travail, his hand found something that was not rough and dry. It was soft, smooth and warm. When Simon’s hand squeezed hers and she squeezed back, he felt the sudden thrill of victory. She was his; the most beautiful girl in the sixth grade was going to be his girlfriend...

Something was wrong. She was squeezing his hand painfully tight. Simon looked over to see what was wrong. Instead of seeing those piercing blue eyes, Simon saw oozing white with bits of purple and green covering Laura’s eyes and running down her face. This was no little splat. The seagull that excreted this waste must have eaten something that did not agree with it. It was a giant multicolored mess that could not have been more accurate if it was a laser guided missile.

Laura was too stunned to move. She could not see or even open her mouth for fear of swallowing a glob of the disgusting stew. She was as stiff as a statue; she did not so much as twitch in the moments that Simon stared at her.

There was only one thing that Simon could do. In such a terrible situation as this, there was only one option for a boy Simon’s age. When he saw what happened to Laura’s face, a whole range of emotions entered Simon’s head. He felt astonishment, pity, fear, anger, sadness and sympathy, but there was only one action that he could take. He burst out laughing. It was uncontrollable. Something like this struck at the very core of an adolescent male’s psyche. There was no other rational recourse for Simon. Something like this only happens once in a lifetime, and Simon took full advantage of the occasion.

Simon’s uncontrollable laughter managed to shake Laura from her self-induced paralysis. She quickly sat up and began to vigorously attempt to remove the bird shit from her face. It was not easy. The excrement was very sticky and there was a lot of it. Laura managed to clean most of it from her mouth and eyes. She gave an ear piercing shriek, the kind that only a girl her age could give. Laura quickly jumped off the bench, grabbed her backpack, and ran for her home. It was this sight, the sight of Laura fleeing so quickly with legs flailing and arms flapping, that finally stifled Simon’s laughter.

The next day was horrible. Simon wanted to see her, but he did not go and look for her. He was both awaiting and dreading history class where he would have no choice but to face Laura’s beautiful wrath. Once again, Simon’s enemy struck. The clocks would take eons to move their minute hands, or sometimes an hour would flash by in the blink of an eye.

Finally, it was time to face his fear. He entered the little classroom with head down and shoulders hunched as if expecting another attack of gastronomically challenged seagulls. Yet, no attack came. Simon's teacher, misinterpreting this nervous behavior, told Simon that if he was that nervous about his report on the Crusades, he could go last to see what the other students had done. Simon did not really care when he went, what really made him nervous was the look on Laura's face.

Laura was simply staring at a point on the wall just to the left of the clock. She had her mouth shut so tight that Simon thought that he would see teeth fly out at any moment. There was not anything overtly threatening about Laura's posture. The outside observer might think that she was just sulking. For some reason, the way she was sitting made Simon uncomfortable and a little scared.

As the other three students made their presentations, Simon watched for any change in Laura's behavior. She did not twitch, or sniff, or do anything else. When it was finally Simon's turn to go, he did not really pay any attention to what he was saying. At that moment, he did not care at all about King Richard or the sacking of Jerusalem, because throughout the entire presentation, Laura did not look at him once.

When the presentation was finished, Mr. Smolensky once again ambushed Simon before he could escape. While he stood at the front of the class with the other three students who presented, listening to Mr. Smolensky complement everyone on their hard work, Simon secretly watched Laura. She quickly and mechanically packed up her bag, all the while, Simon thought he could hear Laura's teeth grinding. She threw her pen in her bag and walked out. Not once did Laura even glance Simon's way.

Once again, Simon flew to his locker, stuffed his backpack, and sprinted out of the school. There she was, sitting on the very same table as yesterday. She had kept her promise to meet there everyday. Simon was so ecstatic that he felt like running right up to her, but as he got closer and saw that same look on her face, he began to wonder if running in the opposite direction was the better option.

Simon had no choice; she had spotted him even though she was not looking right at him. He could tell by the stiffening of her shoulders and the way she looked like she was chewing rocks. He tentatively sat down on the bench next her. As soon as he sat down, Laura picked up her bag and began rummaging around in it. She was probably searching for the wooden seagull to throw in his face. That or she brought her father's gun. Simon wasn't sure which he dreaded more. Either way it was really all the same sad end to him. However, what she finally pulled out and handed Simon wasn't the seagull or her father's gun. It was a small loaf of bread and a bottle of antacid.

Max Klee



Untitled

Joy Messerschmidt

The Human Voice

Tongue
pallet
cheeks
Lips

A vocal tract,
Contracts
Expands,

the neck of
Your body
Breaks,
Silence.

behold,
these Folds,
within
A larynx

Jillian Austin

Artemis

when you gather the
fire, call me what you
want, Locheia, Agrotera,
Kourotrophos, just
remember dear
blemished ones

my arrow is sharp
and flies with wings
of a hawk, look with
eyes of Actaeon, I
will fly my points into
your chest

do not ask for my toys
or locks of hair, I do
not Lay at alters

when you bear down
and scream I will
wipe your sweat, and
if the hunt is right you
will die

do not walk with me
opened legs of Collisto,
I will cast you to the sky,

I don't have mercy
curved in my bow,
with spirits I roam to
the hunger of Blood.

Jillian Austin

Human

I owned a human, once,
but I traded him for
a ceiling light in an eight-cylinder-440-horse-power 1977 Plymouth Fury III
He wasn't very bright anyway

I had a human brother, once,
but I swapped him for
a vintage-chrome-bumper wrap-around-windscreen-neon-lit-1957-plays-100-45-vinyls-
both-sides-AMI200 Antique Jukebox
He couldn't talk or sing very well anyway

I had a human sister, once,
but I convinced the Indian Maharaja of Baroda, Khande Rao Gaekwar,
to swap me for his pearl necklace
before it got to the auction at Christie's in New York
don't tell him, (or Christie's) they both think they came out on top

I had a human mother, once,
but her batteries gave out
so I went to the Mommy Store
and got a newer model with a longer warranty

I had a human father, once,
but he disappeared, one November 11th
into a re-white-blue mist at the Syracuse Veterans Hospital
personally, I think it was the combination of formaldehyde-methanol-ethyl-alcohol
that really put him under
I think that's where I originally lost mother

Once, long ago, they told me
I would be human
as long as
I sing their song
and didn't forget my check
in their 24 karat embossed tray
on my way out the stained glass door

Thomas Sleeth

To Sleep, Perchance to Act (Excerpt)

Emily: I love acting when the story is good, the audience is listening, and the storytellers are skilled. But if my comates and brothers in exile don't know what they're saying or how to say it, or even if they can't physicalize it, then the joy drains. And even if the whole cast is brilliant, the director can ruin everything. "I think *Oedipus Rex* is about one man's journey into true and unsullied love that has been misinterpreted for centuries" "*Macbeth* is actually about the plight of the black man in southern Georgia after segregation" "*The Crucible* is about affirmative action and the glass ceiling." It's about race, about gender, it's about gay rights even though everyone in the piece is straight; it's about reverse racism even though nobody in the play is human. It's about sex, because everything is about sex. Sex all the time! Sex sex sex! Penis penis penis! Vagina vagina vagina! (*embarrassed*) Sorry. I get easily peeved about this sort of thing. It doesn't matter how nice they are, it doesn't matter how personally considerate they are, what they are doing is jerking off and it is not in service of the play. And how many people am I going to work with as an actor who don't give a shit about the play? (*Enter Josh*)

Josh: Hey Erin?

