

The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University





EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

The Mockingbird 2017

The cover image is a detail from *Don't Let Go* by Kathryn Haaland Greene.

The Mockingbird design is by Jeanette Henry,
East Tennessee State University, University Relations.

Photography is by Katie Sheffield, Visual Resource Curator,
East Tennessee State University, Department of Art & Design.

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The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University

Published annually
as a joint project of the
Department of Literature and Language
and the Department of Art and Design



2017

Volume 44 edited by Danielle Byington

A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself serves as an expression of gratitude, but we would like to offer our thanks to Dr. Bert C. Bach, ETSU's Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who has authorized the magazine's production fund as part of the regular budget of the Department of Literature and Language. We also thank Dr. Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Katherine Weiss, Chair of the Department of Literature and Language, and Professor Mira Gerard, Chair of the Department of Art and Design, for their continued support and commitment to this project. We cannot overemphasize the creativity and patience of the ETSU Office of University Relations and, particularly, Ms. Jeanette Henry, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

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2017



Editor's Note

Danielle Byington

During the months that *The Mockingbird's* 44th volume began accepting submissions, reviewing student work, and assembling the magazine's manuscript, our society experienced a grim change in reality. While numerous facets of humanity likely feel endangered by this insular and narrow-minded atmosphere, the arts—the foundation of magazines such as *The Mockingbird*—have now come face to face with their adversary, the antagonist normalizing prejudice against the vocation of artistic pursuit. Between the covers of this volume are voices that place their hands on these troubles, treating wounds obtained and injuries to be endured during a time of potential chaos. This issue acts as a time capsule, incubating literature and art created in a post-factual world, taking the hand of the reader and reaching together towards truth. That truth found in art—on the page, canvas, and elsewhere—links us together, transforming our differences into unity.

In the worst of times, let's remember the arts are our shield, its surface reflective like that carried by Perseus when he slayed Medusa. When we hold up this mirror-like shield of arts to protect ourselves, the grotesque face of anti-intellectualism must look at itself, embarrassed by how it salivates with ignorance, but, then, hopefully becomes beautiful at the realization that the arts can help it change. When selecting this year's cover for *The Mockingbird*, I felt that Kathryn Haaland-Greene's piece, *Don't Let Go*, embodied this metaphor. Just like the snarling fox held by the vulnerably dressed woman, the armor of artistic endeavor isn't easy to grasp, but we must never let it slip from our collective hands.

These selections of student work are each a brick in the castle of East Tennessee State University's artistic community, but my various mentors and colleagues who I think of synonymously as friends in the Department of Literature and Language are truly the mortar holding together everything you see in this issue. I'd like to thank my reading committee—Abby Lewis, Tyler Pickett, Amanda Sawyers, Adam Timbs, Axie Craft, and Bradley Hartsell—for taking the time to finely comb through our submissions and choose the best pieces of literature for publication. I'd like to express my appreciation to Jonathan Hill for conducting this year's interview and taking care of the tedious task of its transcription, and on that note, I'm also

grateful for my past mentor, Dr. Don Johnson, for agreeing to take the time to be our interviewee, as well as contributing poetry to this volume. Additionally, I'd like to acknowledge this year's judges: Joseph Campana, poetry; Joseph Bathanti, fiction; Jeff Mann, nonfiction; Laura Pattillo, drama. It's an honor to have had the input of these individuals, and to know that these experts in their respective category carefully selected winners and gave commentary about other pieces from our pool of student work. Thank you, also, to the chair of the Department of Literature and Language, Dr. Katherine Weiss, especially for letting *The Mockingbird* share such a spacious office with our department's other organizations.

Lest I forget I would like to thank others involved with and supporting *The Mockingbird*: Mira Gerard, the chair of the Department of Art and Design; Karlotia Contreras-Koterbay, director of Slocumb Galleries; Bert C. Bach, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs; and Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. A special thanks to Dr. Scott Honeycutt for his kind patience with my limited presence as the president of Sigma Tau Delta. My gratitude to Diana Qualls, Executive Aide for the Department of Literature and Language, who is always on top of everything we could possibly need. My appreciation to Dr. Joshua Reid who has profoundly shaped my scholarship and work ethic. Thank you to Dr. Robert Sawyer for always encouraging me and reminding me why I do this. For the guidance I so needed to complete this issue of *The Mockingbird*, I will forever owe thanks to past editors Jessica Hall and Catherine Pritchard Childress. Knowing I never had to hesitate asking them any question mitigated many of the bureaucratic must-dos that came my way. It is not only their experience, but their company and conversation, along with that of my evil twin, Kelsey Solomon, who preserved my sanity allowing me to reach the finish line. Finally, there would be no editor's note to read because there would be no 44th volume of *The Mockingbird* if it were not for the faculty advisors, Drs. Jesse Graves and Thomas Alan Holmes; Dr. Graves has been my poetry mentor for some time and my writing wouldn't be where it is now without his advice, and Dr. Holmes deserves a gold medal not only for his readily available advice, but also for listening to me and others sing every word to *Hamilton* and *Beauty and the Beast* on the way to SAMLA 2016. They've simultaneously been there for my questions as well as allowed me freedom and placed their trust in me as this year's editor. Finally, thank you to everyone across campus not listed who has directly or indirectly shaped my experience at ETSU and as editor; you'll always be carried in my future ventures.

To Marlies, The Fun of Living in and Leaving Delirium

Blaine Boles

You, the asterisk of my brain:
Cross-thatched like the burning
Lines of a well-marked poem,
Recall heat of each brief summer,
Historically vulnerable of
Any Dragon's eager flame.

Heaves hyphenated by fumes,
I hobble to a bench,
Get high on the ether
Of an abbreviated sea,
And feed the geese
(Soft migratory dragons)

Buckets of stones,
Like shreds of poems,
Thrown backwards over
Winter's cracking mirror.



A Portrait of My Mother

Blaine Boles

fragments of light
aligned refract
off glossy
glass-cased
family portraits,
making a hall
of mirrors
hollow frames.
the sanitation
of your brain
changed all
our names.

i am not my Name.
just my name:

A crack
in the mirror
that warps you;

A bush
of blackberries
you picked
for me
the summers
we were poor;

A dream,
you had,
of angels,
holding hands;
an electric fence
of love;
while
the front door
was broken
down;
A varicose
kudzu vine
choking
the bole
Of some *Salix*
by our condo,
When you
Taught me the
Latin name;

A cannonball
between
thoughts;

A loose wire
Among the broken
machinery
of your
eyes

lying beside you:
waiting for
those
eyes to
close.



Ode to Cockroaches

Blaine Boles

Cockroaches are beauts!
shiny shells in the moonlight;
fluttering to-and-fro--
soon to inherit the earth.
I bequeath my all
to those post-nuclear successors:
who may smell daisies
at riverside without front-brains,
who may live by cities
but with the stillness of water,
who may feel each ring
your legs create both below—
above the small ponds.
you charge the water,
antennae-first, Antaeus-like;
strutting the bedrock;
emerging on the other side
of time beside time beside
arrays and the arranged
skulls as time's temple;
covered in iridescent
shades of Chernobyl:
mosaics of moving pollen
to your blasé eyes.
why are we not like you?
people wear swim suits,
hide pale legs and genitals.
Oh! they dance askance
around the water,
(like strange pagan bonfires)
fearful of an angry God.
those words or wings,
the small flapping things,
just weigh your shoulders.



Place d'Italie, June 14th, 2016

Blaine Boles

The sun rises
And breathes the fog of
Kids' hands off windows.
A day job ebbs and flows
In a clerk's clinched fist
Like the grip on a spray bottle.
Pull down the awning.
Dance askance its boundary,
Between lunch and work,
To place plates on tables
Until your arms give out or
Stare out for this shift to end:
The emerald simmering of the park.
Now. It is the time of elderberries
And of pale, wet leaves beneath
Plump, peckish crows and
The stillness of the night;
The crescent moon's light transfigures
A crucifix atop Sacré-Cœur,
And so, shadows all streets
As hammer & sickle.



The Names of Stars

Janice Hornburg

We trysted under Milky Way's galactic river,
legendary barrier to star-crossed lovers, Altair and Lyra,
yearly united by passing
a living bridge of magpies.

Doused in the Big Dipper's bevy,
crowned with Corona Borealis,
you reclined in spangles
on Cassiopeia's Egyptian throne.
Struck by your Gemini breasts,
hot as the Dog Star, Sirius,
I drew Orion's sword and sailed south,
star-gazing in your eyes.

Arcturus, Apoplex, Archaeopteryx,
Betelgeuse, Hypotenuse,
Castor, Pollux,
Parallax, Galax, Timex, T. Rex,
Solar Plexus, Nexus, Sex-us.

Neurons kindled the Big Bang, super-novaed the night
until Aurora's rosy chariot
burst through horizons,
and we roused to the whisper of wings.



Mia's Non-accredited Biology Course of Anthropologic Learning

Bradley Hartzell

"I really like you."

"Wow. Listen to me. *I really like you,*" he added, briefly pausing as his eyes narrowed and a coy smirk shrunk his face.

"You know, it's funny. I spent years—*years*—afraid of telling anybody how I really felt. I guess that's normal—shyness. It just seemed easier, you know? It's easier to keep your mouth shut than to be rejected by your crush." He shrugged, but with performance.

"That is, *it seems* easier," he said, chopping his index finger in the air. "What people don't realize—and what I didn't realize for a long time—is that all of that anxiety, wondering how *they* feel about *you* really takes its toll. It's *all* you think about, and yet everyone compartmentalizes it and thinks that's way better than simply saying, 'Hey, wanna go out Friday night?' And by the way, there's like a sixty percent chance they will say yes! And if they say no? You get over it way faster than you realize."

Mia blinked twice and cocked her head.

"Mia, what's the one thing girls always say attracts them to men? Confidence. They say it *every time*. Yet guys clam up and wait for the woman to magically saunter up and start undressing. See, it doesn't work that way," he said, emphatically pointing at Mia.

"I realized that a couple of years ago. One day, I got up the nerve to ask out this really cute redhead who worked with me. And this was especially tough because we hadn't even flirted. Maybe once, but not *really*. We were friendly and professional, but nothing more," he said, scraping his palm flat against the air to signify his last point.

"So, we're chatting, and she mentions how she went to this whatever-Italian restaurant across town and *loved* it. She didn't mean anything

by it, of course. But I had made up my mind. So I said, 'It sounds really nice. We should go have dinner there after work.' Now, I know what you're thinking. 'She said yes and we had a great time and I was set for life with this new creed of mine.'"

Mia wasn't thinking this, but she could see why he'd think she was.

"But actually, that's *not* the case," he said with a laugh. "She was sweet, of course, but she told me she was actually seeing somebody. For all I knew, 'somebody' never existed, and she just didn't think I was all that cute. She was close to six foot, so she probably liked taller men," he said matter-of-factly.

"I was shocked by how little it bothered me, though. Shocked! I felt ninety percent better than I had been feeling by being shy and playing eye tag from across the room. I didn't *enjoy* getting turned down, of course, but it was far from the end of the world. Far from it."

Mia blinked three times, narrowed her green eyes, and slowly nodded.

"Long story short, I learned what many men never do. Just *attack*, man. No holds barred. I landed softly from Ole Red dropping me, and, the next thing I knew, I had a date with the girl who lived two floors below me. Turns out she was a bore, but whatever. So, yeah...long story short, I really like you. I'm happy you invited me over, and I want you to know, well, I *really* like you."

They sat on the brown leather sofa against the living room's largest wall, angled forty-five degrees towards one another. They anchored two points of an imaginary V; given their respective degrees, they would have intersected about two feet short of the 46" LCD TV mounted on the adjacent wall. Their spatial relationship may have been purely mathematical, but Paul's words deluged Mia's apartment like a peak Salvador Dali piece—they made literal sense in individual sections but became completely disheveled and surreal when taken as a whole.

Mia was consciously aware of two things. The first was that she needed to fashion a reply to Paul's verbal interpretation of *Swans Reflecting Elephants* before too much time elapsed and it got uncomfortable.

The second thing, as his jaw kept ricocheting from his skull, she was aware of Paul as a human being for the first time. *Homo sapien*, if you will. Paul had mahogany hair that he parted to the right; it bordered on stylish, only the sides were too long and, thus, undulated goofily around his head. He had brown eyes cramped against his prominent nose. Mia supposed he had a good smile but he flashed it too liberally, leaving nothing for surprise. He was remarkably thin but a couple degrees removed from being "fit." Mia had seen more handsome

men—her neighbor being amongst them, but he was married—but Paul was attractive enough for her curiosity. Just a modicum of good looks was all she asked for; she wasn't *that* shallow.

Paul was the cousin of Mia's third closest friend (Cynthia). He had moved from Lansing to Lexington nine months prior to be a manager of some start-up outfit that sold grills. He was loquacious, and Mia suspected he was good at his job and (probably) deserved a great deal of his comfortable (but not exorbitant) salary. Cynthia had set the two of them up after endlessly needling Mia about her dormant dating life. Mia hadn't seriously dated since she broke up with her last boyfriend two years ago for reasons both abundantly clear and completely vague.

She once raised her voice at him for leaving a trash bag on the back porch instead of putting it in the garbage bin (raccoons ravaged the bag; trash was *everywhere*). He (Terry) wasn't upset, because he knew he was in the wrong. But Mia's raised voice shut him down, and he wouldn't talk to her for four days. She'd ask what was wrong, surely not thinking it was over a simple chore that *he* fucked up, and he'd meekly reply, "nothing." It was equally the most perplexing thing she'd ever seen and the stupidest. She broke up with him on the sixth day after his withdrawal, one day after he started talking again, but by then it was too late.

Cynthia overcorrected and sent her Paul.

Mia was friendly and thought she held conversations well. She didn't retreat from interactions with strangers, and she generally could talk with appropriate broadness to folks from all walks. Still, when she and Paul went out, it was a seventy/thirty split in Paul's favor when it came to discourse. Mia didn't outright oppose this, although she certainly didn't find it enchanting.

They had been out five times. Paul picked her up at dinnertime (1. 7:02 2. 7:30 3. 7:01 4. 7:45—*traffic* 5. 7:02), and he began recognizing her thirty-percent conversation ratio and elevated her to forty percent, now without fail.

He paid for dinner. He drove her home. She kissed him on the cheek at the door. He smiled pleasantly, expecting no more from her.

She knew Paul wasn't her boyfriend (and he'd never dare presume as much), but she grinned when he called, though that always fizzled into "contentment" by the time she was putting in her earrings for that night's date.

By date four, Mia became aware of this circadian rhythm, and, by date five, she sort of secretly grew to resent it. When Paul called for date six, she knew she had to break the cycle or risk being consumed by it.

She told him she had a big lunch and wouldn't be hungry for dinner (this was partially true, although the same could have been said for date two and date five), but that he was welcome to come over and have a casual evening in. She purposely said "evening" even though she knew zero people who didn't just say "(to)night." A casual "night in" implied indefiniteness: *Just sleep over! Fuck it!* She knew Paul wasn't sexually presumptuous, but still "evening" defined the parameters a little more, indicating that *yes, you'll have to go home before midnight*. To this request, Paul did the only thing Paul knew how to do, and he graciously accepted.

He arrived at 6:45 with a polite knock on the door and a fresh bouquet of stargazers. She smiled and thanked him (genuinely) and warmly gestured (genuinely) for him to take a seat. She'd find a vase for the flowers, and she'd be right with him, she said. This sounded like what every smitten girl says on TV when she receives flowers, which didn't totally sound like herself. She wasn't sure if TV rubbed off on her or if Paul's buttoned-down manners were starting to.

She had been finding their dinner conversation stale, so Mia took proactive measure. *Have a seat*, she told him. On the couch, there was an inclination to meditate on the surroundings, to comment on whatever was on TV (in this case, *Chopped*). However, her proactive measure not only failed, but Paul reverted to a seventy-thirty share, discussing his work, his friends, the new city, a dream he had (that Mia wasn't in), why he swore he'd never get a dog (they're too noisy), and why he ultimately caved (they *really are* your best friend). They sat on the leather sofa together, his hand on lap as benevolently as another human could possibly muster.

There remained a healthy distance between them, enough for two bulky remotes (one for the TV, another for the cable box). Paul then suddenly made his boldest move to date, in which he retracted his hand and scooped up one of the remotes. He halved the volume and sat the remote down like a tender parent laying their sweetness to bed. He looked up and angled his body thirty-five degrees more inward towards Mia, who was so initially taken by Paul's intrepidity that she immediately reciprocated his angle.

