the vanderbilt review
2013-2014
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“Dance Spirits Dance”
by Theodore Yurevitch
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table of contents

prose

Sector 1
The Old ’97
The Water Plant
Dance Spirits Dance
Heirlooms

art

The Walls that Breathed
Nobody Knows Nothing
PairAsouls
Untitled
Self-portrait
Untitled
La Chureca 1
Untitled
Hands

poetry

Frankenstein to His Bride in Flight from Las Vegas
More Lilacs
To the Messianic Jewish Man Who Welcomed Me to Sozo Coffeehouse
Rendezvous with Chips & Salsa
In a Few Years
Adoration
Cuando You No Habla el Spanish
Wedding Reception in Western P.A.
Saturday Mourning Cartoons
Neuroscience vs. Soul

Corey Kollbocker p. 8
Corey Kollbocker p. 16
Lane Kelly p. 24
Theodore Yurevitch p. 32
Nicholas Logan p. 49

Allyson Patterson p. 9
Julia Ordog p. 18
Bosley Jarrett, The Kefi Project p. 25
Anisha Patel p. 34
Vibhu Krishna p. 38
Mary Jung p. 41
Vibhu Krishna p. 43
Mary Jung p. 48
Jake Lee p. 51

Michael E. Woods p. 12
Jacob Culberson p. 15
Lisa Muloma p. 20
Vibhu Krishna p. 22
Lucas Hilliard p. 29
Jacob Culberson p. 31
Malcolm Friend p. 44
Theodore Yurevitch p. 46
Anonymous p. 55
Lisa Muloma p. 57

Background spreads for poetry pieces are photographed by:
James Akers p. 12-13
letter from the editor

This year has been a big one for The Vanderbilt Review. We released a fall issue that sparked a conversation around the word “profiles” and saw the creative community here at Vanderbilt answer back whole-heartedly, producing amazing work.

For the Review’s capstone spring issue, we didn’t go in with a particular theme in mind but one naturally surfaced as we selected our pieces. Our prose, art, and poetry all have something eerie and otherworldly within them. Whether that feeling occurs through a unique and poignant use of language or through a true transportation to another realm, we hope you’ll journey to a place beyond reality as you flip through the pages of the Review.

Without an amazing staff, this issue would not have been possible—so huge thanks to our prose, poetry, art, and especially design staff for putting up with (sometimes crazy) deadlines. An extra special thank you goes to our editorial board for working so hard to make both this issue and our fall issue happen—they are a wonderful group that I’m honored to work alongside. I would also like to thank Franklin Graphics and the VSC board, particularly Chris Carroll, Paige Clancy, and Jeff Breaux for their support along the way.

Working on the Review this year has been amazing, and I’m thrilled to see how far we’ve come. I lastly want to thank the Vanderbilt community—without your passion, creativity, submissions, and readership, The Vanderbilt Review could not exist.

I hope you’ll find this semester’s publication truly capturing. Let it take you to another world—and be sure to enjoy the trip.

Sincerely,

Victoria Barner
Editor-in-Chief
A week had passed since the horror of Phillip’s intake interview. The process had been torturous and dreadfully long, but in the end, Phillip thought it went quite well. The point of the intake process was, as Angel explained it, “to place the recently deceased in their proper Sectors to ensure the most appropriate transition into eternal suffering.” Phillip had qualified for a spot in the very mildest sector, and he was admittedly relieved. Leaving the interview room, Phillip had been led through a maze of hallways and staircases, until Angel pushed him through one final door into what at first appeared to be a courtyard. The sky was grey and the ground was dirt, and a thick layer of mist poured from the earth, swirling upwards to join low clouds. Phillip could only see grey mist and the occasional skeleton of a picnic table in the infinite expanse stretched before him. This was Sector 1.

Sector 1 was for mostly good people who had been unfortunate enough to believe the wrong things, and Phillip, over the last week, had met mostly secular humanists and mildly racist—but otherwise very sweet—grandmothers. They all wandered outward into the mist, perhaps veering slightly this way or that, but always walking generally away from where they had begun. They stopped every so often to sit at one of the picnic tables with other passersby. They would try and talk to one another, to strike up conversation, but no sooner would anyone begin to say anything meaningful than the words would get stuck on the tip of their tongue. If anyone tried to think too hard about their past lives, their minds would go blank, and they’d lose their train of thought. As each day passed, Phillip’s own mind had become progressively foggier, until reaching through it felt as aimless as his stroll through the misty landscape. His thoughts hadn’t dissipated entirely; rather it seemed as though his IQ had suddenly dipped thirty points and the distance between Phillip and his memories had greatly expanded.

Phillip knew Sector 1 must be massively large, because he bumped into only a few other people each day, and so far none of them had died more than a few weeks before. That meant out in the misty expanses, those long dead had wandered further than Phillip could ever hope to reach. He thought it might be interesting to meet some figure from history, but when he tried to imagine the questions he might ask, he found himself distracted by his fingernails and sat down to contemplate them for awhile.

For the last two days—and there was both day and night—Phillip had been travelling with an old woman. Her name was Marjorie, and while she appeared a frail octogenarian, she tramped quite capably alongside Phillip through the cool mist. She was convinced he was her son (apparently also named Phillip) and he was too kind to tell her differently. Well, he had tried initially, but she was a firm old woman, and his timid words did nothing to sway her. And after two days together, Phillip was no longer so sure that she wasn’t his mother. He sat on the bench seat of the table, facing out into the mist.

“Life was much worse than this.” Phillip said happily. “Pardon?” asked Marjorie. She was focused on the fraying edge of her sweater. Phillip screwed up his eyes, trying to think, but he tried too hard and his mind wiped clean.

“I can’t remember.”

“That’s nice, dear.” Marjorie smiled sweetly. She brushed her wrinkled hand along the fractured, blood-encrusted edge of Phillip’s skull. “I like you the way you’ve cut your hair. When it was long you looked like that dreadful Spanish man from the television.”

“Who?” asked Phillip.

“Hmm?”

Neither could remember what they had been talking about, but they agreed it must have been a pleasant conversation. They were about to stand and resume walking when another shape emerged from the mist, hallooing at them and giving a cheery wave.

It was around midday and the pair had stopped to sit at one of the picnic tables. They were not resting, for they did not grow weary, nor did they grow hungry. When they chose to sit down it was only to keep things interesting. They did not sleep either, and nights were spent in still silence under a black sky, but Phillip found they went quickly. In fact, Phillip quite enjoyed the calming haze that had crept through his mind. He felt utterly free of worry, completely content to spend his days on an idling walk, making occasional small talk. Gone were the daily irritations of dusting and laundry and cooking, the anxieties and minutiae of the office, the fears of failure and of germs and of women. He had already met more new friends than he had in years, if he was remembering correctly. Everyone he spoke to was friendly and courteous—they were Sector 1’s after all. Some of the people Phillip met seemed mildly forlorn, but Phillip just didn’t know what there was to be depressed about. Life was much worse than this, he thought.

“Hello there, friends. How d’ye fare this foggy day?” The man’s mouth was hidden by his tangled beard.
the walls that breathed

By Allyson Patterson
mane, but a broad smile could be seen crinkling the corners of his eyes. Phillip felt hopelessly small and insignificant next to the giant of a man, but was swiftly put at ease by the warm tone in his voice.

“Oh, quite well, thank you,” Phillip answered.

Marjorie shushed Phillip, silencing him with a warm hand on his shoulder. She turned to the large man and gave him a smile.

“How long have you been walking?” she asked. It was the standard question in Sector 1, and really meant: “when—and how—did you die?”

The big man let loose a rolling chuckle before smacking his round chest with a meaty fist.

“Well, the old heart gave out three days ago by my count. Or was it four?”

The man stroked his scraggly beard pensively and his eyes screwed up with focus. After a moment, his eyes clouded up and he shut them tight. When they opened again, they were wide and innocent, his look blank. When he saw Phillip and Marjorie, he seemed to notice them for the first time.

“Hello there, friends. How d’ye fare this fine day?”

After exchanging pleasantries a few more times, Phillip and Marjorie were able to coax a sufficient amount of information to feel satisfied with their introduction. The man’s name was John, he had once been a handyman, and he died of a heart attack four days before. Heart attacks were easy to meet, as they looked much less intimidating than those who had died in more grotesque ways—like Phillip. But after their initial display of sympathy, nobody seemed to mind the dried blood and his cracked skull.

On his first day in the Sector Phillip met a woman who was hit by a bus, and he found that he too didn’t seem to mind the gore. At first he felt sorry for her, but then he saw she moved quite well—if a bit jerkily—on her broken legs. In fact, her new stumbling gait propelled her forward too quickly for Phillip to comfortably keep pace.

The newly united trio decided to walk together for a time, and tramped off once again into the mist. They walked in silence for awhile, each lost in losing their own thoughts, and soon they came upon something they’d never seen before.

A cinderblock structure the size of an outhouse rose out of the ground in front of them, with a single door cloaked by a double-portion of billowing fog. Without consulting one another, all three sat promptly down in the dirt—near the door, but not too near. None of them thought to try and open it; they just sat, absentmindedly.

“How interesting,” said John.

“How exciting,” said Marjorie.

“Life was much worse than this,” marveled Phillip.

“Do you think so?” asked John.

“I do,” said Phillip.

“How nice,” said Marjorie.

“What’s nice?” asked John.

“Hmm,” pondered Phillip, “this weather?”

“Why, certainly,” agreed Marjorie.

“Just the right amount of mist,” said John. They fell to silence. Eventually they were drawn from their respective reveries by the sound of carrying voices. As the voices approached, Phillip could make out three: one shrill, one gruff, and one as dazed as his own.

“Where are we going?” asked the dazed voice.

“Another Sector,” replied the gruff one.

“Oh, are we?” asked the dazed voice with interest.

“You’re moving up in the world. Or should I say down.” The shrill voice was followed by a sharp cackle.

“Oh, no.” The dazed voice sounded dismayed. “Why is that?”

Shapes were taking form through the mist, and soon Phillip could see the outline of the approaching party. An average-looking man was being led through the fog by two small dark figures in red jumpsuits, and as they came closer, Phillip’s mind became even more cloudy than usual, until his thoughts were only the ghosts of thoughts. Phillip could not recall why, but the small men filled his gut with dread. The jumpsuited man in front called out in the shrill voice.

“Well it turns out you’re a nastier fellow than we thought,” he sneered. “Reports are that you’ve been buggering grandmothers out in the mist.” He cackled again. “Poor, old, confused nannies, and you just can’t leave ’em alone.”

“I’ve done no such thing!” The dazed man didn’t sound so sure. “Have I?”

“You most certainly have!” barked the gruff man.

“Oh, dear. How dreadful.” The dazed man looked distraught, but after a few moments of silent marching his face went placid and he smiled. He tapped one of the red-suited men on the shoulder. “Where are we going?”

The party marched right up to the cinderblock structure and through the door, completely ignoring Phillip, Marjorie, and John on the ground. When the door opened, fog poured out heavy and thick, obscuring the little building. When the excess mist cleared, the structure was gone.

“Well, that was strange,” said Phillip.
“What was strange?” asked Marjorie blankly.

John decided to continue on with Phillip and Marjorie for several days. They enjoyed each other’s company, and while their conversations never progressed far, the chatter seemed pleasant enough to all of them. They soon took a liking to Phillip’s notion that “Life was much worse than this,” and it became a refrain of sorts, the common thread of their aimless diatribes. Eventually the phrase became their new way of saluting strangers.

“Life was much worse than this, don’t you think?” John asked, his booming voice echoing out into the mist. He was addressing a young woman they’d come across sitting at a picnic table. She looked maybe twenty, and she was pretty enough, but her skin was sallow and papery and there were dark rings beneath her eyes.

“I’m not so sure,” the girl said, “do you really think so?”

“Phillip does,” John said.

“It’s quite nice of him,” said Marjorie.

Then she squinted, confused. “Who?”

“Phillip,” said John.

“Yes?” asked Phillip.

“But it’s so empty here,” said the girl.

“Nonsense,” said Phillip, “the whole place is filled with mist!”

“Just the right amount of mist.” agreed John.

“And everyone’s so friendly,” said Phillip.

“And you’re just so lovely,” added Marjorie.

“May I walk with you?” the girl asked.

And so their party grew to four.

