

Litmag

2016

University of Missouri—St. Louis

Cover Art: *Burger of Life* by Grace Gogarty
Best Art Submission contest winner

UMSL

faculty advisor's note

The English Department is proud to present the 2016 edition of *Litmag*. 2016 has brought with it many noteworthy events: the discovery of GN-z11, the oldest and most remote galaxy in the observable universe; the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death; the St. Louis Rams moving to L.A.; and *Back to the Future II*'s promise of hover boards still unrealized twenty-seven years later. 2016 also brought a new editorial team to *Litmag*, eager and committed to carry on the journal's tradition.

Editing a literary journal is not unlike preparing a meal. A lot of care and consideration goes into choosing the best ingredients, finding ways to blend and highlight each individual flavor, and serving the finished product with pleasure and pride for the nourishment it provides consumers. It is a messy and satisfying endeavor. The many textures and flavors that mix within these pages are both distinct and complementary, reflecting the diverse literary tastes of our student editors. We hope our efforts discourage the bustle of a drive-through reading experience with its crumpled straw wrappers and leftover French fries. Instead, the poems and stories published here invite the reader, hungry for a good burger on gourmet rye, to come in and sit down, flirt with the diner girl for a while, sample the full menu we have to offer, and perhaps, even, savor the skin on the palm of your hand.

On behalf of the editorial staff, I want to offer my sincerest thanks to all the authors and artists who submitted this year. We reviewed hundreds of submissions, so many of which were laced with memorable characters, rich imagery, keen insight, and remarkable craft; it was a momentous challenge to choose which pieces to showcase here. The artistic and literary talent we have on campus is truly impressive. We are honored to have explored such a creative body of work and to share these pages with you.

Kate Watt
Faculty Advisor

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about *litmag*

English 4895 Editing *Litmag*, a course in editing and publishing a student literary magazine, is offered at UMSL for the spring semester. Students interested in enrolling are invited to contact Jeanne Allison at allisonjea@umsl.edu for more information.

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*Denotes Best Poetry & Prose Submission contest winners

**Denotes Wednesday Club winner

the storm

zachary j. lee

The rain pecked
against the window sill as
cameras flashed and
the gods argued.
She gripped her mug
a little tighter,
so close to singeing
the pads of her fingers.

Did I leave my car windows down?

She envisioned water
collecting by the bucketfull,
ruining the polyester interior and
pink steering wheel cover that
he bought her last month,
the hula dancer on the dash
swimming away with the collection
of crumpled straw wrappers and
leftover french fries,
the fuzzy dice barely
skimming the surface until
finally
they too succumbed
to the storm.

to the mother who buried five children on the hill:

amber scholl

You never knew—
after six generations,
after surrendering from your hollow bosom
five still hearts
to their final pine embraces,
after slipping from this shady slope
(Did you turn back for one last look?)
yew sprawling from the womb of the dead—

A stranger would stumble upon this
place of forgotten stories where
family lines sprout, cross, and wither
like the yew's sepulchral branches
to kneel where you knelt
(Was the ground solid
those five black days you stood
at an earthy bed's foot?
Or was it soft, supple enough
to curl your fingers in the dirt that
would forever hold those
you held for a heartbeat?).

Today the sun's milky glow warms the
yew—
and you—
where you lie beneath your crumbling crown
whose weathered story whispers your secrets.
The dead don't speak, but
I fill the space you filled—
(This was a moment of yours
shared like a scene glimpsed through
the window of six generations)
and listen.

salvation on rye

abby n. virio

Some people look for God.

In the dead of night, the illuminated cacti were the only townspeople, waving my car down, welcoming me to the middle of nowhere. Through the rearview mirror, I spotted an oversized coyote dragging a carcass out into the desert, about to partake in its midnight meal.

I was looking for a really good sandwich.

By strange coincidence, both my tanks emptied at the same time, and I found myself parked outside the glowing storefront of a vintage diner. Powder blue paint peeled off the art deco façade, revealing a rust-bitten metal frame. A swirling Harlow Solid Italic spelled out the following:

Holy Sandwich

Please be open, I begged the void, searching through the large, open windows for signs of life. Apart from the surgical blue glow of the empty counter, the place was completely deserted. No sign hung above the door, and no other cars slept in the lot.

Then, out of the silence, a pan clattered onto a linoleum floor. The stillness was undisturbed by the sound.

Either that was a worker or a raccoon. Either way, I'm starving, I thought to myself, snatching my key out of the ignition and jingling my purse.

Placing my fingers on the handle, I looked up over the dash, and my heart stopped. A boxy red SUV had entered the lot and parked approximately five spots down. Suddenly sheepish, I ducked out of sight and paused for ten sacred seconds before gathering the courage to spy through the passenger-side window. A shadow leaned over the stranger's steering wheel. The shadow's door cracked and creaked open with painful slowness.

A foot poked out—clad in matronly nude heels—followed by a pantyhosed leg, followed by a complete female body. She was a woman—middle-aged and exhausted—conservatively garbed and totally preoccupied. From the other side, two small boys sprung

and skipped over, kneeling down to pocket a few eye-catching chips of gravel before being dragged by the wrists to the diner entrance. Once inside, the figure of a lanky man in an apron loomed from the back to serve them.

Again, I reached down for my purse. I resurfaced to see another car in the lot, this time with a man and woman inside. They, too, entered the diner.

I ducked and rose, ducked and rose, each time with the same result. Both diner and parking lot were half-filled to capacity by the time I bored myself with the ritual.

Of course I had seen a crowded midnight diner before, but something about this time-forgotten island in a sea of sand—where daytime patrons arrived, like clockwork, from the depths of night—aroused sufficient suspicion to cause me to wait until sunrise to enter. I spent the remainder of the night doing reconnaissance from my driver's seat, tanks—automotive and digestive—drifting from my consciousness. The visibility of myself and my car never crossed my mind.

During the night, I saw at least 50 tables seated, served, and charged. Mothers dragged in rebellious youths, husbands and wives urged along reluctant spouses, and gray men and women coerced groups of young adults. Strangely enough, very few groups entered by consensus, but when they did, they nearly ran the door down with their enthusiasm.

Morning brought with the sun my hunger, and at last I entered the diner. I rubbed my eyes in reaction to the blazing blue light and adjusted to the interior. Despite staring through the window all night, I realized I had not once examined the waiting staff. At the counter stood a man of roughly my own height. I admit I paused, obviously not expecting to come face-to-face with a small, East Asian man in the middle of the American Southwest. But what was I expecting, a cowboy? Shortly after this first encounter, I would become immune to this type of surprise.

“Hello,” he said. “What are you looking for today?”

This seemed like a strange way to take my order.

“Today?” I repeated quizzically.

“Today. No time like the present. After all, what is tomorrow but speculation and yesterday but a memory?”

“I suppose,” I replied, turning my gaze but meeting no menu above the counter. “Um. . . excuse me, could I get a menu?”

“You don’t know what you want?” he said incredulously.

“No,” I said, slightly annoyed. He should recognize that I have never been here. Or rather, fail to recognize me. So I said, “I have never been here before.”

“If you don’t know what you want, a menu will not help you decide.”

I waited for the jig to be up, but the man’s expression made no change. At last, my patience wore thin. I had been waiting all night for my meal. My stomach growled fiercely.

“Fine. This place says ‘sandwich,’ right? Give me a sandwich.”

“If you want a sandwich, you will need to make it.”

“Oh for the love of God, you’ve got to be kidding me!” I exclaimed, smacking the Formica. “The service here is terrible!”

“Do you think so? I can’t give you anything you can’t give yourself.”

“I want to speak to a manager.”

“I am the manager for this shift. You may return in three hours and speak to my coworker, when my shift has ended.”

“Thanks for all the help,” I smirked, taking my bag and turning to leave. Unfortunately, when I reached my car I remembered that it would not run, and even if I did not eat at the diner, at the very least I would need to use the telephone. Not wanting to confront the less-than-helpful cashier again, I folded my arms and sat on the sidewalk, watching the hands of my watch turn until the sun and circling of time hypnotized me into a deep sleep.

I awoke at 9 a.m. to the smell of hair burning and a cat jumping out from under a front wheel. Exactly three hours had passed. I had needed the sleep and now felt refreshed. Again, I was prepared to enter the diner.

The new cashier did not look up from the register when I approached the counter. The dome of his skull was covered by paper cook’s hat, and his elaborate facial hair was comically

wrapped in a hairnet.

"Hello." This time I spoke first. "Could I get a menu? I came here earlier and the cashier was very rude. He refused to give me a menu and told me to come back later. So I am here now."

"Do you have a rewards card with us," he asked, still failing to look up.

A reward's card, for this place?

"A reward's card—?"

"*Do you have a membership,*" he enunciated loudly, turning to meet my gaze with intensity.

"No, no," I stammered, "but I have cash."

"Cash won't do you any good here. You must be a member."

"But I am starving! Please, you must make an exception."

"There are no exceptions," he said, pushing a box bursting with cardstock my direction, "but you can read these. Once you have read and memorized them all, you can be a member and order a sandwich."

This was no shoebox. It appeared as though it had once held an industrial blender or another sort of appliance. The entire counter was blocked by the box. There had to be thousands of menus within. There was no way this diner served everything listed in these menus.

I took one of the smaller, postcard-sized sheets and held it up to the light. The text was miniscule.

"How long would it take someone to read all this?" I mumbled aloud.

"One year, ten years, sometimes a lifetime. It all depends on the person. Enough time for your beard to grow in, at least."

Placing the card back into the box, I returned the man's stare but found I had nothing to say. I turned around and headed to the door, prepared to starve.

"Wait!" he called after me. "In three hours, my shift will change. You may speak to the man who will replace me."

By now it was noon, and nothing looked quite so refreshing as the ice-cold lemonades that the children sipped inside. I pressed my face against the glass with abandon, savoring the sight

until the children yanked on their mothers' sleeves, and a swat against the glass was aimed in my direction.

As the bearded man had said, in three hours, a new manager tended the counter. I entered and approached him right away, this time taking a moment to account for his appearance. He looked startlingly similar to the first man, so that my heart jumped into my throat until I could confirm he was indeed a new manager. Like the man before, he had a beard and a golden complexion I could not quite place. What was so strange about this manager, however, was that beneath his dark, bushy brows, he obviously had fake contacts inserted over his brown irises with the intention of appearing crystal blue. There were streaks of orange in his beard—an unsuccessful dye job, no doubt—and sunscreen plastered across his nose as though an overprotective mother had forgotten to rub it in.

He looked gullible enough.

"Listen," I sighed when I reached the counter inside. "I've come in twice for a goddamn sandwich. At this point I would be happy with crumbs! You've got to help me out, man."

He looked up woefully from his register.

"I would love to help you. Really, I would. Everyone is welcome here. The problem is," he lowered his voice and leaned in closely, enough for me to smell the sunscreen, "if the others find out that I served you, I'll be fired."

"The others?" I all but shouted. "Who? The guy with the hat and the cryptic Asian?"

"No, not them. *Them*."

He gestured toward the patrons.

"I'm just trying to fit in and give them what they want, okay? If I let just anyone walk in off the streets and eat here, they won't feel special. And before you know it, they will find someone else to replace me behind the counter."

My face fell.

"Maybe if you come around back, I can let you sift through the dumpsters. . . ?"

Without a word, I turned my back and left the diner, my steps tracing the faded tiles on the floor, suggesting to me that others had broken down out front and encountered the very same predicament many—at least 40—times.

Outside, the sun was setting pinkly and passionately against the sand, rolling out its tongue like a red carpet. The whole heat of the sun touched my face alone, focused through a lens, so that the wisps of my bangs rustled back behind my ears.

The coyote paused, turning its head back to meet my gaze. Its eyes pierced recklessly through my soul.

Another starving traveler.

The scavenger turned and trotted off into the desert to meet the horizon. Gazing after it, my soul in my mouth, I staggered forward.

Then I followed, willingly.



union pacific

afton joiner



outside lines

katryn dierksen

They're gonna cut that tree down.
They drew a red line
on its belly, three feet up from the ground.
I have a book of poems
about the shape of men—
it reminds me of you, the telephone lines;
the branches grew too close,
I guess. It doesn't seem fair—
I'll pop another pill, higher dose;
maybe the formula will touch my skin,
& I'll feel the way you made me,
cigarette in my hand, growing thin.
What will it be? A week?
How long before goodbye to you
& the tree?

the one taking the picture

ryan coyle

I'm the one taking the picture.
Some foreign phone in hand,
more passive than aggressive,
because no, it's fine.

I see them through the lens and
say something clever about the tall kid.
They smile, I snap.

Their contradictions forever frozen,
rehearsed grins get sold out
by unconvincing eyes,
like I am their cult leader,
and we stop to take a pre-punch photo.

the painting

peter james

The universe is big.

This statement was self-evident to most humans, yet to Adam Ford it was a mystery that needed to be solved. Why was the universe big? He could see the universe laid out before him, an enormous canvas stretched as far as his mind could see. Somewhere on this canvas was a tiny gray speck: Earth; and on this speck was an infinitely small black dot: him, his consciousness, the only thing he knew for certain was real.

Adam wondered what it all meant. Perhaps the universe was a painting hanging in some art gallery whose current exhibit featured abstract images from artists who had to support themselves by selling coffee to other artists who in turn supported themselves by selling coffee to the people who sold them coffee when said people were not selling coffee to the people who sold them coffee on their days off. Coffee would have to be a part of the equation; Adam could not picture a place in which coffee did not exist. There would also be attractive women working at the counter of the cafés where the abstract artists worked and/or drank coffee. He could not picture a place in which attractive women did not sell coffee to struggling artists.