This was when Paul began the first verbal strokes of *Swans* and this was when all of Mia's nascent sincerity felt the vise grip tighter on its admittedly feeble frame. It shattered somewhere in the middle of, "Confidence. They say it *every time*." Mia was now fully engaged in pondering Paul as a human being, as a *homo sapien*. Brown hair, brown eyes, average height, thin but unimpressive build. She began to peel back the layers of flesh tightly wound and clung resolutely to his person. She did this, not in a Jeffrey Dahmer way, but in a biological way;

textbook, you might say. At this point, Paul was a pink-muscled, blue-veined Vitruvian man with perfectly spherical eyeballs looking in her direction.

All of this briefly humored Mia until she realized she had barely scratched the surface. She narrowed her eyes, and the top of Paul's pink-muscled head split, and the entirety of his meat dropped to his feet like link sausages being cut from their tethers. With nothing left to support his eyes, they popped out and rolled around on the carpet. One stared at *Chopped*, while the other stared directly at her. Mia saw a skeleton sitting on her brown leather sofa at a ten-degree angle towards her. Its head was craned to meet her face, and its jaw ceaselessly jostled between its two thresholds.

Mia was startled by this projection's authenticity. Everything she was seeing was a portion of reality, a very tangible portion she just couldn't *truly* see at the moment.

Paul's skeleton had been talking to her for seven minutes. She and Paul's skeleton had been on (now) six dates together. She had kissed Paul's cheek four times and actually felt his skull all four times. In fact, there was no "Paul's skeleton." He was either all Paul, or "Paul" was just an aligned, boned structure some fool bothered to name.

"Paul" had always seemed far below extraordinary but reasonably above mediocre, but now he was instilling a panic in her. Mia became anxious that if she saw everyone decomposed—and what could be more intimate?—she wouldn't be able to tell the difference between any of them. Not even her best friend (Lillian) or her second best friend (Ryllis). A sadist could line skeleton Lillian and skeleton Ryllis side by side, and Mia would certainly *try* in earnest, but if she happened to pick out which was which, it'd purely be by chance.

She thought about her grandmother. She'd been dead for five years—she was skeletal by now. Mia felt as if she debunked some holy myth: take pictures at Christmas, time passes, they die, are consecrated in their finest clothes, and remembered as beacons of grace. Dig them up, though, and the results are biological processes.

"So...that's my little spiel, I guess!" Paul laughed nervously, and suddenly his eyes reappeared, then darted away from Mia's. His link sausage refitted to his bones and his skin, hair, and clothes materialized just as they were.

Mia blinked three times and cocked her head.

She thought of all these engorged multi-celled organisms flittering around one another, convulsing with laughter; those she'd lain on, those who'd been inside

her. She watched her fingers unfurl from her bicep—small bones and tendons working instantaneously and in harmony. Mia, aware of her movement, her brain was aware of her awareness to her awareness of itself.

She examined the disagreeable innumerability of hairs pricking out of Paul's head; she pinched her own tress. She scaled the moles on his neck and remembered the freckles on her thighs. Expanding her lungs with a breath, her chest curved out as she noted how Paul's last statement contained a pause for him to quietly clear the phlegm in his throat. He was mortal and repulsive.

She found his eyes once again.

“I like you, too.”



Bethlehem

Jonathan Hill

I stand at the wall. It is made from the bones of God. I used to watch the olive leaves flicker on the hills of Beit Jala from here. But when the war started, all I could think of was Jerusalem. We ran into the street. The first explosion stole the air out of our mouths. They swarmed us with tear gas, but my brother kept throwing stones we picked from our rubble. They flew like birds that had gone extinct long ago. After they shot him, I could hear the dust settling over our bodies in this house of meat. My mother gnawed on the pits of her olives while my father left his head on the mosque floor. When I look at the gas canister, I can almost read the letters. They are stacked like slabs of stone from an ancient ruin. I can almost read them on the watch towers, on the milk cartons, in the soldiers' teeth. Every day I stand here and wait. Someday it will all be gone, this remnant, this wall of bones, all the grit of what was once holy.



Interview with Dr. Don Johnson

Jonathan Hill

Jonathan Hill: Dr. Johnson, thank you for having me to your lovely home here in Elizabethton, here on the bank of the Watauga River. I wondered if you wouldn't mind describing this place for the readers who don't have the privilege to be here like I do. How long have you lived here, and how does this place influence your work?

Don Johnson: I've lived here since 1998, almost twenty years. It influences my work because the river is always here; the river is important. We have seven acres, which includes an island in the river. It's filled with wildlife, birds particularly, ducks, geese. We had an American bald eagle in the last few days sitting right across from the back door. It forces you to pay attention to the world around you, and I'm very much attuned to that.

JH: Yeah, I noticed a lot of river wildlife in your poems. I actually have a question for you later about paying attention, but we'll come back to that. Before that, could you also speak to how this region of East Tennessee, and Appalachia more broadly, informs your work? Do you consider yourself to be an Appalachian writer? And if so, what does that mean for you?

DJ: It's an interesting question because I was born in Appalachia, in a small town called Poca, West Virginia, which is an unincorporated town on the banks of the Kanawha River. It's about fifteen miles from Charleston. That small town, growing up there—I spent the first eight years of my life there—provided a really strong foundation, a sense of home. It's interesting, in the first collection of poems, called *The Importance of Visible Scars*, I wrote that book while I was living in Massachusetts, and I lived in Massachusetts for twelve years before coming here, but virtually all of the poems, except for a few poems about Hawaii, where I lived for ten years, all of the other poems are set in West Virginia. And it continues to inform my work. In fact, the second novel that I'm working on now is going to be set mostly in

that area, near Poca and Nitro, West Virginia. On the question of considering myself an Appalachian writer, it's really interesting because I do, I do consider myself an Appalachian writer. I live here, I've lived here for over thirty years, I have the background in West Virginia. But at the same time, I've lived in other places, and I don't sound like an Appalachian. And part of that has to do with my mother, who was born in West Virginia. My father was born in southern Virginia, but my mother was an avid reader, and she would always correct my grammar. If I'd end a sentence with a preposition, "Where's such and such at?" her response would be "Behind the 'at.'" So, you know, from very early on, even in West Virginia, I talked differently from my peers. And my dad was in the army, so we lived in Germany four years, and back and forth between Virginia and West Virginia. And then I spent ten years in Hawaii, as far west as you can go and still stay in this country. That influenced me a great deal, both in terms of perspective about the world and a sense of, kind of a cosmopolitan setting. And in some respects, I don't think I've ever been fully accepted, in some ways, by other Appalachian writers who have pretty much stayed in this area, are clearly identifiable in terms of accent, what have you. But I've always tried to write poems which got beyond the immediate area and were more universal.

JH: Right, beyond the merely local. My next question kind of addresses that. One of your collections is called *Here and Gone*, which to me seemed like a very apt title because many of your poems are set in the here and the now, in this region, but many are also gone off on a journey to other places. So could you tell us why you chose this title and perhaps what it says about your life as a poet?

DJ: Sure. As you suggested, many of the poems are thoroughly grounded in this area. A lot of river poems, poems which took place a quarter mile from where we're sitting. I have this sense of reverence for the river, for the fish in the river, and it just speaks to me, it appeals to me. But on the other hand, I have poems set in Hawaii, a couple in Germany, Montana, all over the place. I have one poem about flying from Minneapolis to Missoula, Montana, on the fourth of July, for example, and seeing the fireworks in the towns below as we passed over, upside down in effect. Instead of standing on the earth and looking up, I'm above the earth and looking down. So just an attempt to get different perspectives, ideas, notions. I also lived in Wisconsin four years, Massachusetts twelve years. But it's interesting that in the first book *The Importance of Visible Scars*, most of those poems are set in either West Virginia or Hawaii. And there's only one poem that I can clearly identify that's set in Massachusetts, and I think that's because I never really felt at home there. I had probably the best group of friends that I've ever had in my life, but just in terms of the environment, the weather, the setting, I just never felt at home.

JH: That's interesting. Have you been able to write about Massachusetts since leaving it?

DJ: Not much. I have one short story set there, but I'm not sure there are any poems set there other than the one I just talked about.

JH: Yeah, I can understand that. There are certain places that you just can't write about because some kind of connection isn't there. But regardless, it seems that wherever you happen to be, you're paying this close attention to the world which you mentioned. "Reverence" is a great word for this I think. For me, the keenness and precision of your vision, as well as its openness and receptivity to the world, is a particularly notable part of your work. So for you, what is the importance of paying attention? How have you cultivated this ability?

DJ: Well, I think that's one of the things that tends to be slipping away in our culture, that people don't spend enough time paying attention, and they don't understand where they are and what they are in the environment around them. You ask about the context of *Here and Gone*. It has to do first of all with the notion of being in the now, the here, and also, it has to do with a sense of place. But in that whole book, there's a sense of time slipping away, the idea that you're gonna be gone one of these days, and you need to hold onto what you can capture here. And it's interesting, this only occurred to me as I was finishing up on *More Than Heavy Rain*—whereas I think *Here and Gone* is a book about relationships with time, *More Than Heavy Rain* has a stronger sense of space, of orienting oneself in space, and how it's important to be grounded. It's kind of ironic that I feel that in Appalachia, but at the same time, I feel that in Hawaii. I mean, I thoroughly came to embrace the many cultures in Hawaii. And like here, the water was very much important for me, just a sense of relating to the ocean, particularly under the ocean. I used to do a lot of diving and took a great deal of pride in learning all the Hawaiian names for the fish, for example. And that continues to be very important to me—the trees, the vines, the water, everything about it is fascinating. I mean, there's a vine in Hawaii called Naupaka, which grows only on the ocean and on top of the mountains. It's exactly the same vine, but it only grows in those two environments. Interestingly enough, there's a Hawaiian myth having to do with that vine where the one on the mountain represents a man, the one on the ocean represents a woman, and they have difficulty getting together. And that's another part of the culture, just the mythos. I mean, I have a poem in *More Than Heavy Rain* about a fire on Buffalo Mountain, and the speaker in that poem thinks about the rain in Hawaii as he's fighting the fire up there. And there's an epigraph in that poem having to do with a myth about the continuing war between the vegetative goddess in Hawaii and the volcanic goddess Pele, where the volcano will erupt and cover

the earth with lava, and the lava hardens, and there's just bare, black lava. But before long you'll find little ferns beginning to grow up in cracks in the lava, and they spread, birds will drop seeds, trees will grow there, and the lava begins to break down, and if you're paying attention you can see the land beginning to reassert itself over the lava. But it's a constant fight between the vegetative goddess Hi'iaka, and the volcano goddess Pele.

JH: Yeah, that's very interesting. And I think you also, in addition to paying attention to the here and now, your poetry is also often an investigation of your past and of past events. So how does your own history, as well as the history of this particular locale and region, shape your work?

DJ: Well, it's important because my history is essentially who I am, and none of us can thoroughly avoid our histories, even though we can try to forget them sometimes. But most of the situations feed into the narrative strain in my poetry. I'm an unabashed narrative poet. Although sometimes, I make a definite effort to write a lyrical, in the moment kind of poem, but sometimes what happens there is that I'll start out trying to write a lyrical poem and it turns into a narrative. You know, it's almost as if I have no control, and I'll begin just describing an environment, but it begins relating itself to a story. And part of that has to do with my own family heritage. My father, my grandfather, my uncles, were all storytellers, even though they probably wouldn't think of themselves that way. Most often they had to do with hunting and fishing. It's interesting, one of the things I remember about my grandfather is that he'd always begin his stories with a kind of thorough, environmental grounding—"In the field next to the Sour's farm, where there was a huge walnut tree"—so that he would begin with that physical, historical setting which then spreads out and forms the basis for the narrative.

JH: Right, that's the "groundedness" that a story needs. And that kind of leads me into my next question about your most recent novel that you published, and also to one you're currently working on, is that right?

DJ: The second one I'm working on, yeah. The first one actually came out about a year ago. There used to be a series called *The Silver Dagger* novels that Overmountain Press published, and they were short mystery stories set in this region. I'm an avid reader of mystery, detective novels and I read a couple of those and thought, well I can do that. So I started writing this novel as a kind of a lark, and the first scene in the novel is set in Dogtown, which is a mile from where we're sitting, across the river. But then, it widens out into a fictional landscape, which is loosely set in Elizabethton, but the town is called Maryton, instead of Elizabethton.

JH: So yeah, it's been fictionalized.

DJ: Yeah, fictionalized. So the hero in the novel, the protagonist, is a retired CIA agent who comes back to East Tennessee intent on rebuilding, reconstructing, improving his family home place up in the hills. His parents are both dead, and he just wants to make this comfortable. That's his first goal. Then he wants to garden, then he wants to fish for trout in these two rivers, the Watauga and the Holston. But his efforts to live a secluded life are interrupted by events beyond his control, and he gets pulled into this series of events, part of which have to do with rescuing a woman who's being harassed on the Appalachian Trail, which leads to him becoming involved in dealing with these people who are making meth and broader illegal activities. And essentially, I think of the novel as about murder and mayhem in the Tennessee hills. But the novel I'm working on now is mostly set in West Virginia, where I spent the first eight years of my life, and where their history is inextricably tied to coal mines and the chemical industry which has devastated the area. My first real memory is being blown off the couch where I was lying by an explosion in the Union Carbide plant, which was virtually across the street from where we lived. And that was kind of an indicator of life there. The Kanawha River, which is the lifeblood of that area, was just totally polluted, the water stank, and every summer thousands and thousands of carp would die on the banks. And then they would begin to stink. The river has been cleaned up considerably, but the town where I grew up, this town of Poca, is right across the river from a huge coal electric plant that has these monumental cooling towers. I mean, it's a presence you can't ignore. They loom over this town, even though there's a river between the town and it, and people are still uncovering hidden chemical dumps where the big industries have hidden dumps back in the hills. There were maverick chemical factories that would leave waste everywhere. The whole town of Nitro was polluted by a Monsanto plant, which made a chemical that had a by-product which was used in Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. In a lawsuit several years ago, Monsanto had to clean up not only the plant area, but they had to go into the town and clean the houses of anyone who had worked in the plant, inside and out, because of the pollution. And the water coming out of the water taps would stink. So it was an unavoidable fact of life there.

JH: So this novel deals with some of these issues of environmental destruction?

DJ: Yes, yes, very much so.

JH: Right. Well, I had a question about poetry and fiction. What can a poet learn from a novelist, and what can a novelist learn from a poet?

DJ: Well, I'm not sure what the poet can learn from the novelist, and I don't really have enough experience to say with authority. But the big thing a novelist

can learn from a poet is concrete details, a sense of setting, a sense of immediacy and concrete detail because that's essential in the kind of poems I write. And I think the hardest things I had to try to learn in writing the first novel and working on this one is the handling of dialogue, which doesn't often come up in the poems, and also the sense of trying to carry the plot over three or four hundred pages. You know, when you're used to dealing with one, two, or three pages, even if you're writing a narrative kind of poem, you don't carry it over three hundred pages. And surprisingly, the people who have read *Blue Winged Olive*, which is the name of a fishing fly, have said the most intriguing thing about that novel is the fact that from page one they were caught up in the plot. And several people have said that they sat down and started to read it and finished it in a day and a half because they had to keep finding out what was happening. And it's amazing to me because when I started that novel, there was no outline, there was no real collection of notes. I started with a man in the area who wakes up one morning and his mouth is sewn shut, and he doesn't know how it happened or who did it, and that kicks off the narrative, the plot, and it essentially rolls out from there.

JH: Right, so did you feel similarly, like you wanted to find out what happened to this character as you were writing?

DJ: Probably, yeah. I would sit down and write as much as was in my head in a given day, mostly overnight, but sometimes for a week or so because I couldn't really get straight in my mind where it was going, but then it would ultimately pop into my mind. And you know, one of the things I tell my creative writing students is that if you're going to write a poem, you need to carry it around with you. And I don't mean to have the physical paper in your hand. What I mean is you live with it. And actually, that probably works for expository writing as well. And I think in all the writing classes, the hardest thing to learn is that it's hard work. It's not complicated, it's just something that you have to work with, and I think that's what students have a difficult time understanding, they think they can sit down the night before and in an hour, the paper's done. But you know, if you mull it over in your mind for two or three days even, or weeks or months or years, it's going to be a better product. And getting back to something I said early about paying attention, I think that's a really difficult thing for beginning writers to do, not just for creative writers but for the expository writer. I think in teaching expository writing, we tend to place too much emphasis on written materials that we hand to students, as opposed to giving oral assignments and saying, this is what I want you to do, and it forces them at least, if they're going to do it well, to pay attention to the directions. And I found in the last several years that students have a great deal of difficulty paying attention to directions.

It's just not built into their day-to-day activities, because you can always go back and read the assignment if it's written down. I mean, if you're watching a football game, you know you're always going to have instant replay, so you don't really have to pay close attention to things. It's gonna come back.

JH: Yeah, you may have just answered my next question in part, but how do you push your students to become better writers?