Emily: (*Aside to the audience*) Case in point.

Josh: Erin, you got a minute?

Emily: Sure thing, Jake.

Josh: Uh, the name's Josh.

Emily: Oh, my mistake. How could I have been so utterly inconsiderate as to have forgotten the name of the actor I'm playing against?

Josh: What?

Emily: Nothing. What can I do for you?

Josh: So, like, Ophelia, right?

Emily: ...Yes?

Josh: So she's like, all about Hamlet right?

Emily: You mean is she in love with him?

Josh: Yeah, like, she wants his body, right?

Emily: Theoretically...

Josh: So do you like, think they did it or anything?

Emily: No. No I do not.

Josh: Really? Doesn't Fallwell think they did?

Emily: Yes, but she and I disagree on that particular point.

Josh: How come, dude? 'Cause I mean if she's into him, and if she's hot and all, then like, why not?

Emily: Because it was a lot less common for well-bred people to be as unabashedly whorey back then as they are now.

Josh: Oh. But we're doing the show like it's now, right?

Emily: You mean it's a contemporary setting? Yes.

Josh: Well then maybe they did it this time. You know? Like, they would do it now, so maybe they did.

Emily: That is an arguable point, but not one that I'm particularly interested in arguing.

Josh: Well like, maybe if we did it, it would make sense.

Emily: If we did what now?

Josh: Well like, if we did it –

Emily: It? As in it???

Josh: Yeah. Like, if we did it then maybe it would be like they did it and it would all make sense.

Emily: Are you propositioning me?

Josh: No, I'm just saying maybe we should do it.

Emily: That – That is not anything close to anything that is ever going to happen.

Josh: What?

Emily: Under no circumstances am I going to sleep with you. Ever. Ever ever ever. Ever. Ever.

Josh: But like, for the play?

Emily: No!

Josh: But I thought you were like, all about the play?

Emily: It's a play! I don't have to actually like you, let alone sleep with you, which I don't think Ophelia has done anyway so my sleeping with you or not – and again let me emphasize NOT – has absolutely no bearing on the production, and so help me if you ever bring it up again I will knee you where the sun don't shine!

Josh: Damn, you're uptight. No wonder Hamlet's all "get you to a nun." (*Exit Josh*)

Fiona Barbour



Dreamer's Lament

Richard Brayton

The Un-Civil Airport

To empty her safety deposit box,
I flew to Michigan after Mom died.
Coming home, I spread my legs and
Security ran a rod between them.
They rifled my suitcase. I saw a spark,
A leap of electricity, jump from guard to guard,

“You’ll have to check this bag.”

The carry-on held my mother’s gold earrings,
Her pearls, a small bag of gold coins,
Her documents, will, and my Grandmother’s
Necklace from the Queen of England,
For her service to the UN.

“I cannot check this bag.”

Strong-armed into a small back room,
I marched, face hot, the loss
Of my mother fresh on my skin.
A click of lock. I sat.
A woman guard snapped back and forth
In front of me, an angry bitch,
Her gun snapped into her belt,
Her butt broad and strident.

“You will not be flying today.”

She pulled my Grandmother's
Bird scissors from her pocket,
X-rayed in the lining of my suitcase—
The tiny gold and silver thread-cutters
Pierced the moment with loss,
It's screw eye and pointy beak—
I saw my Grandmother and Mother then,
Mending a shirt, sewing on a button,
Passing the scissors between them. I tried
To tell them of this moment—
They wouldn't believe it, too un-American, too
Unconstitutional.

"It could never happen here."

I heard their voices, reminding me, "Be careful
With those scissors, you could poke out—
Or lose an eye."

Sylvia O'Connor

Decrescendo

Vera tore into the studio of the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, juggling her violin case as she pulled her glove from the wrist that had always been a bit stiff since . . . *then*. She breathed into her hands, the pearly scars blending into the skin blanched with the unseasonable chill. She mustn't ruin such a perfect chance. If she could just keep this job, she could get her residence permit again — everything would go back to normal.

“Vera!” called a voice from the strings section. The conductor waved her over with his hat. “Good to see our first chair is so early.” He grinned. “At least that hasn't changed, thank God.”

She twisted her grimace into a smile. “Hello, Misha.”

“This is going to be fantastic. You know how important good string players are in the Fifth, especially if the composer is actually going to be there . . .”

Her gaze strayed to the man beside him. Pins and needles washed over her skin. Questioning herself, she glanced over to Misha, then looked back. But, no. That same face that had leered from the darkness of her nightmares now lived in flesh and deed before her.

“How silly of me,” Misha caught on, incorrectly. “Verusha, this is Anton Davidovich Volkov. He's your second chair.”

“Congratulations, Vera Ivanovna.” Anton held out a hand.

Vera regarded it as if it were Stalin's own. But Misha was too busy peering, head cocked, at his second chair to notice.

“Have you two met before?”

Met. If one could call that violent encounter in Lubianka prison *meeting*. If one could say that *meeting* meant that still every detail of their encounter crackled with the vividity — lividity — of streaming electricity.

“Briefly,” Anton managed.

Snatching Misha by the elbow, Vera interjected, “Excuse me, a moment, Misha could we . . . ?” She stabbed a glance at the control room.

Misha jumped in surprise when his violinist slammed the door behind her. She slumped against it, breathing as if pursued by spectral tormentors. “It's him.”

“Who?”

The creases of fear in her brow arched in bewilderment. This really couldn't be happening. If she just ignored it, if she didn't speak his —

“Verusha, what is it?”

“It's . . . Anton Volkov. One of the KGB who interrogated me.” Her mouth tasted bitter from having formed those words. *Interrogated* didn't even do justice against his actions. The way he'd ripped open and repossessed even the most intimate details of her identity —

“Oh. Dear.”

Those words did not ring with the promise of his expulsion.

Misha cleared his throat. “Well, Verusha — and please don't take this the wrong way.” His

hands strayed to his buttons, a nervous habit from their conservatory days. “He resigned a long time ago. Something about a nervous disorder. He’s quite talented, you know. I took him in as a favor —” He glanced up long enough to give her a look “— but he’s stayed on for his skill.”

This had to be a trap. How could Misha be so oblivious? “Do you know what he *did* to me?”

Misha’s voice rapped like a baton against a music stand. “Things are different now, Vera. Stalin’s dead. You’re out of the camps, aren’t you? And I’ll have you know, Anton left long before Khrushchev made that speech about Stalin’s mistakes. So give him a chance.”

He never gave *her* a chance. He’d assumed her guilt from the start.

“You don’t know that he’s not an informer.”