Against what were these artists struggling? Adam pictured an artist wrestling a bear, only for the bear to turn out to be Old Man Jenkins, like in the *Scooby-Doo* cartoons he watched as a child. He would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for those meddling kids and their pesky dog. There it was: a painter was painting a painting of a man in a bear suit wrestling a jock and a cheerleader and a nerd and a loser and a talking dog. It was done in the style of late nineteenth-century impressionism. Pierre August Renoir would be proud.

On the wall opposite of the universe and caddy-corner to the bear wrestling was a series of photographs from the coffee shop just down the street from the art gallery. The photographs

were black and white (did that even need to be stated?) and appeared to be of shadows cast by the patrons of the establishment. Either that or the photographer was trying to take pictures of the floor and someone kept standing in his light. Photographers hate it when people stand in their light and cast shadows that ruin perfectly good pictures of wood flooring. Adam knew this because he was a photographer and he liked taking pictures of flooring, though he preferred tile to wood.

Again Adam found himself wondering what it all meant. The painting of the universe was so ridiculously large that the gallery curator almost turned it away because it would involve knocking out several partitions which would result in fewer walls available for hanging other coffee-inspired artwork. The curator ultimately decided that the universe was so wondrously beautiful that knocking out the partitions was well worth the cost. People would be so arrested by its beauty that they would be willing to pay extra just to see it, and the curator did just that, raising the admission fee and calling it a “premium access charge” instead of “a fee to help pay for the demolition of several partitions and the lost business from having less artwork.” Art lovers were happy to pay the extra fee and flocked to the gallery like the birds flocked to Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* except that there was no pecking allowed unless they were pecking at the *hors d'oeuvres* offered by a waiter standing in the middle of the floor like a statue holding a platter full of the strange little finger foods. Some people actually thought that the waiter was in fact part of the exhibit and stood around him commenting on how lifelike the sculpture was, though there were several flaws in the shape of the nose. It turned out that the waiter was a sculptor who had to support himself by holding a tray of *hors d'oeuvres* that art lovers loved to eat while commenting on art.

There was the universe. Adam imagined himself alone in the gallery, excepting the statue of the waiter, staring at the painting of the universe. It was larger than he could have possibly conceived. He futilely searched for the tiny gray speck that was Earth. If he could not find that speck, then how would he be able to find himself? He wondered about the artist who painted such a beautiful painting. Perhaps God was a part-time barista who spent his free time working on the painting of the universe. Every day he would

go into work early and sell coffee to fellow struggling artists, and when he got off work in the mid-afternoon he went straight to the apartment he shared with the sculptor/waiter and continued to work on his masterpiece. Each and every brushstroke was a labor of love, each and every brushstroke represented the thoughts and feelings in his heart, each and every brushstroke had meaning.

But who would notice such a small dot? Who would notice Adam Ford? Earth couldn't even be seen by the naked eye; one would have to use an advanced electron microscope just to see that gray speck, and not even the most powerful microscope in the world would be able to spot the tiny black dot that was Adam Ford. He was merely a dot on a speck on an enormous painting. What meaning was there in life if nobody noticed him, if nothing he could do would alter the painting as a whole?

Just then a man walked into the gallery. After paying the premium access charge, he immediately went to the universe. They were drawn together like two friends who hadn't seen each other since they were teenagers. The man smiled as he looked over the universe, his eyes noticing every brushstroke. Each one held some special meaning, reminding him of a person he once met or a meal he once shared.

"Isn't it amazing?" the man asked.

Adam continued to squint at the painting, trying to find himself on it.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm on here somewhere."

The man chuckled. Adam looked at the man, annoyed that he was being laughed at. The man shook his head.

"Do you look at every piece of art so closely? Do you try and find individual dots on every painting you view?"

"This one's different; I'm one of those dots."

"You are one of those dots, and while I appreciate your intent on viewing it so closely, the only way you can understand the painting is to take a step back and look at it as a whole. Once you do that then you'll understand its meaning and the meaning of each and every dot on the canvas."

The man smiled and turned away, walking out the door and leaving Adam once again alone in the gallery (the statue of the

waiter again excepted).

Adam took a step back. Suddenly the painting was not about dots and specks, but about one unified picture. All the little details gave the painting its character, gave the painting its beauty. Adam could see the meaning and intent of the whole picture, he could see what the painter was feeling, he could feel what the painter was seeing, and what he saw and felt was wonderful. Adam saw that the great canvas stretched before him wasn't quite as big now that he wasn't squinting to find that little black dot.

He saw that it was a beautiful universe.

dog barf soda

grace gogarty



the stripe hour

allison barnett



bridge

janece woodson

My legs make a bridge over the bathtub,
Feet on the rusted window sill,
Spine on the rigid porcelain edge.

I try to separate the layers of the street sounds;
This is our last night in the city, and
Only the mundane notes are sharp.

I can't ignore the thrumming of students
Walking through our meek road to the
Crazy, busy, bubbly blocks.

There, the street signs have Dutch names, and
Lights aren't standards of necessity, but side attractions,
And drinks are sickening, sweet, and steep.

Far away drone the motors and the laughter, from
Crowds at tables on the sidewalks and in basements,
Opening windows to let out fragrant puffs.

the hollow inside

catherine howl

During the spring storm,
I memorized every body
Of white lightning
That appeared between
Each stanza I recited
Of an old poem
On modern art.

I repeated the rhythm
Of words that flashed
With a staccato lull.
As I pulled my tongue back,
I hesitated and imagined
The magnitude of sound
In another language
I never learned
To speak with you.

Instead, I read your eyes,
And questioned my
Final palette of day.
I remember your pupils
Were settled into
Unmatched emerald
Green, gray hues
Blindingly changing color
Against dark masses
Of tree.

Their small offshoots
Of twigs
Were lined up like
Your eyelashes
So thick, as if they
Had been coated
With mascara,
Running beneath sheets
Of inky, erotic rain
That beat louder than

The heavy weight
Of my hidden studio clock
Set upon a high mantel—
The slow *tick, tock*
Adjusted my gaze
To contemplate the way
A wet tarp stretched
Tightly over
Our old neighbors'
Backyard swimming pool,
Where we always trespassed.

Our footprints
Sealed the edges,
But we became
Strangers exploring
The hollow inside
Of it together,
Only as artists left with
An unfinished sculpture,
Waiting to be filled.

It seemed to us as though Mrs. Fanny Greenlowe had simply sprung up in our little town of Milton Ridge out of nowhere. None of us could ever remember a time when she didn't occupy the corner house on Lingulaca Street, with its faded white brick exterior, its garden that housed only weeds, and the four patches of markedly taller grass which grew under the influence of special fertilizer—namely, the four long-dead cats Fanny had buried over the years.

Though she was a Mrs., no one could ever remember seeing a Mr. Greenlowe, and many liked to shake their heads and say, exasperated, that it was no wonder he'd left—after all, who wouldn't? Usually these cruel but not entirely unfounded reflections were made at those times when Fanny Greenlowe had caught someone on a bad day and proceeded to make it worse, or else when she caused such bad days directly, which she was prone to do. Mr. Purcelly had never forgiven her for informing the entire town of his extramarital indiscretions after she'd seen him sneaking out Lydia Bough's back door and through the yard at 3 a.m.

"The woman couldn't keep her mouth shut if God forgot to give her a tongue," Mr. Purcelly liked to say. Mrs. Greenlowe liked to say that at least she was making better use of the tongue He gave her than Mr. Purcelly was making of his own.

The only time any of us knew Mrs. Greenlowe to actually keep quiet for longer than five minutes at a time was in church, during which she maintained a most sacred silence, except at the culminations of what she felt were particularly powerful sermons, which she would punctuate with dramatic, emotional cries of "amen!" Then there was choir practice, during which her discordant warbling swelled over the rest of us until her fervor reached ear-splitting levels, which threatened on a weekly basis to shatter the church's stained glass panes. However, Fanny Greenlowe was not content to simply attend church on Sundays like most people, nor were her religious urges satiated in the musical expression of her

love of Jesus; she also felt compelled to interject him into every conversation the way some people inject swear words into theirs.

“Oh, honey, don’t you worry about that job of yours,” she said to Ana Fibbs when Ana lost her job at the local insurance company ten days after buying her first house. “Jesus loves the impoverished too! When it comes down to it, a job is all you’re really losing.” Or, “Miss Moss is going to the gynecologist on Wednesday—first time back after that nasty infection. Let’s all say a prayer to Jesus for a clean bill of health!”

Even those who might have been persuaded to regard her as a kindly, if kooky, old religious lady were quickly disenchanted by her aforementioned propensity to gossip.

“That damn woman’s nosier than a pig’s snout,” grumbled Phil Burgess after Mrs. Greenlowe had invited Sandra Burgess, with whom Phil had been engaged in a messy divorce, in for lunch, during which she’d somehow gleaned every sordid detail of Phil’s affair and their subsequent marital woes (all of which had, of course, been widely distributed at the first opportunity).

Under the unconvincing pretense of gardening in the front lawn of her little brick corner house, Fanny often situated herself in this prime location, which enabled her to chase down every stray jogger, dog walker, and neighbor who had the misfortune to cross her path. In over 25 years, she had never managed to grow more than weeds and a horrid, enfeebled Chinese buttonbush, which survived for one full summer and promptly lost the will to live, much to the relief of her hydrangea- and rhododendron-sporting neighbors. Yet every reasonably weathered day would find Mrs. Greenlowe in her dirt patch garden, where she scuffed her feet through trenches of soil and indiscriminately tossed seeds that she later ignored in favor of the far more interesting neighbors.

There was only one time in our collective memory that we found ourselves on our own when it came to unsubstantiated gossip, as our usual purveyor of neighborhood knowledge was the topic of discussion herself. As it happens, it was the one time in living history that every one of us would have chosen transparency over privacy.

It had always seemed to us that Fanny Greenlowe somehow existed without a past, as though her beloved deity had simply

plopped a fully grown Fanny in her brick corner house to harass and spy on the rest of us. Besides the occasional joke about Mr. Greenlowe running for the hills, none of us had ever given much thought to what her life might have entailed or who she might have been before she'd been ours.

So we were all shocked when one day Fanny announced to a passing dog walker that her son was coming to visit. The dog walker was Haley Fields, who wasted no time in spreading the news with a speed and efficiency that would have brought pink pride to Mrs. Greenlowe's cheeks.

"I didn't even know she had a son! Who knew she had a son?" And though everyone asked the question, no one had the answer. It seemed incredible that, of all the things for Fanny Greenlowe to be so uncharacteristically cagey about, it would have been a living, breathing child.

"It was like she didn't even want to tell me!" said Haley, who had been shy at first but who, after the sixth or seventh retelling of the story, seemed to be enjoying her quasi-celebrity status immensely. "No, it was like I had to drag it out of her. She was talking about putting up some rosebushes by the house, and maybe getting a nice fountain for the porch, and I said something about how wasn't that fancy, and she just sort of brushed it off. Then she said that her son was coming down to visit in a few weeks, and she wanted the place to look nice. Like home."

Wildfire had nothing on us and the speed with which our news spread across households, across blocks, and finally across the entire town. We anticipated the arrival of Fanny Greenlowe's son with the sort of feverish excitement usually reserved for royalty, or the time the local supercenter hosted a two-for-one sale on potting soil. Somehow, this previously withheld piece of Mrs. Greenlowe's past became the thing upon which we hung all our hope, as if the son might unlock some hitherto untold mystery with his mother at the center. What would she become in light of this newcomer's presence? Some among us hoped he might mellow her out; others feared he would be just as terrible a gossip, if not worse. On some level, we all knew he would have the power to shake up our lives the way Fanny Greenlowe always had. Would he tear down our shadows, forcing us to bear the scorching heat of our own sins, our own

lies, our own secrets, the way his mother did? The thought both frightened and intrigued us.

The day that Fanny Greenlowe's son came to visit, that little brick corner house saw the greatest number of joggers, dog walkers, and random passersby in history.

"He's a biker! Who would have thought Fanny Greenlowe's son would be a biker!" said Carlos Ramirez, who had dragged his poor shih tzu around the block in front of Fanny's house half a dozen times in an effort to catch a glimpse of Milton Ridge's newest celebrity. Carlos' findings joined the chaotic flurry of rumor that began that fateful morning and continued well into that evening, when neighbors could be heard swapping stories over picket fences, or else confiscating their children's electronics and forcing them into the local park so that they could chat with the other parents.

"Glasses this thick, a funny little bow tie and suspenders. . . if he's not an accountant, I'm Mother Theresa," announced Mr. Purcell.

The moon had risen before we had exhausted the rumor mill, and we took this as our cue to go to bed, no more satisfied that night than we had been that morning. All anyone could seem to agree upon was that the neighborhood had been oddly vacant all day, despite all our own goings-about, without Fanny Greenlowe's usual ubiquitous presence.

Unfortunately for our burning sense of collective curiosity, it would be another week before it became apparent that the rumor mill had outdone itself. Malcolm Greenlowe, under the astonished and fascinated gaze of every Saturday-afternoon shopper in town, graced us with his presence at the local supercenter. Or at least, he seemed to feel that he was doing us all a very considerable favor by deigning to touch his polished-shoe-clad feet to our occasionally sticky, tiled aisles.

Some said he came from Wall Street. Others guessed he'd been a used car salesman. Still others swore that he was a representative from one state over, and that their son/friend/second cousin had voted for him. He looked the type, somehow, to fulfill every such rumor—he had that greasy, untrustworthy look about him—and each theory seemed more likely than the last. His hair was dark

like his mother's, not tucked into a gray-streaked bun but slicked back with that faux-natural look that could only be achieved with copious amounts of hair gel.

