

# the vanderbilt review

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cover art:

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# the vanderbilt review 2014 award winners

## poetry award

“Neuroscience v. Soul”

by Lisa Muloma

Juror: Edgar Kunz,  
MFA Candidate

## art award

“pairAsouls”

by Bosley Jarrett, for Kefi Project Installation

Juror: Professor Mark Hosford,  
Associate Professor of Studio Art

## prose award

“Dance Spirits Dance”

by Theodore Yurevitch

Juror: Jenifer Pruett,  
Adjunct Professor of English



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# 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



# sector 1

By Corey Kollbocker

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, who he found he could remember less and less clearly.

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.

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.

"Hmmm?"

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 them and giving a cheery wave.

It was a large, brawny man dressed in blue jeans and plaid flannel. His waving hand was the size of a stool-top, the connecting forearm like a Christmas ham. His brown hair fell down to his shoulder but he was bald on top, and even in the cloudy haze his tonsured head gave a reflective sheen. His voice boomed out from under a scruffy bush of beard.

"Hello there, friends. How d'ye fare this foggy day?"

The man's mouth was hidden by his tangled



# 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.

"Hmmm," 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 bugging 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 stared 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 bugging nannies. How do you plead?”

Phillip felt too overwhelmed to respond. A dull terror gripped his stomach and the fog grew thicker in his head once more. With the small men around his thoughts became barely discernible.

“How do you plead?” the man repeated.

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

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

John looked appalled. “Why, no!” He paused. “I don’t think so.”

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, to no one in particular, “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.”

# frankenstein to his bride in flight from las vegas

By Michael E. Woods

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.

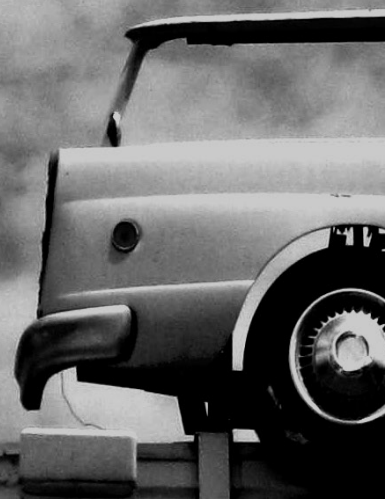
Above the skinny black road, the unwound yarn carelessly  
draped over the range, the retired highway of westward expansion,  
and the flaking fingernail clippings of King's Peak,

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.













# 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.

# the old '97

By Corey Kollbocker

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, never looking back to the window, until one of the sisters swept in, dressed in full habit. It was Sister Deborah, a homely nurse who could have been thirty or forty-five. Her black tunic hung to the ground covered in a white smock, and the larger pair of her sleeves was rolled back.

"How are you, Mr. Lards?" She wore a faint smile and fiddled with the long beaded rosary strung about her neck. Saul stared at her, and stretched his mouth into a lopsided curl that could have been a smile or a grimace.

"Is there anything you need?"

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 weren't such a stickler about his liquor.

He'd been dying a great many years, he thought, who cares if he got a bit drunk. He knew better than to express this though, so instead he just looked up at the Mother innocently.

"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 where 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 handrails 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 flicked 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 there was 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 chew in the pocket of his cheek, but Saul formed words 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 had wandered into the darkest regions of the yard, and though he listened hard he could barely make out the sounds of the freight depot far behind him. Saul felt at home. He meandered between rails and boxcars, chewing, spitting, and drinking to his heart's content, Razor padding at his heels.

Some time later, Razor stopped abruptly. Saul watched the dog carefully and listened. He heard noises a few tracks over—maybe voices. They walked around a hundred feet up the track, and slipped between two sets of cars. Saul could hear the voices clearly now; they were only one track away.

"I reckon to hop the first eastbound freight in the mornin'. S'posed to head out round about five."

"Sure. I'm hoppin' a Northern. Firs' one leave abou' seven."

Saul grinned to himself. He placed the bottle of liquor carefully on a step of the nearest car and reached his fingers down to wrap

around the nightstick tucked into his belt. In his right hand he grabbed Razor's leash, about six inches up from the collar. He pulled the dog after him as he stepped between cars and into the aisle where the voices were coming from. 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.