He gave a grunt of a sigh. “No. No, I don’t. But sometimes you just have to have a little faith in people, Verusha.”

“I — I can’t do this.”

“Vera, be reasonable.”

This was no place for reason. Reason had abandoned her, as had normality.

“Just remember.” Misha might as well have accused her. “If you leave, first chair will have to go to him. As will performing the Fifth for Shostakovich at his birthday gala. So it’s up to you. Good luck in Kostla or Kotlas or wherever you came from.”

He opened the door, exited, and closed it as firmly as the subject.

Vera collapsed against it. Oh, how close she’d been to normality — until *he* snatched her future from her a second time. He tore apart her life like he tore up her permit. Would he always distort everything? Wasn’t it enough that he took her health, her faith, and seven years of opportunities? Must he now take this opportunity, too?

Perhaps Misha was right. Perhaps things were different, but not in that way. She didn’t have to tolerate this — she wasn’t the victim anymore. He wouldn’t take this opportunity from her for himself. Standing, she flung open the door. She did not spend eighty-seven months in Siberia just to hand her life over again and squat in some abandoned tundra village playing folk tunes at factory union concerts. She would find normality if she had to make music with evil itself.

The door juddered shut with her resolve.

Vera plunged into her seat, whipped out her bow, and began tuning.

“Congratulations,” Anton murmured beneath the hailstorm of cacophony. “First chair. That’s quite an honor.”

She jerked a knob, only to snap her E string.

Misha glared at her. She replaced her string without glancing back.

“Assuming our string section is ready —” the conductor began; the brass laughed

“— let’s start with the third movement. Try to capture the undulation of waves. One-two-three-four —”

As she drew her bow over the strings to join the almost choral harmony, she found herself dissolving into the honesty the music sang. How normal this felt. More than normal — it transported her back to the church services she would light candles at, back before — her stomach contracted, but Misha interrupted.

“More contrast in the dynamics. Think of a person, drowning in something greater than himself.”

As the oboe floated into its solo, Anton tilted his head. “That —” he murmured, surely not to himself “— sounds like the ‘amen’ from the Jewish liturgy, now that I think about it.”

Her eyes snapped toward his face, but she redirected them neutrally to his hands. Maybe he really was slipping. “I’m not Jewish, you know.”

“I know. My mother was.” He chuckled. She was just beginning to notice the gleaming scars across his wrists when he added, “No, I’ve converted. Thank you.”

Vera clapped a palm over her knee. A flame of indignation flared from her eyes before she could smother it. He glanced down at her hand. Vera couldn’t muster the self-irritation at how she had slipped. Could he strike her any lower? *Especially* — after — that day, or night, beneath the light bulb —

“Are you praying?” he had said.

His observation had jerked her from her trance, the silent motion falling from her lips, though the mantra had continued in her mind.

“‘Religion is the opiate of the people,’” he’d quoted, taking a drag from his cigarette. “You should transfer your faith in your fairy tales to the real promises of Stalin’s Communism, and confess your guilt.”

“Just as you are loyal to your leader —” Vera had interjected “— I am loyal to my friends and my faith. I’d sooner die than betray them and burn for my efforts.”

The captain had laughed — dry like the kindling heaped on a pyre.

“Is that what you fear?” He’d knelt to her level, puffing the smoke from his lips into her face. The aridity had scorched her eyes, stung her cracking skin. “Is this why you won’t confess?”

He’d driven the smoldering end of his cigarette into her knee.

“Because the only hell you have to fear is the kind Stalin’s justice will rain on your head if you refuse to confess.”

“Vera!” Misha had his baton directed at her again. She realized the orchestra was stifled, and she colored. “Nadia — from the last measure, please.”

Vera could not make it through the movement, however, before Anton pressed on. “Really, I’m glad for you.” He leaned toward her. “That you’ve gotten somewhat back to normal.”

“Normal.” She bolted to her feet, tipping their music stand, the pages of their score fluttering like a dove’s wings. Rationality struggled to cling to her actions, but she crushed its fingers underfoot and sent it falling. *Enough*. “What could I ever know of normal anymore?”

Leaving the score and the orchestra stilled behind, she strode off, away from the infinite loop of the past.

“Wait —! I’m sorry.” He followed her down the corridor, gasping at the sudden exertion. “That was stupid. I know your life’s not normal. Mine isn’t either, but at least I deserve it. Forgive me, please.”

“*You* —” She spun round and hissed “— have a job, favor in the eyes of Chairman Khrushchev, guaranteed residency and income. You have *normality*.”

“And nightmares, illness, and guilt I can’t be rid of no matter how hard I try.”

“And you think I don’t?”

“No, I —”

“I don’t want to *listen!*” Her hands tensed, electrified, surrounding her head. *I don’t want to know you!*

She stormed back into the studio. He’d asked her to forgive him. It was a ploy, of course, to trick her into compromising herself again. Yet her heart felt like a weight was crushing it. She forced the thought aside, narrowing her mind until there was no one left but her, the violin, and the music.

As she packed up her case at the end of rehearsal, she watched Anton talk with Misha, until the conductor put his head in his hand. Between his fingers, he shot her another look.

Vera returned her gaze to her instrument long enough for Misha to restore his to Anton, careful to keep her organization muted enough to hear their conversation.

“Anton, you don’t have to do this. You were here first.”

“Don’t worry about me.” He shifted his case to his other hand. “I’ve thought this all out.”

“I’m serious, you know.”

Anton shook his head. “So am I.”

“Well, at the very least, I’m keeping your telephone number.”

Anton laughed; he clapped Misha on the shoulder. “I’ll see you.”

And with that, he took off.

With Anton out of sight, Vera lifted her case and began to leave.

“I hope you’re happy,” Misha called after her.

She ignored him, and passed down the corridor. It served Anton right, quitting a Shostakovich. He couldn’t handle the admonition it served him. As long as he was playing honest music, he wouldn’t be able to lie about his regret.

She forced out the exit door, but at the same instant someone — Anton — pulled it open; the door hit him, knocking the violin case from his hands with a clatter. He yelped; the case popped open and ejected its instrument.

“Sorry —” her instincts took over, but discomfort overwhelmed her. Disgusted with herself, she bent toward his things — “Here, let me —”

“No — that’s —”

He dove for his case, but she grabbed his violin. Vera’s eyes sharpened.

“What was that?”

“What?”

“You went after your case,” Vera said. “Any self-respecting musician would hang the case and protect his instrument.”

“I —”

She latched onto his case and jerked. “What are you hiding?”

It fell open. Anton looked firmly aside. The lid swung in the air, the paper prayer card glued inside it rocking before her eyes. St. Paul. Vera stared at it.

Anton took this opportunity to take his violin from her and put it back in his case. He snapped the clasps shut. “Well, now you know. Go ahead and inform on me.”

“What?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t think I haven’t seen every excuse. I really converted. Now you can go skipping off down to the Lubianka and get your revenge. Enjoy it.”