From that point on, their number grew quickly. Each new stranger they met was intrigued to find so large a company, and many who heard Phillip’s words of wisdom felt compelled to join them.

“Life was much worse than this.”

After a week or so they had become a small crowd. The words were muttered under everyone’s breath as they trudged through the mist together.

Phillip hardly noticed, but new members of their party fell in rank behind him, and he and Marjorie became the head of a stream of followers, from John right behind them, through a mob of bobbing heads, to the most mutilated individuals, who hobbled awkwardly in their wake.

No one in the crowd was quite sure why they walked together, but there was a distinct aura of pleasantness to their gathering—an intangible impression of optimism. Those who had wandered forlornly before found reason to smile in the presence of Phillip’s band of travelers. But the Sectors were for suffering after all, so it should be no surprise that, not long after, the group was approached by two short, jumpsuited figures materializing from the mist.

“Phillip Burp?” called one of the suited men. “Which one of you is Phillip Burp?”

As one the crowd turned to look at Phillip, all of them staring dumbly. He felt despair as the two small, dark men turned their gaze towards him as well. An intangible glimmer of recognition tugged at his mind when his eyes fell upon the one who’d called his name.

Phillip still struggled to place the men, but he was distracted when one of them drew a long roll of paper from his jumpsuit.

“Phillip Burp,” the man called loudly, “you have been charged with disturbing the peace, threatening Sector efficiency, and buggering nannies. How do you plead?”

Phillip could not speak. One of the men walked over to John.

“You! Big guy. Has Phil here been stuffin’ old birds?”


The dark man asked again, more aggressively.

“Oh, come off it, you great lump. You’ve seen him do it, haven’t you?”

John thought hard, but the harder he thought the more confused he looked. His massive hand reached up to scratch his shiny, bald head.

“Well… maybe.”

“There you have it!” trumpeted the man, “Guilty as guilty can be.”

“Very well,” said the man’s companion, “Phillip Burp, you have been found guilty. For these offenses you will be removed from active service immediately for Sector reassignment. Come along, please.”

Phillip was swept off into the mist between the two men, leaving the stunned crowd behind him. He looked back to see the others dispersing, and heard Marjorie call out, “Well, that was strange.”

Once the crowd was out of sight, the three soon came to a small cinderblock structure with a door in one side. As one man leaned in to unlock the door, the other leaned in to whisper in Phillip’s ear.

“We like to add the buggery bit, or they don’t take us seriously—you wouldn’t believe how much paperwork it saves us.”

Phillip had no idea what the small man was talking about. When he saw Phillip’s blank look, the man grimaced.

“Well, you’ll understand soon enough. You’re a Sector 2 now.”
Maybe it’s just the unreleased pressure in my ears,
but the crescent alignment of the mountains
is the great writhing back of a bearded dragon.

Then the unused grid-lines and untraveled roads
sucker punch right into the mouth of the city,
but so slow that it doesn’t even tickle.

Above the skinny black road, the unwound yarn carelessly
draped over the range, the retired highway of westward expansion,
and the flaking fingernail clippings of King’s Peak,

you and I understand each other, a species apart from
these passengers around me. They are
adorable, but their legs are much too cramped.

And what place do these giant green circles have in the desert?
I know lack of water will stunt growth, I thirst,
but this soft drink wet my throat, however wretched

we were when we were shoveled into existence,
and a Hughes-level of disillusionment fell
onto our shoulders like dandruff. Yet you are the only other

creature like myself who horrifies the world
so wonderfully. Is that the Great Salt Lake,
or just an unwashed chalkboard? I can never tell.

By Michael E. Woods
more lilacs

By Jacob Culberson

Under my own law I wandered toward
The fragrant symbols I saw growing
In thorny hedge, knowing
Well I could not afford
The costly grace they offered.

In young-man’s fettle I did battle
With the ghosts of symbols, and my own law
Was silver and scale,
   and scale was king,
and kings were straw.
And what seemed a death-rattle
Was a lilac tree.
It was winter, and St. Hubert’s Home for the Aged lay blanketed by a thick layer of snow. Saul Lards sat in his wheelchair, rolled up tight against a warm radiator next to the window. He stared out at the flurry of flakes falling to join sizeable drifts, sweeping up against the brownstone building as crashing waves to a ship. Saul hated snow—not because the cold made his bones ache, but because he’d shoveled so many tons of it off so many miles of track in his youth. Then it had been a miserable chore; now it was a miserable reminder of his age and diminished strength. There was a time, though, when Saul was pleased by snow: a time when he would sit in the warmth of the switch tower with the brakemen and signal operators, taking swigs of rye while he sent out the younger men to do the shoveling. Those days were spent drunk and comfortable, all the better at the expense of his underlings.

Saul stared out the window until the sky began to darken. As soon as a ghost of his reflection appeared in the glass, he grabbed for the small bell he kept in the pouch alongside his wheelchair. He began ringing it insistently, for the small bell he kept in the pouch alongside the brakemen and signal operators, taking swigs of rye while he sent out the younger men to do the shoveling. Those days were spent drunk and comfortable, all the better at the expense of his underlings.

Saul lifted a scarred lip to bare his dentures in a grin. He stuck out the thumb and little finger of his right hand and tilted the hand back twice as if taking a drink. His grin got so wide his dentures began to slip, and he had to bring the hand up to close his mouth tight and stick them in place with a sucking sound. Sister Deborah glared at him.

“Very funny, Mister Lards. If you’re thirsty, dinner is in a quarter hour. ‘Would you like me to take you to the cafeteria now?’” He shook his head stubbornly, but she came over anyway and grasped the handles on the back of his chair, wheeling him out into the hallway. Even in his age, Saul was a large man, and Sister Deborah needed considerable forward lean to get the necessary leverage to push him down the hall—it didn’t help that every few feet Saul would clamp down the flimsy rubber brakes and snort silent laughter through his nose. In her exertions the crucifix which hung from the sister’s rosary swung forward and caught in the spokes of a wheel. With the next rotation of the wheel the string snapped, jerking Sister Deborah to the ground and sending wooden beads spilling onto the floor in all directions.

Sister Deborah stood up abruptly, brushing the front of her habit without looking at Saul. In stiff silence, she turned and strode purposefully down the hall in the opposite direction, leaving Saul stranded in his chair. As he looked around at the still-rolling beads, Saul thought of the rosary he had in his pouch. It was much the same, although the wooden beads were more weathered, and the silver crucifix long-tarnished. He’d never gotten rid of it, but neither had he held it in some time. He rarely thought of it any longer.

When the sister returned she was not alone, but stood behind Mother Eglantine. The Mother was a kindly woman, almost as old as some of the patients, but Saul dared not cross her. She had been at St. Hubert’s for a long time, and she knew more about Saul than he cared for anyone to know. He thought her a fair and respectable woman, he just wished she cared for anyone to know. She even grasped the handrims and used what he’d never gotten rid of it, but neither had he held it in some time. He rarely thought of it any longer.

“Now, Saul,” the Mother began, “I’m sure whatever happened with Sister Deborah was entirely accidental. I know you, Saul, and I know the respect you have for the Lord and for the holy sacramentals.” Her face was not unkind, but grave. Saul didn’t think she meant to be threatening, but he felt threatened. He nodded.

After a moment, Mother Eglantine’s face broke into a smile, though her eyes remained serious. “Come now, Saul, let’s go to the cafeteria.” The old Mother looked thin and frail, but in her hands Saul’s chair cruised down the corridor smoothly and easily.

Saul ate dinner alone—mashed potatoes, soupy green beans, and meatloaf smashed up so he would not need to chew. Only a handful of patients ate in the cafeteria, although St. Hubert’s held as many as fifty. Most could not sit up at the table, and took meals in their rooms. Saul had taken meals in his room, but Mother Eglantine decided he should eat in the company of others. “You should not spend so much time alone,” she had said. Saul did not see how he ate made any difference—it was not easy for him to socialize.

The other patients who ate in the cafeteria sat huddled around the same table. They took turns telling one another how their grandchildren were doing, and when they would visit next. Sometimes one would break into a long, rambling story, and by the end no one could remember the beginning. Saul might have sneered at them, if he could—he might be as old as them, but his mind was still sharp.

After dinner, Sister Deborah wheeled him back to his room. He did not fight her now. He even grasped the handrims and used what little strength he had to help propel himself down the hall. The sister helped him to his bed and inserted his catheter. It was not late, but Saul was tired. There was a TV mounted in the far corner of the room, which he clicked on and turned to the evening news. Saul did not pay attention, but fell asleep to the dull chatter of incoherent voices.

It was night, and a light breeze whistled through the rail yard, tempering the summer heat. Behind him, Saul could hear shouts from the men in the goods depot, and the clang of isolated freight cars as they passed through the marshalling switches. Those men would work all night, he knew, redirecting the boxcars for their morning departure. Saul directed his path away from the noise, toward the darker, quieter areas of the yard. As the night enveloped him, the oil lantern hooked to his belt flickered light across his path. Along his side tramped an old...
pit bull called Razor. Razor was the oldest dog in the yard, but was also the meanest, so Saul liked him best, and leashed the dog up when making rounds.

In his left hand, Saul held a bottle of liquor. He'd only opened it an hour ago, but already the authors were room enough for the liquid to slosh noisily as he walked. There was a gentle buzzing in his ears, and the hum which began in the back of his neck worked its way to his mouth and formed a tune. There was a large plug of chaw in the pocket of his cheek, but Saul formed a word around it and began to sing.

"Well they gave him his orders, at Monroe, Virginia, Sayin' Steve, you're way behind time. This is not 38, it's the old 97, You must put her into Spener on time." Saul stopped, expelled a long string of spittle, and continued singing.

"Well he turned round and said to his black, greasy firemen, Shovel on a little more coal. And when we cross over this big, white mountain, We'll watch old 97 roll."

Saul spat again and took a long pull from his bottle. The breeze felt good on his face, and he felt obliged to smile widely. He looked at the nightstick tucked into his belt. It was dark, but Saul's lantern gave enough light to see two sets of legs swinging out the door of the nearest car. Razor growled loudly.

"All right, you sons a' bitches. Don't you dare move."

There was a squeak of fright, and one of the shadowed figures dropped to the ground and took off running down the track. Saul was expecting this and let go of Razor's leash. The dog took off like a bullet, barking ferociously and tearing after the man's retreating back. Saul unhooked the lantern from his waist and held it high just in time to see Razor launch airborn, lock his teeth around the man, and drag him to the ground. The man's screams turned into strangled sobs and into a quiet gurgle. Saul turned back to the other man.

The man was on his feet, standing in front of the boxcar with his palms stretched wide in surrender. The man wore a patchwork shirt and burlap slacks with bare feet, a rucksack slung over his shoulder. He stood about a foot shorter than Saul and at least a hundred pounds lighter. He wore a short brown beard and his large, fearful eyes stared at the Railway Special Agent badge pinned to Saul's jacket.

"Listen sir, I ain't tryin' to hassle nobody. Just point me towards the nearest fence and you won't never see me again. I'm just a man lookin' for work, that's all."

Saul smiled wide, showing his pearly teeth. He took a few steps towards the man, tilting his head and scratching his chin as if in thought. His jaw was square and covered in stubble.

"Now, I wish I could believe you, brother. But I don't think I can, seein' how your friend up and run off like that."

"He ain't my friend. I just met that bastard. He ain't shoulda run off like that. I'm just a man like you."

Saul launched a mouthful of tobacco spit.

"Well—", Saul made as if to turn before swinging the nightstick around and up between the man's legs, connecting with a sickening thump. The man buckled and fell to his knees. Saul slipped the wooden baton under the man's chin and lifted his face up. Saul bored into him with his gray eyes, shot a line of saliva from the side of his mouth and whispered, "You ain't nothin'."

Saul swung the club again, this time crashing it down on the man's temple. Saul was a powerful man, and he could feel the man's skull collapse under his arm like an overripe melon. The man was on the ground, blood spilling out black in the moonlight, but Saul kept swinging the nightstick. God, I feel strong, he thought.

Saul woke feeling refreshed. Voices on the TV still chattered away, but he turned it off before their words could register. Today was Wednesday, and Simon worked this ward on Wednesdays. Simon was a porter who was friendly enough to bring Saul a flask-sized bottle of whiskey each week. The bottle from the past week had lasted until Sunday, as Saul took small sips to savor it.