Over the next few weeks, his presence became a constant source of irritation, like a rash that spread every day, or like a thorn in the foot that pricked and poked with every step. He invaded our shops, our restaurants, our neighborhood. On weekends, he drove his flashy white Jaguar around town, nearly mowing down Dahlia Hart on her bike as she rounded the corner of Lingulaca Street one Sunday afternoon. He flirted (crudely) with Lily Briggs, a newlywed who lived three houses down from Fanny on Lingulaca Street. She rebuffed him, naturally, and although no one could prove Malcolm had been at fault, the Briggs' cheery, grinning gnomes certainly did not walk themselves out of their garden.

However, these small outrages were nothing compared to the most egregious of all his sins in our eyes: that is, the treatment of his own mother. Malcolm berated her in front of everyone at the Samsons' barbeque for spilling sauce on his tie and was so thoroughly involved in his tantrum that he didn't notice when Dahlia's father spit in his drink. He refused to help his mother with house or yard work, so even in the dog days of summer, Fanny could be seen, red-faced and sweating, pushing her lawn mower over the final resting places of Tabitha, Boots, Santa Paws, and Mr. Whiskers. We often saw her at the grocery store with her cart piled high. "Your son help you out with those, Fanny?" Lydia Bough asked one day. "Oh, no, it's my pleasure," Fanny said, but her smile looked less like the product of maternal joy and more like she had recently undergone a particularly invasive dental procedure.

Having lived under Fanny's stern, watchful gaze for most of our lives, none of us could ever remember seeing her quail, or quake, or, indeed, show even a mite of weakness. To see her powerless was to grow feeble oneself, for if even Fanny shrank before him, there was little hope to be had for anyone else.

More than ever, Fanny could be found working in her own garden (it seemed Malcolm had taken over the house), but even this sanctuary was not to last. One morning, several dog walkers reported witnessing an argument between Malcolm and his mother over the payments of his sleek white Jaguar (which he now parked

in his mother's garage, having displaced Fanny's Corolla).

"This is my car we're talking about, Mother!" the dog-walking witnesses had heard him sputter indignantly from the porch (he would not soil his patent leather shoes with such horrors as dirt or grass). "What am I going to do if you don't make the payments? How the hell else am I supposed to get anywhere in this shithole of a town?" Through all her recently intensified effort, Fanny had nurtured a small seedling, which poked from the earth among the fine green hairs of the weeds. Suddenly, Malcolm Greenlowe took everyone by surprise and violated his own rule; disregarding all caution where his shoes were concerned, he ground his heel into the plant, crushing it into the dirt and snapping its tiny green neck.

For a while, Fanny still went to church, but her "a-mens" became quiet murmurs of assent, which became hollow whispers, which then disappeared altogether. She stopped her warbling during choir and contented herself with singing softly or humming when she stumbled over lyrics she'd memorized years ago. Eventually, she stopped attending church and left us to endure Malcolm's presence on our own. He surprised us with his devotion, attending every church session, morning or afternoon, without fail. After a mere few weeks of this, however, every one of us was ready to trade him for Fanny. He lectured the Reeds on their poor presentation (the family had little money, and their finest, though still shabby, church clothes were regarded by Malcolm Greenlowe as little more than uniforms of disrespectful poverty, an assault to both his and Jesus' senses). He corrected the pastor on Bible verses and shouted at those choir performers who struck wrong notes or botched the lyrics. After a month of this, the choir had dwindled to just a few sour sopranos and one tone-deaf alto, who felt duty-bound to Fanny to keep the choir alive in her absence.

The neighborhood had transformed into its own particular brand of hell. If we had ever felt annoyed or harassed by Fanny Greenlowe, we were ready to embrace her fully if it meant we could only get rid of her son. Her faded presence in our lives hit us harder than any of us could have expected. When Mr. Purcellly started sleeping with Lydia Bough again, none of us were any the wiser for weeks until Mr. Purcellly himself shook his head and said, "Well, damn if that boy hasn't gone and done it. He shut old Fanny

Greenlowe right the hell up. Who'd have thought?" But his voice carried no note of smarmy smugness, no vindictive pleasure—only the hollowness of dejection.

For despite everything—despite all our complaints and all she'd put us through—Fanny was ours. The constantly disapproving parent, the strict disciplinarian who doled out punishments in neatly wrapped (if bitter to swallow) truths, Fanny was the one person who had eyes on the back of her head and ears everywhere. She saw it all and let us get by with nothing. You had suspicions about a cheating spouse? You headed over to Fanny's to see what dirt she had. You wanted to know what your errant teenager was up to when he snuck out at 3 a.m.? Fanny knew as much as any teenager's friends and rather more than their parents or the police and was the most feared of all authority figures.

The final straw came one Saturday morning, during which most of us were doing our weekly shopping at the supercenter. No one stopped to chat anymore. What was there to say? Without Fanny as our social lubricant, conversation ran dry. It was as though she'd been the heart of the town, and without her we drifted in isolation, like limbs or organs that had separated from the whole, withering away on our own.

The electric shock that jolted us back to life came in the form of Haley Fields. She burst through the supercenter doors that particular Saturday morning and delivered the news that sent a charge through us all, right down to our fingertips.

"He's staying," she said, with the grim finality that usually accompanied a death notice.

There was no need to explain; we all knew who she meant. Why was not important—all we knew was that our collective resolve to wait out his stay, to grit our teeth and bear Malcolm Greenlowe's unendurable presence until his eventual departure, was for naught. We would never be free of the parasite that was Fanny Greenlowe's son.

"Something's got to be done," said Phil Burgess that night in the local park. At one point, we might have held this discussion in the tavern, but Malcolm had taken to the place and driven the rest of us elsewhere. The park, at least, was one place he'd never dare to venture.

"It's despicable," said Ana Fibbs, shaking her head, "the way the boy treats old Fanny."

"The way he treats us," added Carlos Ramirez. We were hardly saints, but our town had its code nonetheless, our very own set of "thou shalt nots" that we kept by, more or less.

"Milton Ridge is ours. We made it what it is, and that includes Fanny, God help me for saying so," said Mr. Purcelly, who, despite all odds, had become one of Fanny Greenlowe's most ardent defenders. "That boy has no right to come in here and start tearing down everything we've built."

"What can we do, though? It's not like we can banish him," said Lily Mitchell. "Hell, I don't know a place that would take him."

Phil Burgess snorted. "Only place that would is Hell."

What followed next is one of those conversations built like a maze: once you're in the middle of it, you have no idea how you got there, and you can't quite see beyond the hedges. Even we couldn't later explain how we arrived at the place we did. We could have talked it over a million times more and never reached the same conclusion as we did that particular night, driven into the park by our own anger, when the circumstances aligned as though the stars and planets above had ordained it. Our fury burned into us like a sun, scorching away the darkness, leaving our way bright and clear.

All I can say is that, at the time, it was the best plan we had.

There is still some confusion, exacerbated by the rumor mill, of course, about who actually pulled the trigger. Really there is still some ambiguity about whether or not a trigger was involved at all. It seemed common knowledge that Todd Barker had closed up his bar for one mysterious hour that night, but few knew more than this for certain. We were all involved, and yet none of us knew who occupied which link of the chain. We only knew our part, and it seemed best never to look further than that.

By morning, Malcolm Greenlowe lay six feet under.

Well, not quite. He was buried in a makeshift grave, several feet closer to Hell than he had been in life, under a thick layer of dirt, worms, old flower seeds, and—we found it most poetic—the remains of the seedling he had stamped out days before. No one seemed to remember whose idea it had originally been to bury Malcolm in his mother's garden, but all agreed it was the safest place we

could come up with—right under her own nose, the one place she wouldn't go digging.

Fanny must have wondered where her son had disappeared to, but if she did, she never asked. Instead, we were treated to a brief fiction about how he had gone to visit his father, one state over. We told her we were sorry to see him go (although it's worth mentioning, she didn't seem sorry in the least). Perhaps she thought he'd simply run off and couldn't bear to tell us, afraid we'd taunt her for chasing him away, too. Or maybe she knew more than she let on. Either way, we all nodded like we believed her lie, and she nodded like she believed our lies, and everyone was content to go along with whatever truth everyone else was willing to pretend to believe.

Without the constricting presence of Malcolm Greenlowe, Fanny thrived once more. Sunday morning found her back at church, shouting and singing and drowning out the rest of us in her jubilation. The white Jaguar made its reappearances around town, but no longer was it accompanied by the crushing weight of dread in our stomachs that had followed the sight of the car when Malcolm had been its owner. When Mr. Purcelly broke it off with Lydia Bough, Fanny told the entire neighborhood that it was because of the nasty infection he had acquired from Rachel Moss.

"That woman couldn't keep her mouth glued shut if she ate a bottle of Elmer's," grumbled Mr. Purcelly to anyone who would listen.

Each reasonably weathered day found Fanny Greenlowe in her beloved garden. She spent her days gripping tangled weeds by their roots and plucking them from the earth, tossing seeds into the ground, and abandoning her work whenever a jogger or dog walker wandered past. "It's going to be a growing year, I can feel it. Just got to get rid of these weeds. Weeds got to die to let the flowers breathe," she would say on these occasions, fanning herself with a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, hand on her hip as she coaxed confessions from our tongues. "Trim the weeds, watch the rest grow, grow, grow."

to the diner girl

jessie eikmann

I am fondling my straw,
gently nudging its bend and
swirling it through my soda
as I would stroke your elbow,
and I wish
my fingers could skim
through your chestnut dome of hair
the way my fork rakes
the skin of my
baked potato.

In a moment of madness
I might lean on the register
and beg to whisk you away.
You would never again
have to scrape remains from plates
or lug towers of upturned tumblers.

My girlfriend stops just short
of punching my shoulder.
Her frozen fist dissolves
and shrinks under the table.
No doubt she is also spinning
Petrarchan poems as
she scans her periphery for you.

We both ought to know better.
At the end of the night,
when you shed your visor
and greasy shoes,
your Peter Pan collars
and flower-print backpack
whisper that you are
unattainable.

unfinished poems (ode to sylvia plath)

catherine howl

Before your diagnosis,
You were led to London parties,
Never revealing to Ted
Your softer side of flowered gingham.
You drew from gardens
Of fresh images
Flooding your mind
to create poems.

My mind became filled
With years of fading voices
Over hospital payphones
As I wandered away
From the dangling receivers,
The back of my gown
Always open.

My breakfast trays
Followed by lunch, then dinner
Grew cold.
During lock-up
I beat the walls,
Longing to be a true poet
Away from a padded room.

I represented myself
Before the asylum judge.
Sentenced to maximum treatments,
My brain became
The fuse box to my body,
A wire-stemmed flower
Creeping along the corridor.

I lie on a gurney
And easily recall
Your films and letters,
Books and poems,
The way you styled your hair
Or turned a phrase.

You remain so memorable
In my nightmares,
Those flashbacks of you
In endless reels
Leaning in a darkened phone booth
Dialing for help.

Your words reached publishers
When you withdrew from the world,
The only light in your apartment
Illuminating a small, corner desk.

In England, you sewed drapes
For privacy and warmth
As Ted embraced his mistress,
Your children without food
Except the gingersnaps
You baked for them
That last christmas.

After the second attempt
I know time can end so quickly,
Caught up in redressing
Wounds with words.
My memories of you become unfinished poems
Short as photographs
Hanging in the balance
Of my dreams.

The oven is vaporless now.
I keep you alive to keep myself alive.

delicate edges

jaclyn lenggenhager

Whole things made hollow, unnatural;
high logs lovingly pushed,
feeling ice, floating, we were
weightless in this freezing river,
intoxicated with the northern air
touching our bones, held together
by rope and straps, where we will
be separated into dust, then pulp.

I'll be a book and you'll
be a newspaper, your
delicate edges bent and
bastardized into a crude
paper boat not big enough
to dam the damn river
that took us from home—

You'll float up
into pulpy droplets.
Zero-gravity soggy astronaut,
you've been reaching to heaven
long enough. It's time
to join
the dead atmosphere.

who sat down beside her

joseph cusumano

Using the bottom of a coffee mug, Lara crushed the caffeine tablet, chopped the small particles into a fine powder with a razor blade, and snorted all of it up with a short length of rolled paper. Compared to the blast she still craved, rehab or no rehab, intranasal caffeine was a poor substitute. For the moment, however, she had borrowed enough initiative to shower, dress, and make herself a decent breakfast. Lara was still underweight, and she wanted her boobs back.

After breakfast, she slipped into a pair of low-heeled pumps, grabbed her jacket, and stepped outside. Had it not been another day of gray skies and rain, she might have made it. After staring at the dreary landscape for several moments, Lara abruptly turned and reentered her apartment, her pulse already beginning to climb.

The silver-gray, hard-cased Samsonite suitcase scraped the bottom of her bedframe as she pulled it out. After unlatching the top and removing a Ziploc bag, she placed a small quantity of its white powder onto the top of her dresser and used the razor's edge to form a line. As long as she didn't bang it into her veins, she wasn't a total addict, at least not like the crew she'd met in rehab. Those burn-outs, as she referred to them, had already lost their teeth while she still turned heads.

Fifteen minutes later, she was barreling down the highway to her office, Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" booming from the Bose. With her entire nervous system set to blitz mode, it was a lot easier dealing with the decision she'd postponed. Ron, her business partner and on-again, off-again thrill, should be told the news of her recent windfall—at least the cash part of it. It would allow their fledgling business to avoid bankruptcy.

Two days ago, she had returned to the Seattle airport after a fruitless trip to San Francisco and was among the first travelers to exit the plane. Her Samsonite was among the first pieces of luggage to reach the carousel, and by the time the last passenger got

off the jet, Lara was on her way to short-term parking.

After arriving at her apartment, she tossed the suitcase onto her bed, undressed, showered, and dried herself. Still having some clean clothes in the suitcase, she flipped it open and was stunned. On the left side were half-inch thick bundles of Jacksons plus a few stacks of Franklins, more money than she had ever seen at one time; on the right side were four large Ziploc bags filled with white powder. Naked and damp, Lara stared at the contents until she shivered.