"Alllright, 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 airborne, 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, tha'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 jus' 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-odd 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



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 head 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 jewish 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.







# rendezvous with chips & salsa

By Vibhu Krishna

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 fizzle 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 skinnies 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 upbringing. 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, maimed ourselves for music so we could be martyrs for The Cause, 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.

"Darl, help me up."

"Damn it Tammy. They're not gonna bite you," he replied, laying down again and closing his eyes.

"I kept hearing them buzzing around my head. Then it stopped, and I felt something on my nose and I opened my eyes and there was one sitting there right on my face," she said. "Do we got any bug spray?"

Without waiting for a reply, Tammy pushed her floater towards Darl and began to swim to shore. He opened an eye to watch her as she stepped out of the water, dripping and humid and with her elbows pointed high as she tied her hair back into a ponytail. As she disappeared into the truck, he dipped a hand into the water and turned himself towards the sun.

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"I feel heavy," she said, as they sat in the hot darkness of Darl's apartment.

"There's no air in here," he replied, moving to open the window.

As he opened it, a junebug raced in, spinning in the air and head-butting the wall as it realized its mistake and tried to escape the room. Tammy curled her toes and squealed. Rust-colored light poured in through the window.

"Do you love me, Darl?"

He could see the sweat on Tammy's stomach glistening.

"I just did."

It took her a second.

"Fuck you."

"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 windshield 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 summer, and sunbeams would cause the water to reflect in rippling auroras on the ceiling.

"How's that girl of yours, what's her name," said Joel, the words slipping sideways out of his mouth.

"Tammy. She's ok. Gives me trouble sometimes, though."

Joel laughed. "I guess that's how it always is."

During summer, the two would be out around the city all day. Water seemed to try its luck when the weather was hot, swelling in the pipes, bursting, and breaking through the more corroded sections of the city. Darl and Joel had calls coming in from all corners of the town.

Most of their morning had been spent at the city's beat-down golf course, where a pipe had failed and flooded the sandy driving

range. 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 somebody 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?"





*pair@souls*  
By Bosley Jarrett  
and the Kefi Project

"She told me that divorce papers are only for if you want to remarry," Joel said. "I reckon 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.

"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.

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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 shooed him with her hand. Her eyes were squinted in the headlights.

One day he wandered 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.

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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 surfacing, 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.

# 13 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 awake 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 choking 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 had 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 deliquescing clouds and open air. Staring through your window as Laura dozes. Staring at the stars that blink like fireflies. But a blizzard had happened. A coagulation of all the dastardly weather in central Canada. Massive winter clouds, shaded ash now in the night,

bleeding their white hearts out and into the sky. Planes, like toucans, aren't made for such conditions. And that is that.

A groan dispels the silence—Laura? No—you. It had been hard going in the bathroom, but things are harder now. How had this happened? News of some new disease, adult onset diabetes, that would have been easier to handle. Not this, this surprise vacancy of sanity. This is how you feel: a little sick, a sunk feeling. Like you are the fly caught in soup.

"Laura?" Ask the empty room. Laura picked the Sno Haus Hotel for reasons you could not comprehend. You would have checked the airport hotels first and foremost; the expresses, the lodges, the inns. Not something wedged between the steel towers of downtown Calgary.

You circle around the bed, which is, in fact, circular. Though the room is square. The décor, a clash of rusticism and Zen. Sage green sheets and bamboo along one wall. A detailed depiction of leathered men, buffalo hunting on the other. A shaggy carpet the color of down feathers. Andon lamps and an antler chandelier. The space is spacious, so large it almost feels empty. A yolckless egg. It is emptier without Laura, but nevertheless, everything else is in order.

The bed is made; sheets, taunt and firm. Your bags are where you plopped them. The plasma television, the one modern touch to the room, is set to some sort of screen saver. Digitized olive and orchid tendrils waving in that night. Laura's purse is placed beside the screen of flowing light.

Under the bed, inside the closet: no Laura. The door to the corridor is closed. Lock, still locked. So unlock it and check the hall. Nothing but endless red carpet and empty shadow. The candelabras (also shaped liked antlers) are dim, unfurling parchment-like light. Could be brighter.