Saul's day went as usual. After a breakfast of runny eggs and chalky pills, a sister wheeled him to the chapel. More patients made it to the chapel than to the cafeteria. The priest stepped forward to give his morning benediction, but Saul was not listening. Instead his eyes wandered through the chapel and over its geriatric inhabitants. The chapel was as large as the cafeteria, built to hold all fifty patients if need be. There were a few pews in the front of the room, but they were unoccupied. Instead, all twenty-two patients sat in wheelchairs or gurneys, filling the empty space in the back of the room. The walls were wood paneled and the ceiling white. The priest stood behind a small altar at the front of the room. High above the priest's head, light bled into the chapel through a solitary stained-glass window. The window was a passion scene—Christ Carrying the Cross. The bearded Jesus wore a crown of thorns with a golden halo enveloping it. His back bent double from the weight of the cross, and the Cyrenian man leaned into the frame to help him grasp it. Christ's eyes were cast downward, but in Saul's mind they turned and stared at him, burning white hot. Saul's stomach turned sour and he stared down at his fiddling hands.
for the remainder of the benediction.

From the chapel Saul was wheeled to the common room. Instead of watching television or playing chess, Saul napped in his chair, head lolling onto his shoulder, dentures digging into his collapsed chin with each breath. After lunch, Saul returned to his room, where he sat by the window, waiting for Simon to stop by. As he waited, Saul’s mind wandered back to the railroad, and by the time Simon knocked lightly on the doorframe, Saul found he had been humming a gravelly tune through the back of his throat.

“Well, aren’t you a right old songbird, Mr. Lards.”

Saul snorted and gave his best lopsided grin. He beckoned Simon over and shook his hand. Simon was a forty-year-old black boy, but Saul never held it against him. In fact, after several years of weekly bottle service, Saul thought of Simon as his friend. Saul searched his hand through the pouch alongside his wheelchair and fished out an empty glass flask. He handed Simon the bottle along with a five dollar bill. Simon accepted both and handed back a fresh flask. Saul immediately cracked the seal, uncorked the flask and took a small sip. He held the open bottle out to Simon, who turned it down as Saul knew he would.

“Oh, no, sir. That’s just for you.”

Saul nodded and recorked the bottle, reaching out to shake Simon’s hand again.

“Don’t you let Mother Eglantine see you with that bottle, now. It’ll be my ass.”

Simon laughed jovially and walked back to the door.

“You have a good day, now, Mr. Lards.”

As Simon closed the door behind him, Saul wiped away the drops of whiskey that had dribbled out the side of his mouth. The liquor had burned a warm trail down to his stomach, and Saul felt better than he had in some time. He reopened the bottle and took another pull. Fuck savorin’ it, thought Saul, Tonight I’m getting drunk.

Saul hid the bottle in the sheets of his bed and went willingly to dinner when Sister Deborah came to fetch him. He sat at the same table as the other patients tonight, and laughed

nobody knows nothing

By Julia Ordog
in his head at their ramblings. Every so often Saul would slam his fists down on the table and stare around at the others, just to see their response. After the first few times, no one was alarmed, so Saul sat in satisfied silence for the remainder of the meal.

Soon he was wheeled back to his room and helped into bed. Once the sister left, Saul reached down and by his side and searched through his sheets for the flask of liquor. He turned the television back to the evening news, but for the rest of the night he focused on the bottle.

The glass bottle swinging in Saul’s left hand was nearly empty. A bright moon soared in the sky and the air was crisp and cold. Saul's feet crunched the frozen ground, the breath pouring from his mouth in a vapor. He was alone, tramping his nighttime rounds through the moonlit yard. He swayed slightly as he walked, carving a winding route through boxcars and rails. Though the words of the song formed thick in his mouth, Saul slurred them out loudly.

"Headed down the grade, makin' 90 miles an hour, His whistle broke into a scream. He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle, Scalded to death by the steam."

Saul spat tobacco juice from the side of his mouth and veered towards a nearby car. Wrapping his hand around the cold steel of a ladder rung, he leaned forward to take a piss. Saul stared past the boxcar into a wide clearing, mottled blue and black by the light of the moon. The night was quiet, and all he could hear was the spatter of urine on the hard ground.

Saul was startled when he saw a man break into the clearing, walking calmly across the yard. The stranger wore a beard and long clothes, which in the half light Saul thought might be a greatcoat. Hastily buttoning his trousers, Saul stumbled into the clearing, calling out after the man.

“You there! Who are you?”

The man did not turn, walking steadily on instead. Saul heard him call out a response but could not make out the words. Saul closed within a few feet of the man before slowing to match his speed. Saul reached behind his back to grip his nightstick.

“Come now, friend. Have a drink with me and you can be on your way.”

The stranger’s voice was audible now.

“Except ye drink the blood of the Son of man, ye have no life in ye.”

Close up, Saul could see that the man wore a flowing robe. Saul’s mind was sluggish with alcohol, and the words confused him.

“ ‘Scuse me?”

The man still did not turn.

“Your bottle is empty.”

Saul looked down to his hand. There was still a mouthful of liquor left, and Saul upturned the bottle, draining it. He cast the bottle to his side, where it shattered against a boxcar. Moving forward with renewed intensity, Saul drew the nightstick from his belt, reaching his other arm out to turn the man forcibly around. But the stranger spun suddenly, and Saul was left pawing at air. A slender arm darted out, and the man's hand closed around Saul’s jaw. The man’s fingers were short and thin, but strong as iron, and they locked Saul’s jaw in place. Saul released hot, angry breath into the man's palm, spewing tobacco juice which dripped back down his face. Saul jerked his thick neck like a bull, but the man could not be shaken.

Saul tried to bring the nightstick down on the man, but the wooden club had grown heavier than lead, and his arms hung uselessly. Saul’s eyes were locked onto the stranger’s face, and, recognizing the man, Saul’s broad chest filled with confusion and fear. The man’s eyes smoldered with white heat as he began to speak. His voice boomed forth in resounding tones, reverberating through Saul’s body.

“ ‘And thus were the wicked revealed, and by these three were they consumed: by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone which issued out of their mouths.”

Saul woke with a start. His breath came hard and fast, his damp sheets wicking away the urine and sweat which pooled around his legs. Reaching down to his lap he realized he must have jerked free of the catheter. It was late, and the only light spilled under the door from the hallway, where fluorescent bulbs hummed incessantly. The television was off, and when he looked to his bedside, Saul saw the flask of liquor was empty.

Saul tried to clear his throat, but it was thick with phlegm. He pushed himself upright, his arms shaking from the exertion. His heart still pounded, and his head still swam from the whiskey. He wanted to call out, but his haggard mouth could not form the words.

Leaning over, Saul grabbed at the handle of his wheelchair, pulling it alongside his bed. Angling his hips, he scooted himself to the edge of the mattress, and swung himself clumsily toward the seat. The chair began to roll backwards, and he might have fallen, but the arm of the wheelchair caught him hard in the side and he crumpled down into the seat.

Saul’s side ached, and his arms were trembling, but he managed to wheel himself the few feet over to the window. He ripped open the blinds, bathing the dark room in pale, blue light. Outside the snow shone white, amplifying the glow of the large moon. Saul stared out the window, seeing both his own ghostly visage and the sky beyond. Reaching up his hand, Saul felt through the crags of his face, touching the pockets of skin where his jaw should be. Saul withdrew his hand quickly and threw the curtains shut, returning the room to darkness.

Fishing through the pouch of his chair, Saul’s fingers closed around the old wooden rosary. Drawing the crucifix into his lap, Saul began to pray, shutting his eyes tight. The words echoed through his head, coming easier as he counted his way through the beads. He thought them so loud he almost spoke.

O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Thy mercy.
to the messianic jewisn man who welcomed me to sozo coffeehouse

By Lisa Muloma

You are first saying hello to me as if I am an angel, breathing welcome into the air as you lean into tipping curtsy. Now, sweeping your arms (right arm cradling brown Bible) in “thank you for being here today” and I imagine you sweeping your arms into spinning and spinning in that blue hat of yours, in that blue and white prayer shawl.

You are tornado. You are orbit. You are my little sister outside on a summer night, twirling, her neck bent backwards, poised for star swallowing.

You tell me that everything begins and ends in Jerusalem and your brown eyes, they sparkle, as fluorescent lightbulbs in dark cellars I wonder where your wife is this evening.

Whether she sits in paisley love-seat licking Vanilla Wafer crumbs from her fingers as you, now on your knees, turn cave and concave in worship, your hands tight together as your wife watches Jay Leno.

You are crying out to God for Jerusalem and I am stealing away, into the cold quiet of Nashville at night to breathe deeply the severed stillness. Streetlights blink.

You sing heavy the Hallelujah but the rest of us are still so very small.
To the Messianic Jewish Man Who Welcomed Me to Sozo Coffeehouse
christmas lights strung their roofs together, the dips and crests like twinkling fermatas.
i suppose no matter how empty the cup, 'tis the season.
he quickly took her shoulders into his mistletoe soul though their interactions were small,
the words exchanged few. i couldn't help but stare on,
watching concert lights flicker in and out of her seedy eyes,
their starry coked-out gazes and sweaty grins already reminiscing
her maroon dress splayed across a drunken hotel piano,
the line of snow across the baby grand lid under which they shut reality
the night before into a sarcophagus of hammers and strings.

so i let myself become engulfed.

this was the moment of chips and salsa reigning the commons,
when the coffee was dark and the drugs were good. when we flicked
cigarettes into the bushes watching the orange fizzlie out in the snow,
and pulled all-nighters doped up in the freezing cold grinning at the shiny moon and
rocket-ship street lamps. when our hip bones raised outward at beautiful angles
and beer bottles in the shower made the tinny sound of rain on an aluminum rooftop.
when we ran across crossroads cackling into the night holding diet cokes
with straws in them, and wore beanies, headphones to little hipster coffee shops
with fantastical Lewis Carroll names—oh, it was all obligatory, obligatory

of course, i fell in and out of love.
there were the jesus-headed men who had beards and piercings, peruvian sweaters and hebrew names. the man with bob dylan hair and frayed shoelaces who brought his harmonica to our table. the potheads with skateboards who dealt from hotel-room hearts, but mostly tattooed skinies who carried lighters in their pockets and called themselves "writers" and "musicians." how do you do what do you do where are you from i am an Artist they would smile, light a cig, their beaten down flannels betraying first class upbringings. and when that evolved into some series of passionate mountain masochisms it was time time time for step three so we

became immersed in our own psychologies.

we checked ourselves into counseling, romanticized feelings of anxiety, paranoia, splayed our souls open for art, self-medicated with long tokes, put our pulses on our sleeves pretending America was the Paris Commune and we, we were Hugo’s eat-the-rich bloody revolutionaries with more spine than sense and more sense than life left. what we didn’t realize is that we weren’t poor, we had just chosen to believe so. this hit me to cymbals to the ears because when was it that Pablo Neruda stopped cutting it for me for he was too pure? when did i stop seeking sunlit afternoons, decide blue was too beautiful for me, reach for charcoals and coffee out of necessity rather than desire? how to proceed, how to proceed step four usually comes with razors, ropes, and buildings quick quick quick quick pull away pull away pull away pull away deep breath and watch:

Mr. Saturday Afternoon did backflips in the hallway and I felt a blush swimming its way to my brain. I smile, hand in hand with the harmless deranged wondering whether his fingers taste like cerulean.
The Water Plant

By Lane Kelly

Bubbles swelled up through the water as bottom-dwelling, twisting creatures stirred on the silt floor. The lake was green, and warm like bathwater. Dragonflies raced and bounced around Darl’s head as he floated, lax and sunburnt. He heard a yelp.

“Darl get these bugs away from me,” cried Tammy, who was floating somewhere back behind him.

It was a Saturday. The two had driven down to the lake for the afternoon, packing up coolers and towels and floating mats. It was Tammy’s idea. She wanted to catch up on her tanning. Darl heard another scream, and then a splash. He leaned up and turned his head, seeing Tammy surface from the water, her yellow hair soaked and stuck over her eyes.

“You just did.”

She was kicking at him now, snapping her legs like pistons, also shining.

“It’s not funny Darl, it’s seriously not.”

He grabbed one of the legs and jerked it forward, pulling her body underneath him. The two faces were close. She was wild-eyed, and Darl could smell the salt of her sweat.