DJ: Well, emphasizing what I just said, but also making a distinction between the concrete and abstract and stressing the importance of individual words. One of my best students in recent years has said that she had a sense of the imaginative force in poems by taking Jesse's class, but then she learned from the importance of individual words, and it's something that I try to stress. One of the things that Jim Wayne Miller, who was an Appalachian poet who died several years ago, said was that he tried to write poems that were as clear as a mountain stream, that you could look in and see the bottom of the stream, but that when you stepped in, that you discovered, that you found out the water wasn't six inches deep, but sometimes six feet. I think that's a good way to look at poems. Most people think they're presenting what tends to be called "hidden meaning." But from my point of view, it's not hidden meaning, and that poems almost never say, or almost never mean, things other than what they say. But they may mean more than what they say. But most mistakes students make in reading poems is that they don't pay attention to what the poems say because the first question that the teacher asks, quite often, is well, what does this poem mean? And so they're in the realm of ideas, and they're taken away from the concrete. You can see that all the way back, you know, seventeenth century John Donne. Immediately, if you start looking at that poem, students want to say this poem's about betrayal in love. It often might get to that, but it's more important to understand how, what the words mean.

JH: So is that what you look for in a piece of writing, the concrete?

DJ: The concrete, the clarity, and then the evocative nature of the words. How it takes you outside the poem itself.

JH: So what other writers have most influenced you and this view of poems?

DJ: In the beginning, I was most influenced, well, it's interesting. I think the first two poems that grabbed me in college was a poem by Archibald MacLeish called "Ars Poetica." I just loved the language and the imagery in that poem, in the lines where he said "The moon releases / Twig by twig the night-entangled trees," I just thought that was an incredible, incredible image. Another poem that really grabbed me was "Bavarian Gentians" by D. H. Lawrence. I mean,

those are kind of mature favorites. But when I was in elementary school, I memorized the poem by Alfred Noyes called “The Highwayman,” which I can still recite most of today, because the language and the narrative really appealed to me. Then when I started writing poems, I think the poems which most appealed to me were poems by Southern, visionary narrative poets like James Dickey. And then Dave Smith, who was a lot of help to me in the beginning, and tended to be, at least early on, a very Dickey-like poet. But I also like poets like James Wright and came in later years to just idolize Seamus Heaney. I think for my money, Heaney is the best poet of the twentieth century. And you know, I’ve read most of the famous ones, and his poems do, for me, everything that poems should do. So I’d say those four poets, Dickey, Dave Smith, James Wright, and Seamus Heaney, just continue to be influential. And it’s interesting, I was talking to Bruce Wiegl, who was actually a student of Dave Smith’s, back in the late sixties, early seventies. No, I’m sorry, it was late seventies, early eighties, and he was talking about the fact that when he would get stuck, he would go back and read James Dickey poems, and they would often move him off the place where he was stuck. And it didn’t mean that he was consciously imitating Dickey or plagiarizing or anything, but just the sound of the language and the rhythm in the lines, a way of seeing more than anything else, kind of got him going again. And I found that in my own writing in the beginning, that if I’d get stuck, I’d go back and read James Dickey. I think Dickey just kind of destroyed his own reputation in later years, but some of those early books are still just worth going back to.

JH: So what can we look forward to reading from you? Are you currently working on anything?

DJ: Well, I’m working on this second novel and probably have sixty pages or so written. And ironically, or interestingly enough, even though most of it is set in West Virginia, in more or less contemporary times, the first chapter begins in Vietnam and goes on from there. But while I’ve been thinking about fiction, I’ve only written probably one poem in the last year. It’s just something that I get preoccupied with. I’m not drawn to the poetry now, but I imagine it will come back. And I envision a series of novels focused on this same protagonist, whose name is Tucker Chenowith, and they’ll all be at least vaguely related to fishing flies, the first one as *Blue Winged Olive*, and the second one, oddly enough, is called *Yardsale*, I think. *Yardsale* is the name of a huge fishing fly that’s used for big freshwater fish. And my daughter, Carolyn’s daughter actually, but I consider her mine as well, actually did the cover illustration for *Blue Winged Olive*, which is a kind of a gaudy fly.

(here, Dr. Johnson goes to his car to get a copy of the novel to show me)

DJ: So she did the cover illustration. I'm envisioning subsequent novels being pretty much the same pattern, but different flies.

JH: Do you make flies, by any chance?

DJ: Some, but I'm not very good at it.

JH: Yeah, it's pretty difficult.

DJ: Yes. I just don't have the patience.

JH: Right, easier to just buy them. So let me just see if I have any other questions...we kind of talked about your advice to younger poets already, but anything you'd like to add?

DJ: Read. That's probably my most significant advice. It's amazing to me how many people want to become poets and they're either fixed on people like Bob Dylan or John Lennon or Charles Bukowski, either that or poems from the nineteenth century. And if you asked them to name three contemporary poets, they can't do it. But they want people to read their own. And often, I'd say, and the illustration has ceased to have much effect, but I'd say if you wanted to write contemporary songs, you wouldn't go back and look at the songs of Steven Foster. But then they say, who's Steven Foster?

JH: Right, kind of proving your point in a way.

DJ: Yeah. But still, they want to write rhyming, lyrical, sentimental poems like "Old Kentucky Home."

JH: Which has already been done, thankfully. Well, thank you for your time, Dr. Johnson, I really enjoyed this conversation.

DJ: I'm delighted that you came all the way out here for it.



Total Eclipse: Rock Creek, Montana

In Memoriam: Jack Higgs (first published in *Aethlon*)

Don Johnson

Upriver the blood moon rose,
Disappearing: a Greek shield
Sloughing off rust into dark folds
Lifting away toward the Pintlars.

“Achilles,” you would have said,
Had you been among us. “His name
Meant grief, wrought or suffered
In proportion to the hero’s grasp

Of *eutrapelia*, *balance* as Aquinas
Construed it.” In your mind,
“Turningness”—moon to myth,
to faith. Three short steps,

The way your mind connected.
Mine could not turn away from grief
That night, two time zones west
Of where others had already gone home

From the wake I could not attend,
And mourned harder for it,
Murmuring your name with our toast,
As the glow of the pitted sickle

Went black, in a sky with no clouds,
Where even half-forgotten stars
Pouring light down like a blessing
Could not begin to bring me around.



Bucket Soccer

Don Johnson

Only the pale rectangles scribed on the walls
And the swept detritus of old receipts,
Paper clips, one penny, and a curled up
Polaroid of a dog no one recognized
Remained after the movers had emptied
The house. The Mayflower van
Diseled in the driveway, its hold
Being loaded with all we owned, except
A volleyball and a five-gallon bucket
My best friend, Harry, had gleaned
From the vacant dog run. My other friends
Had come to see me off as well,
And, weary of loafing in the yard, someone
Kicked the ball. My little brother caught it
In the bucket, and a game began. Our pitch
Extended to the neighbors' yards, left and right,
and over Horner Rd. in front. The house blocked
off the backyard. There were no teams,

And the goal could be picked up, moved,
And carried, or held above our heads. Whoever
Owned the bucket could maneuver it to catch
A kick and score a point, two points if the ball
Rolled in along the ground, three if the same
Boy kicked and caught the ball, unless he declared
His plan beforehand and failed, in which case
Four points were subtracted. It didn't matter, since
No score added up. There were no time outs.
No time. People drifted out, others in, picking up
The game with no instruction till the bucket's
Black hole disappeared with dark. The truck left.
Friends said good-bye and drifted off.
Harry vanished last, keeping the ball
And bucket, after we had stood five minutes,
Speechless, masked by the soft June night,
Unable to improvise the right farewell.



House by the River

(first published in *Shenandoah*)

Don Johnson

“Earth is a door I cannot even face.”

James Wright

I read from left to right what the carpenters
have hauled out during the renovation
and stacked against the outside wall
of the garage: coiled electrical cable,
two five-gallon buckets filled with rain,
the ripped-out front door, horizontal,
looking like a bulkhead for a cellar
that isn't there, a vacant window frame,
the door again, since my gaze is dragged
back left, the way a focal point arrests
one's gaze in a painting—a raised open hand,
or a face, made luminous with suffering—

the two dark holes, where the door's knob
and dead bolt were, the eyes of a Jakob Kärcher
slave, one of six who built this house
two hundred years ago. All lie beneath
my rich bottom land, nameless, this gutted
structure their only marker. And now
one looks out from underground,
surveying what remains of the original
construction: the cut limestone foundation,
two hand-hewn walnut beams, the kitchen
fireplace where I'll confront him, trowel
in hand, long after my hard work is done.



Things Partially Obscured, in the Dark or Far Away

Don Johnson

It would be easy just to move the newspaper, turn on the light, or simply wait until whatever is far away comes closer. That way I wouldn't take the time to puzzle over half a carabiner, a coat draped over a chair in the next room, an osprey too far away for me to sense the wing shape. But I like to test myself, even when results are not important. The carabiner won't be attached to a key unlocking a storage bin wherein a Maserati sits. The shape in the dim bedroom will be my own anorak I neglected to hang up three days ago, the hood only vaguely like a head, and the osprey's swept-back wings will swoop in close enough for positive i.d. before my eyes are drawn to other birds. Sometimes I miss my guess, but even then it's better to have thought about what might turn up, what could loom out of the dark, or what comes at you from far off, when you can't recognize its shape or name it.



The Red Maple

Gabe Cameron

Daniel stared at the loosening tree bark. His eyes searched for some uneven shape, something familiar he could latch onto. He glanced at the old oak that towered behind him, but he knew it wasn't the one. Not only was it too big, but it wasn't even the right tree. He took off his backpack and let it fall into the muddy snow. The bag had collected its fair share of stains throughout the years, making a few more uninteresting. Unzipping the bag, he pulled out the walkie-talkie and attempted again to turn it on. Where there should have been static, there was silence, and a small red light flashed. He cursed underneath his breath. On the way out of the door that morning, PJ had annoyed him about bringing extra batteries with them. Now he knew he would never hear the end of it.

Daniel surveyed the landscape, praying that the tree would suddenly become visible to him. It seemed as if the red maple had vanished, like the world had pulled the tree in by its roots to enjoy watching him struggle. The forest was quiet, apart from faint sound of snowfall on the trees. He checked his watch. It had been thirty minutes since PJ had deserted him, but it felt like hours. Dropping the walkie-talkie back into the backpack and settling on a direction, he set off. The woods were only so large. The red maple would have to make itself known eventually.

Earlier that morning, Daniel had been prodded awake by his younger brother. Grant still hadn't learned a lot of words, but he kept pointing to the window. With the bitter taste of morning still lodged in his throat, Daniel spread the curtains open.

The world was engulfed by snow. Where there used to be green, white had taken hold. It seemed to cover every inch of his neighborhood. Towards the fields, there looked to be no end to the whiteness, as if entire ecosystems ceased to exist. Daniel was amazed. He had never seen this much snow in his entire life. In his section of Tennessee,

snow was more of a nuisance than anything else, usually only creating patchwork in backyards and black ice on roads. This was different. The weatherman on TV was saying that the storm would only get worse over the next week.

His middle school had called off classes, which never happened in Daniel's town. There were running jokes about the lack of closings in his school district, where both teachers and students would complain. His mother would protest about the ice on the roads, often calling the school to find someone to yell at. His dad used to joke about them not closing school even if the apocalypse had started. He pictured himself walking to school, backpack on his back, trying to avoid meteors.

Daniel always wondered how they determined snow days in far-off places, where snow was always falling. Did they just never go to school? He started to wish that he could live there.

But it didn't really matter today. Today was the first snow day that he could remember, and PJ had convinced him that it was a sign that they should go exploring the woods near their neighborhood. Forests were fairly commonplace around where Daniel lived, but the mysteries of the woods in front of his house eluded PJ, who had become fixated on exploring it. While Daniel normally wouldn't have agreed to go, he had his own reasons to come to the forest this time. He was going to find the tree.

When he was younger, he and his father would come to this forest and take walks. Daniel's father had loved living near such an expansive and open woods, and would take advantage of it whenever he could. His dad worked at the high school as a science teacher, but he had studied trees while in college. There was a name for it, but Daniel could never remember it. When they would traverse the forest, his dad would point out the subtle differences in types of trees and the sounds that different kinds of birds would make.

Several years ago, they had walked the forest and spent the time talking about the differences in maples. His father had preferred the reds for their color, despite the fact that they were everywhere in Tennessee. Because of this, they spent time toward the end of their walk sitting beneath a large red maple, while his father read sections of *To Kill a Mockingbird* out loud.

That was before his father had died. Despite his being gone only a few years, Daniel was finding it harder to remember details about him. He was having trouble remembering what his voice sounded like, and those recitations of Harper Lee were fading from his memory. He hadn't thought of that tree for a long time, and he hadn't even been in the woods since his father had passed,

but when PJ had brought up the idea of exploring the forest, something pushed Daniel into agreeing to go. If he found the tree, maybe those memories wouldn't fade nearly as fast.

His father had told him stories where explorers would double back on their footprints to make it back home. Daniel tried to use this knowledge to his advantage now, but the snow was falling pretty strong, making it difficult to spot where he had come from.

The snowfall was thick, and it was difficult to see far ahead. PJ had spent a lot of the time walking from the neighborhood to the forest trying to scare Daniel with his knowledge of wendigos and other monsters that could be lurking in the woods. He had laughed it off then, but the occasional sounds of twigs snapping or snow crunching sent shivers up Daniel's spine.

Trying to think of something else, he decided to focus on his anger toward PJ. They had spent an hour or so exploring the woods together when Daniel stopped them to go to the bathroom. PJ, taking his place on a grounded tree, had become slightly more irritable as the day moved forward, and for good reason. They had spent so much time wandering but they hadn't actually found anything of note. Neither of them wanted to admit it, but the woods were boring and uninteresting. Daniel didn't know what PJ had wanted to find, but he was beginning to think it didn't exist, and he was worried that he would never find his father's tree.

After he relieved himself, Daniel noticed that he had been left alone. He called out for PJ, but his name fell flat. His friend was gone. Daniel yelled his name a few more times, but the words seemed to hang listlessly in the air, lacking a place to go.

He hadn't seen PJ since. Despite this, he kept walking, and he kept checking the dead walkie-talkie. Though it remained silent, Daniel liked the feel of holding it in his hand. As he walked, he started to imagine himself as a crewmember of the *Starship Enterprise* on a ground mission to a new planet. Pointing the radio forward, he began to scan for other life forms, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure he couldn't be snuck up on. As the snow began to stop falling, he pulled the sleeve up from his wrist, pressing down on one of his watch buttons, and began speaking into it.

"Calling the *Enterprise*. The weather on this planet seems unpredictable. I may need to take a sample." He motioned the radio around himself in a circle. "I'm not detecting any alien life. This is a bust. Beam me up, Scotty." He waited to be deconstructed and transported. But there was no beam. There was no device.

Just Daniel and a useless radio. He knew that PJ would have made fun of him if he had seen that.

He started to feel self-conscious, so he set the bag down again and put the radio away. As he stood back up, he noticed that the forest was beginning to open up. As he walked, the clumps of trees began to thin out. Throwing the backpack back over his shoulder, he started to increase his pacing until he ended up on a hill, overlooking a neighborhood. He had reached the other side of the woods. Daniel took this as good news. The red maple would have to wait for another day. At least he was free of the forest, even if he still didn't know where he was.

Making his way down the hill, he found himself in the backyard of a small house. The house looked strange, as if it was lived in but not cared for. Adjacent from the house was a shed that was physically blocked off by boxes and crates. Up against the side of the house was an older bicycle and large piles of wood, maybe for a fire. On the back porch, there were a few dead plants and a rusted set of outdoor furniture.

He started to make his way through the yard, hoping that if he got to the street he would recognize where he was. Halfway through the yard, the glass door of the house violently opened. An old woman shot her head out and began yelling.

"James. James, what are you doing outside in the cold? Get in here." Her voice was shrill and loud. Daniel was confused. He didn't know who James was, so he decided to keep walking. She cried out again.

"James, don't you turn away from me. Get inside before I call your mother." He was scared. The lady was obviously yelling at him. She must have him confused with someone else.

"My name isn't James. I don't know who that is. I'm just going home." His voice started to crack under the pressure. This only seemed to make her angrier.

"Oh, playing games are we?" She bolted out of her house, which surprised Daniel. She was wearing a thin nightgown and a robe, and no shoes. Although she had to be freezing, Daniel assumed her rage must have been keeping her warm. She grabbed his arm and yanked him toward the house. "Now get inside before I call your mother and explain to her why her son decided to pick a fight with his grandmother."

Daniel tried to pull back, but he was afraid he would hurt her. She yanked on his arm again, and used her other hand to swat at Daniel with a newspaper. Daniel raised his arms to block the blows.