Back inside, check the bathroom. Anything is possible by this point. But no. No Laura. 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, craning 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 grab your vision, stretching and twisting the world, crumpling 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 curlicue 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 throbbed 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 hands, too clunky for pockets. You don't know what to do with them. You don't know anything. And that is the problem. For you. Where to go, what to do. This is not your area of expertise. *Mystery.*

How could Laura disappear? What kind of story is this, the first character introduced, unseen and unheard of? Are the walls so thin, the words so unfaithful that she can just slip between? She is missing and missing things need to be found, you think, practically think out loud, until you stop yourself—realizing that 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?" A voice. A man's voice. Harsh like cleaved granite.

"Hello?" You say back, brusque-like. You surprise yourself with how low and harsh it sounds, like a smokers voice. "Who is? Where's Laura?"

"Laura? Who is this, may I ask?"

Don't fumble with the phone chord.

"Who is *this*?"

"This is"—the man clears his throat in that standard two-syllable grunt—"The Sno Haus Hotel. You are currently speaking with Niklaus, active concierge. How may I help?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. Have a good night." Hang up the phone now. But that doesn't stop the intensely awkward feeling you feel, the very

perplexed gaze of the man, Niklaus, eyeballing you through his respective receiver. You can feel his eyes pressing. They are drilling their way up to this very floor, this very room. This very second, this very moment.

The phone rings.

"Hello?" Calm. More so.

"Sir, this is Niklaus. Do you recall just speaking?" You do and you need to dial one, he says, to place an outgoing call. Oh. "And in case you forget, it says so on the receiver you are holding. Good luck sir, and good night." It does say one, so press it hard and hear: nothing. A blank page of noise. And then, sharp successions of ringing. The gentle jingle of Laura's phone. But wait, you shouldn't be hearing that. The ringing is in the room. Laura's phone is there. Her purse. It buzzes beside the monitor.

Put down the receiver. Quiet now. No buzz. No jingle. No more ideas. Idiot. Beside her purse the screen lights still whorl, shape shift and glimmer. After a moment of deliberation over the ethics of purse searching, go and bring it to the bed. Sit, for a moment, and clutch the black leather sack to your chest. Laura loved this purse. It had been her Christmas gift to herself. (You don't buy yourself gifts.) If Laura had left on her own accord, wouldn't she have taken it with her? So why hadn't she?

She has always been impulsive, yet not impetuous. Still, not a deliberator. Not like you. Vancouver had been her idea, despite it being your home. *It will be exciting*, she had said so ardently and in so many different ways. You have no family, there, or anywhere (anymore) but she said it would be good for you. To go back and be free. That and she wanted to see the Pacific. When it finally seemed like Laura would be going with or without you, you decided to go too.

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 show up. She would say that she was ordering a steak (expensive, but okay), and then order 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.

You stand and feel the world turning. It spins, slowly tipping over itself. Uh oh. Vertigo again. A boat lost at sea, caught in a squall. You keel. Not again. Close your eyes and imagine home, back in New York. Your apartment that you have not yet asked Laura to move into.

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 TEACHtech, 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. That (in the dream) you and 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 bebop. 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 parsable. 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 your 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 scraping wind. Look up and down the street. Look for Laura. Are you desperate yet?

Pace. No matter how much you walk though, this street will reveal no secrets. No Laura.

Pace all you want, the clocks will keep up.

At either end of the avenue, mountains rise into the navy sky. Towers. It is a wonder that

any plane can land in this city at all. Cliffsides, built by bits of pushy earth, shoving and rearing like animals. Angry animals. And yet you've never been, not *actually* been, to mountains, as in; climbed and hiked, backpack upon your back, and packed with things for the wilderness. You've never crossed a river in waders or spelunked into the Earth. Never traversed a forest, feeling the broken bark of trees that grew too fast, or perhaps not fast enough. You've never seen wild.

Lampposts stand all along the street, enveloped in their own angel wings of light. The outside even smells frozen. The kind of scent that fills your nostrils and lungs. The kind of cold that glitters not only on your outstretched hands, but on the air itself. It's beautiful. But this is pointless.

Turn around, and reenter the Sno Haus. Inside again, you take a seat on one of the spindled chairs. The skeleton of an outstretched hand. Fingers extended, twisted in pain. 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 buttchin 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 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 choice. It is not always best to walk around at these hours." Niklaus grins a crescent moon. His mouth wasn't made for smiling. Too severe.