The water plant was tucked into the forest on a ridge above the lake. There was only a small sign that marked the gravel road that led to it, the city insignia bleached away in the sunlight and only a few of the painted letters still visible. Each day, Darl’s truck would crunch up the gravel to the plant. On summer days, the sunlight would bob in green dapples across the windshied as he drove up the tree-shaded road. Joel would be waiting for him in the parking lot. He was always there early, leaning against the city truck the two would drive for most of the day.

On the hot days, when the air was sticky and the heat already unbearable early in the morning, he and Joel would go inside and cool by the cisterns. There were eight of them in a row; huge and carved into the floor like swimming pools. Water was pumped from the lake and filtered through the large tanks, which were lined in the bottom with a black layer of charcoal silt. Long windows stretched around the tall roof of the building, cracked open all day. No new calls had come in, and the two were lounging near the truck, whose tires sank slightly in the yellow sand on the side of the road. Joel was sitting in the kudzu.

A junebug was buzzing around the truck, fat like a catfish. Joel saw it, stood, and went to mess around in the truck’s front compartment. Darl knew that Joel was looking for the spool of fishing line. One of Joel’s pastimes was catching junebugs and tying strings around them. It had evolved out of tying them to line as bait while fishing. Once tied, Joel would hold one end of the string and the bug would buzz and fight like a little kite in the air. One time, when they were out heavy, he caught a bunch of them and put them all on strings. Darl thought it was uncanny. Joel waltzed around with all the strings in one hand, as if holding a bunch of balloons. Soon the junebugs started flying in his face, and when he swatted them away, the strings got all tangled. Darl had watched as Joel, angry, bunched the whole mess into a ball and stomped it.

Darl heard the static bark of the radio in the front seat, and he called to Joel, who had waded further into the kudzu after the junebug.

“How old are you, Joel? Fifty?” Darl said as they drove to the call.

“Lord, boy. I’m only forty-three.”

The sun was bright against the windshield, baking their arms.

“It’s funny how you can know some body but never learn their basic facts,” said Darl.

Joel pondered, and finally spoke loudly. “The facts don’t mean squat. Who cares if I’m fifty or forty? Just looking at somebody can tell you almost everything you need to know about them.”

“That’s the thing, Joel. I can’t learn squat from watching you. Who are you?”

“I’m an old man who likes to fish, and who’s got a wife that left him.”

“See, I would have never known that,” he said. “What’s she doing now?”

“Staying with some guy named Terry.”

“Are you divorced?”
pairasouls
By Bosley Jarrett
and the Kefi Project
“She told me that divorce papers are only for if you want to remarry,” Joel said. “I reck I won’t do that.”

“You got any kids?”

“A boy. She keeps him at Terry’s house.”

As they turned onto the gravel road, the wheels turned up plumes of hot, yellow dust. Darl could smell it sifting through the air conditioner.

“She said her kids can’t go around and shooed him with her hand. Her eyes were squinted in the headlights.

“Joel if you get a divorce, the judge will let you split time with your kid.”

“I know, I know, Darl. I just want to leave her alone for a while. If she wants space to get away, I just want to leave her alone for a while.”

As they neared the house, water was rushing like a flood through the grass of the yard and mixing into the thin dust of the street.

—

Darl’s truck heaved over the divots in the gravel. The truck’s headlights cut through the indigo, diffusing up the long driveway and blushing across the small house at the top of the hill. There was a dog barking somewhere, the loud, cannonball assertions of its territory echoing through the treetops. There was an old, purple sedan parked just outside the house.

“Darl, just drop me off here,” Tammy said. “Looks like momma’s home.”

“What’s so bad about momma?”

“You don’t want to get caught up in all that yelling. Here is fine.”

“What’s she yelling about, me?”

“Mostly me. Some of you. Mostly me with you.”

“Huh.”

“…”

“What about your dad.”

“He’s gone.”

“Oh.”

“Bye Darl.” She kissed him and curved her hand into his thigh, then left. He watched her a little ways until she turned around and shoved him with her hand. Her eyes were squinted in the headlights.

One day he wondered over to the bookstore and found himself in the children’s section. The shelves were smaller, the rows adjusted for shorter sets of eyes and hands. Darl squatted and surveyed, his eyes scanning the bright, patchwork rack. A series with pale yellow spines found his attention, the titles all aligned and simple. He took one at random out of its groove, the two neighbors leaning in and touching their tops where the empty space was. It was a collection of old folk stories. Thumbing through the pages, he stopped at the beginning of a story near the middle.

It was about hedgehogs meeting in a winter forest. In the summers they stuck to themselves, but as the seasons became cold and more severe, they would instinctively gather to conserve heat. However, they soon realized that, thanks to their quills, they couldn’t become too close without hurting each other.

“This is a parable of the human condition,” read the story’s epilogue. “In our relationships, we find that in the process of developing intimacy with one another, it is inevitable that both parties will damage the other along the way.

Unlike the hedgehogs, we must acknowledge this pain, and push on anyway. Remember this parable when times are tough with your children. There is no more intimate bond than the one between parent and child, and disagreement and discomfort are simply part of the process.”

Darl read the paragraph a few times over before putting the book back in its place and leaving the store. The bell chimed as he swung open the door and stepped out.

Tammy called one night and told him she was pregnant. His hand shook as he put down the phone, and he didn’t manage to sleep until sunrise. The next week, she went to the doctor to confirm that it was true. Darl met her outside the doctor’s office.

“He said it’s like a chili bean,” Tammy said, pinching her fingers together. “I got a long ways to go yet.”

Darl spat and wiped his mouth on his collar. The shirt was dusty, and the moisture dampened it like mud. He opened the truck door to get in.

“Does your momma know yet.”

“No.”

He made to spit again, but didn’t.

“I got to go back to work. I can’t keep the truck too long,” he said.

“Ok, well, bye.”

Darl shut the door and roared the engine into motion. As he backed out of the parking space and began to drive off, something made a loud crack against the rear cabin window. He looked back in the rearview and saw her throwing rocks. The next ones fell short, and he cursed loudly as the dust swallowed her in the distance behind.

When the days were long, Darl and Joel would walk down the bank after work and fish from the small shore of the lake. There were deep pools and channels that ran close to the shore, and as the sun set, the two would bait their hooks for the fatter, shyer creatures that fed at dusk.

“How’s your kid doing?” asked Darl. They were standing close, and both kept their eyes fixed on their lines.

“Hell if I know,” he replied. “Doing okay, I reckon.”

As dusk settled over the water, katydids began to ring in the treetops.

“Do you ever miss him?” Darl asked.

“Of course I do.”

The air took on a swollen quality as the colors began to darken in the sky. Darl could feel and hear the whine of mosquitoes dancing about his face.

“That reminds me,” said Joel, “I was watching the news last night, and someone had found a photo of two missing kids. They were tied up in the back of a van, with tape over their mouths. One was a little boy, and as soon as I saw him, I went cold. It looked just like my own boy. I swear I couldn’t even take a breath. Luckily the newscaster said they’d been kidnapped somewhere in Florida. I never knew I could get so shook up.”

“Huh,” Darl said. His eyes flitted nervously on the bobber at the end of his line.

“Sure is something, ain’t it,” said Joel, chuckling quietly to himself.

Rusty light poured into the bedroom. Tammy had taken the covers and was curled
underneath them, only her yellow hair spilling out. Darl’s eyes were closed and knitted tightly. Tammy poked her head out.

“What if it’s a girl,” she said.
Darl remained motionless, not stirring.

“What if it’s a boy,” she said again.
There was an old standing fan in the corner, jerking in spasms as it blew stale air over the room. Darl had got it from the landlord when it finally became too hot to sleep.

“What if it’s just an air bubble,” Tammy said, finally. “Just nothing at all. That’s what you want, don’t you.”

He was still silent as she teetered softly and leaned against him. He put his arm around her when he heard her start to cry.

The gate was locked when Darl pulled up in the truck. He got out and fumbled with his keys as the headlights shone on him like twin spotlights. It was the Fourth of July. Crunching up the gravel path, he parked the truck in the plant parking lot. Everywhere was indigo, and the air seemed to throb under the weight of its own humidity.

Darl went down to the shore. The stones were already cool as he sat on them, round and chalky and worn. He watched as the lake gurgled and simmered. Even at night the water was warm to the touch, and nighttime fish kissed the surface as if peeking at the stars. Far away, around the ring of the lake, he could spot distant bursts and flares, multitudinous celebration rising from the houses, docks, and beaches that lined the shore.

He noticed a pale glow emanating from one of the deep pools. Some creature was surging, the water cloudy and shining around it. Darl wondered if it was some baby star, birthed from the depths of the fecund lake as the culmination of the density of life surrounding it, surfacing finally in its time to drift upward like a dandelion seed to join the splatter of jewels above.

Perhaps it was an old star instead, too dim to stand rank and cast earthbound towards a warm and lonely exile. Maybe it was looking upward now, startled by the local, ersatz sparks and remembering its own past.

It could have been something more terrestrial, a strange fish or a clot of phosphorescent algae. He didn’t know. Soon the glow swallowed itself as it disappeared back into the murky deep, fading as gently as it had arisen.

Darl stood and climbed back towards the water plant, the soles of his boots scratching the gravel and loam underfoot. The door to the plant building opened with a grating noise as he twisted the key and pushed inward. The spacious main room was quiet but harboring a deep resonance, as if the pumps and machines were issuing the soft breaths of a dreaming bear. Even here, the moonlight penetrated, filling the dark room with pale beams.

He kneeled gently at the side of one of the cisterns. The water was black, impenetrable like ink, as the charcoal at the bottom absorbed any light that wandered in. The surface was completely still. Darl stared into the blackness, his eyes burning as if he too was trying to pierce the darkness. He dipped one hand in, mixing the water around and causing it to ripple along the surface. Looking up, he noticed the weak, yet present reflections dancing along the ceiling.

Darl cupped his hand in the water and lifted it to his mouth. He was crying now, and the water tasted salty as he sipped it from his palm. He remained still a moment longer, finally standing up and wiping the wet hand onto his jeans.

The tires of his truck once again ground against the gravel, and as he left the plant, the twin beams of his headlights swung into the road, illuminating shortly the path that wound out of the city, out of the county. And there was a crying in the air over the lake, a terrible and beautiful harmony, a bottle rocket whistling, a young woman wailing, the first whines of the pumps at the water plant, as scheduled in their cycles, thrumming slowly back to life.
in a few years

By Lucas Hilliard

My grandfather will die around seven
in the evening while eating a snack
he just picked from his small backyard garden,
a tomato rescued from cracked
vine – he enjoys things precariously placed.
It will be his second heart attack.

His wife will find him, face
down in the dirt. His limp body will be too heavy for
her wiry arms to pull him into an embrace,

yet she will try to do so once more,
and she will buckle from the strain of this affection.
She will react to his death with tears and alcohol before

she finds this tiresome. Then she will shun
his memory and grant another man displacement.
Her life is composed of pauses from motion.

His ex-wife, my grandmother, doting and patient,
will awake early the following morning, unaware
of his death until it is announced by the harsh accent
of the old phone he bought her when they were married.
She will skip work that day, moving only from the couch
where she sleeps to the long-ignored bed they once shared.

When my grandfather dies, a deer will crouch
to retrieve the half-eaten tomato he left behind.
The deer will eat it then scurry off.
adoration
By Jacob Culberson

What are we to do with it,
Shivering, rocking, muttering on the porch,
Found like a flower in an old book
(dry and brittle and having, it seems,
so little to do with the words on the page)?

The appeal of things done:
Beams set at such an angle
As other beams have been;
Trusses placed at such a distance
As is trusted to be fitting.

Thunder between every panel
Where faith stitches
Symmetry into air—
speaks it in lightning.

Oh, the proliferation of songs!
Oh, the desiccation of words!
Oh, the house that may defy both,
and accept for itself both
hunger and silence.

In the clear, fragrant dark that follows a hanging
What is beat out of steel at the edge of the mist
Can be vengeance or compassion:
But some have survived the furnace.

Words outdo themselves
When, set alight in the
Cool watches of the night,
They give off
So pleasing a smell.
Cool smoke, star-smoke, blood-smoke,
And genuflection:
Mighty deeds done.
dance spirits dance
By Theodore Yurevitch

It’s like when you fall asleep for a midafternoon nap and wake to find that it is night. Night and the sun has moved on. So you assume. You cannot know for sure because you didn’t see it set.