She was old, older than his grandmother was when she died. She looked like she could have been broken with a small push. She didn't seem dangerous, just mean and mistaken. He let her pull him inside the house, hoping that explaining his situation would make her understand that he wasn't whomever she was looking for.

Somehow, the inside of the house looked worse than the outside. He assumed he was in the living room, as there was scattered furniture pointed in different directions. There were stacks of newspapers and boxes randomly placed throughout the room, which towered fairly close to the ceiling. Walking through them gave Daniel the sense of what it was like to be Godzilla stomping through a city. He resisted the urge to knock one of the stacks down.

"Sit down, dear," she said faintly, "I'll make you a cup of hot chocolate. But don't think you're out of trouble yet." Her tone had shifted, and she suddenly sounded more loving. "Why did you run away this time, James?" Her voice was faint in the kitchen, overburdened by the sounds of pots and pans being shifted.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Daniel was growing more anxious. He wondered if she was playing a weird game with him that he didn't know the rules to.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Jimmy, then. I thought your mother told me you wanted to stop being called that." The sounds of clanking metal emanated from the other room. Judging her house by the room he was in, he couldn't imagine that the kitchen looked much better.

The house was far too cold to be comfortable. Making out the shape of a fireplace on one side of the room, Daniel tried to push two of the stacks of newspapers out of the way, attempting to keep them on balance. But something caught his eye. Several pictures were hung on the wall and placed on the mantle above the fireplace. Some of them were old, but a few looked like they could have been taken as early as a few years ago. They varied in subjects, ranging from children to wedding photos. He picked up one of the more recent pictures, which looked like the kind of family portrait people would pay to take at the mall. The kids, a boy and a girl, looked to be around his age, give or take a few years.

"I just have to heat up the oven..." The old woman trailed off as she came back into the living room. Daniel turned toward her, noticing that her face had taken an odd shape. "Who are you? What are you doing in my house?" Her voice was softer, and sounded both scared and confused.

"I'm Daniel. I was on my way home when you brought me inside. You kept calling me 'James.'" He tried to remain still.

“James...” Her voice faded again as she walked towards Daniel. She took the photo from Daniel’s hands, and looked at it. Her eyes became fixated, as if she were trying to see the hidden image in one of the “magic eye” pictures that Daniel’s dad had shown him.

Daniel watched her nervously. He knew she had him confused for someone else, but had come inside anyway. He could tell that she had grown upset and he was worried that she would find a way to contact his mother, worried that he wouldn’t know how to explain the situation. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I think I was mistaken.” Her eyes didn’t lift from the photo.

“It’s okay,” he tried to divert the subject in hopes to start heading home, “I was just coming inside for a second anyway. I was a little lost, but I think I’ll be able to find my way home by following the road from here. I should probably go.” She continued to focus on the photograph. After a few seconds, she placed it back on the mantle, and looked towards the others.

“Okay,” she said quietly, “I’m sorry if I scared you, young man. I lose myself sometimes.” She eyed the photos, occasionally glancing from one to the other, like she was solving a puzzle. It seemed like she was missing a piece.

Daniel started to put his coat back on, but he couldn’t get over the feeling that something was wrong. He turned toward the woman again, but she remained still. “Who is James?” he asked.

She didn’t turn towards him. “He was my grandson,” she stopped, correcting herself, “...*is* my grandson.”

Daniel came closer, looking at the photo on the mantle. He pointed to the boy. “Is that him?”

She looked back at the family portrait, smiling. It was the type of smile that people would use when they wanted to pretend to be happy, just to get someone off their back. “Yes. I haven’t seen him in a long time.” She reached out and touched the framing of the photo, using her thumb to wipe away the dust that covered James’s face. “He used to visit me a lot with his mother.” Her smile turned into a frown.

“What happened to them?” Daniel asked.

She looked at him for the first time since she had seen the photograph. He could tell that she was holding back tears. “I don’t know.”

The oven let out a loud beeping noise, and the old woman decided to turn her focus again to the hot chocolate. Daniel followed her into the kitchen that was,

unsurprisingly, as cluttered as the living room. It didn't look dirty, necessarily. It reminded him of how his room would look when he tried to find something he had misplaced, like homework or the second controller for the Nintendo.

"Did you say your name was Daniel?" she asked as she fiddled with the stovetop's control system. Daniel had tried to learn how to use an oven before, but had burnt his hands. His mom still scolded him about it. He nodded, watching her as she mixed ingredients like a witch making potion in a cauldron.

"Well, my name is Helen. It is nice to meet you." She stopped for a moment, alternating between staring at the pan and closing her eyes. Daniel noticed and tried to help.

"You need milk, right?" he asked, "You make hot chocolate like my mom makes it." He opened her fridge and found the milk, gesturing it towards her. She smiled and thanked him, pouring a few cups into the pan.

She transferred the liquid into two mugs and maneuvered to sit them down on the kitchen table, asking Daniel to push aside more books and newspapers. They spent the next hour or so sipping on hot chocolate and talking. Helen told Daniel that she hadn't seen the rest of her family in a year or so. She explained that as she started to forget more things, they stopped visiting, and eventually stopped talking to her altogether. Daniel expressed bewilderment at this.

Daniel went on to explain the circumstances that led to his arrival at Helen's house. He even felt comfortable enough to tell her the silly parts, where he was worried about PJ's wendigos and pretended he was a space-explorer.

"I don't think that's very silly," she said frankly, "In fact, when I was your age, I used to get in all types of trouble. I wanted to be an explorer like Marco Polo or Harriet Adams, and I made my father furious because I would sneak out of church to explore the woods and the creek. He would scold me for getting my dresses dirty." She smiled wide as she focused on the memory. Daniel wondered why certain things were easier for her to focus on, but others put her mind into a frenzy. She made her way back into the conversation. "So what happened to your friend?"

"He just walked off. I wouldn't be surprised if he's sitting at home playing video games. He's done stuff like that before. When we were in elementary school, he used to pick fights with the bigger kids and run away when they'd decide to fight back, leaving me alone to apologize for him or get picked on."

"He doesn't sound like much of a friend."

"You're probably right," Daniel laughed.

Helen took hold of the two empty mugs and placed them in the sink. “Now, Daniel, as nice as this has been, you should probably head back to your mother. She must be worried sick about you.” Daniel glanced at the clock on the wall and began to panic. He had told his mom that he would be back by dinnertime, and it was already almost four o’clock.

“Wow, you’re right. It shouldn’t take me as long following the road, but I didn’t realize it was this late.” She smiled at him.

“You’re a lot like him,” she said, “My grandson, James.” She paused, finding the memories.

“You said something about him running away?” Daniel asked, somewhat regretfully. Maybe it wasn’t his place.

“He would fight with my daughter a lot, for stupid reasons. Children can be a fickle bunch,” she turned toward him, laughing. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Daniel said.

“Well, he would end up here every time, but he always seemed to not know why. But I knew that it was because he was scared and wanted me to take him home. He never wanted to run away, he just wanted to make her upset.” She chuckled to herself, but allowed her eyes to focus back onto Daniel. “Why were you out there in the woods this morning? Don’t tell me it was all your friend’s idea.” Daniel shifted in his seat.

“My dad used to take me out there. Before he died.” He reached for his bag, unzipping and pulling out the tattered copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “Once, we sat under a big tree and he read this book to me. I wanted to find that tree. I never did.” Helen took the book into her hands, smiling.

“I remember this one.” She closed her eyes, searching for something. “Delete the adjectives, then you’d have the facts. It’s a good one.” Daniel smiled at her quote.

“I thought finding the tree would help me remember him more.” Helen looked again at Daniel.

“Take it from me, the tree won’t help.” Daniel’s expression dropped at her words. She noticed this. “You just have to focus. Focus on that moment in your head. The tree is just a tree. And just because you didn’t find it today doesn’t mean it’s not out there. Maybe you’ll find it one day. But you should ask yourself if you’re searching for something that isn’t there. The tree won’t be like you remembered it, and your father won’t be there.” She glanced back at the mantle through the archway to the kitchen.

Daniel flashed her a puzzled look, but she ignored it. “Now, you better get going. The clock’s ticking. I don’t want to be responsible for a scared mother.”

He thanked her for the hot chocolate, and she thanked him for the company. Daniel offered to come back when the weekend came, but Helen politely declined, saying she didn’t want him to worry about her. It didn’t matter. He had already decided that he would.

Stepping back into the wilderness, he set off toward the main road. He briefly looked back at the woods, picturing the red maple again, this time in the winter, jagged branches where the bright red leaves had been before. He closed his eyes and focused in on Helen’s words. The tree was just a tree.

Daniel took a few more final glances at the woods that he was leaving behind, sometimes imagining a young Helen weaving through the trees, looking for a new adventure.



Don't Let Go

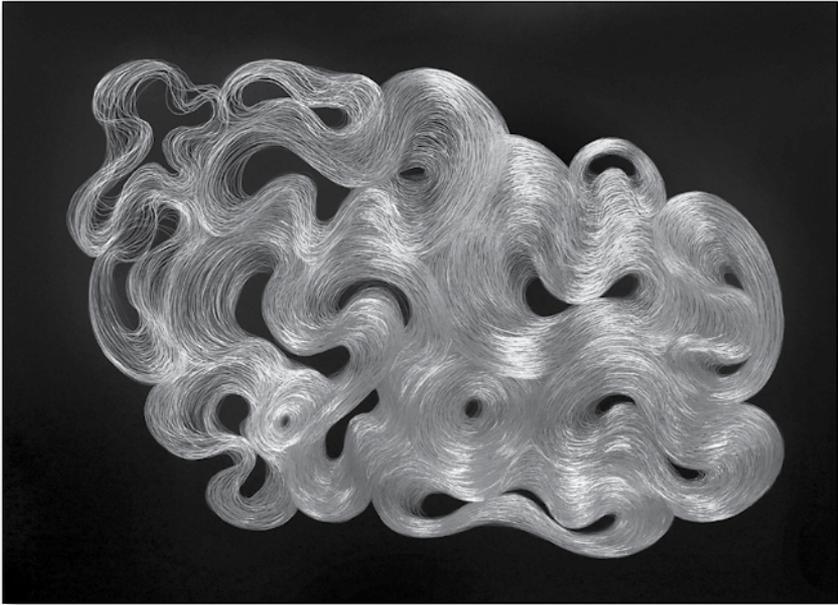
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Kathryn Haaland Greene

Meta-Forms

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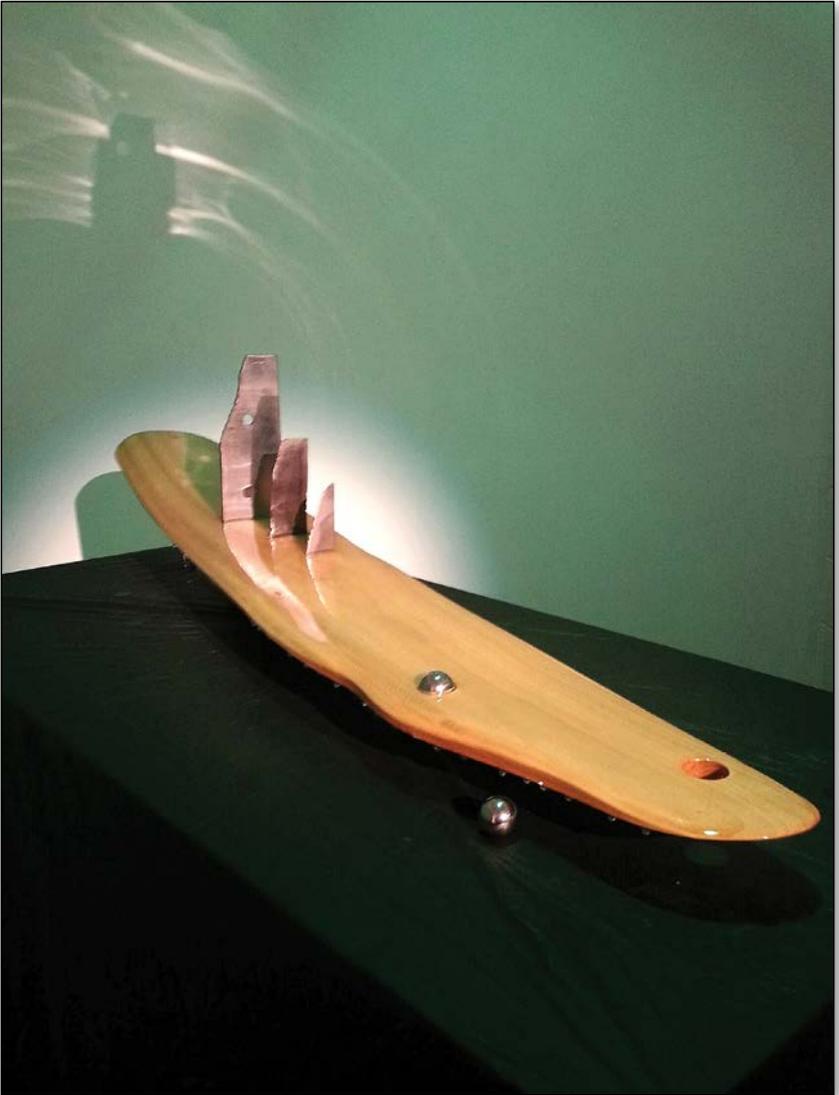


Rickey Bump

1st Prize, Tennessee Craft Award and Sculpture Juror's Choice

Pythagorean Decay

Sponsored by Catherine Murray Fund



Todd Simmons

2nd Prize, Tennessee Craft Award and Ceramics Juror's Choice

Submarine

Sponsored by Tennessee Craft



Jodie Strapp

↳ 3rd Prize, Tennessee Craft Award and Fibers Juror's Choice ↲

Amethyst

Sponsored by Tennessee Craft & Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Emily Parris

Graphic Design Juror's Choice

Sugarcoated

Sponsored by Fletcher H. Dyer Scholarship Memorial Fund



Michelle Benson

Self Discovery

Sponsored by Soleus Massage



Shai Perry

Emily

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Katie Murphy

Printmaking Juror's Choice

Sentiments 3 & 4

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Rebecca Cox

Mavka

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Jared Sapp

Toothless

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Hannah Schean

↳ *Sherrod Library Purchase Award* ↲

Philosophy Department

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Matthew Brown

Faculty Award

Honey, Sweetie, Sugar

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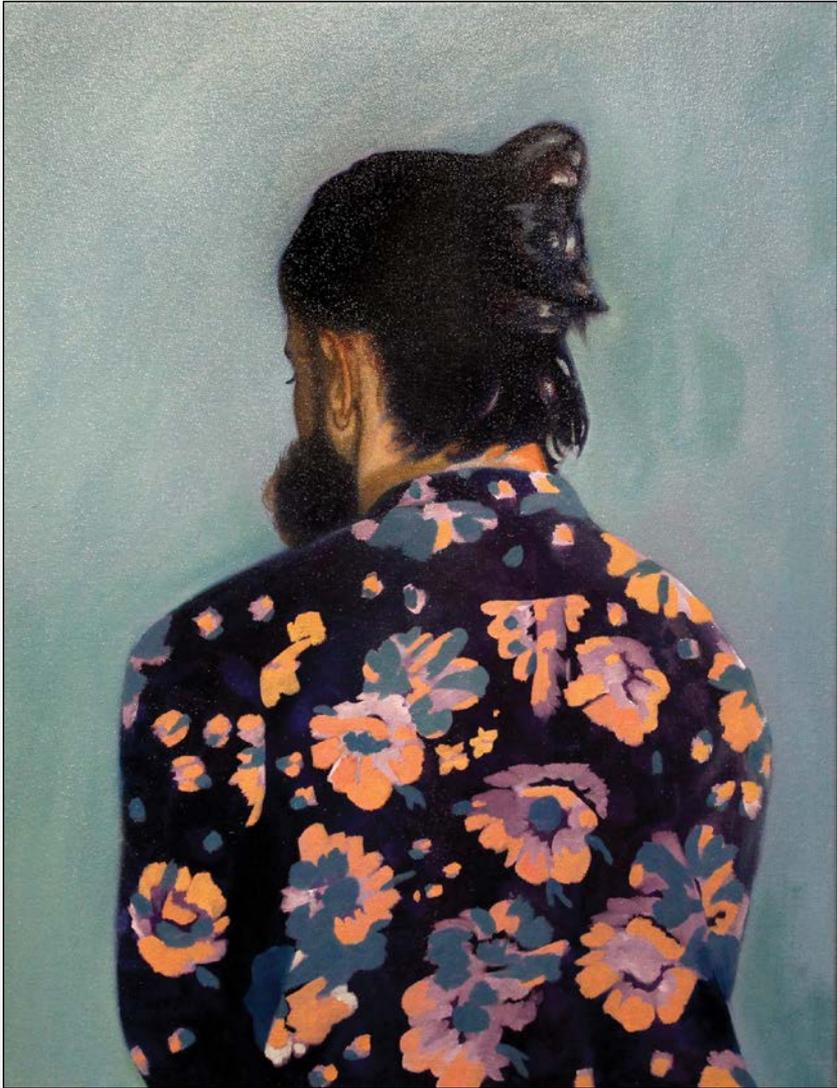