Too much like the bit of an axe. He hands you the map.

"I hope you find what you are looking for. But still, enjoy our city. Night is one of the most beautiful times." Niklaus's blue eyes swirl like a whirlpool ocean. "People see the most

beautiful things. Surrounded by mountains, and air, life. Do you plan on exploring?"

"I didn't plan on being here."

"But you are. Now that you can, will you?"

"There's Laura, right? She's still out there."

"But if she isn't?"

"What?"

"Ah. I see. Not my place."

Neither of you speak; a competition to see who will break the awkward pause first, who will bend to the nail-on-chalkboard feeling we people get when standing with another in total silence. He breaks first.

"Tell me, have you seen the Northern Lights before?"

"No. Can't say I have."

"Tribes-people called it the Dance of the Spirits. The Aurora Borealis. Rare, but it's been seen in the city itself before. Breathtaking. Truly."

And now Niklaus nods his head and heads to the door.

Thank him and once again revolve yourself outside. This world is even colder than before. Cold like witch eyes. Glance down the street and see the mountains again. A trick of the night makes it seem as if they are moving, grinding against the starless, cloud filled sky. You think of the aurora. But no, this is just your own, tired eyes struggling to stay open.

Now get in the cab.

Stale, pale brown coffee. This is the smell of the taxi's innards. The beaten down, mustard seed sedan moves before you even put on your seatbelt. Before you tell the driver where it is that you are even going. And where is that?

"Excuse me." You fumble in the back.

"Can you take me to the Wolf's Moon? Please?"

The driver looks over his shoulder. His eyes, half in the shadow of his brow. The man is big, fat, absurdly so for the seat in which he sits. His face alone is twice as wide as an average human being's—yours, for instance. Hand over hand, the man makes a turn.

"Got it, chief."

Through the front window the world streams past in a blur of liquid lights so beautiful it feels fake, painted. Shops, closed for the 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' ladies?" 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 incandescent 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 feel 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 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 bartender has a thick, roasted Irish accent.

"Flats. Black ones."

"Brand?"

"Don't know."

"She have..." the bartender draws infinite patterns over his chest.

"I guess."

"You guess?" He leans forward now, resting his muscled arms against the wood.

"Brunette, right?"

"No, I said blonde."

"Oh. Well, no then. Haven't seen a blonde all night. What you drinking?"

Pass and keep searching. The patrons here are mostly men. Guys of all shapes and sizes, colors and styles. The servers are women though. Obviously. And all dressed in a variety of cabaret outfits. Bustiers and tights abound. This is your first time in a place of this kind.

You weave through the tables, the wooden stools and standing men. The people throwing die and tossing back drinks. One man asks if you've ever played a game called "Eat the Turtlehead." A server brushes past your arm, whispering something about a backroom, its location, perhaps she can show you.

Say no, thank you, but stop and ask if *she* has seen any blonde women lately.

"She work here?" the server-girl asks, scrunching up her nose in thought. She looks older, weathered and beaten upon closer examination. Tired, underneath a pound of powder.

No, you tell her, but think for a moment—what do you really know?

Is she there, in the dark corners, the blurred edges? Or walking about, stuck with leather and strapped in thongs? Maybe she is on her way. Maybe she decided to walk to this world, this Wolf's Moon.

You take a seat at a table. A spot to think. Across from you sit two older men. They roll die and drink beers, speaking to themselves and not really to each other. Stories they have undoubtedly told before. They pay you no mind.

For a while, you simply sit and watch others. Survey the room. This night. You wonder what you are doing, really, hoping to accomplish. You imagine the day to be a prism of glass, shooting strains of color in every direction. The pyramid falls to the ground and shatters into dust.

Minutes crawl along the dirty floors. No new ideas. Maybe you should just go back to the Sno Haus. Maybe she is there, in the room. Maybe she just stepped out for a cigarette (but she didn't smoke?) or to grab a bite to eat.

Maybe something.

But here, now someone comes to your table, to sit beside you. A man with a thin black mustache, very carefully groomed. Odd. There are other, emptier seats. This man is tall and lean and not at all like every other gargantuan specimen you have encountered on this exploding night. His hair is swept to the side and black. He wears a chambray shirt and dark trousers. He looks a bit like a mongoose, but with a drink in hand.