You didn’t see the glowworm dusk. The violet gloam. You awoke unsure if your eyes are even open. It is night now and Laura Stern is no longer there.

You walk back into the hotel room, the toilet still chinking behind you, and when it finally stops, when silence drops, that is when you realize that she has vanished. Evaporated. You (and she) hadn’t been in the room for long. Not for more than minutes, moments. Your shoes are still on, still tied. Your coat isn’t even hung, just tossed to the side, shed like a snakeskin.

This is the Sno Haus Hotel.

Sno Haus means snow house in German. And yet you are in Calgary. But really you are supposed to be in Vancouver, visiting the city of your birth. Are supposed to be with Laura. She had come with you, after all, her idea, after all.

“You like traveling,” she said in her viola pitch, as you two talked about it some months before, at dinner somewhere, where the light was soft and the food, French.

“No I don’t,” you told her then.

“But you like planes.”

“I like engines. The way they work. Reading about them. Writing. Stuff like that.”

“So you like planes. We’ll take a plane there.”

She knows you so well.

Laura Stern is your girlfriend of seven months even though no, you have not said anything super affectionate or even exceptionally amatory towards her. There is nothing wrong with that, though, you tell yourself, knowing full well that there may be. Probably is. Something wrong. But that’s fitting. Everything is wrong now.

Calgary, the most evident of mistakes, a freckled finger, a fly in your gazpacho. You should still be in the sky right now, blading through deliquescent clouds and open air. Staring through your window as Laura dozes. Staring at the stars that blink like fireflies. But Laura dozes. You look into the mirror over the sink, but only find your long face. Your raccoon eyes, shadowed and sunken in blue, as if bruised, beaten by the exhaustion, by the intensely stressful five minutes you’ve been having. Hair, untidy. Bangs knocked loose from the travel and the pooping. And yet your cheeks are clean. You never forget to shave. Turn on all the lights in the bedroom. Overheads. Bedside lamp. Bedside lamp. You turn all the lights on and then you turn all the lights off. Not pitch black though. A hum of light comes from the wall-sized window. Outside, snowflakes dance their way down to the ground. Neon light from the city streets set the flakes on fire. Green and blue and molten gold, like pieces of rainbow ash, falling after an eruption.

Pressing your forehead against the glass, the street is everywhere below you. The snow spins past your nose and finally settles down, so many floors away and to the ground. It sticks to the sidewalks. Men and women walking through the street pull their jackets tight around themselves. Laura could be down there. Your forehead is starting to stick so pry it off and press your chin to the glass instead, cranking upwards and looking into the snowfall. The mounds of clouds in the sky are bright, for night.

But then vertigo comes, like a hand slapping you straight across the face. A big, purple hand. This is vertigo, here to say hello. It comes fast and furiously—the fingers grasp your vision, stretching and twisting the world, crumbling sight into a little ball.

Something you toss into a trashcan. In the violet, swirling shade, you stumble. Squeeze your eyes shut, hope that it will help to dispel the spell, but as always, it does no good. This isn’t the first time that these ghost hands have grasped your eyes, pushing and pulling, flushing you down.

Vertigo is a childhood friend. Height often does this, as it is doing now. Height and nerves. Crumbling away from the window, you try to speak, try to stagger, try to stay upright. You aim for the bed but miss and hit the floor. Sink into the plush, polar bearish carpeting. Be glad that it is not hard wood.

A curlique of soft, pearl carpet tickles your eyelid. Blink, and awake.

The first time you ever felt vertigo, you were ten. Little then, and living in a little town in British Columbia. Summer. July and as warm as it was ever going to get. You had been climbing a tree. Spindled cherry branches. Plucking the pale, rose-pink blossoms on your way up, you
made a mistake and looked down. The ground pulsed and thrrobbed like a belly dancer’s shimmering flesh. Unsure of where it was, unsure of where you were, you fell.

Now you roll on the ground again, around until you are face up and can see the clock. 10:47 P.M. It seems out of place, the basic, digital thing—one of those with rigid, red lines and dashes, dots and numbers. Cheap, you think, but it quite nicely recalls an airport express. You fumble around and find the lights. Back on. Ocher glow fills the corners of room once again.

Guess what? She’s still not there.

Sitting on the foot (what might be the foot) of the circular and solitary bed, you hold your head in your hands. Large hands. Clumsy, too clunky for pockets. You don’t know anything. And that is the problem. For you. Where to go, what to do with them. You don’t know anything.

And that’s why you talked to Laura once more. You didn’t see her. You didn’t hear her. But her purse buzzed by the monitor. And that is who you are thinking out loud. 

Should you call the police? Call the front desk? Call Laura’s mother? Call Laura? That’s an idea. Call Laura. You should’ve thought of this long before, fool. So dial her number, and see what happens.


“Hello?” You say back, brusque-like. You don’t like. She picks good movies to see. She likes National Geographic and quite often sees a tidbit—slime has memories, but no brain—there is a turtle in China that urinates from its mouth. But other things drive you—there is a turtle in China that urinates from its mouth. You always first read the reviews, and then the ending, even if not the story. When it finally seemed like Laura would be going with or without you, you decided to go too.

And there are many things about Laura that you do like. She picks good movies to see. She reads National Geographic and quite often shares a tidbit—slime has memories, but no brain—there is a turtle in China that urinates from its mouth. But other things drive you steadily up the walls. She would make plans, then never finish. She never finished the chicken, which was what you were going to order. And that was not okay. That was worse than ordering steak. It bothers you how she begins a book and then never finishes it. You always first read the reviews, and then the ending, even if not the rest.

Back to the bag, tip it over and dump the contents onto the comforter in a waterfall of knickknacks and womanly things. The cell phone slides out first. Then some beauty devices. Lipstick, hand cream, lip balm, tampons, some old receipts. Disordered slips of paper. Her wallet, slim and cerulean in color. Feminine, but not girly. Just like her. Nice. There are receipts for unfathomable amounts of coffee and half-finished novels.

You stand up unsatisfied and then see: a scrap of paper on the floor. It must have floated away like a lost snowflake, you assume. This is no receipt, though. Not a shopping list, or a reminder to get nails done, hair done, something done. No. On it, this shard, written in an unknown cursive, are the words: Wolf’s Moon.

Wolf’s Moon.

Hold the note in your hand. Feel the width of the paper. Feel the bite of the torn off edge.


Haven’t even thought to ask, not once over the course of the seven-month relationship. The space is your space; basically furnished in what you think adds up to serene. Outfitted wall-to-wall with things accrued from various catalogs, department and hardware stores. An amalgamation of years of material. Modern stuff, mostly. Neutral colors. You have your very own multi-condiment dispenser that you, of course, keep ever full. Your bed is rectangular, as it should be. Sometimes you work from your apartment, your job writing technical manuals, and so therefore it must be kept professional. Technical pamphlets for TE Achtech, the leaders in home appliance information manuals. Refrigerators, microwave ovens, ovens, toasters, toaster ovens.

That sort of thing. It was the very first job you got out of college. There had been plans to write other things; stories, novels, maybe even
untitled

By Anisha Patel
poems, but this wasn’t such a bad start, you thought.

You are still writing.

But then there’s how seven years have passed. In those seven years, Laura was the first coworker you dated. Although to be fair, it was she who asked you out. She told you how you made a cameo in one of her dreams. Why did she ask you out? She had been out on a date and that you had graciously given her all of your food. Maybe you should go on a real date now, she said. You didn’t know what to say, but you eventually said okay.

It was big news in your office. You who is always punctual, polite, and avoidant of any non-work related activities (at least between the office walls, yet really outside them too) was dating Laura: who is beautiful, blonde, smart and has such wonderful legs. Why did she work for TEACHtech in the first place, was the primordial question everyone asked when she started working over a year ago. Now the question was why was she with you.

Seven months with Laura. Seven years telling others to push the power button if experiencing problems. As those years folded into one another, the thoughts of stories, half finished things, and incomplete journals, fell further and further into a spot of your desire that for all intents and purposes no longer existed. You were/are content with what you do/have done.

There is satisfaction, sure, writing such concrete things. This is what you remind yourself of.

What you are, what you have become: a reporter of sorts. You report. Still, your words are stories, just built on information, truth and precision. They quite clearly help others, and it feels good to write down what is right, you tell yourself.

(But really, what is right? Truth? This is not what you would have ever written down, after all.)

Now open your eyes and see how different the room is. How much it has changed, how much it has not. Laura is still not here, there is that, and there is also the stifled air. The swaddled, throttled, hugged feeling that you feel when you just barely escaped an episode. The product of the purple hands. The after-effects of vertigo. You need to get out of this room. Outside the window, stars of snow continue to fall. Do you remember the time Laura told you that she had once caught a seven-armed snowflake? These sorts of things happen to her.

Put on your parka. A size too big, but okay. Not too big for your hands at least. You should go outside. Get some fresh, frosted air. Cold doesn’t really make people sick, it just kills the germs. The good and the bad. Right now you could use some emptiness, you think. Clear the head, sweep out the cobwebs and confusion. Take the elevator to the lobby. Janacek plays the way down; not the best, but not the worst. Better than instrumental pop or counterfeit jazz. Imitation bobop. It is never really Miles Davis or Monk. Doesn’t matter. Do you even like music? What, if someone asked you right now, would say is your favorite style? “Um, all kinds?”

The lobby is mammoth. You hadn’t noticed how truly, breathtakingly large it was when you first walked in, when things were tightly wound and parseable. When Laura was at your side. Now you do. Rich, floating lights sketch along the walls, etch shadows in the corners. The floors are covered in carpeting dyed every shade of old west. The walls and columns are wood, chestnut brown. Odd chairs twist and rise from the ground like little trees, malformed shrubbery.

You cross the room, eyeing the abstract and uncomfortable looking seats. Now that you’ve reached the revolving door, spin yourself out and into the cold. It’s a whole new world. Not light or dark outside, but like a shadow at noon. Snow glows saffron under streetlights, falling in thick handfuls. Catchable, if you concentrate. Gather your jacket to your chest. Flip the collar and shield what face you have left. Few people are out anymore and those few who are have their own faces bowed to the wind. Or pleasure. (Or both.) It is then that someone calls out.

“Sir!” A harsh, accented voice.

At the concierge’s desk stands a man of indistinguishable age. He has a face, chiseled from granite. Eyes the color of faded denim. His brow dips down and his steel-black hair is swept back, like a bald eagle’s crown. “That is art you sit on!” Jump and apologize, pinwheel your hands as if to brush aside idiocy.

The man steps out from behind his obsidian desk. He wears a neatly tailored grey suit and a slender, subdued blue tie. His shoes are black, dutifully polished. “Pardon me, but do you happen to be the guest from room 1403?”

“Maybe. I don’t remember.” Odd. It’s the kind of thing you do.

“Did you happen to call a small while before?” The man raises his fingers to indicate how small the time had been. This small.

“Oh. Oh yes. You told me to dial one.”

“Might I be of assistance?”

Consider the floor for a moment. Gather yourself. “The woman I checked in with—she’s missing.”

“Ms. Laura?”