Ron arrived at the office about five minutes after Lara. Although none of their employees were in their cubicles yet, Lara asked him to come into her office and close the door behind him. By then, she had decided that the cash and drugs she'd found were a gift from heaven, not someone else's dangerous ill-gotten gains. But Ron was a four percenter, one of the very few who had stayed clean after a couple of days in detox. Almost everyone else needed months of rehab to kick the habit. He was the exception to a rule about cocaine that got tossed around in rehab: the first time you try it, you sign over power of eternity to a molecule. She couldn't bring herself to tell Ron about the cocaine.

"Well, shit! You're cranking again!" Ron said. It wasn't a question. Lara's first impulse was to deny it, but her runny nose and constant movements made that impossible, especially to a former addict. No way I can plead the Fifth in this court, Lara realized, so she pled guilty and braced herself for a lecture she didn't want to hear. But instead of playing drug counselor, Ron surprised her by focusing on a more immediate issue, one to which she had given little thought.

"Can you tell if somebody took your suitcase, emptied it out, and then refilled it with the cash and coke? Or do you think it's not even your suitcase?"

"It's not mine. It just looks like mine" Lara said.

"How do you know?"

"All the internal compartments for storing separate items have been torn out. I also found some scratches on the outside that mine doesn't have, and it smells funny on the inside."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. . . some weird chemical smell."

"Does it have an I.D. tag on the handle?"

"No."

"Did yours?"

"No," she replied. Ron appeared to relax a little.

"So whoever packed the money and drugs in the suitcase that you took home likely has your suitcase and clothes."

"Yeah, but like I said, there was no I.D. tag on mine."

"Was there anything in your own suitcase that could identify you?" he asked. From the look on her face, Ron could see that she hadn't considered this. "Well?" he prodded.

"Give me a moment, will you?" she shot back.

"What about the documents for the group in San Francisco? Were they in the suitcase?"

"No. I carried them in a briefcase along with my tablet."

"Did you have any personal items in the suitcase?"

"Like what?"

"Like... prescription medicines with your name and address on the label. Or mail. And what about your travel expense receipts?"

"I keep my meds in my purse, and the travel receipts are in my briefcase." She lifted her purse and the dark brown leather briefcase off her desk to show him, her arm trembling.

"And what about mail? Did you take any mail with you, even junk mail?"

"Yeah, I did..."

"And where is it?" Ron asked.

"I read it and threw it away at the hotel. Most of it was women's magazines."

"You threw all of it away before you packed your suitcase in San Francisco?"

"Yeah, I think I did." She wanted to kick herself.

It would have to be Connie. Two years ago, Connie had been so helpful when Lara had her abortion, driving her to and from the clinic and spending the first night sleeping on a cot alongside her. In other circumstances, Lara would have used the word "godsend" to describe her. But when the ordeal was over, Lara

drifted away. She still had some guilt about it—the separation from Connie, not the abortion— and decided that she must have needed to close an entire chapter of her life, one that had included her closest friend. But now she needed Connie again.

Lara arrived at her favorite coffee shop five minutes early and twelve pounds underweight. She had no appetite but ordered a pecan-filled pastry with her coffee. The coffee came in an old-style, heavy white ceramic mug, just like the ones from which she'd sipped hot chocolate when she was in grade school. The pecan pastry lay on a plain white china plate, and the silverware was stainless steel. Nothing fancy, but the place had none of the cheap, disposable feel she encountered nearly everywhere else. After meandering around the coffee shop, Lara found an empty table at the rear.

She still hadn't decided how much she would have to tell Connie and how much she could keep to herself. The financial predicament of her company? Her cash windfall? That she was cranking again? Her uncertainty about whether she had left personal information in her suitcase, the one that the smugglers now possessed?

Suddenly aware of someone standing at the edge of the table, Lara looked up and saw her friend. Like herself, Connie was tall, brunette, and fair. Unlike herself, Connie had curves.

Connie gave Lara the smile she remembered, the one that said everything is going to be okay. Lara jumped up, hugged her, and didn't want to let go. Neither did Connie.

In minutes, they were conversing as if their separation had never occurred, and Lara remembered what she most admired and envied about her friend: Connie saw life as an adventure, and she still trusted her own judgement.

After a two-year hiatus, they had some catching up to do, and there were enough safe topics that the time passed easily and quickly. But Lara knew that Connie would question her for the reason for their *tête-a-tête*.

"Lara, is something getting you down? You don't look well, and you're too thin."

Lara glanced at her coffee and untouched pastry, still unsure about how much to reveal. She would just have to begin and trust herself to say the right thing.

"It's not completely my fault," Lara said.

"I read the article in the paper a few months ago about the business you started," Connie replied. Lara remembered the friendly note that Connie had sent at the time, one to which she should have responded. "Is your business in trouble?"

"That's a big chunk of it. You don't know my partner, Ron, but we met on a detox ward."

"Strange place to formulate a business plan." Connie smiled.

"For sure, but I needed something to work toward, not just something to get away from. Without a project like this, it would have taken me a lot longer to get clean."

"What kind of business is it?"

"Crowd lending. People with money to invest who can't earn much more than two percent in CDs can get up to five percent if they loan their money to us. Then we loan the money out at seven percent to small business start-ups. Each investor's money gets spread out over a large number of different start-ups to minimize risk. It's a neat business model. We have much lower overhead than a bank does because we do relatively little investigation into the people we loan to. Of course we provide information to our investors regarding the nature, size, and number of start-ups in our loan portfolio."

"Most of this is done online?"

"Exactly. We almost never meet face to face with investors or borrowers, and that saves a huge amount of overhead and time."

"Sounds efficient. Is it working out?"

"Sort of. The trick is simply having enough borrowers and lenders, so I was really excited when I got a call from a larger company based in San Francisco. They're in the same business we are, and they wanted to explore a possible merger with us."

"That sounds great. What happened?"

"I went to meet the CEO in person. I showed him our current balance sheet, the profit and loss statement for the most recent quarters, and our projections."

"And?"

"He lost interest, fast. He thought the projections were unrealistic and said we had made the most common mistake start-ups

make.”

“Let me guess,” Connie interrupted. “Beginning without enough capital to stay afloat until the operation becomes self-sustaining.”

“You’ve obviously seen this before. From the CEO’s point of view, we would be a drag on his company. It was a huge let-down.”

“Do you think he was right?”

“It looks that way. If we don’t get bigger very soon, we won’t be able to pay the salaries or the rent. We’re going through our cash too fast.” Lara took a large swallow of coffee, hoping to warm herself without having to force food down her gullet. Closing her eyes, she felt the warmth spread through her chest and stomach. “About a month ago, I started doing something risky.” She paused, and Connie gave her the encouraging nod she needed. “I started paying the interest owed to the early investors with money coming in from new investors.”

“You mean a pyramid scheme?” Connie seemed horrified.

“Not like Madoff!” Lara insisted.

“How is it different?”

“Well for one thing, Ron and I aren’t living some extravagant lifestyle. I’m just trying to keep the business alive until it reaches a size where it can generate a profit.”

“Does Ron know what you’re doing?”

“No. I’m keeping two sets of books.” When Connie remained silent, Lara looked down and fidgeted with her napkin and silverware. The pastry on her plate looked even less appetizing now than when she had bought it, and after cutting it into small bites, she lifted the plate to her friend. Connie took a piece, held it between thumb and forefinger, and continued to wait. “But I’ve been given a way out,” Lara finally said, and she amazed Connie with the story of the switched luggage and cash windfall, not mentioning the plastic bags filled with cocaine.

When she finished, Connie asked, “And what does Ron think?”

“That I have to turn the money over to the police.”

“And you?”

“If he doesn’t let me save the business with the cash I’ve

found, I'm going to buy him out.”

Connie left the coffee house 15 minutes later, wondering why Lara had bothered to ask her opinion.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Is this for real? Lara read the email for the third time.

Ms. Wilson:

You are in possession of property that is not yours. We are referring to the contents of a suitcase that you took from the airport on December 3rd. We believe you took it from a carousel by mistake and that you wish to return it in exchange for your own. Park your car at the lot on the corner of 27th and Carter this coming Tuesday at 4 p.m. Leave it unlocked with our suitcase on the floor of the back seat and leave the area immediately. You may return to your car after 4:30 p.m. Your own suitcase will be in the back seat.

I did leave some kind of I.D. in my suitcase, Lara realized. But how did they get my email address?

In less than a minute, she had her answer. Using Google, she found all sorts of online services that would provide that information and much more. Lara jumped up from her desk and quickly headed into her bedroom. After tossing the suitcase on top of the bed, she opened it and stared at the contents. Although she had taken some of the cocaine from one of the plastic bags, the bag was still over three-quarters full. The other bags were untouched. As for the cash, she had taken only two of the bundles of twenty-dollar bills, leaving well over \$300,000.

If they had contacted me right away, I wouldn't have dared touch it. Why the hell did they wait? Do they expect me not to have used a little coke and cash after two whole weeks? What are they going to do when they discover that some of their stash is missing?

Lara didn't have any answers, and pacing the rooms of her apartment didn't help. She stopped to glance at the clock on her fireplace mantle. It was 9:30 p.m.. No wonder she was crashing; it had been over 14 hours since she had snorted her daily allotment.

Maybe she could get some sleep and face things with a clearer mind in the morning, especially after her morning fix.

After undressing in her bedroom, she entered the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Not good. Red-rimmed eyelids. Patchy discoloration on her left cheek, typical of coke users. Her face was gaunt and the bathroom scale confirmed it: she was down an additional four pounds. *I've got to start eating!* she vowed. *I'll get a solid breakfast in the morning.*

Lara leaned over the bathtub to turn on the water but immediately jumped back. A spider the size of her hand was inside the tub. She quickly backed out of the bathroom and closed the door. The space under the door was too narrow to permit the thing to crawl through, which calmed her somewhat, but re-entering the bathroom was out of the question. The landlord could deal with the spider in the morning. Alone, she wouldn't have faced it with anything less than a flame-thrower. She tugged on the door again to make sure that it was completely closed, headed for the half bath off the living room, and washed her face and hands repeatedly.

Lara knew she needed a sedative and took a double dose. When she finally relaxed enough to fall asleep, her dreams were overrun by spiders which had long, bony human fingers in place of legs. She whimpered and thrashed about in bed, but the sedative prevented her from waking. The spiders climbed all over her, used their human fingers to pull her hair and to bite her arms and legs. When she couldn't seem to swat them away, Lara glanced at her hands. Her fingers had turned into bristly spider legs.

"Ms. Wilson, there's nothing in your bathtub."

"What about the rest of the bathroom? Maybe it crawled out of the tub and is hiding in the closet," Lara said.

"I checked everywhere," Rick answered while walking into the kitchen where Lara was waiting. "It must have gone down the drain. I'll run some hot water in case it's still in the pipe."

When he finished, Rick told her to call if she saw the spider again, then returned to his office. Lara stepped gingerly into the doorframe of the bathroom and looked around. Her search included all four corners of the ceiling. The last place she wanted to find it was on top of her head, but Rick had been right: it was gone.

Lara pushed the rubber plug into the bathtub drain as far as it would go, aware that it would be difficult to remove later. She then filled the tub with enough hot water to fog the mirror above the sink, even with the bathroom door left wide open. Next came the lavender bath salts. Once settled into the hot water, the tension in her neck and traps began to ease.

Thirty minutes later when Lara had finished dressing, she went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator in hope of finding something palatable. But having neither added anything fresh nor removed any of the older items, she caught a whiff of something that had spoiled and quickly shut the refrigerator door. Her final preparation for work was a long line of white powder.

Lara exited the freeway at 27th street and headed south toward its intersection with Carter. The clock on the dashboard read 3:45 p.m., and the parking lot designated in the email was less than a mile away. Even with fur-lined gloves, the steering wheel sucked the warmth out of her fingers, and the mirror on her visor had been especially unkind. Sunken eyes, patchy discolorations all over her face, dark stains on her teeth.

Several minutes earlier, she had jerked the steering wheel and been buffeted by the blaring horns of other drivers when the spider crawled across her windshield. In the previous days, Lara had seen it multiple times. At the office, she had watched it climb onto Ron's lap and settle in. When Ron continued to calmly sip his coffee, she knew the spider wasn't real, but Lara believed it was something she could handle. It couldn't be any worse than what she had experienced years ago with ketamine.

However, this had been a turning point for Lara. Ron was aghast when she showed him the anonymous email. He begged her to follow the instructions that had been sent. It meant she would have to surrender her windfall and go back into detox and rehab, but he insisted there was no alternative.

Eventually Lara agreed, knowing full well that the business might fail, but she couldn't bring herself to tell Ron about the second set of books she'd been keeping. If she ended up in prison for defrauding their investors, Ron would be left to pay both Peter and Paul.

Lara was three blocks away from the parking lot when everything suddenly became clear. She immediately pulled into an empty parking space and sat with her heart pounding.

How could I have been so stupid? she wondered. *The anonymous email was sent by Ron, and he's the one coming to switch the suitcases! Then while I'm in rehab, he'll try to buy me out for a song, maybe even force a sale in court by claiming that I'm a hopeless addict who was committing fraud and destroying the business. Nobody will understand that I'm the only one who can save it.*

Devastated by the betrayal, Lara sat a few more minutes before another suspicion crept over her. Was Connie in on this too? Was Connie going to be Ron's new partner? Given her own wasted condition, curvaceous Connie might already be Ron's new love.

She swore out loud and angrily shoved the gearshift back into drive, made a hasty U-turn, and headed back to the highway. Instead of heading north on the interstate back to her apartment, she took the southbound ramp. Five minutes later, she crossed the river and the state line. With the suitcase in the back seat, she didn't need anything or anybody.