"You have gotten yourself a good seat." He smiles, sliding, inclining his head from side to side like a snake charmer. He speaks like slithers, he smells like musk. "I hope you don't mind if I sit beside you."

And so he sits and introduces himself. Jean-Baptiste, shake hands.

"Do you come to Wolf's Moon for Oracle too?" Jean-Baptiste's eyes are near black—like the space between stars.

"I've never been here before. I'm not from around."

"And you decided to come to Wolf's Moon for... local color?"

"I guess." Why don't you talk about Laura? Why don't you ask, tell him you are here for a reason, looking for someone? Have you given up? Or is it something else. Okay. Play it that way. Keep your cards close to your chest. "Wait, what did you ask before?"

"Did I ask something?" Jean smiles.

Wide. Wider.

"You asked a few things. The first question, I mean."

"Oh. Oracle?"

"Yes, that. What is that?"

"Hm. Wait, not long. You are in for a treat." Jean raises his glass in search of a toast. "No drink? Let me buy you one." He calls over a waitress and orders two scotch and sodas.

"That is okay?" His eyebrows lift.

"Sure. That is okay."

"Tell me, where are you from?"

"Where am I from. New York. But originally Vancouver" —(wait, *why* are you telling him all this?)— "Really a town outside of Vancouver. A small one." Where you would be if it had not been for the snowfall. Think of the house that you grew up in. The books you had read.

Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Robertson Davies; your Canadian classics. Dostoevsky. You





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 swills 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 coal 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 stamina 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 glows 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. Turquoise shadow hangs over sunken and sad eyes. The androgynaut 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 pricking. 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 grasps 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 falling 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?"

"Meet Oracle?" Head buzzes. Bees in the bonnet. Bees in the brain.

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 moan 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 lovelorn lips like a vomitish imitation of Shakespeare?

Some say that if you are uncertain, well then, there's your 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 ageing. 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 without 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.

(It 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 it isn't the worst either. The strike clips you a little too high on the head and sort of just skids off your scalp.

"What?" Surprise, you speak, not thinking whether or not words are really the best solution. At least it doesn't hurt so much, where his knuckles caught your messy tangle of hair.

"Your wallet," Jean shakes his hand, waving off the pain that he himself feels from your

thick skull. Good Job. "Pass it here, friend."

"My wallet?" You and he are not alone, you realize. Other men begin to crawl from shadows, out from behind dumpsters and the insides of garbage cans. Creatures. And now you start to back away. A little late.

And then there is a crash. A shattering. Someone doesn't have patience. Glittering shards of amber glass rain down around you as a bottle smashes against your head. Then comes another punch. This is going very poorly. Stumble and fall to the ground, this is hard to watch. More punches. Or maybe they are kicks now. You can't tell, can't tell if there is one man towering over you or ten. The figures multiply and divide, then morph back together once more.

Amorphous. So the world grows. And now the hands come. Vertigo, seriously? Now, of all times? They are back, that familiar tinge. The purple hands of the ghost. Ghosts. They pass over eyes, waving back and forth, saying are you awake, are you awake, or are you mine.

Stand up now, try at least and see your assaulters. Close one eye, that'll make it easier. The faces swarm and shout. This one is Jean-Baptiste with the pencil thin mustache. But then so is this one. And this one. No. No! This guy, the one with the bottleneck! Who are they? What does this have to do with anything? How can our story fall so far away from what it is that you really look for?

Was it ever really about Laura?

*Fucking wallet!*

The words drift into the air, echoing and rebounding off the alley walls. It grows harder and harder to distinguish sound, to see. Your world has been caught in an iron-blue maelstrom.

*Fucking wallet! Us. Give us. Fucking wallet! Your money. Where is your money?*

Questions. They ask so many questions, 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.