Explain how she vanished, as impossible as it may seem. How everything has spun apart and far away from your grasp. Your hands are
so large, but handhold so weak. She is gone. And yet everything else is in order. “Except this,” you say, unfolding the scrap of paper you found in her purse. Niklaus examines the note for more than just a moment. “This is Ms. Laura’s?” “I guess. It’s not mine, so it must be.” Examining the scrap once more, his brow furrows deep, creasing a cleft quite like a butthole but across his forehead. He doesn’t take his eyes off the paper when he says, “Wolf’s Moon is here, you know.” Now he looks up—for dramatic effect. “In Calgary.” “That doesn’t make sense. We aren’t supposed to be here.” “And yet you are here. You.” Niklaus raises a check-mark eyebrow. “Herr—sir, the Wolf’s Moon is a sort of... cabaret.” “A cabaret...” “A... burlesque?” “A burlesque.” “More like a... gentleman’s....” You know what he means. Share a moment in silence, observe each other’s shoes. Your sneakers. Niklaus’s venetian low-vamp loafers. “Cabaret.” Whisper the word to your self. You want to sit down again, but everything is apparently art. Twisted sculptures. “Can you tell me where it is?” In two steps Niklaus is back behind his counter. From below, he pulls out a map. Unfolded, he first circles where the Sno Haus Hotel is and then another spot, not far away. “Okay?” He looks up. Look back and nod, say okay. He dials a cab service from his obsidian desk’s obsidian phone. “Cabaret.” Whisper the word to yourself. You want to sit down again, but everything is apparently art. Twisted sculptures. “Can you tell me where it is?” In two steps Niklaus is back behind his counter. From below, he pulls out a map. Unfolded, he first circles where the Sno Haus Hotel is and then another spot, not far away. “Okay?” He looks up. Look back and nod, say okay. He dials a cab service from his obsidian desk’s obsidian phone. Why is it that you don’t remember seeing him when you first walked in? Why can’t you remember anything right? Everything is unfurling and falling away, like a winter dandelion blown in a cold wind. “You have made a wise decision. It is not always best to walk around at night, neon lights, flickering dirty places. Snow—flakes still fall in kaleidoscope sheets. People, indistinguishable through the window, pass by. Wind billows against the car. Little mountains and crescents of snow form in the corners of the windshield. The world is being washed away in the white. Soon the world will disappear entirely. Maybe then, you will find Laura. “Um. Are you going to put on your wipers? You scratch at the window, as if that would scrape away some of the snow. “Wipers?” The man’s voice is gruff, filled with gravel. “Where you from?” “New York.” You don’t say Vancouver. That’s not your home, not anymore. And besides, you don’t want to be lumped into the same bunch as this guy, do you. “Rangers?” Hockey. Always. “I like baseball better, actually.” “Ah. Say, what you doing in Calgary?” “Visiting.” Knuckles pale, wrapped around your seatbelt. Don’t say anything about the storm, about the Sno Haus, about your missing girlfriend. “You visit for what? The ladies? Cal’ lladies?” The man laughs like a lion, a growl. “Or the mountains?” “Mountains. I guess.” “Beautifuls. The lights are something too. That’s something.” “The lights?” See the back of his head bob as he says, “God’s lights.” The cabbie, the Catholic. Not expected, but you should have suspended your expectations long before. “See them in the city, sometimes.” “So I’ve heard.” Close your eyes, tight, push out those purple feelings of vertigo. “You heard? You heard from who?” “So the wipers? No?” “Wipers?” You feel as if you are stuck in the revolving door back at the hotel. Endlessly going round and round. Infinity, perpetual motion discovered. “How can you see anything?” Clutch at your seat belt, like that will help. You feel woozy once more, as if you are deep under the ocean, sinking, unable to swim. Not the purple hands, per say, but they will come soon. “Yes, wipers!” How can you see?” “What you mean? With my eyes.”
“Please, just let me out!”

The cab comes to a screeching halt and all the snow flies off the car and into the air. The wind grabs the pearl white dust and tosses it about like confetti, a celebration. Yay. You survived.

“Here,” is all the driver says. “Fare’s five seventy five.”

Pay and get out. As you swing the door of the godforsaken cab closed, a walking man knocks into you and you all but fall to the ground. No, just fall to your knees. Now look up, and see in the air, amidst cyclones of red stained flurries, a scarlet, neon sign. WOLF’S MOON. Next to it is an inandescent circle. A face. Eyes that are wide open in either a grin or a grimace. The man on the moon, bearing his great blocks of teeth.

Stand up and slip your hand into your front pocket. You can’t find the slip of paper that had been in Laura’s purse. Missing. Everything has gone missing. Searching hand turns into fist.

You walk into the Wolf’s Moon.

Welcome.

Inside, all surfaces are velveteen. Dim haze fills the room along with the din of drunkenness. The smell of beer, liquor, dirt. The place is a sort of converted dance hall, unsure of its desire to be trendy or a dive. Filled with a mix of battered tables and plush booths. Lava lamps the size of full-grown men line the walls. There is a bar on the side closest to you and a large and empty stage on the side opposite.

Say, “Excuse me,” to the bartender. The bearded man behind the counter. The amount of hair that clings to his chin more than makes up for the lack of it upon on his head. Assert yourself, don’t be afraid. “I’m looking for a woman. Named Laura. Blonde, blue eyed. Not terribly tall. Wearing a blue sweater. Black jeans. No earrings. Fair skin. It’s a turtle neck sweater.” Keep going, try and jog his memory.

“What kind of shoes did you say?” The sweater. “Keep going, try and jog his memory.

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You walk into the Wolf’s Moon.

Welcome.
self-portrait
By Vibhu Krishna
don't have much time to read anymore, not for pleasure, not with how much time you spend supposedly working.

"Ah." Jean swillls the rest of his drink down into his mouth. "Me? Montreal." But he pronounces it Montreux, like the city in Switzerland.

The waitress comes jiggling by and together you clink glass with Jean and drink. As the warm gold seeps into you, you forget more and more the feeling of cool he first gave you.

Suddenly, everything seems both heavy and sharply clear. As if you are witnessing a crime through the holy images of a stained glass window. Dramatic lighting. Rembrandtish.

"Excuse me." Jean exits, nodding into the ever-dimming room. "A moment."

Give your full attention to what is to come. This is close to the end. This is important.

Worries of Laura continue to ease and slip, and yet the thought even occurs to you, whether this is your weak disposition towards alcohol or something else entirely. You don’t often drink, you know, because your consumption stamia is probably equivalent to that fourfoot eleven, vaguely Asiatic looking girl. That one over there, accepting some colorful Canadian dollars between her butt cheeks.

Now. Silence seeps its way into the pores of the crowd. Chitchat fades. The room is shadow now, but the stage glowes like dawn. Auburn lights set the space ablaze, the curtain that hangs behind a microphone. The subdued, blue velvet begins to draw back. On the stage is a shaded figure, upright limbs, and bent head. A human, hidden in the blackness behind the forward lights. All eyes in the room are on the stage. The shade walks forward and finally slips into the tangerine shine.

It is neither man or woman, or at least you cannot tell. The facial features are sharp, though, angular. Hollow and high cheeks. Hair, long and platinum and flying in every direction. He or she is wearing make up. Powdered cheeks, jasper lips. Torquoise shadow hangs over sunken and sad eyes. The androgynous body is slim, with little muscle and no sign of chest.

There is no way to hide anything under the leotard that this one wears—a onesie, patterned with ripe triangles of color. Aztec style.

"That," Jean whispers, "is Oracle." He is back.

Oracle presses lips to the microphone and begins to sing.

The voice is like a breath. A cool exhale over a hill, over treetops. Pines, the Pacific Northwest. Needles coming within a centimeter of prickling. Knives, reminders of life, sharp as dreams. The song has no accompaniment, but needs none. The voice is every instrument, every tone, every soft touch. Jazz, a ballad, a hymn—some shards of everything. A magnum opus, a mountain. Sounds both full and low, a simulacra of life. Some wails, some whispers. Sometimes words, sometimes just vocables. As Oracle sings, his or her body moves, stiffens and sways.

Dances. Hands flick and fall. Sometimes he strangles the microphone before him. Other times she graspis it in her arms, gathers it like water. You feel like you are dancing too, like you are swaying under the sea and surrounded by a school of rainbow colored fish. Even though you are not. Or are you? Wonder. Wonder where you are, if you are even here. You feel as if you are everywhere. The bottom of your glass, in the last swirls of goldenrod liquor. In the heat of the orange light. You are you, but you are also Jean. The dice men and the Oracle itself. Laura.

Laura. Laura. Who?

Jean's lips brush against your ear (or do they?), whispering hairline words. Asking if you want the answers or if you want to be free. If you want to be failing or to be caught. The singing ends but the song still hangs in the air. A ghost, a love story. The stage recedes back into dark. Oracle is nothing more than a shadow, and then nothing at all.

"What did you think?" Jean's lips are no longer pursed and kissing, if they had ever been at all. His mustache, aslant. His eyes, pieces of onyx. How long had the song lasted? (Why are there so many questions in this story?) Without waiting for an answer, Jean asks, "Would you like to meet Oracle?"


Jean nods. His cue has come. He stands and steadily makes his way to the stage, weaving between wooden tables and waitresses. The room is all but empty. Now it is just you and Jean—and oracle somewhere in the beyond. Follow.

Together climb the stage and slide inside the curtain folds. Hesitate, try and think. It is pitch black here in this backroom space. The kind of dark where only uncertainty flowers. The kind where you can’t even see your hand in front of your eyes.

You wait for your sight to adjust but it doesn’t.

"Over here," Jean calls in his crisp, dollar bill voice. You follow the floating sound, walking carefully, probing with your toes. Walk, walk for longer than you think it will take. It smells like sage and strong winds back here, the distinct scent of what it is like to be in a desert just before a storm. Are you afraid that you have gone astray? Perhaps you have. So turn and twist, turn again, re-correct your course corrections, your mistakes. Turn and turn. Pirouette in the dark, like the negative of a whirling dervish.

What if I never find the way out? What if I'm trapped in here forever, you think-speak.

Can’t tell which. What if I never find Laura? You reach up to feel your lips, and yet at first can’t find them. How long will you stay in this void? How long can you stay? A minute? An hour? The night? The moon of thunder reverberates in the darkness, inside your head, your soul. Will you dream of Laura Stern the way lovers are supposed to? The way Troilus did for Criseyde?

Would sonnets spew forth from your love-orn lips like a vomitish imitation of Shakespeare?

Some say that if you are uncertain, well then, there’s you answer. But what if the answer is uncertainty?

Imagine yourself growing old in this black dimension. Look at yourself as an elder, filled with weary and creased with wrinkles. Your father died with cataracts clouding his eyes. You don’t know if this is genetic. But that wouldn’t matter if you stay stuck in the void. You don’t need eyes to see, at least not in this place. Maybe none of it would even happen. No aging. The process itself (the way we understand it, at least) occurs in part because we see it occur. Maybe.

Seeing is believing. Seeing is what makes things real. Or is believing what makes things real?

But believing in what? What? If you don’t
see the sunset, how do you know it occurred at all?

You fill in the cracks the blank spaces with explanations. But when everything is black, when everything is a gap—in time(?)—an endless crevasse where there is no time and/or space, can anything be explained away at all? You can't tell if you're moving up, down or around in circles. If you are walking or running. Or swimming. Cha-cha-ing your way to the astral plane. But then magic happens and you see a golden crease materialize in the nothingness. The heartline of the black. The very thing holding it all together. It. Again—what? The lungs that give the darkness life. Even nothing has a heart. You can't have dark without light just like you can't have good without bad. Peanut butter with jam. Or jelly. Or whipped marshmallow spread. There is no total end, but this light is growing total, totally bigger. Stronger, solid and wider. Run towards the opening light. Run as fast as you can. Not because you are afraid. Not anymore. Not because you need to know what is hidden away in the cosmos of bright. Run because you can run, because your legs are legs and free and you realize the feeling is spectacular. Run into the golden doorway and tumble to the ground.

(If was, in fact, a doorway.)

Outside and in the cool night you get to your feet. Snow no longer tumbles about—the clouds have blown by and the night is now filled with a thousand stars, bright and real like little lanterns, floating away. The light that had seemed so strong and wondrous from inside the black is really an amber window, high up on the wall of the building before you. It is wonderful, nevertheless. It is wonderful, because it is.

Still, you are in an alleyway.

“Hey.” Someone speaks from out of sight.

When you turn, first see Jean-Baptiste. Then see his swinging fist. It isn’t the best hit, but still, not as many as I. And yet, can’t they just take the wallet from your pocket? Would that not be easier? They haven’t given you much of a chance, have they. So pat your butt, but find nothing there. Check your front pockets too. Nada.

Try and think. Try and ignore the sweet, purple hands that dig deep into your mind. Ignore the dizziness that burns your vision, clouds, cataracts. Okay.

The slip of paper. The scrap that read Wolf’s Moon. Vanished, just like Laura. Of all the things you and I have asked you (I), why was it never wondered where that slip of paper had gone? (Maybe you should have also asked yourself where it really came from?) Maybe if you had thought about it, you would have realized that your wallet has been missing all this time too.

Maybe you should have gotten that drink, that lap dance, then you would have known much sooner, much before this brutal climax that we have reached.

“Damn,” you say between bleeding lips, realizing what must have happened. But to the ring of men around you it sounds like ham. Grin, now (why, you don’t know) and feel some teeth fall out and away.