This wasn’t abnormal any more — this was unreal. “*What?*”

“You’ve lost faith,” he stated. “It’s terrible, because you’re the one that . . . got me to start questioning my beliefs. I tried to tell you that, but the way you reacted . . . I hoped you thought I was lying. But it doesn’t matter anymore, now does it?”

He thought she was . . . *Dear God, what have I done?* She’d let him take over her — the malice and torment he’d served her she gave right back to him. How had she let herself descend to this.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked at her, perplexed.

Vera sighed. “I’m not turning you in. I . . .” She cast around for something new, something normal . . . “You’re a good second chair.”

“. . . Thank you?” He paused. “You’re . . . a good first chair.”

The silence was strangling. “The orchestra really doesn’t have enough time to prepare another violinist,” she ventured. “And this concert is very important to me. And Misha. You can’t quit now.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Anton. Please.”

He glanced at her. She met his gaze.

“I do hate to stress Misha like that,” he started.

“Well, we should probably let him know he doesn’t have to.” Anton nodded. Vera opened the door back into the studio, and stepped across the threshold. Hesitating, she leaned back, and caught the closing panel. She held the door open for him.

Ashley O’Mara

While You Do Whatever It Is You Do

Nana would lie in bed in sweats and wait for
Grandpa until dawn turned the sky
the same warm color of the chemise she slipped into,
tearing off her headscarf, stashing her sweatpants
where he could not see them.
She was home to the man who was late,
Like her period that month, then

Mom would wait until Dad was done getting high
behind the pizza shop dumpsters
She would lie lonely in forest green,
the straps of her cami slipping down
bronzed cocoa shoulders,
as forgotten as the tear that slid a path down her cheek.
Dad was late from work,
like her period that month, now

Brother, Natasha waits until you decide to stop being young,
and until she decides to stop being dumb,
while you do whatever it is you do.

And on a holiday like today,
the women sip wine in the kitchen,
over steaming stoves while the men recline
in the living room, impatiently waiting for dinner.
They shout a heated debate about pigskin,
while the woman giggle about pigheaded men.

Staci Dennis



Lost Hope

Richard Brayton

Me and Trees

Sometimes trees look tired
when wind is going through them and their long branches
sway over to one side like a stretch
or a wide green yawn.

I can hear them saying
will you just let me sleep my warm green sleep.

I think sometimes they just want some rest.
They must get tired standing there all the time.
Waving their green fans. Standing with deep voices.

Other times they are quiet
still
shaking only slightly
like a rattle.
Or when you hear the wind in their branches sounding like tiny beads of ice
flowing in with the tide.
Breathing light in and out lazy as turning over in your sleep.
But glimmering as if they know a secret.

They let me climb them
with young fingers that sometimes tear
and feet that scrape and slide
leaving a trail of green tinsel at their feet.

Then there are the times when I let them sleep
their lazy green sleep as I sit under their branches
and rest with them. My head against their strong brown skin
thick with years.

I close my eyes and fall asleep
warmed by their silent green fire.

Alicia Jastorff

Death Sticks

He takes a long drag of his cigarette, a long drag. Besides the dim flickering light hanging from the ceiling, the glow of his cigarette is the only other light in the room. He likes the darkness, not only does it hide his face, but it hides his shaking hands. He slowly exhales the smoke from his lungs, the smoke rises even slower. The heat from the cigarette starts to burn between his fingers, snapping him out of his momentary coma. Flicking the butt onto the concrete floor he reaches into his pocket and pulls out another death stick.

“You know those things will kill ya,” a voice says from within the darkness.

He doesn't respond and struggles to light a match. Like clockwork the scrape of a matchbox sounds and a flame ignites from the darkness. A hand reaches out, offering the flame to his cigarette. The cigarette almost falls out of his mouth, but the end sticks to the wetness of his lips. He quickly recovers and takes a few puffs. The match illuminates his face for a second, but not enough to reveal his features to the man in the darkness.

“You ought to quit them things you know,” the man in the darkness persists. Still no response. “My brother smoked three packs a day, them things, he died from lung cancer just the other year.”

He is almost at the end of yet another cigarette, which brings him right back to his coat pocket.

“Shit,” the smoking man murmurs. His pack is empty. Now he will have to say something. What, he has no idea.

“Anyways, I always told that poor bastard those things were gonna kill him some day...he never listened to me.”

The smoking man opens his mouth to respond but gets cut off before he can utter a single word.

“Listen, I'd like to get down to business, Mr...”

He is hesitant to respond, but manages to cough out, “John...”, he clears his throat, “Johnson.”

“Okay, Mr. Johnson, have you reviewed what I have offered you?”

“Yeah,” is the only word he's able to respond with. His concentration is on the bead of sweat that is slowly making its way from his forehead down to the tip of his nose. The bead falls and graces his lips. He can taste his fear in his sweat.

“And you understand the consequences, Mr. Johnson,” the nearly invisible man sternly asks. “I happen to be a very serious man, and there's nothing I take more seriously than business... Do you understand?”

Searching his pockets, he forgets he is out of cigarettes. God damn does he need a cigarette at this moment. Johnson inhales loudly and slowly as he buys time to review everything in his head.

“I don't have all day Mr. Johnson! Now, do you, or don't you understand me?”

His family runs through his mind: his wife, the kids, the family dog, even his mother-in-law for God's sake. He knows he is in too deep now.

“Yeah, whats the number again?” Johnson replies.

“We will settle for eight hundred and sixty four dollars... U.S. currency of course.” There is a short silence. “Do we have a deal?”

Johnson uses the darkness to his advantage and slowly reaches into his breast pocket inside his jacket. His sweaty palm wraps around the object, the metal cold to the touch. He tries to be silent but accidentally makes a loud click. The man in the darkness quickly reaches behind him and flicks on a light switch.

“Ah I see wee have an agreement Mr. Johnson,” the now visible man says happily. “I’m telling you, you’re wife is going to love this vacuum, you are making the right decision!”

Johnson takes his pen out of his pocket and hesitantly signs his name at the bottom of the document that the salesman has placed on the table. Eight hundred and sixty four damn dollars for a damn vacuum that his wife won’t respect and that his kids will probably break.

“Let me remind you that this is not any ordinary vacuum Mr. Johnson, it also transforms into a power washer, paint sprayer, toilet cleaner, and dog groomer... let me tell you, your house will never be dirty again.”

Johnson wipes the sweat from his forehead and looks the salesman in the eyes. “I need a cigarette.”

Brenton Finizio

Cancellation

My class for this afternoon was cancelled, not
Held, not taught, which quite surprised me, and intrigued
Me, because now I had to find something to
Do to fill the time

When I was supposed to be in class. I thought,
And I thought, and I thought, until it seemed like
All I was going to do was think about
What I could do in

My unexpected free time. There was not a
Desire to work, for this was a nice treat, a
Chance to take a break from the rigor of the
School day, before I

Joined my group to work on our presentation.
As I thought, and thought, and thought, my time slipped from
My grasp like water, leaving me with little
But what I have now.