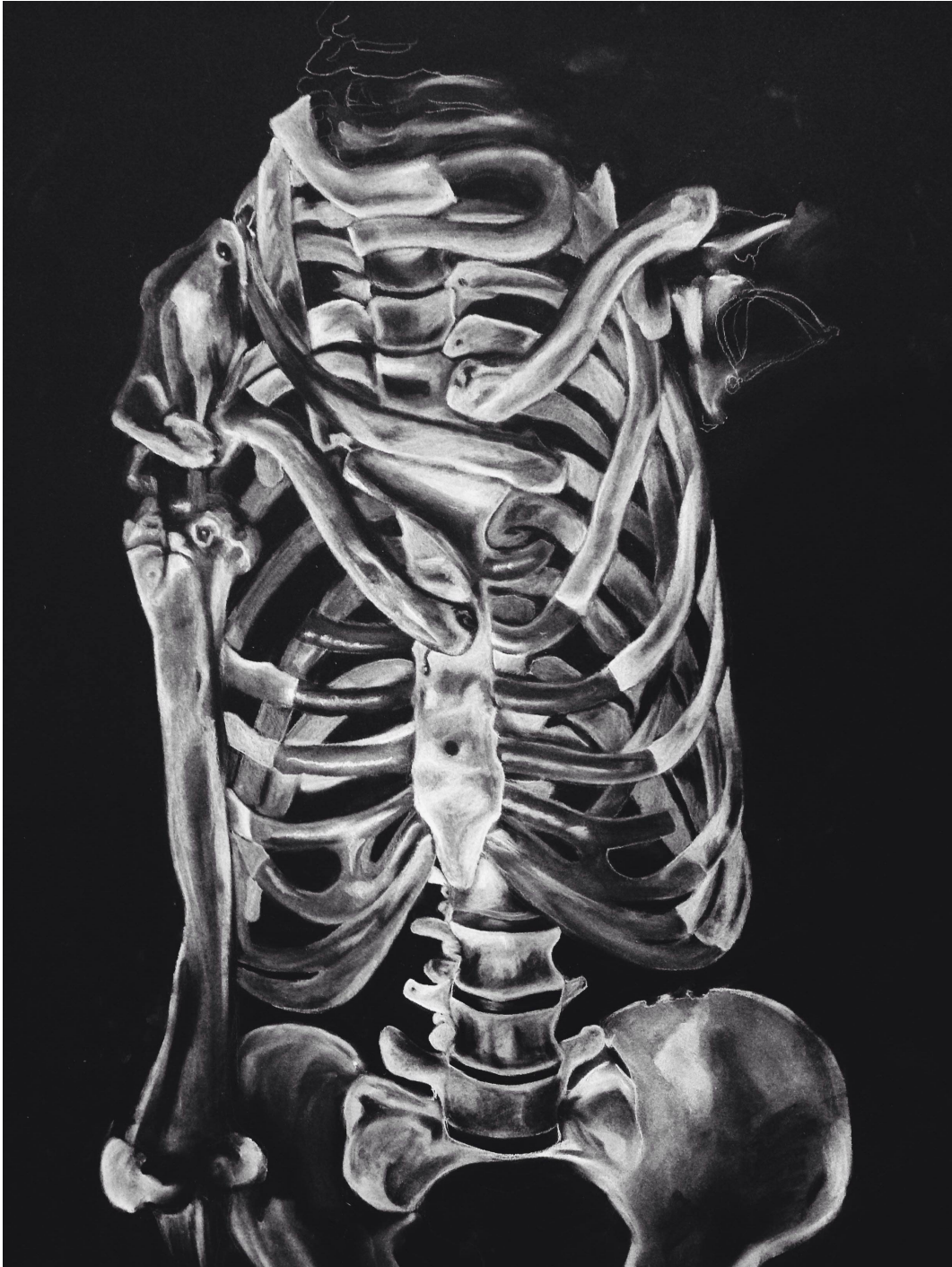
Maybe you should have gotten that drink, that lap dance, then you would have known much sooner, much before this brutal climax that we have reached.

"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 smack 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, be-freckled 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 vermilion 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 stores and 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.