Seeing the smile, Jean-Baptiste twists and turns around, shoves you with all his strength.

You don’t half stumble and fall this time. No, now the wall breaks your fall, but in a very bad way. You smash the solid cement and it smacks you back. Your head bounces off the building like a little rubber ball, pulling your body to the ground. Things pause. Time freezes. Or maybe it has just sped up and away. Jean and his band of merry muggers slip your watch from your wrist and leave, although you don’t really notice due to current circumstances. And that is that.

Now you are alone, in an alleyway, on your back and against the thinnest of blankets, the powdered white reminder of why you are even in this nightmare city. Is it purgatory, or hell? Are you alive? Nevertheless, it is nice to finally be still, to rest, to lie down. So stay where you are (you can’t move anyways). Think, if you can—or maybe that is all you are now. Thoughts released from the prison of motion and movement, muscles and weight. But no, it is not your body that has kept you tethered to the strangeness, to the inescapability of this perplexing night. Not your body. It’s been your own thoughts all along. So what’s different now? Why does what little breath slips from between your whistling remains of teeth feel so sweet? It’s not that you are released. It’s that you feel released. That is all there is, after all. What you feel. Not love, not for Laura, not truly. Not for yourself, at least not yet (but don’t fret, there is
untitled
By Mary Jung
a yet to come). It isn’t even hope that forms the stars above you. The sky is not black, not full dark—but a deep violet, a beautiful face, belfreckled with stars. Beauty. Things drift in and out of focus, as if your eyes are lenses, trying desperately to capture the moment on film. And then you realize it is in fact a face over yours. But whose? Laura’s? Finally, has Laura entered the narrative? Or is it Jean, and his gang of monsters?

None of them. It is Oracle. Floating above you, the wondrous mystery. The question-creature whose voice had so bewitched you.

Oracle reaches down and strokes your cheek. Fingers that feel like warm milk. The hands are purple, but not from frostbite. They are purple because why wouldn’t they be? Not the violet hands of vertigo, of dizziness, of all the forces in the universe that work against you. These are kind hands.

“He wasn’t kidding,” you say, or think or something in a voice barely more than broken glass. “You are here.”

“And so are you,” says the exhale, the woodwind breath. Oracle’s voice, an orchestra of notes and tones, textures. Scents. Jasmine and rose, almond blossom and civet sac.

“But Laura isn’t. Can she come back now?”

“She never left.” Oracle smiles. Teeth and lips and pale, stretched cheeks. “But you have.”

Don’t ask. You don’t ask where she has been, not just because this story is not actually about her, but because you don’t need to. You don’t feel to. A change has occurred, one other than the vermillion gash on the back of your head. The weight of the world that you have put upon yourself in such a desperate quest for answers has started to slip.

Oracle, I, the being, the ghost, the reflection of you, yourself. Now we clasp your face between palms and push up. This time let yourself be swept away. Fire like a firework into the sky, enter the unanswerable night air and glide above the mountains. That endless range of dogteeth. Forget the city with all its stories and answers. That’s gone now, past. Below you, but above the jagged spires, shines a dark light. The Aurora. Teal and mint and lavender ghosts that twist through the peaks of broken bone. Twist and dance—do the salsa.

And so you dance with them, these spirits. These inhuman beings who reflect dreams and nightmares and all the things you thought you couldn’t face because there were no answers. Now you don’t know.

Don’t have the answers. But you don’t need to. Don’t need to. Don’t need to.

Laura sweeps aside the bright, loose blades of hair that had been caught in her eyes. She pushes them away and looks up from the city street and into the sky. There are no more storms, no more clouds plush with snow. Now, the only white lies low and swirled around her feet. Her booted toes. Laura looks up at the shaking heaven, the pulsing colors. The dancing spirits, the northern lights, the aurora—call it what you may. (It exists in all words and in all worlds.) She watches them dance despite the turning Earth around. The cars and people and roving beats of electricity. Life, in beautifully dissonant colors. Couples cling to each other, sharing this sight, fingers twined like roots in soil. There are boys in pajamas on their stoops. Women still in nightdresses. Men wrapped in their blue collars, already on their way to work. They all stop and watch the opal sky.

And Laura does too. This is where she is, now, at least, and as she watches, she smiles. Not because she knows what happens next, but because she knows things are happening. With her and with him. There is no without you. She watches until the shades quit their dance—when the scope of the sky cracks with pale streaks and amber waves. Newborn sun, so full of future.
la chureca 1
By Vibhu Krishna
cuando you no habla el spanish

By Malcolm Friend

When a Puerto Rican girl
Tells you “buen trabajo,”
Respond in Spanish.

You don't have to converse,
You don't have to joke with her,
But, whatever you do,
Don't let an English “thank you”
Work its way out of your mouth.
Don't fracture her faith that someone
Kept American colonialism
From cutting out their Spanish tongue.

Forget the insecurities
Bred into your bones
From having a no-Spanish-speaking,
African-American mother
And a household mostly absent
Of the language:
Your terror that your tongue
Will tie itself to the back of your throat
And induce peanut-butter-mouth Spanish
She'll laugh at;
Your reluctance to say anything
With an “r” because not only don't yours roll
Like Caribbean waves onto Puerto Rican shores,
But they seem to get caught in your teeth.

When a Puerto Rican girl
Tells you “buen trabajo,”
Don't let an English “thank you”
Work its way out of your mouth.
Just say “gracias.”
wedding reception in western

Evening now and from the open doorway
of the ornamented barn, the sun
sets our dancing shadow on cedar floor.

We spiral out of step from song,
crash into others—but just laugh,
and linger in the feeling of hips, of want
not knowing what. I touch the halfheart
birthmark on her neck
and see outside the fields bathed
in bourbon light. I don’t know what happens next,
but I see what could: she and I slip out, run
through wheat and rye, stretch
evening into night as earth turns
to mist. By the harvest moon,
we will be asterisms of unfurled
limbs, weaving like threads on a loom.
No words, or names, only flashes
of heat and bending light, lost in time.

Now, we do slip out, but to the outhouses—
she to pee, and so I wash my hands.
The mirror here is old and clouded,
but I see my face still and wonder
if sometimes it is better to be alone.

By Theodore Yurevitch
Wedding Reception in Western P.A.

Evening now and from the open doorway of the ornamented barn, the sun sets our dancing shadow on cedar floor. We spiral out of step from song, crash into others—but just laugh, and linger in the feeling of hips, of want not knowing what. I touch the halfheart birthmark on her neck and see outside the fields bathed in bourbon light. I don't know what happens next, but I see what could: she and I slip out, run through wheat and rye, stretch evening into night as earth turns to mist. By the harvest moon, we will be asterisms of unfurled limbs, weaving like threads on a loom. No words, or names, only flashes of heat and bending light, lost in time.

Now, we do slip out, but to the outhouses—she to pee, and so I wash my hands. The mirror here is old and clouded, but I see my face still and wonder if sometimes it is better to be alone.
untitled
By Mary Jung
The Trouble began, for the second time in my life, on the night of my fifth anniversary. My wife and I had been at a nice steakhouse, a black-tie-only place.

“Back me up, Robert. This steak is certainly overdone.”

This was my wife’s ritual when we went out for dinner. It was her way of showing that she was important enough to be dissatisfied with even the greatest luxuries. When I first met her, this trait had been charming, like she was determined to drink in everything that life had to offer her. Presently, it had lost some of its luster.

The waiter was making an attempt at calming her, but he had made the mistake of trying to fix things before she was done making her point.

“Please. If we are going to be paying for an overpriced meal, I at least expect it to be prepared the way I requested.”

The soft and gentle way she said this seemed to only distress our waiter further. He took the steak from her and told her he would fix it, apologizing with every other breath.

“Well, I think that maybe your restaurant needs to consider compensating us in another way. Don’t you think that would be fair, Robert?”

She was looking at me, but I had long since checked out. There was a woman wearing a pearl necklace sitting behind my wife and I had taken to tracing my eyes around the curve of her neckline. There was something about the softness of her jaw and the way her lips met her wine glass that reminded me of a ballet.

“Robert?”

I just nodded in agreement with my wife.

Later that night in bed, just after we had turned the lights out to go to sleep, I heard rustling noises coming from downstairs. Careful not to disturb my wife’s sleep, I left the room to make sure no one had broken in. When I reached our living room, I discovered a translucent pair of heels connected to a wispy, vaguely feminine figure seated on the couch. A smoky material drifted upwards from the heels, outlining a greenish shape resembling thin legs and the curvature of hips. I rubbed my eyes firmly, trying to make sure that I hadn’t fallen asleep. The heels were still there. It emanated a low humming sound, something slightly musical and inviting. A sense of dread settled into my stomach as I returned to the bedroom and pulled my wife close to me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, on the border of sleep.

I thought about my father.

Our family had been on vacation in North Dakota. We had spent a large portion of it in the car since the Dakotas lacked a central source of entertainment, so in addition to my younger sister and my disdain for spending a week away from our friends, we made sure to express our complaints about lack of personal space and time. It was because of this unpleasantness that our parents had decided to stop in some small tourist trap of a town to walk around and do some exploring.

“This one looks interesting,” said my dad, pointing toward a store with a sign that read NATIVE AMERICAN ANTIQUES. “Want to look around?”

Mom didn’t want to spend any time shopping, just wanted to grab a cup of coffee and read her book until we were ready to get back in the car. The rest of us went to check out the store.

The store was larger than its shabby exterior had indicated. Inside, buffalo skins of various sizes hung from the walls with dream catchers and other crafts hanging between them. My sister and I walked around the room, breathing in the earthly scent of the weavings and carvings that decorated the store. I looked through glass cases that held various forms of pottery. My sister took to running her hands through the buffalo fur on each of the skins. After we had finished exploring, we found my dad talking to the middle-aged shopkeeper.

“Tell me about this one.”

He was pointing at a brown mask in one of the display cases. The shopkeeper informed us that it was a tribal mask, made of clay with thin strands of buffalo hair woven underneath the surface. The mask was simple and relatively inelegant, but there was something attractive about it. My dad hadn’t taken his eyes off it, even after the shopkeeper had tried to steer him toward some other more intricate (and more expensive) pieces of art.

“I think I’d like to buy it,” said my dad. He handed the shopkeeper his credit card.

We found our mom sitting outside a small shop, a plastic cup of coffee in one hand, her book in the other.

“What’d you get?” she asked, gesturing toward the wrapped package in my dad’s hands.

He unwrapped it slowly and offered it to her. She didn’t take it from him, just glanced at it and asked where in the house he planned to hang it up. My dad shrugged.

“Robby? Eva? Did either of you find something you liked?” My mom turned to us.

We were empty-handed.

When we returned home from our vacation, my dad placed the mask on a stand above the fireplace in our front room. He started spending more time there, reading the newspaper in the mornings and drinking beer and staring out the window...
sitting on the furniture and standing in our house during the daytime, while the imprecise human shapes appeared in various rooms. Things went on like this for a few minutes, occasionally looking back and forth between me and my former high school classmate. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My father got up from the table and went upstairs. Paul Franklin also left, disappearing around the corner into the kitchen.

More of them started materializing. William Brinks, star tennis player and class valedictorian, started taking afternoon naps on our living room couch. Shelly Beal, co-president of the chess club, took early baths, setting all of our morning routines back by several minutes. Joan Ballard, an incredibly attractive member of the track team, could often be found reading various books in the study.

My mother finally moved the mask into the display cabinet where we kept our nice dishware, but it didn’t change much. She started taking long, late-afternoon walks around the neighborhood talking with friends on the phone. She would come home, still on her phone, and head straight to her walk-in closet, close the door, and continue the conversation. Hours later, she’d come down and let us know there were frozen pizzas or left overs to heat up if we were hungry.

My father began working later and later. There were new projects to complete at work, a lot more deadlines to meet. When he was home, he could find him in the study, surfing the internet while Joan Ballard read Lolita in the recliner, crossing and uncrossing her legs every few minutes. Sometimes he would sit at the dinner table with his former classmates, sipping a beer and staring off into space.

One day Eva and I were watching American Idol on T.V. while my father cooked dinner in the kitchen. William Brinks and Charlie Sheppard (class clown extraordinaire) walked in and sat on the couch with us. We were about to learn about the new contestants when I noticed a faint wisp that had positioned itself between my parents. They seemed to be unfazed by its presence.