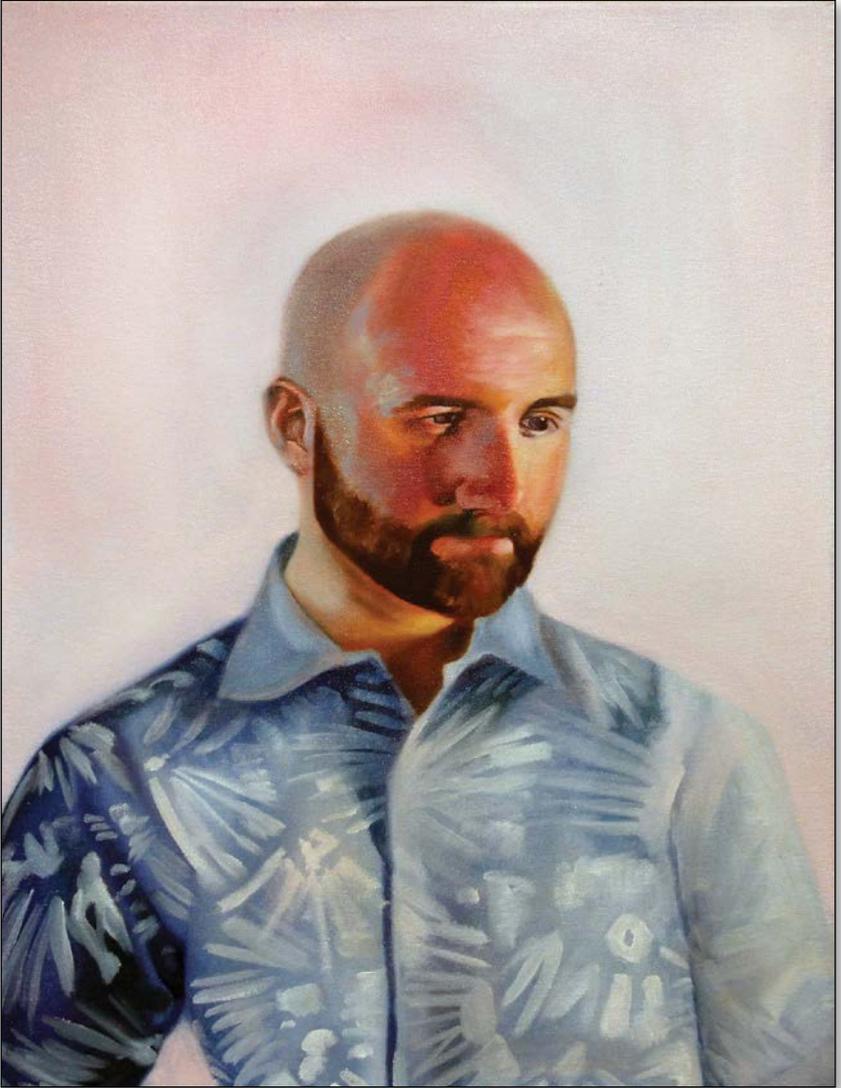
Brooke Day

Painting Juror's Choice

Illusion and Virile

Sponsored by Nelson Fine Art Center





Andrew Norris

Respect

Sponsored by The Honors College



Rick Harris

In-Between

Abby N. Lewis

Too big to simply carry to bed.
Too small to wake.
That nasty in-between
of adolescence where
even your parents don't know
how to treat you anymore.
So they let you lie
half-awake in the
backseat of the car,
convinced you'll
instinctively rise and
follow them inside
in a few minutes.

When you don't,
they pretend not
to notice, call you
cute in your
absence, as if you
were still that
three-year-old toddler
tripping through their house—
not the stranger
asleep
in the backseat of the car.



Mirror Perceptions

Abby N. Lewis

I.

The author of the ballerina book asks me why I'm here, at
this internship.
I tell her I want to be a book editor, that this is good practice.

She nods, agrees, asks me where I plan on getting a job.
Nashville, I say,
because it's the closest city to home that has a Simon & Schuster.

She's been to Nashville. She says it's sort of depressing—a lot of
women with
guitars on street corners, hoping to be discovered—the next
Taylor Swift.

II.

At the fundraiser, an old woman comes in, the mother-in-law of
one of the authors. She
sits in a chair across from me and a little to the right. We make eye
contact and she winks.

The publisher, my boss, leans in next to me and whispers the
woman is a psychic. I don't
know how much I believe in psychics, but I do believe I want to get
to know this one.

Later, after the food is served, she sits beside me, asks that question
again, why am I here? I tell
her what I tell everyone. She smiles. *I was hoping you'd say
something in the music industry.*

My head tilts to the right, thrown off by her reply. *I only ask*, she says, *because when I saw you across the room earlier, you had music notes above your head.*

The whites of my eyes expand in the reflection of her glasses. I've always loved music. I could be a singer, I think, yet all I can picture are lonely women with even lonelier guitars

sitting on unforgiving brick steps outside glass buildings, their image distorted in the windows of skyscrapers. OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE LARGER THAN THEY APPEAR.

III.

The food is gone, the wine supply is dwindling. The old woman stands to leave, gives me a final farewell wink. She tells me she looks forward to hearing my music.

I wish I could go with her, hope that I see her again. As the glass door closes behind her, I realize OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR, not LARGER.



Blue Chair

Nancy Jane Earnest

After we dug ramps
off the hill by the laurel thicket,
and the curse of this hateful winter
was trying to break itself,
the picture man came up from town,
hauling his black box and the
pieces of dirty glass he pokes in it,
and he sets it up by the spring house.
Mom and Pap first. No smiles.
Then us young'uns all washed
and cleaned up good like Sunday.
But before the man could pop
that light again, Pap goes inside
for the little chair he made you,
blue paint peeling off the hickory splits
he weaved so fine,
and he sets the empty chair in the
middle of us, taking up the hole
winter made. But no picture can ever
remember the sweet smile that was on your face
when you left us.



Close to the Moon

Brandon Bragg

Here I sit, dusty from the road, but the offshore wind blows cold outside of this Baltimore Holiday Inn barroom. The November sky fades through the wall of windows as twilight and darkness creep in. Right on time, the horizon rises to hide that daytime ball of blaze and glory.

The sun slowly disappears like a swollen dead sailor sinking into the sea. I've always felt closer to the moon. (Philosophically...and literally I guess.)

So I trap myself at nighttime with all the stories played out on some whitewashed brown barroom stage. My role is a simple one right now, as I hide in the corner in the shadows down by the industrial ice machine, way back at the yonder end of a deserted bar. An empty Budweiser bottle stares back at me from my distant seclusion, yet my half full bottle of Coors quietly takes my side. The only other motion is the scarce barmaid darting in and out, not bringing my beer fast enough. But she's nice. She is an African American, and she is a knockout.

I know it, but she knows it, even the beer bottles know it. She has a tattoo of the word "snake" on her neck, and she's ten feet tall and bullet-proof. She's a real specimen. Ten years ago I would have tried conversation with her. Ten years ago it wouldn't have worked. I wasn't nearly as cool, calm, collected and/or handsome. I would have made an ass out of myself. Then she'd feel uncomfortable, and then I'd get uncomfortable. Then we would break off conversation with, "I had to ask," and "I'm flattered, really, it's just . . ." Then I would get really drunk.

Now I skip all the drama and just get drunk, gaining age in a fast-forward motion. I burn the candles at both ends, then I break them in half and light the middle. I spend my life working too hard and playing too hard, and I'm in dire need to change the routine. But the night falls on me. The darkness revives me and the twinkles in the eyes; the gleams of the bottles at night captivate my mind.

It's that feeling you get on the wide-open nights when you down gin and tonics while watching people dancing and you laugh until your ribs hurt, or the nights when you meet with a couple friends and brush off the day with a few cold ones and a baseball game on the tele. It's those beautiful nights when you make beautiful love to a beautiful woman, or even the rainy November, Baltimore nights hidden in the corner, down by the ice machine, in the shadows just reflecting life.

I have always felt closer to the moon.

It rises and falls differently than the sun. The moon is more random, romantic, inspiring, and most of all haunting. Finally the barmaid brings me another Coors, and I'm hungry. I ask for a menu. She brings it. People are trickling in. They are like moths to a flame, at night. They are flies hovering over dead rotting flesh on a burning sun highway. I'm the moth without any wings, under the flame, endlessly trying to jump high enough. I hide in this corner. I order a salad (ranch), a T-bone (bloody but not cold), potato, another Coors.

The bar has come to life now with a bus load of fraternity-faced soccer chumps from some New York shit-hole, a Jewish couple in a heated lovers argument, a middle-aged gay man with a cell phone glued to his ear, and a few scattered walk-on characters, they line up here, before this bar, beer bottle in hand, just hoping to find the garden of Eden tonight, within the barley and fermentation and within the beautiful barmaid. None of us are new at this game. We have all been drunk before, we've all been laid, we all drive a car, and we have all felt lost in our own homes. Especially me and the beautiful barmaid...we've seen tragedy and madness. We've known love and hate. I'm not sure about the rest. But we line up here like a tribal community, meeting at a watering hole with all the rituals and fear. The difference these days is that the water has alcohol in it, and it comes in a glass.

These holes are more comfortable and convenient, and the hunt...oh the "hunt" these days.

Now the hunt is the jobs to pay for all this mess. That's the blood, sweat, and tears to pay for all the booze, sex, and gasoline. That's where all this ends. The problem is that the victim is no longer a deer, or buffalo, or elk, or moose. Our prey is ourselves, and our method is the flame.

We corrode our own lives with the candles we burn, the brain cells, the cigarettes and the endless hours looking for that mystical garden. The one we believe in but can't realize, the one where we can tolerate the sunshine, the one where everything is going to be okay. But we just keep coming to this purgatory

while looking for heaven, until last call. That's when the crying ashtrays and heart-broken beer and liquor bottles go back to sleep again before our part of this spinning ball of water, dirt, and madness twists around to face that star of light and gravity. We come here when the moon smiles, even if it's hidden by clouds; we come here when the moon is on our side.

I have always felt closer to the moon.



River of Salvation

Mark Hutton

August's beams blazed down to dusk, and bent us low.
We'd walk from barn to field, stoop and cut,
plunge wooden spears into thick, green stalks,
down one tobacco row, up the next.

We'd rise, choir-like, dazed by sweat, heat,
And stare at Mossy Creek as it snaked the field,
called like a Siren. We longed for Lazarus to dip his finger,
and touch our tongues. Overcome, we'd slide down the bank,
slip past cattails and sink into her bracing current.

Once we found a melon among the reeds, plump and green.
Church folk used the river to baptize each other in Jesus' name,
and to keep their melons cold.



Midlife

Mark Hutton

Summer's long light gives way with
Autumn's nearness. It tempers a soul,
reminds that winter comes to balance out
the longing and the dread.

Should I rage, dare I disturb the universe?
Or should I like a whisper go?

Embers, though dying, still burn flesh and fields.
Wasps sting but once and leave pain in their passing.
Perhaps, though in finch to hawk and bees to rose,
a better lesson lies.

She leaves her brood, prey to the predator
Young to replace old. And the rose spreads her petals,
beguiles the bee to lie with her,
to gather and scatter, while she wilts and dies.



Styrofoam and String

Seth Grindstaff

How is it that our cups overflow at such d i s t a n c e ?

The knotted yarn is a slack-less memory-share, v b a i g

i r t n s

o

u

t

hward.

How is it that we are a part

n

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a l

r i

of this flood-feeling



The In-between (Or, *En Svenska Historia*)

Bradley Hartsell

Two years ago, I was living in Georgia, and I was miserable.

Alone, I began regretting my haphazard move from home. Trying to escape bad memories in Tennessee only reinforced the feeling of defeat. Instead of finding any sense of liberation, I sequestered myself inside routine.

Home. Work. Home. Work. Cat! Home. Work. Dead cat. Work.

In another idle evening on my laptop, I came across a Forbes slideshow ranking the twenty happiest and twenty unhappiest countries.

I love lists.

Each slide had a picture and general responses from a country's people; their reports concerned issues like healthcare, safety, tolerance. Nordic countries dominated the top ten. Everything I read, from Switzerland to New Zealand, was new to me.

Mostly, though, I found Scandinavia incandescent. The pictures displayed quaint buildings on a glassy waterfront, all in beautiful shades of pastel. The description told of a secular, affluent culture, where people felt free, content, and unthreatened.

Maybe I just hadn't escaped far enough, I thought. I kept visualizing Oslo. Stockholm. Reykjavik.

I'd been to New York. I did Chicago and Washington DC for a few days. And Myrtle Beach...over and over and over and over. My traveling dossier was rail thin. And why shouldn't it be? I was scared to fly; I'd never drank; I'd take a girlfriend, but *what would I tell my parents?*

After two years of languishing, I was laid-off for writing a pro-gay op-ed for the newspaper I was writing for. At my emotional nadir, I was too despondent to act on my new fixation on Scandinavia. Feeling lost, I moved back home to Tennessee, though I kept jabbing myself with a recurring realization: I am a product of fear.

Everybody says they're going to do something, then never follow through, I thought. I kept reading about Sweden and Norway, and was becoming transfixed with that part of the world. I touched base with an old Swedish friend I made through an Animal Collective message board years prior; I checked job sites out of morbid curiosity.

I had some money saved up, and put some impetus on myself by applying for a passport.

Six months of unemployment provided some kind of convalescence, but when the checks ran out, I was left with the option of going back to school or finding work. I applied for both, expecting to start ETSU the following fall while working to make ends meet. Though I couldn't get scheduled for the GRE until after the spring semester had started, fortune intervened as the department voted me in as a late admission. Now knowing I had summer break, I became infatuated with spending a chunk of it abroad.

The more I studied about the Nordic countries, the more Sweden (the largest of the five countries) appealed to me. Intentionally, though with a touch of naivety, I had a no real tourist itinerary; I just wanted to start in Stockholm and roam from there. I had seen Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*, where Ethan Hawke's and Julie Delpy's characters walk aimlessly around Vienna talking and connecting with one another. I didn't hold any romantic notions of appearing at Historic Museum of History at 15:10 sharp—*ticket!, thank you, sir, ohh, that's beautiful*. I wanted to walk from one end of the city to the next with my girlfriend, tell the best jokes, have meaningful moments of quiet—I wanted to learn about myself.

I had made up my mind that I didn't want to stay in hotels. I was put off by this notion of sterility in them—would a Swedish Hilton be any different from an American Hilton? Hostels, on the other hand, seemed cramped and invasive. I had heard about Airbnb and loved the idea—staying in a real home of actual citizens; this felt like the most authentic way to travel. Satisfied, I tried mapping the logistics: I knew I wanted to start in Stockholm, but then where? Gothenburg? Oslo? Copenhagen?

Father John Misty, an American singer/songwriter who dominated my listening interests in early 2016, listed his European tour dates. It seemed too serendipitous when his Nordic dates aligned with my summer break. His show in Gothenburg (about three hours southwest of Stockholm) was sold out, as was the one in Oslo (in Norway, almost five hours west of Stockholm).

Copenhagen (in Denmark, nearly six hours southwest of Stockholm) was still available, and thus, the second leg of my trip was solidified. I was conflicted,

however, because my brain works in rigid categorization; though Denmark is Nordic, and though it's currently considered the "happiest" country in the world, it's not in that recognizable landmass in northwest Europe that looks like fingers—Norway, Sweden, and Finland. My mind kept leaning towards Oslo, but I continued comparing the superficialities I privilege, like color and aesthetic, and massaged my apprehension about Copenhagen.

I decided I'd spend three weeks in Europe; my girlfriend, Cayla, would stay for two of them before meeting up with her archeology team for work in Israel, and I would have another week to go (or return) to whatever struck me while there. Feeling set, I booked our plane tickets, the Father John Misty concert, train tickets to Stockholm to Gothenburg, then to Copenhagen, a couple nights in a Gothenburg hostel, and a week apiece at Airbnbs in Stockholm and Copenhagen. Plane tickets were especially difficult because I was highly particular about wanting the first country I touch down in to be Sweden. Most flights had layovers, some in Paris, some in London, some in Amsterdam, but it'd cheapen my experience to be somewhere foreign besides Sweden first. I had the fortune, though, of finding a flight out of Knoxville to Chicago, then directly to Stockholm Arlanda Airport. It was \$100 cheaper and almost half less travel time than most other flights (that had added layovers). Fortunately, I had thwarted my fear of flying by having to go to my best friend's wedding in Key West the previous summer, but nine hours in the air was still daunting.