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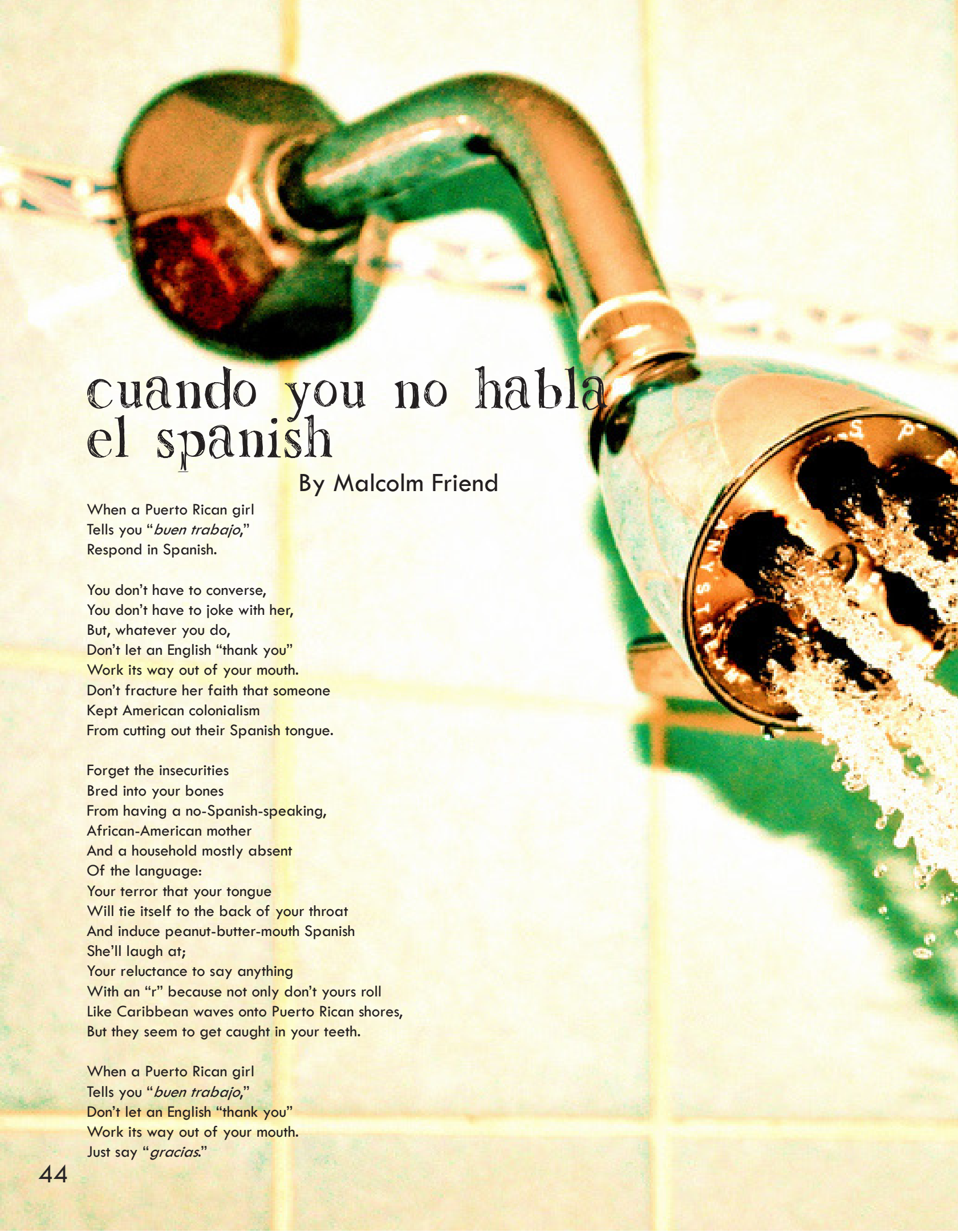
Laura sweeps aside the bright, loose blades of hair that had been caught in her eyes. She pushes them away and looks up from the city street and into the sky. There are no more storms, no more clouds plush with snow. Now, the only white lies low and swirled around her feet. Her booted toes. Laura looks 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 scape 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