“Can you pass me the coupons?” my mom asked my father.

He dug the coupons out from between the pages of the classified section and handed them to my mother, reaching around the figure. My father looked over at me.

“Good morning, Robby,” he said. “I have a meeting this morning so we have to leave a few minutes early.”

“Would you like some breakfast?” My mom offered me a plate of toast, also careful not to let it collide with the wisp on the table that was now making a soft vibrating noise. I noticed my father glance at the mask.

We had never been a family that talked about the important things. Growing up, my parents held court behind locked bathroom doors, venting their anger and gripes in harsh whispers that occasionally seeped through the cracks beneath. It was out of a perceived sense of duty to my sister and me, I think. They wanted to protect us from the adult world of inevitable disappointments and disappearing feelings. Either way, my sister and I compulsively cleaned the house every time we knew they were fighting.

Things went on like this for a while, the imprecise human shapes appearing in our house during the daytime, sitting on the furniture and standing in closets. Slowly they became more distinct. A nose was clearly visible on a ghost that walked in on my sister taking a shower. It closed the door and left upon realizing the bathroom was occupied. Another that kept wandering around the study had finger nails that were painted a bright shade of pink. My mom hated that one.

After the first ghost with fully developed arms and legs ate all the leftover meatballs, my mom bought a huge decorative silver bowl from a local art fair and put it above the fireplace next to the mask. It looked ridiculous up there, eclipsing everything around it and throwing the whole mantle off-balance. Still, neither parent seemed willing to rearrange much.

A month later, the ghost of Paul Franklin, my dad’s best friend from high school, sat down next to me at the dinner table while I was doing my homework. I recognized him from a picture hanging up in our study of him and my dad in their high school football uniforms. He was still alive as far as I knew. Nonetheless, there Paul Franklin was, pale and see-through, in all his gawky, teenage awkwardness sitting beside me.

“Can you help me with my Spanish homework for a minute?” Eva asked, sitting down on the other side of the table. I watched her eye Paul Franklin, a look of recognition passing over her face. “Dad’s working late and Mom is already in bed.”

I looked at the clock. It was eight. We hadn’t even eaten dinner.

“Of course,” I said. Paul Franklin just sat there with a blank look on his face. When my father arrived home an hour later, I was still doing my own work. He sat down next to me and Paul Franklin.

“How’s everything, Robby?”

“Fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” My father sat for a few minutes, occasionally looking
hands
By Jake Lee
It was late November. My father had been the very least, that the worst of it was over. That the Trouble might be subsiding, or, at came back inside. always gave me disapproving looks when I potted plants on the deck. William Brinks I smoked cigarettes and hid the butts under friends' houses more and more frequently. door closed. Eva was sleeping over at her father spent more time in the study with the bought bottles of red wine in bulk. My able during the daytime. My mother ghosts more brash. It was almost unbear the conversations became louder, the As the fall months turned colder, humming every once in a while. The only person who seemed to care was William Brinks, who now left the room in disgust every time I came in from smoking. I wasn’t too upset about this. There were plenty of voices in our house, but no one was saying much of anything.

My father left the next month. The only things he took with him were his clothes, a few photos, and the mask.

The night before our parents sat us down to tell us that my father was moving out and they were getting a divorce, I woke up to the sound of voices in the dining room. The ghosts were normally quiet during the night, so I got up to investigate. I found my father sitting at the dining room table across from Joan Ballard. They were talking in low voices, back and forth with a quiet kind of intensity. The clouds in the sky outside moved away from the moon, filling the room with pale light. They were naked. Joan Ballard’s pale nipples were soft and green against the moon’s glow and I could see the outline of my father’s cock resting

which contestant was going to get kicked off that week when the two ghosts started having a loud argument over the proper way to pronounce the word ‘pecan’. My father walked in from the kitchen to see what was going on. It was the first time the ghosts had made any significant noise on their own. By the time our surprise wore off, the show had gone to commercial break and we had missed the climactic announcement.

My father walked over and put a hand on my sister’s shoulder.

“How was school today, Eva?” he asked softly.

Eva got up from the couch and walked to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. My father and I watched the rest of the argument unfold.

This became the norm for us. At breakfast, we listened to Shelly Beal expound on advantageous chess openings to her classmates. Paul Franklin kept asking the other ghosts if he could copy their homework since he’d accidentally left his book at home or whatever excuse he had for that week. Joan Ballard was relatively aloof but you could hear her whistling or humming every once in a while.

As the fall months turned colder, the conversations became louder, the ghosts more brash. It was almost unbearable during the daytime. My mother bought bottles of red wine in bulk. My father spent more time in the study with the door closed. Eva was sleeping over at her friends’ houses more and more frequently. I smoked cigarettes and hid the butts under potted plants on the deck. William Brinks always gave me disapproving looks when I came back inside.

There was a time when I thought that the Trouble might be subsiding, or, at the very least, that the worst of it was over. It was late November. My father had been coming home from work earlier and my mother’s phone calls to her friends stopped occurring as frequently. We had even had a few meals together without my father’s high school classmates interrupting us. My parents were going to therapy, explaining to us that there were things they needed to work out. They told my sister and I that things were getting better. They wanted to host Thanksgiving dinner at our house.

“It will be really good for our family,” they said.

On Thanksgiving, there were no ghosts to be found in our house. Instead it was filled with relatives—my dad’s parents, a few uncles and aunts, some cousins. During dinner, the only thing left in the china cabinet was the mask. Everyone was smiling and laughing, especially at the antics of some of our younger cousins. We were going around in a circle, participating in the family tradition of talking about the things we were thankful for when my mom asked my sister to retrieve the cranberry sauce she had left in the fridge.

As she reached the refrigerator, Joan Ballard and Paul Franklin walked around the corner, blocking her from opening it. They were holding hands and laughed softly at whatever they were whispering to each other. Paul Franklin pushed Joan Ballard up against the fridge and kissed her hard on the mouth. The thud of Joan hitting the Maytag drew everyone’s attention away from the table. My youngest cousin was trying to tell everyone that he was thankful for farts, but no one seemed to notice. They watched my father’s high school classmates make out against our refrigerator. When Paul Franklin stuck his hands up Joan Ballard’s shirt, people began to look away, fiddling with cutlery and pouring another glass of wine. Aunts and uncles covered their children’s eyes. Everyone except for my father, who couldn’t take his eyes off the couple. He stared as the two ghosts pulled one another closer and closer, finally naked and fucking against the fridge. Eva stood there, waiting for them to finish.

When Eva brought the cranberry sauce to the table, my mother was crying silently, tears sliding down her cheeks into her wine glass.

“So, Eva, who won American Idol this season?” my father asked.

My parents stopped talking to each other in front of us after that. Whenever we were all in the same room, they made a point of asking how we were doing, but they usually had to yell so we could hear them over the sound of the ghosts. Joan Ballard started leaving the study a lot more frequently. I stopped bothering to hide my cigarette butts. I even left the roaches of a few joints on the deck. The only person who seemed to care was William Brinks, who now left the room in disgust every time I came in from smoking. I wasn’t too upset about this. There were plenty of voices in our house, but no one was saying much of anything.

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pathetically against his inner thigh. She leaned and whispered something to him. He smiled at her and ran a hand through his hair, leaning back in his chair. I felt sick. Careful not to make any noise, I walked back to my room and closed the door.

Even though my father and the mask left the house, the ghosts never really did. They weren’t as loud or distinct as they had been before, but they were definitely still there. We tried everything to get rid of them: rearranged the furniture, switched around our bedrooms, even remodeled certain sections of the house. Still, we would turn corners and catch glimpses of a stray foot exiting the room or the hem of a dress swishing by us. There were audible whispers during mealtimes and the occasional extra plate at the table. When I went away to school, I was terrified of being followed by the ghosts, but they had never shown up.

Until now.

The morning after the anniversary dinner, I called my sister.

“Hello?” She sounded old. I couldn’t remember the last time we had spoken.

“Eva, it’s Robby.”

“Robby…Hi.” Her voice softened, sounding more like the sister I knew.

We talked about my nephews, who had started school again, and about her job, which she was beginning to enjoy. Her husband had just gotten a raise, so they were taking the kids to the lake for the weekend to celebrate.

“And you Robby?” she asked me.

“How’s your wife?”

“She’s doing just fine,” I said. We had been educated so well in the art of always having everything be fine. I wondered if she remembered that as well as I did.

“She’s a sweetheart. I hope it’s going well with you two.”

“Listen Eva, I wanted to ask you something,” I said. “The Trouble…with mom and dad—when did it start?”

I could hear her thinking on the other end of the phone.

“After we came back from the Dakotas, I think,” she said. “God, remember how much we hated that vacation?”

“I do.” There was a moment of quietness. I could hear church bells ringing somewhere in the distance. “Why do you think it happened?”

“…” She started to explain and then stopped. “I think maybe sometimes people just change like that. And maybe they don’t want it or they try and pretend it’s not happening, but one day you just look in the mirror and you know that it can’t be the same anymore.”

I spent another minute listening to the gentle chiming of the bells before I spoke again.

“Have you talked to them at all lately? Mom and Dad, I mean?”

“I talked to Mom last week. She’s on vacation in Mexico right now. I haven’t talked to Dad since last year.” The way she said the word ‘Dad’ was rough, like it was in a language she hadn’t yet learned to speak.

I wanted to ask her if she’d ever seen the ghosts again, but I knew that even if she had, she would have lied and told me no. I knew this because we’ve never spoken about the ghosts. I knew this because it’s what I would do. These are the things we have inherited.

“I should get going,” she said.

“The kids are pretty anxious to get to the lake.”

“Of course,” I replied. “We should try to get together around the holidays this year.”

“Definitely. Let’s talk again soon.”

It was nice thing to say, but we both knew it wouldn’t happen.

These days, mostly live in fear of my wife noticing the yet shapeless spirits and shades that have been hiding in the corners and closets of our house. I have seen no noses, no fingers or toes, no outlines of lips or ponytails. But I know that they are coming. I know that soon the nagging feeling in the back of my head will turn into a pull, a pull into a yearning, a yearning into a need. I’ll look in the mirror, like my sister said, and I’ll know.

At nights, I scratch my wife’s back until she falls asleep. I listen to the night-time, the low drone of crickets and beetles pressing against the bedroom windows, and for the sounds of ghosts wandering through our house. I think about my father sitting at the dining room table with Joan Ballard. I think about the things that I will pass on to my own children someday. I have a mask of my own to wear now.

My wife stirs and nuzzles herself against me and I can feel her warmth pressed up against my chest.

“Goodnight, honey,” she mumbles in her sleep.

I wrap my arms around her and I squeeze her. I squeeze her until I no longer can.
saturday mourning cartoons
(jamesbuford angus, born 1944, died 2013) By Anonymous

A Coyote leaves a self-sized hole in a brick wall running from rogue rockets

We leave stains Kool-Aid red Where we lay cross-ankled and creep Half-crayons into your Afro That snores over Daffy

Brown mouse outwits slingshot Feline who thrust to a sunset, airborne and soaring Shricks to the point of a pen or smaller an afterthought for Dismissive Pig

You dragged out death like a frayed rope Winding down humid highways up sterile stairs to white rooms a defined line, curving, spiking to meet powder kegs with ACME logos

Huntsman sees bunny dive into a pool, an optimist, he plunges enters a cup of water Contorts flaccid jaws to the glass mold Befuddled

Your cup was always full With life, quilts, and scripture We heard it in the song of your laughter We expected you to shake off the ashes To regrow limbs and to straighten Once curtains had kissed

The glass now is brimming with air and Space

You kept running even when the ground gave out With greater dignity than a comic a poem could capture

I only draw cartoons sketches with four-fingers and no collarbones
neuroscience vs. soul

By Lisa Muloma

The problem: that if mind is me is brain
is I, why should hot air balloons matter
with all their useless big beauty? And rain,
if I should like its cold holy spatter
to dampen cheek and concrete? If somehow
all of this music is simply neurons
singing dopamine, (since me is brain now)
then nirvana is Zoloft, TV on.
Salvation is lobotomy and I
would’ve liked to have been born a walrus.
Purplebrown, fat, and always swimming, sky
above me. Sky above me. A chorus
of whale song would send reward feedback to
my amygdala. I’d fish, catch cod, chew.
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