Due to a complicated process with my girlfriend's archeology team, we ended up having to take different flights, and I had nine hours to anxiously contemplate how much money I had just used to fill some vague void. I'm a homebody. The only two places I've ever taken initiative to significantly travel to were Chicago for Pitchfork Music Festival and Washington DC to visit a close friend. I lived thirty minutes south of Atlanta and, in two years, probably went to the city a dozen times. I didn't drink, for one, which meant no classic European pub crawls. I became panicked that after a week, we'd be holed up in the room and I'd have to go take obligatory visits to museums with her; the last week by myself could be an immolation of being abroad.

When I touched down, just navigating through Arlanda overwhelmed me, though not from some culture shock. After all, Sweden is fluent in English, and for several months, I had been trying to learn their Swedish on Duolingo—while at a comically low level, I could manage knowing enough key Swedish words on signs. Rather, the anxiety from my flight surged. Having to wait on my girlfriend for several hours to get in from her Amsterdam connector, I was uncomfortable and didn't bother talking to anyone; I sat on a bench in some forgotten corner of Arlanda, dreading the next three weeks. I had long been

suspicious of “big events” being a vacuum that sucked in time and finances and returned...what? A couple of stories? You came back home the same person. I felt like I conned myself. I had built Sweden into something transcendent but it would just be another place with people and buildings and food and sofas to lounge on while the hours ticked by.

My girlfriend finally got into Arlanda, and our Airbnb host, Oskar, was kind enough to pick us up; he borrowed his mother’s Volvo—made in Gothenburg—and drove us around the city. Oskar was a scruffy but chic blonde in his early thirties. He was playing my kind of music—I can remember LCD Soundsystem and Mount Eerie coming on. We made small talk with him as we drove, passing by country and quaint towns on the way to metro Stockholm. It all took maybe forty-five minutes, and there was something peaceful about driving through a place not so different from coming into Nashville.

Oskar took us to the apartment we were staying at in the borough of Hägersten, which is quieter, almost like a suburb of Stockholm (though only a ten-minute metro ride to downtown). The apartment belonged to his girlfriend, Kiki, and when she moved in with him, they put the place on Airbnb. When he took us up, I felt all my cynicism melt away; it was a small one-bedroom flat like you’d expect in New York, but it was clean and minimal and *real*. There was no room service to clean after some Shell middle manager passed through; rather, Kiki tidied up the place she had lived in earlier that year. As we made ourselves comfortable, Oskar came back with patio furniture; after that, he politely wished us a good week and that was the last we saw of him.

A week in a Swedish apartment was disarming, like I was a VIP in some Hands On Museum exhibit. Oddly, though, being in tune with the surreal hit a fever pitch when my girlfriend and I went to Hemköp, a grocery store chain. There’s something comical about admitting to being deeply moved walking through aisles of meat and jam, but I was in awe trying to translate all the products, signs, prices from Swedish, all while listening to people shopping around me speaking Swedish. Tabloids filled the queue, all in Swedish but with Americanesque rhetoric about celebrity culture. In line with our sandwich and breakfast food, the cashier and the customer ahead of me made small talk in Swedish; when I came up, I said “hello,” and she seamlessly spoke to me in English. I was both impressed and envied the cultural fluidity. This country felt enough like America to be welcoming, but so deeply specific as to be completely alien.

The country’s natural strangeness struck me almost as much as the cultural. Though I wasn’t jetlagged, adjusting to the prolonged sunlight was joyfully disorienting. In the late spring and summer, it’s only *dark* in Sweden for about

three hours; midnight looks like twilight. Time blended all together as we started the week visiting churches and museums and exploring different aspects of the fourteen island archipelago, like Gamla Stan (“The Old Town”), whose tourist-attracting gift shops felt so much like Gatlinburg.

After four days, though, this novelty had worn off; something more essential struck me. Standing in Kiki’s modern European shower, I swelled with an identity crisis.

First, I started feeling badly for my girlfriend. In twenty-six years, I’d never taken a sip of alcohol, and I had long worn it as a badge of honor. I was especially proud that I had no particular reason, other than *I don’t feel like it*. With no moral or religious conviction, I didn’t judge people for drinking, nor did I have any family history or scarring experiences with alcohol. I held this trait as my trademark characteristic; hell, I thought it was a little bit charming. Cayla accepted this, but now I wondered: deep down, did she enjoy not going to a bar or seeing the Swedish nightlife? After five or six o’clock, when museums and attractions had closed, we’d slowly start heading back to the apartment. I’d say I would be fine with going out, but it took every bit of those twenty-six years to realize it’d be too inhibitive: your partner doesn’t like drinking alone, and no matter how hard I try, I’m too reticent to feel completely comfortable in a space where I’m the only sober one. In addition, it felt so limiting to travel all this way and not connect with a Swede. Nordic people are much more reserved than Americans, and it was naïve to think some meaningful moment would occur on the metro or in Hemköp.

All of this made me start questioning the foundation of this prideful personal streak. I *happened* to be born in America, particularly the South, where alcohol is drilled as a taboo *until you’re* twenty-one. I suspect this suppression festers, then explodes, meaning that “drinking culture” for teenagers is an elaborate comedy of errors, trying to get drunk at all costs. In Europe, though, alcohol is almost treated as soda—everyone I saw had beer or wine to go with their meal. The laws are laxer; the culture’s attitude is far more accepting. If I had been born in Europe, say Stockholm, I asked myself, *would I have taken a drink by now?* Absolutely yes. When I thought how proud I was of being secularly non-drinking, I had to remember a fact I had conveniently buried: The reason I did not drink began as fear. My friends started drinking when we were about fifteen, and I was still colloquially religious, as were they, but I didn’t want to get in trouble and disappoint my parents. As I intellectually grew away from religion, my “code” morphed with it, but it took until that Swedish shower to locate its source.

The problem was, of course, you can’t try alcohol for the first time and be-

come a regular Norm Peterson. The next day, at the restaurant Blå Dörren (“The Blue Door”) I enjoyed one of the most delicious meals in memory—traditional meatballs served over gravy and mashed potatoes. It was there that I decided to break my strongest inhibition. I got water but Cayla ordered the special, a Falcon Export lager. I sat there holding her glass for ten minutes, my mind swirling with indecision and ensuing regret for saying goodbye to a significant part of myself. I finally took a sip. I hated it.

Maybe I had grown away from looking down on friends who drank, but I was judging myself, and feeling a strange dissociation from my long-self-constructed image. Plus, I thought it tasted terrible. It wasn’t until I tried Cayla’s Somersby apple cider in Gothenburg a couple days later that I found some resemblance of decent taste for my inchoate palate. By the time we were seeing Father John Misty in Copenhagen a week later, I was just comfortable enough to order my own Somersby, feeling weirdly guilty with every sip and thinking it was too damn sweet to keep drinking. Still, I felt a new sense of pride, one where I knew I had conquered some large and fearful part of myself.

I even started finding this new sense taking root in seemingly lighthearted instances. Halfway up the helical corridor of Copenhagen’s 137-foot Rundetaarn (“The Round Tower”) is a niche in the center; stepping into the hollowed-out stone, a person has only Plexiglas sustaining them from what looks like a black fall into oblivion. On the way up, I tried stepping in but became paralyzed; I couldn’t do it. As we strolled around the top observation deck, though, I kept chastising myself. Just as I did when I had to control my fear of flying, I ran the crude numbers through my head: *was I really going to be the first person the Plexiglas fails?* Coming down, in defiance of a former self, I stood inside the niche, put my hands at my side, and looked down. It both terrifying and empowering.

In Copenhagen as it came time for Cayla to leave, I still hadn’t decided how I’d spend my final week. Feeling anxious, after she fell asleep, I texted my uncle, a longtime Delta employee. I asked if I could change my flight—maybe I’d only stay for an extra day or two—but he told me how costly it would be, and thought I should try to enjoy the time I have left. We both agreed—how many chances to do you have to be in Europe? Feeling less reluctant, I decided to stay a couple more days in Copenhagen and finish my trip by returning to Stockholm. Oslo was out—every person I spoke to, from Oskar to the American emigrant we met at a German restaurant, said it was the most expensive Nordic city with the least culture; Norway was great, they all said, but only if you explored its natural wonders, like its many beautiful fjords. That same American emigrant told me about a cheap weekend cruise liner that would hit Helsinki and Estonia,

and sometimes St. Petersburg. It sounded great, but when he told me about it, I hadn't even tried Cayla's Falcon Export—I certainly wasn't ready for a crescendo of vodka. Trying to justify staying an extra week in Europe, I stayed conservative and money conscious, booking Copenhagen and Stockholm hostels.

The solo Copenhagen experience was regrettable. I was lonely, all with an awful toothache that wasn't going away, so I largely confined myself to the dingy hostel, which was much less inviting than the Gothenburg one. I went out for the massive Distortion street festival, where seemingly anything goes. Though I had broken the seal, I was still not comfortable with drinking, so I walked around sober by myself, unable to enjoy something almost objectively great. Feeling empty, I got on the train to Stockholm—five days left, all with no plans.

I took the Stockholm metro to Skarpnäck, the end of the green line that made the Hägersten Telefonplan station seem bustling in comparison. Americans would see this area as far more “working class,” though this being a socially democratic country, I can't speak to the distinction's accuracy. I found my hostel, but the door was locked. I knocked. No answer. I walk around the building, double check my map, see it's the right place, knock again. Some man comes to the door and seems a bit confused when I ask if this is the hostel. Finally, he seems to make enough sense of what I'm asking and grabs a young woman, whom I take to be his sister, for me to talk to. She says they've been having issues with Hotels.com (where I booked the hostel), and that she thinks no room is available but she'd double check. She is wearing, I should say, a faded Garfield t-shirt. This is *not* reassuring attire.

She makes a phone call to her boss, whom I can hear enough of on the other line. She's speaking in her native language (not Swedish, not that I'd understand anyway), but her boss seems to be talking in English, at least enough for me to hear him ask “How does he look?”

“Good,” she says. *Good? Good for what?* I wonder.

Her two brothers sit at the table in the lobby. I think they're watching YouTube videos. She takes me into the office and says it looks like there *is* a room available after all. She asks to make a copy of my driver's license, which I assent to, then asks me if I want to pay now or in the morning. Being whatever this place is, and on the fritz with Hotels.com, is helpful because I haven't been charged yet via the site. I tell her I'd like to get settled, I'll pay in the morning. She takes me upstairs to what I imagine a boarding house looks like; she opens the door to my room, and I am briefly intrigued that I could have my own space, as austere as it is. The intrigue quickly gives way to the reality of the situation. There's a bed, desk, and TV; I sit down and start to mentally ream through my options.

There's no readily available wifi, so I have to go back downstairs to get the password from the lady. Back upstairs, I check the spaces around me. The bathroom has a broken showerhead. I try snooping the other rooms—one door opens. It's unoccupied, just like mine, meaning her telling me that one room was left wasn't true. I go back to my room, frantically fumbling through what to do next.

I immediately compromise my ideals of international authenticity, and in fact, begin longing for the comforts of luxury. Unfortunately, I find that hotels are absurdly expensive. I want to consider Airbnb, of course, but their hosts are just regular people who aren't obligated to last second requests, so even if I found a room, forty-eight hours could pass before they'd respond. I text my uncle and say I've got to get out of here—I need to be on a plane by tomorrow.

As I'm considering my exit plan, a couple of guests have returned. I hear them strolling and talking, seemingly without sharing any of my dread. Enough time has passed that I reason that I *probably* am not going to be killed like in that Eli Roth movie, but that didn't make this shady hostel much more appealing. I was on the outskirts of the city, and the TV was broken; my tooth may have stopped hurting but *oh yeah*, I didn't know a single person for thousands of miles. My uncle hadn't responded, so I found a cheap room with high ratings on Airbnb and sent a request. To my great relief, within minutes, he messaged back and said I was welcome.

The thought of leaving the hostel still made me uncomfortable. I'd have to sneak out. Though I knew the only thing of mine this place had on file was a copy of my driver's license, I wasn't exactly excited to flash the peace sign to the lady and her brothers, suitcase in hand. I was waiting for evidence that I was in the clear, but I kept second guessing and time kept passing. Discouraged with my procrastination, I decided to take the plunge. Luckily, everyone had moved—to a room upstairs, I believe, as the brothers argued with one another. I left and headed to Alexander's apartment.

Though it took me awhile to find it (directions are difficult in Europe, especially with no cellular data), a smiling Alexander answered the door. A fitness freak, he was tall, early thirties, with long, blond hair. He welcomed me in and gave me the full tour. His apartment, though slightly bigger, had many of the same minimalist charms as Kiki's, all with similar Ikea furnishings. He laughed when I told him about the Skarpnäck hostel, saying how that place, unsurprisingly, is *not* doing business aboveboard.

Though I loved having Kiki's whole place to myself, having a friendly face hosting me was needed; considering what I had just left, Alexander's greeting was the warmest, most inviting I'd ever seen, even if he was shirtless. Though a Rus-

sian emigrant, Alexander was a perfect embodiment of the kind of Swedish culture I had learned almost by osmosis; now it was tangible. I considered the American version of Alexander, whose interests and lifestyle would render him a punchline, a meathead. He only seemed to care about working out and '80s hair metal; he walked around the next morning in a speedo. Yet, talking to him was illuminating. Though he was between jobs, he had a master's degree and he both took interest in and understood what I was drawn to. We talked good movies (I suggested he watch *Ex Machina*. He did that night and loved it. He sincerely thanked me). I told him my master's thesis idea (Nordic noir) and he said "Oh, those are crime stories, aren't they?" and we ended up watching a Nordic noir film adaptation, *Snabba Cash* ("Easy Money"); he told me about the Swedish Institute, an agency that provides scholarships for people to study in Sweden; when I told him metal wasn't really my scene, and I named the only heavy band I can tolerate (Deafheaven), he said "Oh, they're that black metal [a genre] group, right? I've heard some of their stuff." He knew more and was far more helpful than his American counterpart ever could have been.

If Alexander hinted at an epitome of Swedish culture, a couple I met two days from my flight out cemented that idea. In meeting these two, whose names I now gladly cannot recall, I achieved my goal of organically connecting with someone. I saw *Metropolis* was playing at Bio Rio in Hornstull, the "hipster" part of Stockholm, the gentleman I met called it. I had downloaded the German sci-fi silent film a few years prior, and thought this proper, in-theater re-watch sounded perfect. When I arrived at Bio Rio, I was incredulous at the long line waiting outside. I took my spot, but as the show time got nearer, I started wondering if I was in the right place; surely this long line was not waiting for a 1927 silent movie. I swallowed the introvert in me, and turned around to a chic-looking couple, a man and woman, maybe late thirties. I confirmed that the line was for *Metropolis*, and that led us to talking, intially about the first time we saw the movie, then more about other weird movies and culture. The man said he was an astrophysicist, and the woman praised Uppsala University, about an hour north of Stockholm, calling it the best years of her life. The line started moving, and we cordially departed upon showing our tickets at the door.

When I bought my ticket, I didn't realize it was more than just the film. The Metrophonic Orchestra quartet was set up by the screen, and they beautifully re-scored the film live. At intermission, the astrophysicist and I ran into one another, and we talked for several more minutes. Though nothing we discussed that evening was revelatory, the amiabilities richened me with a proactive feeling of connecting with something outside of my limited experience and worldview. Today I remain somewhat conflicted, since I've grown into actually *wanting* to

have a beer, that I should have asked if he and his girlfriend wanted to grab drinks after the movie. I've come to realize, though, that such a fleeting essence served as the perfect capsule for what I needed in that moment. As opposed to some banal declining of the invitation ("We've got work in the morning, sorry"), I experienced something effervescent to me and didn't try to mar it with permanence.

Something about that time alone, post-horrors of the Snarpnäck hostel, felt gratifying. When I was reading a novel (*Wolf in White Van*), watching Netflix, or in a dark theater, I didn't feel like a reclusive homebody languishing a trip abroad. It felt natural, like a citizen enjoying some leisure after a day exploring record stores in Hornstull, perusing the national library, or taking in the tourist charm of Gamla Stan. On my last night in Europe, on Sweden's national day, June 6, Alexander and I went to ICA (a supermarket chain) to prepare for a cookout. While shopping and grilling sausages over Finnish beer Lapin Kulta, he and I discussed American and Swedish politics and national health-care. It was fascinating to compare the Donald Trump fiasco and his growing sense that the conservative party was creeping back into Sweden. I complained about our country's student loans and health insurance, and though he agreed people shouldn't be going into debt to receive an education, he picked over Sweden's healthcare model, citing enormous wait times. He saw great appeal to the American ideal of becoming anything you set your mind to, and I saw great appeal in social and economic tolerance.