Lara glanced at the rearview mirror and saw two large spiders crawling on the inside surface of the rear window. Although her hands instantly gripped the steering wheel tighter, she kept the car in the center of the lane.

self-portrait

angela a. moore-williams





yuki-omba

sarah hayes

As the sun rose and created a glaze of sharp, cold light across the ice-covered hills of the countryside, so Yuki-omba rose with the sun and prepared for the day ahead. For the thousandth time, she washed her face in the stream, weaved a new kimono out of the snow to wear—as stark white and crisp as the snow bank it was born from—and brushed a flower across her lips until the crushed petals turned them blue.

She climbed over the low-lying hills that covered the countryside, gliding over the crust of ice and frost, as if her feet did not touch the ground at all. No chilly wind, no blast of cold could slow her descent through the rolling expanse of trees, all bare limbs and sparkling with frozen ornaments from the previous night.

The humans in the nearby village called her Yuki-onna, whispered her name with a mixture of reverence and fear. But she did not feel like a young woman anymore, not after one thousand years of winter. All she knew, from the moment she first opened her eyes and felt the ground with her hands and fell into the fresh snow with her newly born body, was the eternal season of winter. In her head, she was Yuki-omba now: the grandmother of the snow.

Eventually, the hills gave way to a long, winding path that she knew ran through several villages of average proportions before connecting to a much larger town, where the women wore kimonos with flower prints and the men still thought she was the most beautiful creature they had ever seen in their lives.

Yuki-omba used to love being adored by the handsome young men and mature older men who lived in these towns, especially when they gave her gifts and kept her secrets. Now, when she looked at them, all she could see were the faces of their fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers and the stretching out of their ancestral scroll across hundreds of years that never seems to stop. All she could see was their dead.

“Are you human or yokai?” one man long ago asked her,

before there were feudal lords and laws to worry over. He traced his finger across her skin; under the stars, it looked as if he were drawing a line across moonlight itself.

“Is it so wrong,” she had whispered, “to want to be human?”

A hundred or so years later, she would wear her first hand-woven kimono, but at that moment she was as clothed as the sky itself, and she held her unchanged body against his mortal form under the celestial figures until night changed to morning. She disappeared from the man, who then slept forever in the snow with a lasting flush of passion on his cheeks, before the sun hit the horizon.

Now, the hem of her kimono skirted the places on the path where bare dirt peeked out amid hard-packed snow on a heavily traveled road, the imprints of horse hooves and cartwheels evident in the tracks left behind. A long time ago, the people had given her a palanquin in which to ride; it had been carried by a quartet of subservient kappa folk, the palanquin itself made of a black lacquered wood so rich and deep it hypnotized the humans into following it with their eyes until it was no more than a spec of black in the distance, and then gone. But the palanquin, the kappa, the power—they were all gone now. Everything, she thought, was gone.

Yuki-omba, once Yuki-onna, looked ahead. Although she had lost sense of the passing of time on a minute level, she felt like she had been walking for quite some time. She could smell the burning fires of breakfast being cooked, could hear the cry of animals as their owners corralled them into their rightful places. Yes, she was close to a village full of industrious humans. The air was rich with crackling wood and animal fat.

She knew there was warmth in that place. She also knew she could never feel it. With one hand, she fashioned up a cloak from the nearby snow and drew it up over her shoulders and head until the unnatural hood hung over her, casting part of her face in shadow, leaving the rest just a tantalizing part of a greater mystery.

The sound of wings flapping drew Yuki-omba's attention to the trees. A pair of crow tengu were perched on a thick branch, looking down their long red noses at her.

“*Can! Can!*” They mimicked the sound of the birds that

had once lived there, before the tengu moved in and made their masks red with their blood. Now their cries were a cruel imitation of what was.

“Fools.” Yuki-omba's voice was deep and low, but it had as much edge as a freshly sharpened razor. “Pretending to be what you cannot.”

One tengu hid his face behind his feathered fan and laughed. The other tengu joined in, and together they sounded like creaking floorboards ready to snap.

Her face set tight, Yuki-omba passed by the tengu tree. The wind whistled softly in her wake. She would go to the humans yet again and look again for the gleam of summer that would end her eternal winter.

As if deciding her luck for the day, the snow began to fall again.

the apple tree

jessie eikmann

The first thing I noticed when Dad parked our Saturn in the cleared field—aside from the lack of a real driveway—was the NRA sticker sitting proudly in the window of the truck next to us. I immediately regretted coming and closed the car door again.

When I worked up the nerve to crawl out, I only had five seconds to consider what I was doing there. Four boys almost smashed into me. They managed to divert their course and run around me, easily navigating the maze of parked cars. A soccer ball bounced off four different tires and hurtled towards the gravel road. The boys flung themselves after it.

I had no idea why I let Mom drag me to her coworkers' bonfire party. She had been on the verge of begging, since my sisters refused and she wanted to show off at least one of her children. Maybe I caved in to her pleading, or maybe the promise of food lured me there. Any purpose I had for attending, though, was overshadowed by the fact that my clothes made me an easy target; my work uniform of collared shirt and dress pants was too cosmopolitan for the blue-jeaned crowd at the party.

The party's host was Jean, a sixty-something wisp of a woman with a voice like a food processor. Dad greeted her by saying, "Hey, look, it's the Jean Genie," singing the last two words to the tune of the David Bowie song.

Jean cocked her head and laughed as if this were a cherished nickname she hadn't heard since childhood. She was carrying a tray of what she billed as "party food": a sausage and cream cheese mix stuffed in wonton shells. After she finished with Dad, the Jean Genie went around raising the tray under everyone's chins, insisting, "Y'all should try my party food." Behind her was a stone barn that could have passed as a dance hall if it weren't for the myriad tools and oil drums pushed into the corners to make room for the unplugged karaoke machine. In the back, a fire pit gave off curls of smoke, and a man in overalls stacked logs on it, coaxing the first bright strands of fire from the pyramid of wood.

Jean Genie took her party food back into the house. Mom led me on a round of introductions. She began with Darrel, her boss in the sheet metal department. He was a sallow-faced man with a slicked-back ponytail that clung a little too closely to the side of his head. She shoved me before countless other people, but none of them stood out until I met a young man named Justin, who had a wide, toothy grin like the kid on the *Mad* magazine covers. Justin was holding a beer in his hand, but out of habit from my job I attempted a handshake by reaching around the beer and trying to pump his wrist up and down. He scowled at me and moved his beer away. “Hey,” he said sharply, “what’re you doin’ with my drink?”

Mom quickly diffused the situation. “No, no, Justin, it’s okay. Jennifer’s still a year too young for that.” Justin eyed me suspiciously and walked away.

Mom waited until he was out of earshot, then leaned closer and said, “I know you weren’t going to try anything, but Justin’s not used to your kind of... formalities.”

So much for my notion that good country folks did everything on a handshake.

After eating some of the food Jean Genie had prepared—chili with a side of five different brands of crackers—I got my last introduction of the evening. Mom had been looking everywhere for her best work friend, who was also named Jennifer. She finally waved me over to a pudgy woman with a traffic-cone-colored T-shirt and a shiny cheerleader smile. “Hi!” Other Jennifer chirped. “I’ve heard so much about you. Come here.” Before I could even move, she seized me into a bear hug.

When she released me, she gave my uniform a once-over and said, “Well, you’re awful dressed up! What do you do, again?”

I felt we had crossed into murky waters. “I... I work for a politician.”

The next question was inevitable. She asked, “Which party?”

“I’m extremely Democratic,” I replied, waiting for her to slap me or laugh in my face.

Instead, she gave my back an affectionate pounding. “Good girl! My mama raised me that way, and I always go that way

myself. They're the best people, y'know."

Relieved, I gazed behind me at the barn. Other Jennifer followed my eyes and hit upon the karaoke machine. "Oh, look. I can't wait to use that. I love singin'." Then she wandered back up the hill towards the beer cooler.

A hot hiss in the air drew me to the backyard and the now massive bonfire. Two of the boys, neither of whom looked older than eight, had abandoned the soccer game and started to sacrifice twigs to the blaze. Though the fire towered three times their height, they didn't seem to fear it. They raced around the pit's perimeter, daring one of the wayward tufts of flame to leap up and ignite their gym shorts. Then the younger boy stopped running. He suddenly held out a hand as if testing for a secret panel in the wall of heat. The hand made a shadow, a tiny blip in the orange radar screen. I raised my cuffs to block my eyes. That poor kid's hand would surely be engulfed any second. I couldn't bear to watch, couldn't bear to hear his startled shriek when the fire licked his forearm. But then, as quickly as the tension rose, the older boy, who had paused to watch his playmate's standoff, ended it with a tap on the younger boy's shoulder. Apparently this was the signal for the chase to resume. The younger boy giggled, jerked his hand away from the fire, and sprinted back across the yard after his companion.

My eyes moved up the column of flame to where it skittered in the upper air. An oak tree stood only a few feet behind it, and the errant sparks came close enough to peck at the overhanging branches. The tree's left side had a gap where its limbs should have been. Either those branches had been hacked away in advance, or—what I thought far more likely—the tree had already been nicked in previous bonfire parties. Some sparks from the present fire drifted into this hole as they flickered out. The rest continued to graze the dry leaves above them. I looked to my right and saw miles of the bare, dry cornstalks that surrounded Jean Genie's property. This arrangement was—as the lopsided oak attested—designed for a catastrophe. One kiss from the embers and the leaves could catch and spread to the cornstalks. The field was a tinderbox waiting to ignite.

In my spell of fretting, I hadn't noticed Other Jennifer standing right next to me. She tapped me on the shoulder. I nearly

jumped out of my shoes. “Hey,” she said. “Whatcha thinking about?”

My eyes jumped from her to the bonfire and back again. “That fire,” I quavered, “it’s *huge*. I’m worried that...” As clear as the disaster was in my head, I couldn’t articulate it.

Her intuition startled me. “That it’ll get out of control? Oh, don’t worry. Jean knows what she’s doing.” She chuckled, and added as an afterthought, “Hey, maybe if there’s a problem, they’ll bring some hot firefighters, huh? With muscles and abs and everything.” She elbowed me in the arm to punctuate her hopes.

I laughed in the stifled way you would if you heard your grandmother make a racist joke. “Yeah, I guess.” Even if firefighters could make it here over the gravel road, I highly doubted that they would be concerned with putting their muscles on display for the ladies. Besides, I would have hoped for a firefighter with broad hips and generous cleavage. But I made sure that didn’t pass the vault of my lips.

I had been searching for a space alone for an hour. The ceaseless chatter and blaring country music disrupted my nervous pacing. I moved to the other side of the barn. For the first time that evening I noticed the apple tree—or rather, I noticed its smell. The mixed perfume of mulch and fermented fruit congested the air. I wrinkled my nose. After taking three steps, I stumbled on what I thought was a tennis ball from the way it crumpled under my shoe. I recovered and stood up just beneath its lowest-hanging branch.

The tree was nestled close to the barn’s right wall. Its crazy-straw trunk made a thin spiral. The limbs hung only about six feet at their lowest, drooping down on one side and holding upright the closer they crowded the wall. Fallen fruit carpeted the ground around the tree. The cider smell confirmed they were apples, but they were so warped and scabbed that they resembled small potatoes.

One apple dangled in front of me. It didn’t look fully mature, but it still seemed inviting. My fingers wrapped around the apple delicately, clutching the smooth skin as if I expected it to flake off on my fingers. A tiny shift of weight plucked the apple down into my hands. For several moments I stared at the gold

flecks on its red surface. I gave it a firm squeeze with my thumb on the stubble on the bottom and my forefinger lodged in the valley under its stem. Then I kissed it with my teeth as I would kiss Leslie in the school commons—quickly, followed by a frantic look around to make sure nobody noticed.

After biting the apple once I had dropped it on the ground, thinking I might find someplace to gather my thoughts in Jean Genie's house. I almost managed to ease through the screen door silently. Unfortunately Jean Genie's shoddy house gave me away. Her door swung back with a whump and stuck in its own frame, misaligned, like the house was pouting at my plan to not be discovered. The plan forsaken, I yanked the door shut and groaned. The second *whump* made Jean Genie poke her head out of the kitchen.

"Hey, you!" Jean Genie rasped. "I've got more party food comin' out in ten minutes if you want it. I don't know what it's actually called, so I just call it party food. Or football food. Just depends." Her granddaughter sat on the counter siphoning off some of the party food's cream cheese with her finger. Some of the cream cheese plopped off the girl's finger and onto her overalls. She giggled with satisfaction at the mess and sucked on her finger. I made a mental note not to eat any more of Jean Genie's *bors d'oeuvres*.

I went down the carpeted staircase to the basement, seeing no one at first. Just when I started pacing again, a voice barked out, "Whatcha lookin' for?" from the corner of the room. A stout, balding man was guarding the cooler with his butt. Clearly the basement was out. I fidgeted with my collar and ran back upstairs. The man yelled something about cocktail shrimp at my back.

Finally, I reasoned that if nothing else, the bathroom was private. When I tiptoed in, I was surprised to find that it was the only part of Jean Genie's house exempt from decay. Lavender scent enveloped the room. Spotless white tile lined the glass of the walk-in shower. Even the toothbrushes were perfectly straight. I nearly scratched the wall, convinced that it could all be peeled off with the nick of my thumbnail and that the room's true shabbiness would bleed through the scratch.