Evan Thomas

Reading Verses to Stone

I read my lyrics
to my parents
wind drifting
across their polished marble seats
spent leaves at the base
where indented inscription
listed lives lived
losses lost
loves loved
dates dated

Another dried arrangement
thrown away

Thomas Sleeth



Lunch Break

Ashley O'Mara

Changing

Cortez looked at the clock in eager anticipation. The little hand looked so much like the big hand, or was it the other way around? He could never tell.

“It has to be soon,” he thought.

The second hand ticked slowly. There were a couple of times when it got so slow Cortez almost told the teacher. But it always eventually ticked again, causing Cortez to swallow his words.

He knew the end was near. He could feel it. It was pal-pa-ble, as the teacher would say.

There were stealthy noises coming from the edge of the room. His classmates were sitting up, hunching over, and sitting up again.

He watched as Brad preemptively placed his pencils in his desk hoping the teacher would see and punish him for packing up early. But she didn't.

Last week, as Cortez tried to pull the same maneuver, Brad had told the teacher that Cortez was making faces at him. While he didn't get in trouble for that, he did get in trouble for packing early. “It's rude!” Miss Aubry had hissed at him.

His mind turned back on the waiting.

He squeezed the edges of his chair, trying to contain his energy, trying to will himself to stillness. He could feel the rush of heat sweep over him. His face turned red. His shoes squeezed his feet. The sides of his wrists and hands started to sweat. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton – and his eyes itched.

Just when he thought he couldn't stand it anymore he thought of Marty. How he had jumped out of his seat and raced around the room, no longer able to contain his energy.

ADHD they said. He took Ritalin now. Most of Cortez's friends took Ritalin, or Adderall. He didn't want to though. It changed people. It changed his friends.

He slumped in his chair, feeling spent. And then the bell went off with its loud electric ‘ring’ sound.

Every student but Cortez was on their respective feet within a second and was out the door within another.

He still sat in his chair, musing on his Unseen Warfare and his drugged-up friends.

Then he saw Brad moving down the hall with his Lebron jersey on.

At that, images of a hoop and net swept over Cortez. He jumped out of his desk, yanked his foot free from the clutches of one desk leg, and raced out the door almost knocking over little Miss Aubry in the process.

“Slow down,” she screeched. “Or I'll have you visit the doctor!”

He loved the feel of it in his hands. Smooth, yet sticky. Its rubbery smell drifted into his consciousness and he took a deep breath – letting it come.

The he realized that he was standing there treating his basketball like it was cheese flan.

He glanced around to make sure no one saw his moment of softness and ran off toward the park.

The streets were bad. A pungent smell hung in the air. He tripped on the cracked sidewalk where a tree root had grown through the cement.

“Damn,” he said. Then he immediately felt bad for swearing.

“Thou Shalt Not Take the Name of the Lord in Vain,” thundered his mother every morning. Those words now branded themselves in front of his eyes – like a light does after you look at it for too long.

“Is damn a bad name for God?” he thought.

As he was deliberating this question his legs faithfully bounced him up to the basketball courts.

“Hey Tony,” he said to a tall skinny boy covered in pimples and freckles. There were so many that they blended together to create a dappled look. Behind his back some called him “Spotty,” but only behind his back.

“Sup Mike,” he continued, giving a slight head nod to a strong-looking boy with huge hands.

“Bro,” he nodded at Marcus, unable to hide his friendly smile. He only ever said “bro” to Marcus. But Marcus had his back, and that made things different.

“Let’s play two-on-two,” Marcus said. “Me and ‘Tez.”

“Dude,” said Tony. “I don’t want to do that! You’ll win.”

The boys stood there looking at each other. Cortez spat on the ground, turned around, and said, “Let’s just play 21.”

Tony smiled, agreeing with Cortez, but before he could say anything else Marcus said, “You’re a woman, Tony.”

There was a moment of silence as Tony digested this insult. His brow furrowed a little, and then cleared. Then it furrowed again and his hands, loosely hanging at his sides, formed themselves into fists.

“Damn, this could be bad,” thought Cortez. This thought quickly begat the next: “Is it bad to think the word damn?”

He was lifted out of his reverie by Tony’s decision to viciously attack Marcus.

With three steps and a jump Tony launched himself into Marcus like a linebacker into a quarterback. The two hit the ground and started twirling over and over – creating the effect sought after by cartoon writers when they show a swirl of dust and hands to represent a fight.

Cortez looked on with a concerned face when he felt a sharp pain in his knee. Someone had hit him.

He spun around and saw Brad.

Brad looked like a taller more-muscled and pimple-free version of Tony, which made sense because he was Tony’s older brother.

Cortez ducked the fist that Brad flung at him, jumped onto his stomach and rolled over into a defensive position.

“No one touches my little brother,” barked Brad, trying to find a gap in Cortez’s defense.

“You hurt him all the time,” retorted Cortez. “You are always ‘touching’ him.”

“Burn,” yelled Mike. “Major burn,” he repeated before turning and running down the street, carefully jumping the low cement slabs the city called benches.

This comment caused Brad to turn and look at Mike’s fleeing heels. It was all the opening Cortez needed. He took four quick steps and kicked the unseeing Brad between the legs. As Brad instinctively hunched his body Cortez delivered a rapid punch to his face.

This last stinging blow created the exit door for Cortez and he ran through it. He turned and looked over his shoulder and started to form words on his lips when his body came to an abrupt, if cushioned, stop.

As Cortez pulled his head around to examine this unexpected obstacle he felt two hands grab his shoulders with a grip that tightened and tightened. He took a gulp of air and looked up – into a big broad bulbous face.

Cortez felt his stomach go weak, like the feeling he got right before he walked in through the doors of the free clinic.

His mind raced, he wanted to hit, to run, to scream. He wanted to be the Hulk: to have unlimited power at his disposal. He wanted to use his green wrath to destroy Brad, Tony, and the big police officer now holding him.

But he didn’t, because he couldn’t.

Cortez sat in the kitchen with his elbows resting on the table holding his head up. It felt heavy, and got heavier with each second. His stomach still felt unsettled. Not like it had when Lucy Russell gave him a Valentine’s Day card, but like when Brad had taken that card and made fun of him to all the cool dudes. It was a painful and cowardly fluttering. And he wanted to be brave, like a man.

“Remember who you are,” his grandfather had told him. “You are Cortez Garcia, and you must be a man.”

He remembered how his grandfather told him about Hernan Cortez, his namesake.

“The Great Cortez led 600 brave soldiers into the mighty Aztec empire. They fought their way in against thousands, and then fought their way out against thousands. Those 600 men conquered the greatest empire on American soil.”

“Bravery led them,” his grandfather said.

And Cortez wanted to be brave.

“But he did nothing wrong! Nothing,” hissed Cortez’s mother into the phone. Cortez knew that tone of voice, and he was scared of it.

“I will not,” she said again. “It is not right.”

Then her face went from looking defiant to looking panicked.

“But you can’t take him out of school.” These words were said with a soft, broken tone. Like when Cortez last said goodbye to his grandfather.

“He needs that. He needs that,” his mother continued in the same tone. She was pacing back and forth from the stove to the sink. One, two, three: one, two, three: one, two, three. Faster and faster.