Alexander and the Hornstull couple put humanity to the aesthetics and ideals that first drew me to Sweden. There's a Swedish word for the country's ethos, one I saw demonstrated in their worldview and could relate to my own experience. The word is *lagom*, which roughly means "just the right amount." Swedes don't believe thinking in peaks and valleys is constructive; their ideals lie in the middle. To an American, this sounds underachieving, even lazy. Our culture is the opposite of *lagom*; we exist in extremes: *This is the greatest movie of all time! Anyone who likes this band is an idiot!* Every Swede I came across, however, had this fascinating gravity towards the center. The astrophysicist, for instance, was talking about how he's always been suspicious of whatever is popular, and that the world's current Marvel craze was at the height of something he's long picked apart. He's watched some of those movies, he said, and though they were entertaining in spots, he found them too lengthy and the dialogue too stilted. Instead of speaking more like an American, that Marvel movies are vapid moneymakers, he conceded to seeing how that they appeal to so many people, but alas, they simply weren't his taste.

Not too high, not too low. Finding something sweet in the middle is how I've processed my trip abroad. By no means was it a perfect trip. The fiasco with the Skarpnäck hostel; the mistake by our Copenhagen Airbnb host that kept us waiting outside for hours; a ten-day toothache that had me talking like my jaw was wired shut. And my girlfriend and I, we discovered, travel poorly together. In my impassive way, her with her grousing, we were often at odds; Father John Misty may have put on a great show, but she and I didn't speak to one another. Rather, our "good" moments were just polite observations: "Oh, look at that building." "Yeah, that looks neat." I wanted Linklater's Vienna, and she wanted structure.

Comparatively, what I consider apexes were relatively modest. I didn't scale an ungodly fjord or crash some Swedish wedding or audit *Svenska litteratur* at Stockholm University. I won back-to-back "roll-a-ball" horse races and rode the roller coaster Dæmonen ("The Demon") at Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen; I re-watched *Metropolis*; I found The Fall's *This Nation's Saving Grace* on vinyl at a Stockholm record store; I made a meatball breakfast at Kiki's; I grilled with Alexander.

It was a messy three weeks, and I wish a lot of it went differently. I wish I had gotten that tooth pulled last year or wish I would've enjoyed many more glasses of wine and beer (at lunch, at dinner, afterhours) or wish I could've either divorced my *Before Sunrise* ideals or experienced them completely. But I don't regret any part of the trip; rather, I adore it. I embrace the messiness, because I know that in-between the memories and the frustrations, lies an ideal center. It's where I found just the right amount.

Lagom.



Out of Your Control

Michelle Wanzor

Author's note: The characters in this play were created with the intent that any actor of any gender or race could play them. The characters have no intended gender or race, and the script will use gender-neutral pronouns and titles for each character (ex. "they" and "Mx."). The pronouns and titles may be altered from production to production to properly suit each production and whether each character is male, female, or nonbinary.

Cast of Characters

ADRIEN LAZARUS – the defendant and the reincarnation of infamous serial killer Taylor Cane

PROSECUTOR DU PONT – the corrupt prosecutor representing the state in the case

JUDGE HEROD – the judge presiding over the trial

DETECTIVE – the detective formerly in charge of the case on Taylor Cane

DOCTOR – the professional who conducted the test to find Adrien's past life

THERAPIST – Adrien's therapist

MX. MICHAELS – Adrien's neighbor

PRINCIPAL – Adrien's elementary school principal

Setting

A courtroom with the audience positioned as the jury.

Scene 1: Introduction

Enter ADRIEN.

ADRIEN: In the past sixty years, the use of past-life detection technology has skyrocketed. More and more hospitals offer free services to detect a newborn baby's past lives. For most people, their past lives

are a source of pride. Their souls belonged to groundbreaking scientists, renowned artists, or revolutionary activists. However, some of us aren't so lucky. We share our souls with crooked politicians, outcasts, and criminals. Out of these, the criminals are the least easily forgiven. Those of us whose past lives weren't tried for their crimes grow up knowing that the day after we turn eighteen we will be tried in their places. The justice system fights tooth and nail to convict the souls that escaped its grasp while we struggle to earn our futures. Yesterday I turned eighteen. Today is my only chance at freedom.

ADRIEN sits.

Scene 2: Opening Statements

ENTER JUDGE and PROSECUTOR.

JUDGE: Today we will be reviewing the case of State vs. Lazarus. Adrien Lazarus is accused of killing ten people in their past life as Taylor Cane. Prosecutor Du Pont will be representing the state while Mx. Lazarus represents themself. This trial will be conducted using the experimental expedited trial format. Prosecutor Du Pont, would you please come give your opening statements to the jury?

The PROSECUTOR stands.

PROSECUTOR: With pleasure, Your Honor. The state's case is clear: I will prove to the court that Mx. Lazarus is Taylor Cane and, thus, responsible for kidnapping, torturing, and murdering ten people in their past life. The case against Taylor Cane has already been proven in a previous trial, and tests have proven that Adrien Lazarus is Taylor Cane reincarnated. The case is solid; there is no reason to doubt Mx. Lazarus' guilt.

The PROSECUTOR sits.

JUDGE: Thank you for your conciseness, Prosecutor Du Pont. Mx. Lazarus, your opening statements please?

ADRIEN stands.

ADRIEN: Thank you, Your Honor. People of the jury, I will show you beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am not guilty of the crimes I'm being charged with. I am not Taylor Cane; I am Adrien Lazarus. I have not committed any crimes, and I would never commit the atrocities I've been accused of. I have never had any excessive thoughts of violence against others, and I'm in no danger of repeating Taylor's mistakes.

ADRIEN sits.

Scene 3: The Prosecutor's Case

JUDGE Thank you, Mx. Lazarus. With the opening statements completed, I would like to turn this over to Prosecutor Du Pont once again for their arguments. Whenever you're ready, Prosecutor.

The PROSECUTOR stands.

PROSECUTOR: The prosecution is ready, Your Honor. People of the jury, as I stated previously, Mx. Lazarus is without a doubt Taylor Cane and thus is guilty of the accused crimes. However, in order to understand the severity of the charges, it's essential to understand the severity of the crimes. I would like to begin by reviewing the details of the Cane case to inform jury members who may not be familiar with the details. To that end, I'd like to call the stand the detective who headed up *State v. Cane*. Detective, if you would.

ENTER DETECTIVE.

The DETECTIVE takes the stand.

DETECTIVE: Good afternoon, Prosecutor.

PROSECUTOR: Good afternoon. Detective, would you please summarize to the court what Taylor Cane's crimes were?

DETECTIVE: Of course. Thirty years ago on August 29, my subordinates and I received a call from an older teen claiming to have escaped a house where they were being tortured along with one other person. We immediately sent them help and investigated the house they had escaped, where we found there were not two victims but ten, nine corpses and the one survivor. All of the victims were of different ages and from various economic classes and parts of the city. There were no ties between them aside from most of them having been reported missing in the preceding year. According to the autopsies, four of the victims were beaten to death over an extended period of time, three of them were drowned, one was skinned alive, and the last endured a mixture of various tortures, including removal of extremities and cauterization. We later learned that Cane had promised to free our survivor if they tortured another victim. However, Cane went back on their word after our survivor complied.

PROSECUTOR: And how did you discover who the culprit was?

DETECTIVE: That was surprisingly easy though the neighborhood was shocked that such a quiet person would kill people and so brutally. Taylor Cane had left their DNA and fingerprints all over the crime scene and left their driver's license behind. They even owned the deed to the house. However, by the time we arrived, they had fled the location, and we never found them in that

lifetime. Lacking the culprit's presence but having more than enough evidence to convict, we went ahead and pushed through an *in absentia* conviction—the first of its kind in the area—so that Cane would be punished as soon as we found them, even in another life. We had to wait until Cane died, presumably of old age and was reincarnated. Then we had to wait until their next life was able to be tried as an adult, but we did what we had to. And here we are.

PROSECUTOR: Thank you, Detective, you may step down now.

EXIT DETECTIVE.

PROSECUTOR: Next, I would like to call to the stand the doctor who conducted the test that found Lazarus to be Cane.

ENTER DOCTOR.

The DOCTOR takes the stand.

DOCTOR: Good afternoon, Prosecutor Du Pont.

PROSECUTOR: Good afternoon, Doctor. Would you please tell the court exactly what your job is?

DOCTOR: I work as a professional to identify people's past lives.

PROSECUTOR: How long have you worked in this field?

DOCTOR: Fifteen years this May.

PROSECUTOR: And how accurate are these tests?

DOCTOR: The identification test is 99.9% accurate. Most of the misidentifications involve either the present person or the past person being part of a multiple birth, such as a set of twins or triplets.

PROSECUTOR: Ah, I see. In your professional opinion, what is the chance of the test on Mx. Lazarus being inaccurate?

DOCTOR: I would say next to impossible. Neither Taylor Cane nor Mx. Lazarus is a twin or part of another multiple birth. In the course of the test, we also learned that Mx. Lazarus has a long history of taking prescribed sleep aids for nightmares caused by residual memories from their past life. As part of the test, we examine some of the memories the subject has from their past life, and Mx. Lazarus' perfectly line up with what we know of Cane's personal life and even some of their crimes.

PROSECUTOR: That is all I have to ask, Doctor. Thank you very much for your input into this case.

EXIT DOCTOR.

PROSECUTOR: Your Honor, that is all I have to say on the matter.

The PROSECUTOR sits.

JUDGE: Thank you, Prosecutor Du Pont. Mx. Lazarus, you may begin your arguments whenever you are ready.

Scene 4: The Defense's Case

ADRIEN stands.

ADRIEN: People of the jury, while it may be true that Taylor Cane committed horrible atrocities and that my soul used to belong to them, that does not mean that I am guilty of Taylor's crimes. When a child's parent is found guilty, the child is not convicted alongside the parent just for inheriting the adult's genes. If a child were punished for their parent's crimes, the public would be rightfully outraged against such an injustice. If a child should not be blamed for the genes they inherit, why should someone be blamed for the soul they inherit? It's the same principle. I am no more Taylor Case than I am my mother. I would like to call to the stand two character witnesses to testify in favor of my true personality. First, I'd like to call my long-time therapist to the stand.

ENTER THERAPIST.

The THERAPIST takes the stand.

THERAPIST: It's nice to see you, Adrien.

ADRIEN: I wish it were under better circumstances, Doctor. Now, would you mind explaining to the jury the reasons for my sessions with you?

THERAPIST: Of course not. You first started coming to me around five years ago, when you were in middle school, because of nightmare problems. You described to me very intense, violent nightmares that had you so rattled and sleep-deprived that you were unable to attend school regularly. We determined that the nightmares were your previous life's memories, and I prescribed some sleep aids for you. The continuing sessions have been for properly managing those memories and for generalized anxiety disorder.

ADRIEN: Can you recall any incidents where I seemed inclined towards violence?

THERAPIST: None. You always directed any negative feelings inwards towards yourself. In my experience, you're more likely to blame yourself for others' problems than to blame someone else, especially to such a degree that you would react physically.

ADRIEN: Thank you, Doctor. You may step down.

EXIT THERAPIST.

ADRIEN: I would now like to call Mx. Michaels to the stand.

ENTER MICHAELS.

Mx. MICHAELS takes the stand.

MICHAELS: Hello, dear.

ADRIEN: Hello, Mx. Michaels. Would you please explain to the court how you know me?

MICHAELS: I've known you ever since your family moved in next door to me three years ago.

ADRIEN: How many times would you say you've come to our house?

MICHAELS: I couldn't even begin to count. I'm over there at least once a week visiting with your mother.

ADRIEN: How would you describe my conduct when I'm at home? Do you hear any violent noises while you're over?

MICHAELS: No, never. You're always very polite, well-behaved, and quiet. The only time I can remember you even making any loud noises is the time you accidentally fell off of your bed.

ADRIEN: (embarrassed) Thank you for being so specific, Mx. Michaels. (They clear their throat.) Do you ever hear strange noises or feel suspicious towards anything in the house?

MICHAELS: Absolutely not. I've never had a noise complaint, even the regular ones for houses with teenagers, and your mother keeps everything in the house out in the open, metaphorically. Though, she does leave her doors open, so she hardly keeps anything put away or hidden.

ADRIEN: Do you feel safe in our house and alone with me.

MICHAELS: Yes, completely safe.

ADRIEN: Thank you very much, Mx. Michaels. You may step down.

EXIT MICHAELS.

ADRIEN: (turns to the JUDGE) That is all, Your Honor.

ADRIEN sits.

JUDGE: Thank you, Mx. Lazarus. Prosecutor Du Pont, the floor is now open for your rebuttal.

Scene 5: Prosecutor's Rebuttal Witnesses

The PROSECUTOR stands.

PROSECUTOR: Thank you, Your Honor. I would like to start by pointing out that just because someone has not yet shown any violent behavior does not mean they will never become violent. Even Taylor Cane was a quiet person in their neighbors' eyes before their victim escaped, as stated earlier by the detective. The defendant is still only eighteen years old; they still have time to become who they will be as an adult. Crimes of passion are committed every day by people who would have never harmed someone before that one moment when it all went wrong. And sometimes we forget what we have done, as is the case with our defendant.

ADRIEN: What?

PROSECUTOR: I call to the stand the principal of the local elementary school.

ENTER PRINCIPAL

The PRINCIPAL takes the stand.

PROSECUTOR: How long have you been the principal at our school?

PRINCIPAL: I've been the principal for almost twenty years now.

PROSECUTOR: And do you remember when Adrien Lazarus was in school?

PRINCIPAL: Yes, I remember it quite clearly. They were a quiet child most of the time.

PROSECUTOR: Most of the time? When were they not quiet?

PRINCIPAL: There was only one incident with Adrien, but it was big enough to stand out in my memory even today. There was a large fight involving six children that began because Mx. Lazarus punched another student in the nose hard enough to break it and send the child falling to the ground, ending up with a concussion. The other four children got involved as revenge against Mx. Lazarus.

PROSECUTOR: Do you recall why Mx. Lazarus punched the other child.

PRINCIPAL: According to the official school record, Mx. Lazarus accused them of bullying another student, but an official investigation turned up no evidence.

PROSECUTOR: And obviously a school cannot condone such violence, no matter what the reason. Thank you, Principal.

EXIT PRINCIPAL

PROSECUTOR: As you can see, violent behavior would not be unprecedented from Mx. Lazarus. Their soul has not changed as much as they would like for you to believe it has. I rest my case.

The PROSECUTOR sits.

Scene 6: Closing Arguments

JUDGE: (to the audience) Members of the jury, it is your responsibility today to decide if the defendant is guilty or not guilty. If they are guilty, then they will be sentenced to death for the crimes committed by Taylor Cane. If they are not guilty, then they will go free. Please think carefully about your answer during and after the closing arguments. Keep in mind that what you choose today will immediately impact many lives around you and choose responsibly. Prosecutor Du Pont, you may make your closing argument.

The PROSECUTOR stands.

PROSECUTOR: People of the jury, you have heard my statements. Taylor Cane committed undeniably heinous crimes towards their fellow men, kidnapping and torturing them to death, including making one teen torture another person to death for a false freedom. And you have seen evidence through tests and past experiences that Mx. Adrien Lazarus is Taylor Cane reincarnated. Do not put such a cold-hearted killer back on the street. They must be taken out of the equation immediately, for the safety of everyone in our community.

The PROSECUTOR sits.

JUDGE: Mx. Lazarus, would you like to make any closing arguments? Please know that this is your last chance to state your case, but not making a closing argument prevents the plaintiff from having one more chance to rebut.

ADRIEN stands.

ADRIEN: I have no more arguments to make, but I wish to address the jury. Members of the jury, take a moment to think about the power you have in this moment. You have the ability to make or break someone's life. From your perspective, I am either an innocent person being wrongly accused or a serial killer waiting to strike again. One of those is right, and one of those is wrong. Scary, isn't it? I'm sure you're wishing you hadn't been summoned for jury duty. But we all influence each other all the time, not just in jury duty. People screw each

other over all the time, even people they don't know exist. We love to say that we choose our own destinies, but we don't. Sometimes other people's actions determine if we get to work on time or how well we can get by on any given week. Sometimes other people get to choose whether we live or die. Take that seriously. Take me seriously, whether you think I'm guilty or not, whether you think I'm a menace or a victim. Choose wisely.

ADRIEN sits.

JUDGE: Jury dismissed!

CUE LIGHTS.