I adjusted my bobby pins in the mirror and wondered

aloud how I would bring myself to confession. The trial period of my secret affair with Leslie was dwindling. I'd pegged the relationship an accident, a by-product of misplaced hormones and the hedonism of college. *A month, I had thought, this'll pass in a month. I can't possibly be gay. That makes no sense.*

Perhaps "accident" was the right word. It seemed to reflect the entropy that drew Leslie and me together on the day this madness hit. No, I realized as I skewered my hairline with a pin, it was more like the Holy Grail of accidents. We were well into the third week and the feelings showed no signs of letting up. If anything, they had put down roots. We had held hands, kissed each other's cheeks, and only two days before, she had ambushed my lips. The month was almost up, yet my so-called "reason" had not intercepted me and said, "Jennifer, you must stop this. You're *straight*, remember?" It was clear that I couldn't stop the roots from spreading. Nor did I want to stop them. Trial or no trial, Leslie wasn't going anywhere.

My resolution made the showdown with my parents inevitable. It wasn't fair that Leslie was trumpeting her love from the rooftops and I was barricading myself in the closet. I figured that after a month I would either reassess and go back to boys or figure out how to stop introducing Leslie as my "friend" to my family.

I finished playing with my hair and glanced around the bathroom again. The walls seemed a few inches closer in.

The bathroom window overlooked the barn and the circle of my mom's co-workers. Rocking back, laughing like maniacs in their fold-out lawn chairs, they looked like overturned beetles with the blob of the dying bonfire as a backdrop. I thought I could make out the outline of Mom's hair and Dad's graying scalp on the close edge of the ring. I had planned to pull them aside tonight, so I could get ahead of the calendar as it sucked the last of the trial days into its vacuum bag. My parents were already halfway drunk down there anyway. Maybe all the Bud Lights they sucked down their throats would make what I might say easier to swallow. Speaking of that monster, what *would* I say?

Whatever the right words were, I didn't have time to decipher them here. Someone was pounding on the bathroom door.

I pulled out my iPod when I went back outside to drown

out the Kenny Chesney that Jean Genie's radio insisted on playing. In honor of Jean Genie, I flipped to David Bowie. As I mumbled along with the words, I wondered what secrets Major Tom in "Space Oddity" was hiding when that glitch took his tin can off the grid. I envied his ability to just float into space and take his existential crises about the blueness of earth with him. Ground Control could interrogate his capsule forever and never get anything on him. I even envied that kid who tried to stroke the fire. At least he had a chance against his. You couldn't win against a fire like mine, one that stirred imperceptibly in the blood and was about to explode all over everyone in my life.

When I slipped back into the circle, Other Jennifer was in the part of the drunkenness gradient where she was just sober enough to recall how much she disliked her estranged husband, but plenty drunk enough to think sharing it was a good idea.

No one could quite grasp what she was saying about her husband. Between gulps of beer she tried to explain: "I mean, I'm living with him, but I'm not *really* living with him, you know? Being married was never all that great, except when it was *really great*, know what I'm saying?" She giggled spastically. Whatever she alluded to floated down the river of Budweiser. The rest of us couldn't follow her meaning through the current.

Other Jennifer finally saw our confusion and gave up. "Hey, guys, whattaya say we break out the karaoke machine? I wanna sing."

She had been clamoring to use the machine all night. Twice she sat in front of the barn while Jean Genie hooked it up, but the epic sing along she hoped for had never materialized. Every time Other Jennifer brought up the subject, people had given her a half-hearted "maybe" and walked away. Mom had whispered to me when they hooked up the machine, "We probably won't end up doing that. We don't know any of the songs they like anyway." So far Mom was right; the string riffs and the twangy broken voices the radio played sounded to me like one unfamiliar song that played on loop.

Other Jennifer would no longer take their indirect refusals for an answer. She stumbled up to the barn door and came back in

few minutes. She was dragging the machine's cords like a garden hose. The machine bounced dangerously through the grass behind the cords. Twice on the way down it came unplugged and toppled in the grass, forcing Other Jennifer to run back and readjust while shouting, "Goddammit!" Luckily Jean Genie was chatting away in the kitchen and couldn't see what Other Jennifer was doing to her karaoke machine.

Other Jennifer turned the microphone on and let out a celebratory *whoop* that made everyone in the circle flinch. Then she bobbed her head, straining to hear whichever country song was playing now. I saw her mouth open and twitch with the intention of belting out a song, but something stopped her from vocalizing—whether it was because we all started covering our ears or because she was too drunk to summon lyrics from her brain, I couldn't say. She made a final appeal for a backup singer, saying, "Come on, don't any of y'all want to *sing* with me?"

This time she got a straight answer. Darrel replied, "Nope. I think we're good, Jennifer."

Even this refusal didn't seem to deter her. She hollered into the microphone. "Hey, you know what would be funny? We should all yell stuff into this."

"Like what, Jennifer?" Mom said.

Other Jennifer hesitated. Her eyes squinted at the challenge. Suddenly her face brightened and she clutched the microphone with both hands. "Oh, I know," she cried, "*Shit!*" It was raw, inarticulate, and ridiculous—yet when she said it, it was almost an anthem. "*Shit!* Somebody say it with me." She then held the microphone out like she was passing a church donation plate.

The microphone sat expectantly in her hand for thirty seconds. Finally, Darrel snatched it away. "A'right, a'right, I'll do it." He took a deep breath, screwed up his eyes for dramatic tension, and let the word burst from his lips in two syllables: "*Shee-ut!*" On the second half his voice cracked slightly, giving the impression that he was yodeling it.

The circle's laughter began anew. Mom covered her laughter with both hands, the long bony fingers eclipsing all but her watering eyes. Dad clapped his palms together as he chuckled. Other Jennifer yelled, "Yeah, Darrel," laughing so hard that she snorted

and almost tripped over the legs of her lawn chair. Even I participated this time, but I drew up my lower lip so only my trembling shoulders and the hiccups in my breath revealed my amusement.

At some point during the hoopla, Darrel had passed the microphone back to Other Jennifer. When the fits of laughter collapsed back into themselves, she said, "That was cool, man. Anybody else wanna do it? Anybody wanna say something?"

As everyone else shook their heads and held up their hands as if defending themselves from hurtling projectiles, an idea flared in my head. I had the mad desire to grab the microphone and plant myself in the middle of the ring announcing, "I think there's something you guys should know. I'm dating a girl. So there." I imagined the silence that would reign in the aftermath, and I pictured myself wheeling around to stare at all the gaping mouths. I'd end by dropping the microphone and walking away, leaving both the literal and figurative dust to settle behind me.

Then, as Other Jennifer retracted the microphone back into her chest, my common sense intervened. The exposé wouldn't happen like the movie scene my head had just directed. There would be laughter peppered in somewhere, and nobody's jaw would be dangling dramatically from the impact. Besides, a party of Mom's business associates was hardly the venue for publicly humiliating myself. So I just sat there and listened to the subtle buzz emanating from the microphone.

The withdrawal of Other Jennifer's offer of karaoke seemed to be the signal for the circle to scatter. My parents went back towards the house, but I had something to take care of at the apple tree.

The apple I had bitten into was still sitting at the base of the tree. It looked way too obvious there, its exposed white flesh clashing with the blackened bites of the other fallen apples.

I decided I had to hide the apple even though I didn't feel as if I had broken any rules. Jean Genie didn't strike me as the type to zealously guard her apples or start doing dental analysis when someone bit into one. It just made sense to me to keep this apple a secret like I kept Leslie, at least for now. I thought about Other Jennifer as I swept aside some of the surrounding apples. She would

have thought I was being a real dumbass about this. Drunk or sober, she probably wouldn't think much of scattering apples like bread crumbs all over Jean Genie's house. She could wave her half-eaten apples in front of anyone and everyone, but I wasn't brave or transparent enough to do that. When I revealed my apples, I would have to do it carefully and strategically. This moment was neither of those.

I had just managed to bury my apple in the pile when I heard Mom call, "Jennifer? Jennifer?"

I dove into the range of the streetlight. Mom tramped around the corner and met me where I stood. She batted at some dust on her jeans as she continued, "I think we're ready to head out. You about ready to leave?" I nodded but lingered by the apple tree a few moments more.

The fire pit seemed like an ordinary hole in the ground by the time Dad pulled the Saturn out onto the gravel road. No embers, smoke, or scraps of charred wood stuck around as evidence that an inferno had ever been there.

I slouched in the back seat and leaned against the car door, pretending to be asleep. Then I snuck a hand underneath my shirt and pulled out two apples from the three I had stashed against my breasts. Stealing them while my parents said goodbye to the party guests had only been a frenetic impulse a few minutes ago. Gripping the two apples in my hands as I was tucked in the safety of the car, though, made the theft seem like a triumph. The apples weren't apples anymore; they were props from an elaborate play that I refused to act in, and I had spirited them away to repurpose them—and recast myself in the process.

I placed the apples back under my shirt, hoping the trip home wouldn't take too long. There were too many burdens in my chest, and I was anxious to unload them.

longinus

thomas s. mays

Jesus, I want to weep, too—probably not for the same reasons you do. Am I so much a bigger man than you because I was taught never to cry? Twenty-two to your thirty-three years I have tried, yet no tear of unselfish love has been allowed from my eye.

Jesus, I want to pierce my hands with the pen I could never hold properly—but not my feet (though, I was told that you would carry me), because

Jesus, I want to walk on the water that must have trickled down the lance to anoint The Skull and turn it into wine and become drunk with your blood and weep.

blood clot florals

jaclyn lenggenhager

Do you remember the blood clot
florals you so smoothly,
breathlessly placed on my
moonlit chlorophyll
skin? They bloomed:
a blue-brown-yellow
chrysanthemum
from your wet lips (such
a careful pressure),
bruising my caught neck,
my cheek—bouquets
for your mouth.

Your crooked, calloused
fingers, gliding across,
lightly clutching
my petal frame,
passing every
pore
with irradiation.

Vulnerable, weak in your
gentle embrace, beneath
your quiet palms, stretching
over my stemmy arms,
softening, whispering to
my wilting will.

Sometimes I look up at the night sky and wonder why. Out of all the planets I know exist revolving around all those suns, why had fate chosen me? Those silent stars just gazed back until I left the window in favor of the non-judgmental artificial light of my new lamp. The room is full of new things, courtesy of my parent's life insurance policy. Our mortgage is paid off and the house is almost done being renovated from the funds that came from our parent's fatal car accident.

"Mell?" The unexpected voice of my sister makes me jump out of the thick fog filled with morbid thoughts. I didn't even realize I had started crying again. Wiping the salty trails away, I respond.

"What is it Piper?" Silence. "Goddamnit," I say under my breath. Walking through the hallway and into the kitchen, I see my older sister hang up the phone. "What *is* it Piper?"

The sister in question turns slowly. "I was just going to see what you wanted for dinner, but then the phone rang."

Did it? "I didn't hear the phone ring." I glance suspiciously at the tightlipped red receiver.

"That's 'cause you were locked away in your room and the telephone is out here. I know it's already six o'clock, but would you want to help me make sushi? It's Mom's favorite."

Painful memories punch me in the gut, a Heimlich maneuver that brings up a "Yeah, no shit, Piper," and the accidental acid eats a hole through the space between us.

Her face falls and I remind myself she's in pain too. "Sorry. Yeah, I wanna make sushi with you." I really don't, but it beats the loneliness and the smell of "Morning Fog" by Sherwin Williams drying on my bedroom walls. Piper ignores the outburst and is able to remain somewhat perky as she gets out the raw salmon. We used to fight more, but nothing is as important as having someone there to comfort you.

Over dinner we talk about her job and the coworker Don-

ald she hates because he's rude and always messes up the data. She claims to know more than "that dumb scientist" she works for. I tell her how uneventful my senior year of high school is without my friends from back home. There is guilt engraved all over her face for making me move out here, so I keep going. "As much as I miss them, I like having a new start. There're no memories here." Piper nods solemnly. I left out the part where my friends became pity machines but stopped calling me as soon as I stopped calling them. I couldn't deal with that kind of fake support.

Lying in bed that night, I stroke the exposed brick wall behind my headboard. The rough texture is familiar and comforting. I think about how I love the way the design turned out before I drift off to sleep and dream of a house bricked with sushi that only lasts until Piper and Mom eat it down to the foundation.

Getting out of bed is hard in a Wyoming winter. The wind charges rampant over the clear hills surrounding Piper's town. My town now, too. Even though Piper has already left for work, I can still find the morning bearable thanks to the in-floor heating system. My bare feet are toasty warm as I microwave some oatmeal and try to ignore the swirling snow just beyond the kitchen window.

Instead I imagine myself back in Tampa, where I ate cold cereal and dressed in a light jacket on a normal January morning before Mom drove me to school. Now I have hot chocolate and scalding oats, so I can survive the walk to the bus stop in my parka and fur-lined duck boots. By the time I reach school, the sun is shining and the wind chill is finally up into double digits. It's gonna be a good day.

The school has beautiful large windows that allow the light to come streaming in. Precious warmth soaks into my bones and numbs my mind. Instead of economics, sleep is all I can think about. I'm just so bored with the monotony of Mr. Winwood's voice piling on my eyelids and pushing them down. His words are lead. The prolific vocabulary tumbling off his lips are fishing weights, dragging me down deeper into darkness.

With the weather improving, the students around me are bouncing off the halls. I try to smile to look friendly and approachable but no one notices. Being new in a small town is lonely some-

times, but it's a relief to see people act like themselves in my presence. For now it's enough. Since the wind has died down, I head to the grocery store instead of going straight home. I have a mac and cheese craving.

Piper is waiting to pounce as soon as I walk through the door, gesturing wildly "Where *were* you, Melody? School lets out at 2:30. What have you been doing?"

Her irrational anger catches me completely off-guard. "Whoa, relax, Piper! I'm fully aware of when school lets out; I went to the grocery store afterwards for some *groceries*. You're welcome!" I yell my response as I pointedly slam down the bags of food on the counter. What is *with* her lately?

"Well, I got worried." Her voice has shrunk considerably. Some mood swing.