Cortez felt dizziness spread through his head. His mother’s tone of voice caused him to look around the room hurriedly. Then he became still. Very still. When something frightened his mother Cortez became terrified. Nothing felt like that. Well, trying to sleep without a blanket in the dark felt like that. But it wasn’t as bad.

“Okay. Okay, I will take him. Tomorrow? Okay, at 11.”

His mother hung the phone up and turned to look at him. Her face was wrinkled, her eyes dull, and her lips pursed, but her back was straight.

“Cortez,” she said. Her voice sounded tired. Like when she got home from work. But there was something else in it too, it was sad and tired.

“You aren’t going to school tomorrow. I’m taking you to the doctor’s instead”

He wanted to scream and run.

“I have to be brave,” he thought. “I am Cortez.”

Cortez stepped out of bed, tested his weight, and took a stealthy step forward.

The words, “I have to be brave. I have to be brave,” cycled through his head like that song they sang on the school bus about John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith.

He knew he couldn’t take regular steps because the floor made noises. But he knew where it didn’t make noises, and that is where he placed his toes. Then his foot hit something and he lunged out for the wall but couldn’t reach it. There was a moment of silence as he fell.

“The calm before the story,” as Miss Aubry would say.

“How can I think about that at a time like this,” thought Cortez. He would have continued thinking about thinking, if his hands, knees, and chest had not hit the floor with a loud thud.

His lips attempted to silently form the word “Damn,” but he interrupted himself before they could come together and complete the ‘M’ sound. Cortez knew he couldn’t sabotage his chance at success with a sinful slip-up like that.

Instead, he remained motionless on the floor, his breaths coming short. There was no sound but the echo of his own fall, and that seemed to last forever. At first he was sure the police would be there any second, but after a short time he let himself hope that his clumsiness would go undetected. He reached out and felt his basketball lying in his path, right where he had left it, not 10 seconds after his mother had told him to put it away.

He heard a noise. His heart stopped. It was his mother in the room next door.

“Please! Please! Please,” he silently whispered to himself over and over again. These tacit prayers were answered with more silence.

Unable to contain himself any longer Cortez stood up, took a slow step, and started toward the door. His legs sailed him out the door, and he imagined himself as a sleek ship sailing silently through

the water at night on a secret mission for king and country.

When Cortez reached the kitchen he opened the medicine cupboard and ran through the motions that he had played over and over in his mind hundreds of times before. He took the orange bottle of Adderall and emptied its contents into his left pajama pocket, fastidiously forcing himself to remember the level of fullness. Leaving the lid carefully off, he opened the white bottle of vitamin C and poured its contents into his hand. Then, cupping his hand to create a mini-funnel, he filled the orange bottle to the meticulously remembered level, making sure to put one pill into his right pocket. He put the caps on both bottles, placed them on the shelf in exactly the same position, and shut the cupboard door silently.

When he got to the bathroom Cortez stood up on the toilet and delicately slipped the pointy edge of the 'L' hook into the circular lock hole. He gently pushed on the door, and being satisfied with its security turned on the light. He took all the pills but one from his pocket and gently eased them into the toilet, not letting them create even the slightest splash.

"I would be good at fishing," he thought. He quickly dismissed these thoughts as extraneous and took the pill from his right pocket and placed it next to the single pill that had momentarily escaped joining the pill community in the toilet.

They looked the same. Exactly the same, in fact. Just as Cortez knew they would.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes Yes Yes."

Cortez marched through the halls with his shoulders and head set back. His feet hit the ground, lifted up and then popped back down in an easy elastic motion. He imagined himself marching through the deserts and jungles of Mexico as one of Hernan Cortez's conquistadors. He saw the pointed steel helmet, the broad shiny breastplate, and the pointy moustache turned up at the end. In one hand he carried a large machete which he used to hack through the jungle of children on his way to class. In his other hand he carried a long jeweled pistol which he kept aimed at the classroom doors as he marched past, ever ready to fend off the attack of the savage teachers. He was just pulling the trigger on Mr. Saunders when he arrived at his own classroom.

Putting his hands down, adjusting his backpack, and taking a deep breath he marched into the prison.

"I hope they don't cut my heart out," he thought, but then felt bad because he knew that for all their savagery the teachers weren't nearly that bad. But sometimes they got awful darn close.

"Darn," he said aloud. "A good word. Not too bad, but not too clean either. It was just perfect," ran his thoughts.

Cortez arrived at his desk and sat down on it gingerly – acting like it was foreign to him. He settled back, yawned, and let his head drop so far back that he was looking at the classroom door upside down. He was just thinking how awesome it would if the ceiling really were the floor, with no obstacles and plenty of room to run around, when he saw the Kobe jersey-clad Brad walk in.

He yanked his head up so fast that it hit his collar bone and felt a brief but soon overwhelmed bolt of pain. The pain was canceled by fear, because as he sat there head screwed around he saw Brad walking toward him.

And Brad was not walking like he normally did, bouncing, striding, leaning all ways to give and receive high-fives from his buddies. He was walking still. His face was set, his eyes dull, and his movement precise. He never walked like that except when he was ready to play an official basketball game or on the way to a fight. And he was coming right at Cortez.

Cortez started sitting up, trying to escape, but sat back down when he saw Miss Aubry's eyes drawn toward him by his movement. He got that old feeling in his stomach, his shirt closed about him, and everything got slow. So slow that Cortez felt like he was in one of those cowboy movies where everything goes to slow motion right before the draw.

Yet he didn't have a gun. He only had a pencil, and it wasn't even a cool 49ers pencil like the one Marcus had. His was a boring yellow pencil. Yellow, the color of cowardice.

"I have to be brave," he said to himself.

But he didn't. Because Brad just walked right by and sat down at his desk three rows up and two over. Brad took out his books, set two pencils by them, and sat upright in his chair. He looked straight ahead, in silence, not moving a single muscle.

"What the hell," Cortez almost said aloud. Then he remembered that those who use the word 'hell' go there. At least that is what his mother told him.

And then Miss Aubry asked for a volunteer to read the assignment – and Brad volunteered. He read in a low monotone voice without any movement. When he finished he closed his book and continued staring at his desk.

"He's changed," thought Cortez.

He was just about to start imagining himself in a deathly battle with the dinosaur pictured on the wall when his words came back to him.

"He's changed."

"BRAD IS CHANGED."

Aidan Cleghorn



The Beach
Amber MacDuffie

Spring

Sweet wick and pink buds ponder a blooming
two blushing lovers, birch wood and soft cotton
the future vast, fear forgotten – an ocean stirring
luminous portal forming – for the mind – a looking glass behooving

Amber MacDuffie

Fall

Soon winter clocks in
tickling the bones until sore
Death: bright white silence

Amber MacDuffie

Looking for Aliens

The fallen autumn foliage was up to Jimmy's ankles. As he walked through the woods, little bits of brown and red leaves stuck to the Velcro on his sneakers. The trees were thin and tall, dull brown with few branches. When Jimmy looked up he could see the tops swaying in the October wind. They made creaking noises that echoed through the woods. And though there were many trees, all around Jimmy and as far as he could see, there was enough room for him to walk easily through the forest. He was deep in the woods; he was looking for aliens.