By Theodore Yurevitch

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

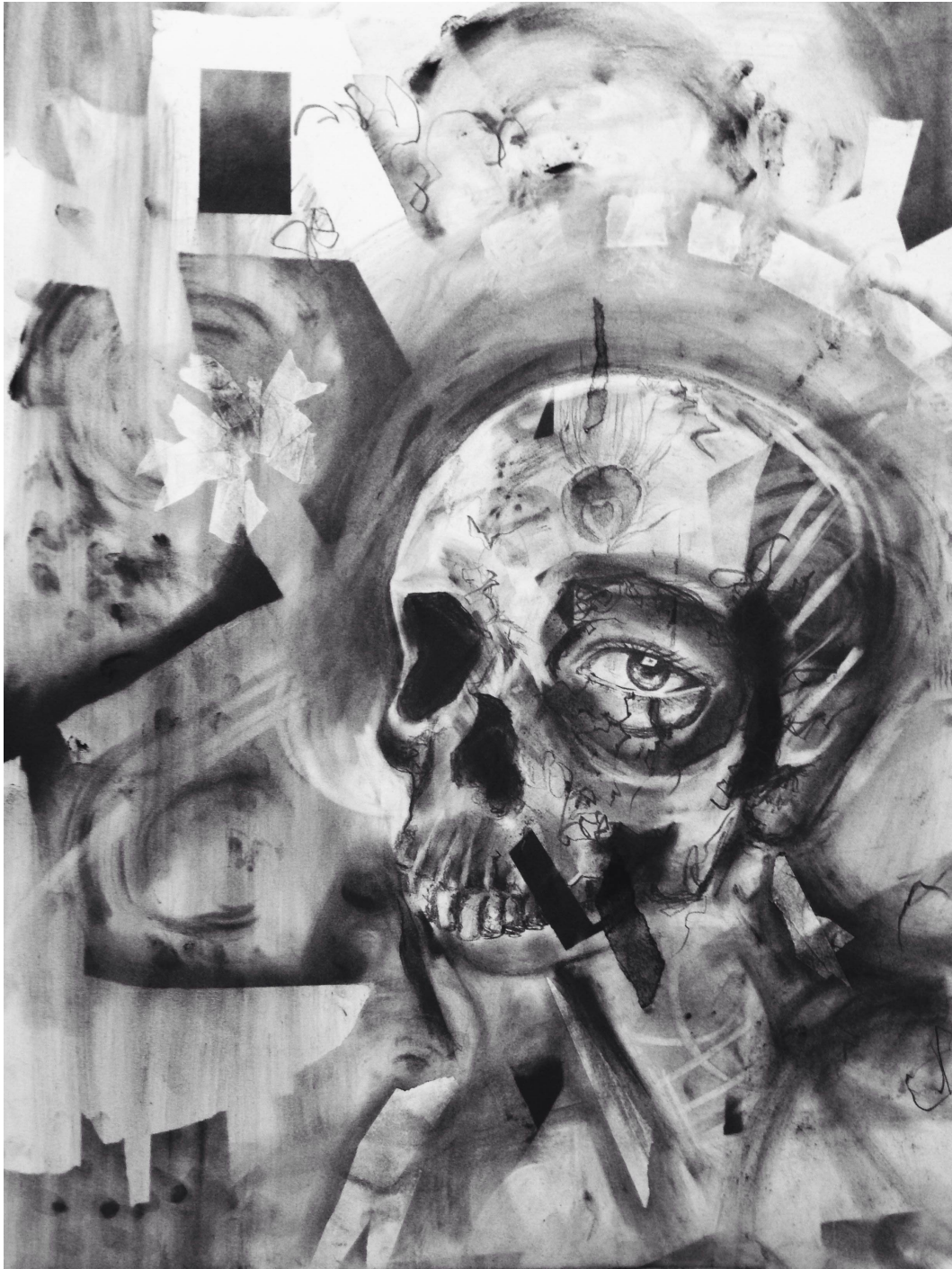
limbs, weaving like threads on a loom.  
No words, or names, only flashes  
of heat and bending light, lost in time.

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.



p.a.



untitled  
By Mary Jung



# heirlooms

By Nicholas Logan

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 earthy 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



front window at nights. Occasionally, my mom would join him, but never for long. Usually half a beer, or the local section, at best.

One Monday I woke up to find my parents reading the paper with a ghost sitting on the coffee table. To be fair, at the time it wasn't quite clear what exactly it was: just a vaguely human, semi-opaque 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

back and forth between me and his 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 for 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, you 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





# hands

By Jake Lee



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.

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



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?"

"I..." 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, I 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 nighttime, 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 (james buford 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  
Shrinks 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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