"Did you forget I have a cell phone?" I can't seem to drop the attitude.

Her shoulders slump. "I guess so. I don't know why I didn't call you. Just got caught up in worrying, I guess." When she looks up, her eyes lock on the phone peeking out from behind me before settling guiltily on my face. "I'm sorry, Mel."

I see a fleeting look of loss cross over her brow, and I calm down. "It's alright, Pip. I understand that you would be worried, but you don't have to jump down my throat for coming home thirty minutes later than usual, okay?" She nods. "Next time I'll text you if I'm not coming straight home."

"Thank you." She smiles, and I know the fight is over.

In three long strides she's beside the counter and is hugging me tightly. "I just couldn't lose you too." There it is: the unspoken pact we've had since that night changed our lives weeks ago. I hug her back because I love her, and in this unfair life she's all I have now.

Once again the sun is shining on our little town of Cody, making the snow-capped mountains behind me gleam. The air is calm, and I hope I will get to see 30 degrees today. But first I have World History with Mr. Lander. The crunching gravel of his voice grinds down my concentration until my attention span is a smooth slate, which all opinions just slip right off of.

“Hey,” I turn to the kid next to me, who also has a back-of-the-class attitude. “You’re in my Economics class, too, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I think I am.” Well, that sounded unintelligent.

“I was sick yesterday. Would you mind if I borrowed your notes?”

“Sure, no problem. Remind me tomorrow when I have my notebook.”

I smile. He’s kinda cute.

He smiles back. “Will do.”

As I walk home, my phone tells me it’s 32 degrees.

Today Piper is the one who isn’t home on time. On the way to my bedroom, I see there is a message on the machine. Our first one on the new phone.

There turns out to be several, and they are all from Piper’s boss, who is wondering where she is. Panic sets in and I call her immediately, afraid there will be no answer. Again.

“Hello?” Thank God.

“Piper, where the hell are you?”

“Just out shopping. Why?” She sounds confused.

“Why? Because I just listened to three messages from your boss asking where you were today. You didn’t go into work?”

“But honey, my office is closed on Fridays.” Her response chills me to the core.

“No, Piper. You work on Fridays, remember? It was Mom who always had Fridays off.” It wasn’t something she could forget. We always looked forward to those rare Fridays where she’d pick us up from school and take us straight to the mall. We would get the coveted cinnamon-sugar pretzels and have a girl’s day out.

She’s quiet for a long time and I wish she was here at home with me. Finally there’s a shaky sigh.

“I need them back, Mel.”

The desperation I hear in her voice matches how I feel. “I know, Pip. I do too. Just come home, okay?”

“Okay.”

My weeks are filled with a schedule of monotony that consists of homework, school, checking on Piper, and scavenging for food. Piper cooked when I first moved here, but she hasn’t lately.

She spends her evenings in her room or in the garage where we store the belongings of a past life.

School is getting much better. No one knows my story and my new friends act like I'm normal. I finally have someone to sit at the lunch table, and I look forward to the times we go out and have fun. I crave their normalcy and dread going home.

Sometimes I recognize the sister I grew up with. Other times she's distant and moody. As selfish as it is, I want her to move on so I can too. Some days I come home to her quickly hanging up the red phone that she picked out, as if she doesn't want me to see. But those are her good days. The days we eat ice cream and watch any movie with Ryan Reynolds in it. Those are the days I find myself living for.

"Yes, Mom, I know. I'm a big girl now, you know." Piper's voice is far away in the kitchen, and I think I'm still dreaming. A heartfelt laugh echoes down the hallway and I know I'm awake. The realization fills me with dread.

I find her sitting on the kitchen counter with her legs gently resting inside the door of the dishwasher for some reason. The raw body of the phone can be seen just beneath the curtain of Piper's unkempt light blonde hair. When she catches sight of me, her eyes light up.

"Oh! Mel's finally up; do you want to talk to her?" She pauses as if listening for a response. As she hands me the phone, I can hear the dial tone. I don't want to do this, but the consequences might be worse if I don't.

My mental debate takes too long for Piper, who raises her brows suggestively as if to say, "Aren't you going to say something?" I can't believe I'm doing this, but I struggle to pull myself together and say, "Hello?" my voice quivering into the void on the other end.

Piper just grins and exaggerates her mouth movements to let me know she's going to take a shower. In an effort to be quiet, she slowly disentangles her legs from the dishwasher and hops off the counter.

Frozen in horror, I wait till she flounces into the bathroom before I struggle to find the phone jack and eventually pay attention

to what I'm doing. Its crimson body reflects brightly against the white quartz counter.

The phone and I have a blood-shot staring contest until I hear the distant splatter of water.

Perfect.

In moments I am tearing through her room like a guilty tornado, leaving no trace of the damage I was causing. My fingertips search through drawers and shelves, fluttering beneath piles of clothes. I pickpocket jackets. Innocent shoes turned up empty, as did the pillowcases.

Frustrated with my failure, I sit on her bed and dejectedly listen to her blissful singing. Vaguely, I notice how firm and uncomfortable her mattress is compared to my soft one.

Her mattress.

Leaping off, I thrust my arm beneath the box spring and finally find them. There are three pill bottles and the rattle lets me know they are all full. She must have stopped as soon as our parents died.

I rest my forehead against the comforter and squeeze my eyes as tight as they'll go. I should have seen this sooner, I should have checked earlier, I should have asked her about this before now. I've been so wrapped up in my own pain I hadn't taken the time to look for hers.

I hold the pill bottles in my hands and let the memories plague me. I remember the fear and confusion of my childhood while I watched my big sister struggle through the thoughts her warped brain forced upon her. I remember my father's strength as he pinned her flailing body and tried to bring her back from the nightmare we always questioned her about. She never saw how her tears made him cry, but I did.

It's too quiet all of a sudden and I realize the water has shut off. Fleeing her room like a hunted deer, I hurtle into mine and close the door fast and soft. Frozen to that spot, I try to catch my breath but I've held off the panic for too long and it's already settled on my chest. Dad was always so good at controlling Piper, but I am all alone in this now and there's no one to call, no one to reach out to, no one to help, no one to tell me how to do this. My parents are dead and my sister is sliding backwards into her mental illness.

A quick sob bruises my throat. I asked myself what Dad would do. *What would Dad do, what would Dad do, what would...* The mantra is somewhat comforting and calms me enough to give me an idea.

By the time the bathroom door opens, I am back on the phone, rambling just loud enough so that Piper can hear me. She comes around the corner and her irrationally large grin just about breaks my heart, more so than the conversation I'm pretending to have. "You should see how great the house looks now. Our rooms? Well, I went contemporary—shocker, I know—and Piper went more on the crazy side. You know how she gets."

She had heard her name and was now loading dirty dishes into the dishwasher, pretending not to eavesdrop. It seemed to be working, so I kept at it. "How's Dad doing? Yeah, I'd love to talk to him, thanks." What I would give for this to be a real conversation.

I catch Piper's eye and smile warmly. She smiles back, but I can see the crease of confusion on her forehead where sense is trying to break through. I hope that means I'm getting somewhere.

"Hi, Dad! Good, how are you? And work? Have any interesting clients lately?" Piper is having a harder time pretending now. I decide it's now or never. "Yeah, Piper's doing well. Nah,, I'm not worried about her." I remembered I had to let her know that I was on her side. "Her pills? Oh I'm sure she's still taking them, they work so well for her. We've been having lots of fun redecorating together. Sure, one sec."

It's a relief to take the blare of the dial tone away from my ear. "Here, Piper, Dad wants to talk to you." I strive to keep my expression open and innocent. She uses a few fingers to lift the chunky red phone from my outstretched hand and put it reluctantly to her ear.

Elastic moments pass and I start to get nervous.

"Dad?" I can't hide my sigh of relief when she finally speaks. But she must not "hear" anything because she repeats the plea several times. Her panic is palpable.

"I can't hear him, Melody."

Slowly I take the phone from her and hang it up. "That's because he's not there anymore, Pip." Her eyes widen and lose focus.

I leave my carefully chosen words dangling in front of her and casually turn away. "I'll be in my room if you need me," I call over my shoulder. She'll need me.

Hollow footsteps mirror mine to the threshold, where they stop, but her eyes still follow me as I move about, getting ready for bed.

"What did Dad say?" Her voice sounds years younger. I make sure to start with positive reinforcement.

"He said he loved you and will always miss you." It takes a second of facing away from her to choke down the teary fullness expanding in my throat. "He's worried about you and wanted to make sure you're still taking your pills. He just wants you to be happy, you know?" I had begun folding my laundry so I wouldn't have to see Piper's haunted eyes. But her eerie silence makes me look up. "You're still taking your meds right?"

Tears trace track marks down her cheeks and instantly trigger my own.

"Oh, Melody," she begins to sob, "I miss them too much. I don't know what to do! I *need* them back!" Like a puppet with her strings snipped, Piper crumples in the doorway. Overwhelmed, I join her and hold her bony shoulders hard against my chest. Horrible keening tears up her throat: the sound of a broken mind struggling to find sanity.

I'm undone as well, finally releasing a cathartic quake that shakes my chest. Time heals nothing. My sorrow is too deep to stop and I find myself holding onto Piper desperately.

By the time we run out of tears, it's dark outside. We just sit on the floor, too exhausted to care. Piper breaks the empty silence.

"I don't want to take the pills anymore, Mel. I don't like how they make my head feel. I just... I'm tired of feeling like this."

"I know, Pip." For now that's all I can say. There's nothing I can do for her, and I don't know how to help. "We'll find you professional help again. It worked last time, right?"

"It helped." She hates shrinks, but I would give anything for the normalcy she desired.

"I'll find somewhere in town, okay? I'll even go with you if you want." Piper just nods stiffly. Her empty expression scares me

and I am ashamed to be afraid of my own sister. “Hey, stay in my bed tonight.”

She hesitates, as if she can tell how much I want her to say no. “Okay, sure.”

“Great,” I say, giving her a small smile. Without bothering to brush our teeth or change into pajamas, we ease under my duvet. Once snuggled in, Piper reaches her hand up and feels the brick wall behind my headboard, just like I do every night.

“This was a really cool idea, Mel.”

“Thanks. Mom got me into reading her *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. We were planning to redecorate my room...” I let my voice fade as the memory grows.

I had decided I was done with princess purple and wanted a change. Mom told me to start planning for when we had enough money to renovate.

What Piper doesn’t know is how much I regret the brick wall. I’d rather have that purple back as a reminder of the all the happy times that must still exist somewhere in those walls.

“Hmm.” Piper is falling asleep. “I wish she could have re-decorated my hospital room.”

Her admission wrings my heart out. “I hated that they sent you away to that place.” But my words fall on deaf ears. She’s already out, her snoring barely audible.

There are few things better than waking up on a Saturday. I leave my eyelids closed while I relish a long stretch. My limbs spread unhindered by Piper. Unfamiliar and beautiful birdsong seeps past the glass window pane and settles along with the sun patch I can feel soaking through my blanket.

I’m about to drift off again when the scent of bacon reaches me. Piper is cooking breakfast, which means I have a reason to get out of bed. Sitting up, I open my eyes just enough to find my fluffy slippers and tug on my floppiest hoodie. They close again while I walk down the hallway and allow myself to fall on the loveseat.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” A voice that’s Piper’s but not Piper’s wafts over the sizzling; it makes me uncomfortable. I open my eyes as much as possible, as they’re still swollen from last night.

In the kitchen stands a woman who is wearing my mother's clothes, the ones I remember boxing up and putting in the garage. I can see that it's Piper, but something is wrong. She has cut her hair herself to the chin length our mother had worn hers, and she seems overly comfortable in Mom's favorite salmon blouse and jeans, which are a couple sizes too big for Piper's dwindling frame.

"Why are you wearing Mom's clothes, Piper?" Trepidation turns my question into an accusation. Thankfully, she doesn't pick up on it.

"What are you talking about, honey? These are my clothes, and I know your sister and I look alike but surely you can tell the difference." Piper's voice is high and has adopted the too-familiar Southern lilt.

She's lost it. I must have done the wrong thing last night. Where did I go wrong? I thought I broke through to her. I thought she was going to be okay...

All I can do is stare at her in horror while she sets down two plates of eggs with bacon. They are scrambled. Piper doesn't know I prefer over-easy. I'm lost as to what to do, so I try a different tactic.

"Piper, that's enough." I struggle to sound authoritative and not angry. Or scared. "Go put Mom's clothes back."

"Melody." She's quick to respond. "What is wrong with you today?" She stares me down for a minute before sighing. "I know you're upset about Piper. I wish she was here too. But you have to accept that she's just not here anymore." With that she turns away and just beyond her I can see that the phone has been disconnected.

"Pip-" I start again, but am instantly cut off.

"Enough, Melody." Her words crack like a whip. "Piper isn't here anymore." I can only stare at her blankly in utter dismay. She holds my eyes until I give up and look down at the eggs.

"Okay, Mom," I say as I let the tears fall.

queen of sheba

an epitaph for the fallen regnant of olive and kingsland

jessie eikmann

Her color has been misreported.
She was mostly stucco-skinned;
only the brown beams of her hips
betrayed the shades of Yemen,
though she disavowed it
and told anyone who asked
that East Africa reared her.
She had spices,
as rumored in tales of old,
but Solomon
had to bring his metal caravan
to her painted palm trees.

The riddle he whispered
ripped her inside.
She bound her kingdom
with yellow tape
and banished the caravans.

She threw up bricks,
and it left her body lopsided.
The shamans donned their neon vests,
tried to sew new stones
so the foundation could hold.