He carried with him a bright yellow squirt gun. It was filled with water, just in case the aliens were allergic. He saw an alien on television once who was allergic to water, and he figured it was a good theory. Around his neck he wore a blue and red scarf, to show whomever he came across that he was an American. Under each of his big brown eyes were three lines of face paint. Brown, green, and black. The paint felt cool against his cheeks when he faced the wind. He wore all green. He felt he could blend into the forest, not be noticed, like a tiger in long grass.

Jimmy checked the compass that hung from around his neck. It was made of clear plastic, and the needle and markings were red. He knew it pointed north, always. His father taught him how to use it. He twisted the compass so that the "N" and the needle were aligned, and he looked west. West was where he wanted to go, deeper into the woods.

As he walked he kicked up leaves with his white sneakers. It hadn't rained in some time and the leaves were very dry. They made a swooshing sound when he kicked. He picked one up and crumpled it in his hand. The tiny bits stuck to his sweaty palms, and he wiped his hand on his pants. On a tree he saw a caterpillar. It was brown with black tips, and fuzzy. He put his finger up to its mouth and it stopped climbing the tree. It curled upward and swayed around before climbing on Jimmy's hand. It felt like a feather brushing his finger. Jimmy flung it to the ground, and continued west. There were no signs of aliens yet.

Ahead of him, Jimmy saw a flower. Its petals were light purple like Easter eggs, and they surrounded what looked like little orange tentacles. Jimmy had never seen this sort of flower before, and thought it was strange to see one this time of year. It was solitary, proudly standing alone above the fallen leaves. Jimmy decided to practice his aim on it. He closed his left eye and lifted his squirt gun up to his right. He moved his right leg behind his body and stiffened. He began to pump pressure into the squirt gun until it became too hard to pump. He aimed, and pulled the trigger. A light hissing accompanied the stream of water. It hit the flower right in the center. Jimmy knew his aim was good and moved on.

There was no sun, so Jimmy didn't have to squint. The air felt cool and moist, and the sky was blanketed by grey clouds. It would probably rain soon. As Jimmy walked he saw the cracked shell of a light blue egg resting upon a small cluster of dry leaves. The egg looked like a strange eye that peered at Jimmy from the ground. Next to the egg was the frail and feeble body of a baby bird, its mouth agape in a silenced scream.

Something caught Jimmy's gaze ahead of him. About four feet up a tree there was a wound left by a branch ripped off at its base. The tree bled a sticky clear ooze, and the splintered wood stuck out the side with sharp points. Jimmy wondered, could this be a sign of aliens? He had never seen a branch ripped off like that. He looked around the tree to try to find the branch, but there was nothing but leaves

and dry dirt. If a bear had ripped off the limb, the branch would still lie on the ground. No, this was no bear. Something deliberately tore it off and left with it. Jimmy wasn't ready to sound the alarm just yet, but he was on his guard. The aliens could be anywhere.

Suddenly, a strange noise emerged from the wind and creaking trees. Jimmy jumped, but didn't quite hear what it was. The wind subsided and the creaking stopped. There was only silence. Then again, the noise. It sounded like a woman's laugh. It came from Jimmy's right. He figured he should follow it, and he did.

Again, there was the laugh. It was distant and muffled, but Jimmy knew he was going in the right direction. As he walked, he could hear the faint sounds of human voices among the squawking birds and swaying trees. The laugh again. It wasn't loud and cackling, but soft and playful. Were these aliens? Had they mimicked human voice? Jimmy wasn't sure. A cold wind tore through the forest and he shivered. He was frightened and cold. But he was also excited. Curiosity propelled him forward. He was determined to see what was making the noise.

The next sound was not a laugh, but a moan. It sounded like the trees in the wind, but it was not. It was human, and it traveled through the woods, echoing from tree to tree and into his ear. Jimmy knew it was human. There it was again, the strange groan. Jimmy became more frightened, but pressed on. It sounded strange, as though arisen from neither pain nor pleasure but some kind of mutation of both. The sound was at once terrifying and infinitely alluring. Was this the trap of aliens? Was this how they tempted little boys to their mothership? It sounded like a call, luring Jimmy like bugs in the night to a streetlamp. The strange sound echoed through the woods again, this time much louder. Jimmy was close.

He came to a rocky ledge. It was a grey and weathered boulder that protruded from the earth atop a slight incline that led to flat ground. It was only about twenty feet up. Jimmy saw the cause of the noise at the bottom of the incline, next to a softly flowing creek. On a large bed of leaves, the limbs of two naked bodies were intertwined and slowly rocking back and forth. On top was a man, brown and muscular and shining with sweat. Under him, a woman. Her skin was a ghostly white, her legs and arms wrapped tightly around the man. Her hair was golden brown, and it fell around her face and blended into the fall leaves. She looked to the sky with closed eyes and mouth agape in an open half smile, her head rocking back and forth.

Jimmy looked on; frightened, confused, and intrigued. His mind no longer was concerned with aliens, just these two people. It seemed like a strange ritual. He thought that, whatever it was, this was the perfect spot to do it. There were trees as far as sight could allow, and no unnatural or jarring sounds. There were no people around either. It was secluded, removed from suburbia. There was danger here, and no distraction.

The woman's eyebrows curled upward and she sucked her lips inward. She moaned. It was loud and uninhibited. This was the sound Jimmy followed. This was the sound that frightened and propelled him. Her fingers were pressed hard against the man's back. They caused little valleys in his skin. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and turned her head. She locked on to Jimmy.

"Shit!" she yelled, and scrambled out from under the man. Jimmy jumped, and the squirt gun fell out of his hands and tumbled and scraped down the rocky incline. The man quickly turned toward the noise and saw Jimmy. Immediately, the man ran over to a pile of clothes and began frantically rummaging through them. Jimmy stood trembling, unable to flee.

“Who the fuck is this kid?” the man said.

“How should I know,” said the woman, “Don’t curse in front of him.” She was calmer, content with holding a blue blouse over her breasts and sitting as to not reveal herself. The man was quickly pulling up a pair of khakis to his waist.

“Get the hell out, ya hear!” he yelled up to Jimmy. “Go on now, get out.”

Jimmy couldn’t move.

“What are you deaf? I said get out! Go on home, now.”

The woman touched the man’s leg to try to calm him.

“Robert,” she said, “his gun.”

“What?”

“He dropped his toy gun. I think that’s all he wants.”

“I don’t give a shit about the gun...”

“Don’t curse in front...”

“I said I don’t give a damn about the gun, he should just get out!” He turned to look at Jimmy. “You hear me, son! Get on, now. Go. Go home.”

Jimmy still couldn’t move. He stood as straight as the trees around him, and with his head down. His mouth was neither frowning nor smiling. He felt his throat tighten and his eyes start to glisten. His fists were clenched at his side.