Duck Pond

Keith Maultbody

(10:59 p.m. in a small city park. A dark blue light is cast over the scene, which features a bench adjacent a duck pond. FRED, a twenty-something man, enters, carrying a basket of dinner rolls. Munching on the bread, Fred sits on the park bench. A few seconds later, OSCAR, a white mallard, enters waddling. Fred begins chucking bits of bread to the duck.)

FRED

Lucky duck. You don't have to worry about love or politics or dealing with other people. You just sleep and eat food. *(a beat.)* Wow. What a beautiful moon.

(A clocktower chimes eleven. As if triggered by this, Oscar begins convulsing.)

Oh my God, are ducks allergic to whole wheat?!?

(Oscar stops convulsing and stands straight, with his arms to his sides.)

You're— you're— you're—!

OSCAR

(extending his hand) I'm Oscar. Nice to meet you.

(Fred takes Oscar's hand)

FRED

(disbelievingly) I'm Fred.

(Oscar yanks Fred into an embrace, in an attempt to kiss him. Fred resists.)

Woah, woah, woah!

OSCAR

You're not gay?

FRED

No, I am!

OSCAR

(*loosing his grip*) Shit, I knew I put on a couple pounds—

FRED

No it's not that!

OSCAR

Are you in the closet? Did I just out you? Oh, I feel awful! Unless you're a homophobic Republican governor in which case—

FRED

No, I'm out. But I draw the line at bringing home a duck.

OSCAR

I'm not a duck!

FRED

If it quacks like a duck...

OSCAR

I mean, I wasn't always a duck. I was turned into one by my boyfriend, Bart. My ex-boyfriend.

FRED

Your boyfriend?

OSCAR

Ex-boyfriend. He was a wizard.

FRED

You cheated on a wizard?

OSCAR

If I had known he was a wizard, I wouldn't have cheated on him! Especially if he'd used that magic wand in bed. No, Bart was on some Samantha Stevens kick, living life as a bear in the city.

FRED

Just so we're clear, you mean the burly kind in chaps not the one that shits in the woods?

OSCAR

(ignoring him) I don't know how he found out about the affair. He just came barging into our apartment one afternoon. He was...so emotional. Tears and snot mixing together on his face, all scrunched up like a living Picasso painting. He was just blubbering, as if I'd really hurt him. I couldn't take that, it was so ridiculous. So I left him in the apartment and ran to this duck pond across the street to clear my head.

FRED

You didn't apologize?

OSCAR

It wasn't all my fault, okay? He had his own issues. For one, he was a complete exhibitionist! He actually followed me to this duck pond just to cause a scene! We got into a shouting match. I called him a fuckboy. He turned me into a duckboy. But it was worth it to see the look on his face!

FRED

Come on. That's not real. Wizards don't exist, and they don't turn gay men into ducks.

OSCAR

You saw for yourself. It's Undine's Moon, and I transformed into a man right before your eyes. You see that pale blue cast over the moon? Like water pooling in the craters? I've been waiting three months for that. It's a rare astrological phenomenon that happens once a year. It's the only time I get to be human. The only time I can break the spell by kissing my true love. I only have till midnight.

(a beat.)

Speaking of which, can you do me a favor?

FRED

What?

OSCAR

Kiss me!

(Oscar again lunges for an embrace, but Fred gets out of the way.)

FRED

Hold your horses, pal! We at least need to have dinner first.

OSCAR

Au contraire, mon amour, the dinner rolls were delicious.

FRED

Doesn't count.

OSCAR

Next time the bill's on me?

FRED

How do you even know it would work? You said only true love's kiss breaks the curse. I only just met you.

OSCAR

Love at first sight?

(Fred remains unchanged.)

I'm desperate, okay? I figured any guy might be the one, so I might as well give them a shot. Kind of empowering, like being in a Madonna video.

FRED

I don't know how I feel about this.

OSCAR

Damn it, was it the Madonna reference? Listen, if it makes a difference, even I draw the line at *Evita*.

FRED

No, no, it's not that. I mean, she's no Patti LuPone, of course, but even I can concede that Madonna brought a certain unique element of star quality befitting the character of Eva Peron.

OSCAR

Yep, you are gay. So what's so bad about a little kiss?

FRED

I don't know. I just....What if you have the bird flu?

OSCAR

Dental dams. (*grasping Fred in an embrace*) Pucker up, pretty boy.

FRED

I mean, true love? All I know about you is that you're an unrepentant adulterer and you've spent the last three months unemployed. Not exactly boyfriend material, much less true love.

OSCAR

Fred, you don't understand! I can't stay out here. It's like Sodom and Gomorrah! Did you know ducks are necrophiliacs? I didn't, until I saw Daisy over there, munching on a moldy piece of bread. Next thing you know, she's tits up and Uncle Donald is screwing her like it's after hours at Disney World!

(*Fred is unmoved.*)

Please.

FRED

I mean, sure. Okay. If it could break the curse...

(*Fred leans in to kiss, then stops himself.*)

Wait—is anyone watching?

OSCAR

It's late night in a city park, of course some weirdo's watching.

FRED

No, I can't. I can't do this.

OSCAR

You can't do this? You said you were out of the closet.

FRED

I am out of the closet. I am just out of the closet.

OSCAR

Have you ever kissed a man before?

FRED

No.

OSCAR

Have you ever kissed anyone before?

FRED

No.

OSCAR

Have you ever—

FRED

Stop!

OSCAR

Fred?

FRED

No, I've never kissed a man or a woman or a duck before, okay?!? I've never had any sort of meaningful connection with another person, ever. My emotional growth was stunted by family, politicians, and religions from the time I was born, until—poof! Ruth Bader Ginsberg floats down with her immaculately crocheted jabot and everybody says everything's okay now. You can marry a dude, fuck a dude, watch reruns of *Glee* with a dude! I spent twenty-five years in a morass of pent up self repression like the butler in a fucking Merchant Ivory movie—and now suddenly, everyone says everything is a-okay and the White House is a rainbow and Princess Elsa is a lesbian and I'm supposed to immediately overcome all my issues and start a relationship with someone?

OSCAR

It's just a kiss. It's nothing wrong. There's really nothing wrong with us.

FRED

You know why I came here? I was supposed to go on a date tonight. I went on a date tonight. I got there first, I sat at the table. I ate a bread roll. And then I left. I left before he got there. I took the basket of bread rolls and I left. You know why? Because I'm not ready for this.

OSCAR

Don't say that. You don't know—

FRED

I still hate myself. I still hate that I love men.

OSCAR

Fred...

FRED

I always wanted to be a good person. I tried—I try so hard to be a good person. Why did people work so hard to make us feel bad because of who we love?

OSCAR

Fred, we all need help. We need other people in our lives. Just give me a little kiss. We'll work it out together.

FRED

I'm not ready.

(Fred turns to leave.)

OSCAR

No wait! You can't do this to me! Just listen, please!

(Fred looks at Oscar.)

Please don't go. Don't leave me here.

FRED

I'm sorry. I have to.

OSCAR

Stop! Fred, listen to me! Just look me in the eye and listen to me! You're so wrapped up in your own despair it's like you can't realize there's someone else out there who is just as fucking miserable as you.

(Oscar stares despondently as Fred exits.)

Just as fucking miserable....

(A beat as Oscar is alone on the park bench. He hears yelling. Fred enters, cornered by THE MUGGER bearing a knife.)

FRED

No, no! Please don't!

MUGGER

I said, gimme your wallet!

FRED

Here take it!

(Fred tosses the wallet and the rolls to the mugger)

MUGGER

(counts the money) That's not much. You must just be starting your nightshift.

FRED

Nightshift?

(The mugger is still brandishing the knife, now approaching Fred, closer and closer. Oscar watches, terrified.)

MUGGER

You and your buddy over there. You just suck dicks for the money or are you card-carrying faggots?

FRED

Oh my God! Oscar, help!

(The mugger lunges to stab Fred but Oscar intervenes. A fight ensues between Oscar and the mugger.)

MUGGER

Guess I'll have to kill two birds with one stone!

(The mugger positions his knife to slam directly through Oscar's heart, but Fred takes the opportunity to cold-cock him. The mugger falls straight to the ground, unconscious.)

OSCAR

Tell me again why you thought coming to the park at midnight was a good idea?

FRED

You're bleeding.

OSCAR

Don't worry, the magic of the moonlight will heal me.

FRED

Really?

OSCAR

Fuck no, take me to a hospital or a veterinarian or something!

FRED

Of course, don't worry!

(Fred tends to Oscar, allowing him support as they stagger out of the park.)

FRED

You kicked that mugger's ass.

OSCAR

You dealt the final blow. We kicked the shit out of that creep together, like the fucking Band of Thebes.

FRED

We make a pretty good team. *(a beat.)* Oscar, you had my back.

OSCAR

And you had mine.

FRED

That's why, isn't it? Why generations of humans who only lived-- who were only allowed—half-lives....It's why they took risks, Oscar. This is what makes it worth it, isn't it?

OSCAR

Knowing someone's on your side. Being on someone else's side. I'm learning, too, Fred. But I think you're right.

(The clock strikes twelve.)

FRED

Maybe we can learn together?

(Fred kisses Oscar. The clock strikes one. Oscar remains human. Black out. SCÈNE DE FIN.)



Epiphany of a Defeatist Who Stubbornly Fished a Rainstorm on His Birthday, September 7th, 2014

Adam Timbs

A storm is boiling
on the dark back of Watauga Point.
Dusk drapes shaded fingers
down on the old glade path
to dredge an otherworld from the loam
before an iron night of rain.
The creek bed is filling with ink,
bronze filaments of bloody sun
are hung within cragged bark
of bent and dying hemlocks.
Swarms of combed wings
invisibly beat out chants;
the thrimming
and thrum that
swallows the red clay beach.
Skoal cans rust out
like heaps of Saxon coins,
put away and gleaming
under the leaf-faded shallows.

Later at 11:22,
my rods lie
unbent and useless.
The fish never inched
from the bottom of the damn lake.
I have turned 22. I have
grown sour with lonesomeness,
stale beer, the impatience
of my two cold hands.
Suddenly, 80 feet off,
lightning grows down
out of black air,
quickens the water
with a whole heaven of fiery roots.
After such a mercy
of seeing, I can only know gladness
of God and my mother,
who sleeps beautifully
far from this dark cauldron of shore.



Funerary Procession Out of Summer's Lands

Adam Timbs

For M.

There is no weeping
for summer any longer.
Marrow in the bones of memory
seeps silver-slow
when relinquishing to fresh fissures.
The hewn down cherry trees
on high Hall Hill
will rot a long time until
shasta daisies make bright root
in their sumping red bark.
And that poor skull
of the jersey cow
plugged between the eyes with a 30.30?
It is lodged on the meadow fence
just as you last saw it,
witching the indian spring
like a three-eyed totem and rusting
out till kingdom come.

You are rendered into shade
that filters impossible shafts of limestone,
embedded beneath moss ridden hearts
of white oaks
and ruined tobacco lofts.
There are no springs
that do not drink you.
There are no storms now
that do not sow you
deeper away into
winds singing.
So,
let come
the fall,
and the grey doe
shaking her hide at evening,
and your hidden hands that
draw down September's long days.



Before the Council

Kelsey Kiser

“Henson, Emily.”

Jumping at the sound of her name, she stood up quickly, peeling her legs off the leather chair. She stumbled twice before she even reached the door—the high heels were a bad choice.

Before she opened the door, she took a deep breath and said, “I can do this.” Not even looking up from her keyboard, the woman who’d called her name lazily responded, “of course you can.” Emily spared just a moment to wonder how long the woman had been allowed to use a computer and opened the heavy door.

This was her fifth appearance before the Council, but the sense of intimidation had never worn off; the stately mahogany tables, the too-bright lights, the blinking red bulb on the camera. The whole room screamed, “you are under pressure!”

Four men and one woman, all in matching suits, were sitting at a long table, paying various degrees of attention to her as she walked in.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, one of the men cleared his throat and proclaimed, “Begin with a review of your currently approved items.”

Ok. Deep breath.

“A pencil is a piece of wood, typically six to seven inches long, generally covered with paint. This paint is traditionally yellow, but there are pencils of many colors and patterns. Inside the wood, there is a slim cylinder of graphite. This graphite, when moved against paper, produces gray marks. Pencils are frequently employed in the art of writing.”

She knew she was going overboard; in fact, she was pretty sure she saw one of the men roll his eyes during her explanation. But she could never be too didactic. It was only two years ago that she failed “pen”

because she couldn't answer, "why doesn't ink flow from the tip all the time?" She'd rather get eye rolls than another failure.

These five, the Council of Awareness, held the ultimate power: they got to tell Emily (and everyone else in the state) what they could use and what they could not. Every year, you get the chance to appear before the council and campaign for the right to one more item of your choice. But, as per the Decree for Increased Appreciation of Our Tools, you can only use what you can understand. They think we'll appreciate everything more if we have to work for the right to use it.

The fact that it makes people like the Council who've earned the right to use computers and autos look better by comparison is just a happy coincidence.

Snapping back from her thoughts, she heard one of the men say, "Proceed." A few minutes later, she had passed "paper" and "pen" with no trouble.

"And your new selection."

"A telephone transmits sound waves via conductive wires, picking up waves through a microphone and delivering them through an earpiece."

"For what is it used?"

"It is used for communication across distance, specifically between two buildings with receivers and access to telephone lines. The desired phone is reached by dialing a given sequence of numbers pre-assigned by phone companies."

"How are these numbers entered?"

"By pressing different portions of a numeric keypad on the face of the phone or, in older models, by rotating a dial."

The men nodded, jotting down notes in Emily's file. She smiled inwardly—she was going to use a phone!

"And how does this information pass from the keys or the dial to the phone?"

Wait, what?

Emily's mind worked frantically, reviewing everything she'd studied about phones. She didn't know.

She didn't know. The silence stretched, and the woman at the table offered a smirk.

"Maybe next year, Ms. Henson."



Judges' Biographies

Joseph Campana – Poetry

Joseph Campana is a poet, critic, and scholar of Renaissance literature. He is the author of the poetry collections *The Book of Faces* (Graywolf, 2005), *Natural Selections* (2012), which received the Iowa Poetry Prize, and *The Book of Life* (forthcoming from Tupelo Press). His poems appear in *Slate*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Conjunctions*, *Colorado Review*, and have won prizes at *Prairie Schooner* and *The Southwest Review*. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Houston Arts Alliance, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He teaches Renaissance literature and creative writing at Rice University.

Joseph Bathanti – Fiction

Joseph Bathanti is former Poet Laureate of North Carolina (2012-14) and recipient of the 2016 North Carolina Award for Literature. He is the author of ten books of poetry, including *Communion Partners*; *Anson County*; *The Feast of All Saints*; *This Metal*, nominated for the National Book Award, and winner of the Oscar Arnold Young Award; *Land of Amnesia*; *Restoring Sacred Art*, winner of the 2010 Roanoke Chowan Prize, awarded annually by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association for best book of poetry in a given year; *Sonnets of the Cross*; *Concertina*, winner of the 2014 Roanoke Chowan Prize; and *The 13th Sunday after Pentecost*, released by LSU Press in 2016. His novel, *East Liberty*, won the 2001 Carolina Novel Award. His novel, *Coventry*, won the 2006 Novello Literary Award. His book of stories, *The High Heart*, won the 2006 Spokane Prize. Bathanti is Professor of Creative Writing at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, and the University's Watauga Residential College Writer-in-Residence. He served as the 2016 Charles George VA Medical Center Writer-in-Residence in Asheville, NC.

Jeff Mann – Nonfiction

Jeff Mann has published five books of poetry, *Bones Washed with Wine*, *On the Tongue*, *Ash*, *A Romantic Mann*, and *Rebels*; two collections of essays, *Edge* and *Binding the God*; a book of poetry and memoir, *Loving Mountains*, *Loving Men*; five novels, *Fog*, *Purgatory*, *Cub*, *Salvation*, and *Country*; and two volumes of short fiction, *A History of Barbed Wire* and *Desire and Devour*. The winner of two Lambda Literary Awards and two Pauline Réage Novel Awards, he teaches creative writing at Virginia Tech.

Laura Pattillo – Drama

Laura Grace Pattillo earned her B.A. in Theatre and English at the University of Richmond and her Ph.D. in English with a minor in Theatre at Louisiana State University. At Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia she teaches courses in dramatic literature, playwriting, and dramaturgy, and is Co-Artistic Director of the SJU Theatre Company. Her research focuses on American drama with an interest in Southern and Appalachian plays. Pattillo has performed in dozens of plays, as well television and film productions, co-directed two prison theatre companies producing original inmate-created works in Louisiana and Kentucky, and was a literary intern at Actors Theatre of Louisville. She has participated in many play development workshops and served as artistic director of the Religion and Theatre play festival for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

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