But even after they patched her
she still raged.
She shrieked at BP's green eye
that glared at her

from across the Olive river,
shrieked that it blinked in the night
like Solomon had winked at her
before he departed—

and even now that the Turks
have deposed her,
there is no peace for
the newly-named Merhaba
or the river;
the horns
of passing hordes
are her spirit screaming
at Solomon's secret.

maple

abigail page

That night I was a helicopter seed
and there was so much wind
when you got rid of me

And the ground is not a soft place to land
not even for me—
now with my
seed stuck steady in the ground
and the sound of nobody around
I shot the breeze

(I put a hole in me)

but I'll take root
Now tell me: who used who?
(a seed is still a fruit)

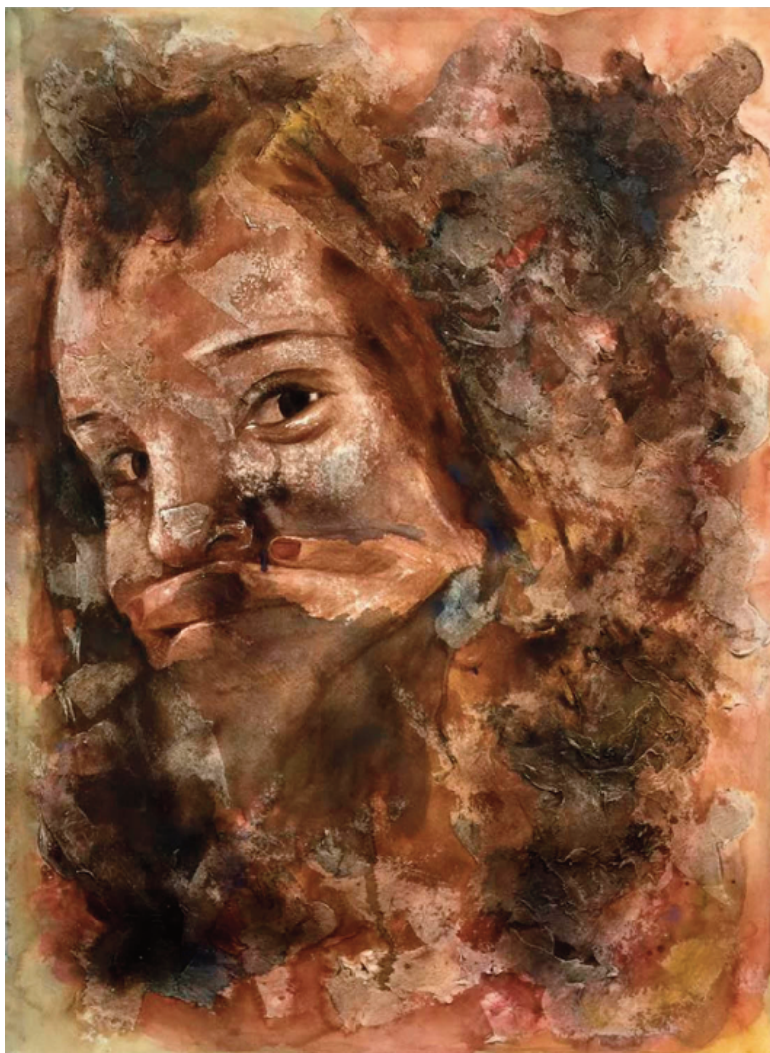


amber scholl

aurora

interpretation

afton joiner



Kim's body was draped over the sofa, still and mussed, like a sheet. Her eyes were tired and open. She was defeated, nearly broken. And she was hungry—not hungry, but empty. She heard the door slam shut behind him, and she listened to the sound of his car tearing down the road, away from the house, forever, and it worried her when she couldn't cry, "Why me?" The roar sank away, and the volume of the room filled, rebalanced with the dull sound of her television set.

And so, Kim could not move. She reprised her role as the discarded, ugly doll, etc., etc., a role she had always seemed to gravitate towards. People used her and she ended up here, alone, in the most miserable, and perhaps familiar, state she knew. It didn't seem fair; she hadn't figured it out yet.

The TV set showed a grainy filmstrip in black and white: a woman in white robes dancing with a cobra. Her village was in a drought, the worst in many years. Everything was dead, and now the dancer had to kiss the cobra's head three times to bring the rain. Cobra raised his head straight as a sapling, level with the woman's eye-line, mesmerized by her bobbing prayer. They danced. Kim shifted uneasily as the dancer squatted and pecked at Cobra, and then she tapped his throat with a firm, outstretched hand when he hissed and jerked out in retaliation.

The scene made Kim nervous, and she began to nibble on her palm, on a callous. Her teeth pinched the skin into a little white ridge near the base of her index finger, and she groped at it with her teeth, pushing and gnawing several times, trying to get a hold while it slipped back. It was soothing, like picking a scab or popping a zit or biting her nails. Like washing her hands of everything. She chewed and stared at the cobra dance with longing.

The dancer descended for a second kiss, and Kim's teeth clenched harder—the skin held taut as if something was pushing its way out. As the dancer's lips landed on his head, Cobra lunged forward again. Kim shuddered and jerked back. When she lifted

her mouth, the skin pulled right open. A little pinch—but nice, in a way. The dancer dodged and Cobra hissed giddily. Kim's heart pounded angrily against her chest, demanding, "More." She was happy to comply. Slowly, her mouth crawled down towards her wrist, peeling gently, until the callous just separated silently, a whisper almost. Like a cherry blossom finished with the branch, it floated down and fell from her lips and back into her palm.

Kim held the skin up to the light. It glowed—a pretty thing—and she loved it. It was made of lines that swirled around and crisscrossed, and it was so soft. And it was Kim. She sat up straight and spun around. There was no one, but she paused and listened, outside, anywhere, for anything. The thought of anyone seeing her like this seemed shameful—not that Kim was ashamed of what she held, but that she could not explain it. No one would understand. She closed her hand in a fist and darted for the windows and drew all the shades and turned the lights low. The television kept playing its dance and hum, but she did not notice anymore. When she came back to the couch, she opened her fist and looked back at the little leaf in her hand.

Now what? It was too special to throw away, but she had no place to hide it. So, Kim swallowed the skin.

She examined her hand. A pink line traced her palm, blunt at the top and thinning at the bottom. It was pink—a new, untouched layer, breathing for the first time. She kissed the stripe and felt the bright raw skinning song of scraped knees and it made her heart pound harder still. "More."

So Kim began again. She pressed her teeth into her palm and found where to peel it back, and Cobra bobbed along in fascination.

biographies

Allison Barnett is a senior at UMSL who loves animals and writing. This is the first time her work has been published. She will be graduating in May with a bachelor's degree in English and two writing certificates. She hopes to one day travel the world, either as a photojournalist for *National Geographic* or teaching English in various countries.

Ryan Coyle is an undergraduate student studying philosophy. He graduated from Fort Zumwalt North High School but currently lives in South St. Louis. His interests include indie music and coffee, and his primary poetic influence is Billy Collins.

Joseph Cusumano has enjoyed and benefited from writing workshops taught by UMSL professors Mary Troy and John Dalton. He has also taken inspiration from short stories written by John Fournie, a teaching assistant, and Victoria Walls, the university's poet laureate. A beginning writer, Joseph's previously accepted stories include two pieces of flash fiction.

Katryn Dierksen is a poet, artist, and soon-to-be UMSL graduate; she is working toward a BA in English. She has spent her undergraduate career participating in the Pierre Laclède Honors College publications, *Brain Stew* and *Bellerive*, as both a contributor and an editor. In her free time, Katryn has co-created a St. Louis-based collaborative guerrilla 'zine known as *Bad Jacket*. Her poetry has been featured in *Apeiron Review*, *Bellerive*, *Brain Stew*, and *Bad Jacket*. Katryn's latest project is a chapbook, currently titled *No More Renaissance Man*.

Jessie Eikmann is a senior English major who has also been published in *Litmag*'s previous two issues. She has been accepted into UMSL's MFA program and will begin the program in fall 2016. She is sad that she currently has no girlfriend, though she did get a sweet bowler hat (named Tobias) from her ex as a parting gift. While she waits for another girlfriend, she will continue to write poetry about pretty girls.

Grace Gogarty is a fourth-year education major who makes comics and looping animated GIFs in their free time. They prefer digital art formats because all colors perceived by the human eye are free of cost. Gogarty's big aspiration after graduation is to fall off the face of the earth.

Sarah Hayes is an English major, transfer student, Honors College member, A&E editor at *The Current*, student employee at the Thomas Jefferson Library, and an all-around show-off. Just like her country, she is young, scrappy, and hungry, and she is not throwing away her shot to make a *Hamilton* reference in *Litmag*. "Yuki-Omba" is her first published work in a professional college magazine. Sarah plans on pursuing her MA in Library Science in 2017.

Catherine Howl graduated from UMSL in 2015 with an MFA in creative writing. Her poetry has been previously published in *Litmag* as well as literary magazines found in Southern California. In part, Howl's poetry in her thesis *Darkness of Drains* was influenced by the visual arts and the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

Peter James is a writer, filmmaker, and educator from St. Louis. "The Painting" is his first published work. He is a senior in the College of Education.

Afton Joiner is a senior at UMSL and Development Intern with CAM. Her artwork stems from the desire to explore the world and express it with vibrant colors meshed with abstract backgrounds. Working with many mentors has shaped her passion and created a strong appreciation for individuals who have guided her. Her work has been featured in *Litmag* since 2014 and she values the opportunities that have arisen from the exposure. View more work at www.aftonsfineart.com.

Zachary J. Lee is an English major at UMSL emphasizing in creative writing. As a member of the Pierre Laclède Honors College, Zachary has worked on *Bellerive's* editing committee and contributes frequently to *Brain Stew*. He draws his inspiration from his family, friends, fellow students, and his brothers in Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

Zachary is honored to make his publishing debut in *Litmag*.

Jaclyn Lenggenhager is a writer and artist attending UMSL. She is heavily influenced by the natural world, intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, and her experiences with synesthesia. In her works, Jaclyn blends the physical and abstract to create a communicative sensory experience rich with meaning.

Thomas S. Mays will be graduating in May 2016 with a BA in English, a minor in American studies, and an Honors Certificate. He lives in South St. Louis and owns a television.

Angela A. Moore-Williams is a graduate student in the public policy administration program at UMSL. Angela has always possessed a deep interest in women's art and its role in society. *Self-Portrait* depicts the inward emotions of her view of herself in the today's society. As an African-American artist, Angela at times has felt the need to mask the ugliness of her work which reflects racial and gender injustices. *Self-Portrait* captures a moment in which these injustices were masked and hidden from society.

Tam Nguyen is an information technician, working for the USCG (active military) while pursuing his Bachelor of Science in computer science part-time at UMSL. "The Look no. 4" belongs to the 2016 series of portraits called *The Looks*, in which he tries to retell a person's life story in charcoal and graphite. Tam taught himself art when he was a teenager. After a long break, he decided to start drawing again in early 2015.

Abigail Page, who their friends call Abby or Nels, is majoring in Spanish and plans to graduate in the spring of 2017. They spend a lot of time writing, but their poetry tends to stem from experiences that have impacted them the most—because for them, to put things into words is to put them into perspective.

Amber Scholl is a senior pursuing a BA in English, a minor in Spanish, a Creative Writing Certificate, and an Honors Certificate. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with family and friends,

doing crafts, drinking too much coffee, and binge-watching Netflix. After graduation, she hopes to teach English in Spain and continue to write.

J. Soboleski did not provide a biography.

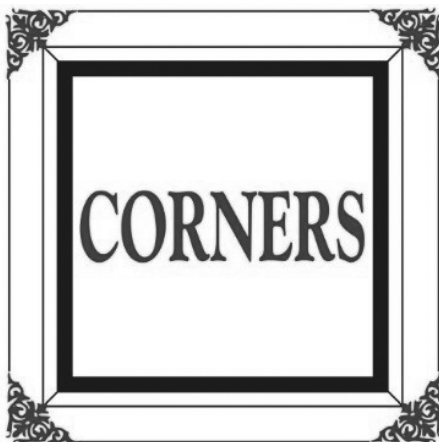
Abby N. Virio is a feminist killjoy with a penchant for tonkotsu ramen and brightly-colored hair dye. An international relations major and Japanese and psychology minor, she can be found haunting Clark Hall most of the day. Her work has been featured in *Brain Stew* as well as *Bad Jacket*, St. Louis' most exclusive underground poetry club. Her travel, satire, and political columns appear regularly in *The Current*.

Janece Woodson is a chemistry-turned-English major, a dog person, and a vegan. In the winter, she enjoys procrastinating, watching horror movies, reading historical novels, and writing poems. In the summer, she enjoys hiking, rock-climbing, gardening, and the air conditioning in museums. Above all, her greatest passion is the Oxford comma.



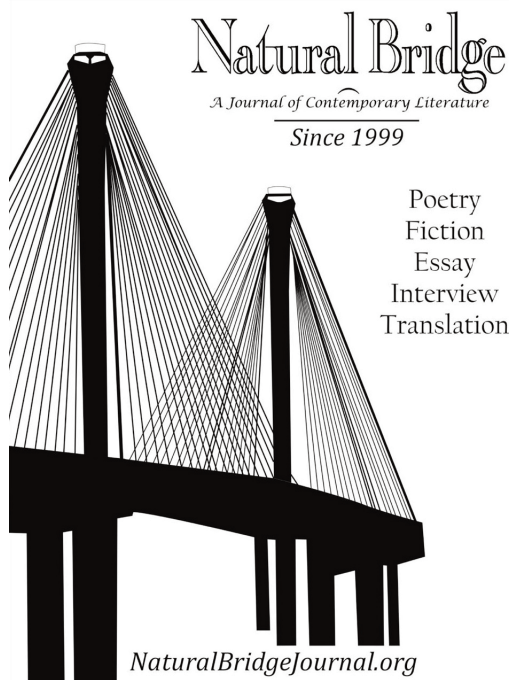
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