“You’re scaring him, Robert,” said the woman. Her voice was low but feminine, motherly and soothing.

“You want to come get your gun?” she said up to Jimmy, “It’s okay, it really is. I’m not mad, okay? You can come get your gun if you want. He won’t yell at you anymore, I promise.”

Jimmy hesitated, then slowly eased his way down the hill. The man stood with his khaki pants on, shaking his head at the woman.

“Be careful,” she said.

Jimmy made sure to avert his eyes from them. He didn’t want to look at them. He stayed focused on the ground.

“That’s it. It’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.”

The gun was near the woman. Jimmy walked up to it and bent down to pick it up. All the while, he kept his eyes focused downward. The man sighed.

“Listen, son,” he said, “I’m sorry I yelled.” He had his hands on his hips. “I, um, I didn’t mean to frighten you. You just, um, you just startled us is all.”

The woman laughed. The man glared at her then turned back to Jimmy.

“I hope you understand that I wasn’t mad, just a little startled. Okay?” His voice was low and masculine. He spoke slowly and with emphasis, as if giving a speech. Jimmy didn’t respond. He just looked to the ground, his sweaty palms gripping the plastic toy gun.

“You just shouldn’t be sneaking up on people, okay?” said the man, “I, um, I think you’ve

learned your lesson and all and I'm sure you won't do that again. Well if that's all understood, you can go now."

Jimmy didn't move. The man stared at him.

"You can go now, son. I'm not mad. You can...uh...I promise I'm not mad at you. You can go home now."

Jimmy still did not move.

"It's okay. You can go, now. Come on now, your mother's probably worried sick. You can go home."

The woman slowly reached over and took hold of Jimmy's hand.

"What's your name?" She smiled. Jimmy struggled to find a voice in his heavy throat.

"Jimmy," he cracked, "But my Dad calls me Jim."

"What do you like to be called?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"Can I call you Jimmy?"

He nodded.

"Jimmy, it's okay. You can look at me."

He looked up. She smiled at him, her thin pink lips stretched to the bottom of her cheeks. Her eyes were bright blue and piercing, with their own kind of smirk as if they knew a secret no one else did.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy said.

"Don't be."

Jimmy sniffled.

"What were you doing out here?" she asked.

"I dunno."

"You don't know? Why do you have a compass and a squirt gun? And face paint?"

Jimmy wiped the snot that dripped from his nose.

"I was looking for, uh, aliens, I guess."

The man let out a loud laugh that caused a nearby flock of birds to scatter into the sky. The woman shot him a glance and he stopped laughing to resume dressing. She looked back to Jimmy.

"Well," she said, "I hope you find some nice ones. Some good aliens, right? You don't want to find any bad ones."

"No."

She rubbed his hand with her thumb and smiled at him, still holding the blouse to cover her breasts. Her hand was warm and smooth.

"Are you okay now?" she asked.

Jimmy slowly nodded his head.

"Okay. Good. Do you want to go back home?"

"Yeah."

“Okay. You can go home.”

“Okay.”

“Goodbye, Jimmy”

“Bye.”

Jimmy turned and quickly scampered up the incline. The rock at the top was moist and slippery. It had begun to lightly rain. When he got to the top he bolted through the forest. The leaves made a loud rustling sound under his feet. The moist air condensed on his cheeks. As he ran he leapt over fallen branches and small bushes. He darted through the trees like a running back. His heavy breathing became visible in the cold air. He heard the distant rumble of thunder.

He didn't look at his compass; he didn't have to. He knew where to go. The thunder came again. It started as a low rumble, but was then interrupted by a shattering crack that seemed to unhinge the sky from the earth. Jimmy's heart was pounding against his ribs. It began to pour.

Jimmy started to cry. He didn't know why he started crying, he just did. He didn't fight it. He let the tears flow from his eyes and get lost in the rain. He let the mucus run out his nose and into his mouth. His whining gasps were intermittently lost in thunder and blinding lightning.

He burst out of the line of trees and into the field next to his house. No more forest. It was slippery, and the grass was tall enough to slap against his legs. He was glad he wasn't wearing shorts. Across the field, through the rain, he saw his home at the edge of the neighborhood. On a lightly populated cul-de-sac, it looked like a safe haven, far away from danger and confusion. The rain pounded against the roof and the brick walls that Jimmy sprinted toward. He longed for the warmth and comfort of his room.

When he got to the house, he quickly jumped up the porch steps and flung open the front door. He ran inside and slammed the door shut. It was quiet. The only sound came from the rain outside, thousands of drops thudding against brick and glass. It was soothing. Jimmy began breathing more slowly. He was standing in the living room, dripping, his crying reduced to a light whimper and the occasion snuffle. His ears adjusted and he could hear the light ticking of the clock in the kitchen. There was nobody home. His older brother was supposed to be here, babysitting him. But there was nobody.

He walked over to the bathroom to wash the snot off his face. When he did, the water in the sink looked brownish green. He remembered the face paint. He got a paper towel and scraped it off. When he was finished, his face was red from the abrasive towel, but the paint was gone. He looked in the mirror and smiled to see his missing front teeth.

He went down to the laundry room in the basement to get clean clothes. There were some in the dryer; someone must have done the laundry. They were warm and dry. When he put them on he shivered, as if to settle into their comforting warmth.

He walked back upstairs and pulled a kitchen chair up to the window. He gazed out into the rain and marveled at the thunder. He felt better now; he wasn't crying anymore. The rain was tapping against the screen beyond the window. Jimmy rested his forehead against the glass. He watched the lightning, and wondered where it came from.

Matthew Denvir



Dormant
Maggie McCune

Words Associated

I used to know a man named Jonas. We would sit on the concrete stoops in the old yard, with rocks rattled through, and Jonas would talk words. They were words none of us had heard before, and hearing them, the boys that played at being hoppers would get sly looks on their faces and call him ‘doctor.’ He got a real kick the first time and let every one have a pin-sized sip of wine. As time advanced, they’d heckle him and crowd him, but Jonas was never in any trouble from those delusional drug dealers: if they’d got too close he’d pop out his fake eye and they always scattered. What always struck me about the man was how much he liked the days when no one listened. He’d sit back, wide eyed for a moment of failed expectation, and only after his surprise expired did that customary scaffold grin slide even wider over his features. On those days, when you could count his missing teeth, Jonas would look around the yard real slow and say to everyone and no one: “I am your loving carnifex. I am your torturer.”

James Vanderpool

PA Politics

When I was in AP gov Mr. Miller mistook us for responsible people and told us to make a political party platform. It didn't take long for the back corner to come up with the pro-abortion position: all abortion, all the time. We got a few laughs when we stood up front with pie charts and diagrams, but not many votes. It was Francesca Defazzio who won the in-class polls that year, with a stirring speech against illegal immigration. Despite the unanimity, the pro-abortion party was always confused in defeat: overpopulation seemed an important issue for the labor shortened world of tomorrow.

James Vanderpool

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Thank you to David Lloyd, Daniel Roche, Linda Pennisi, and Patrick Lawler.