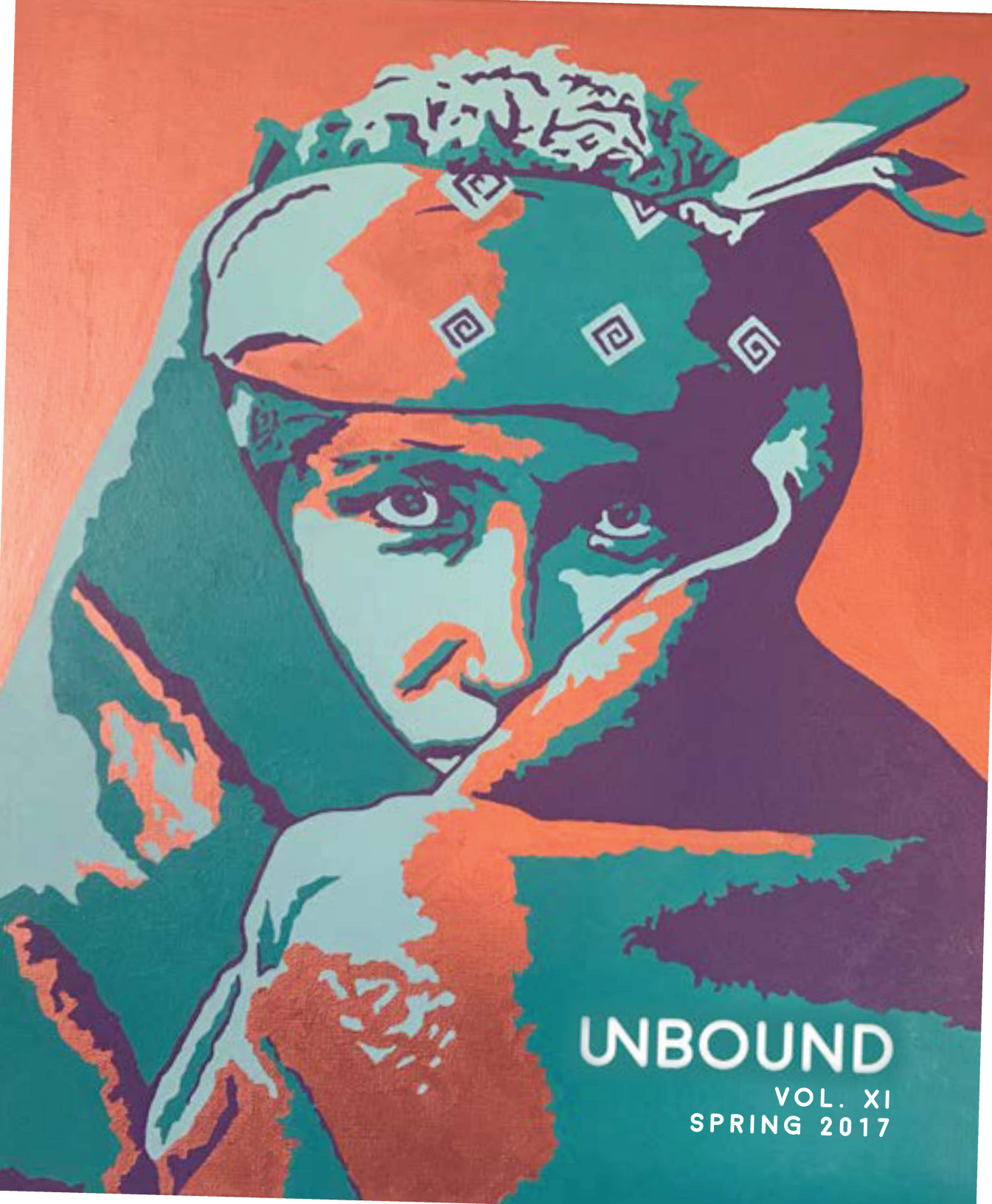




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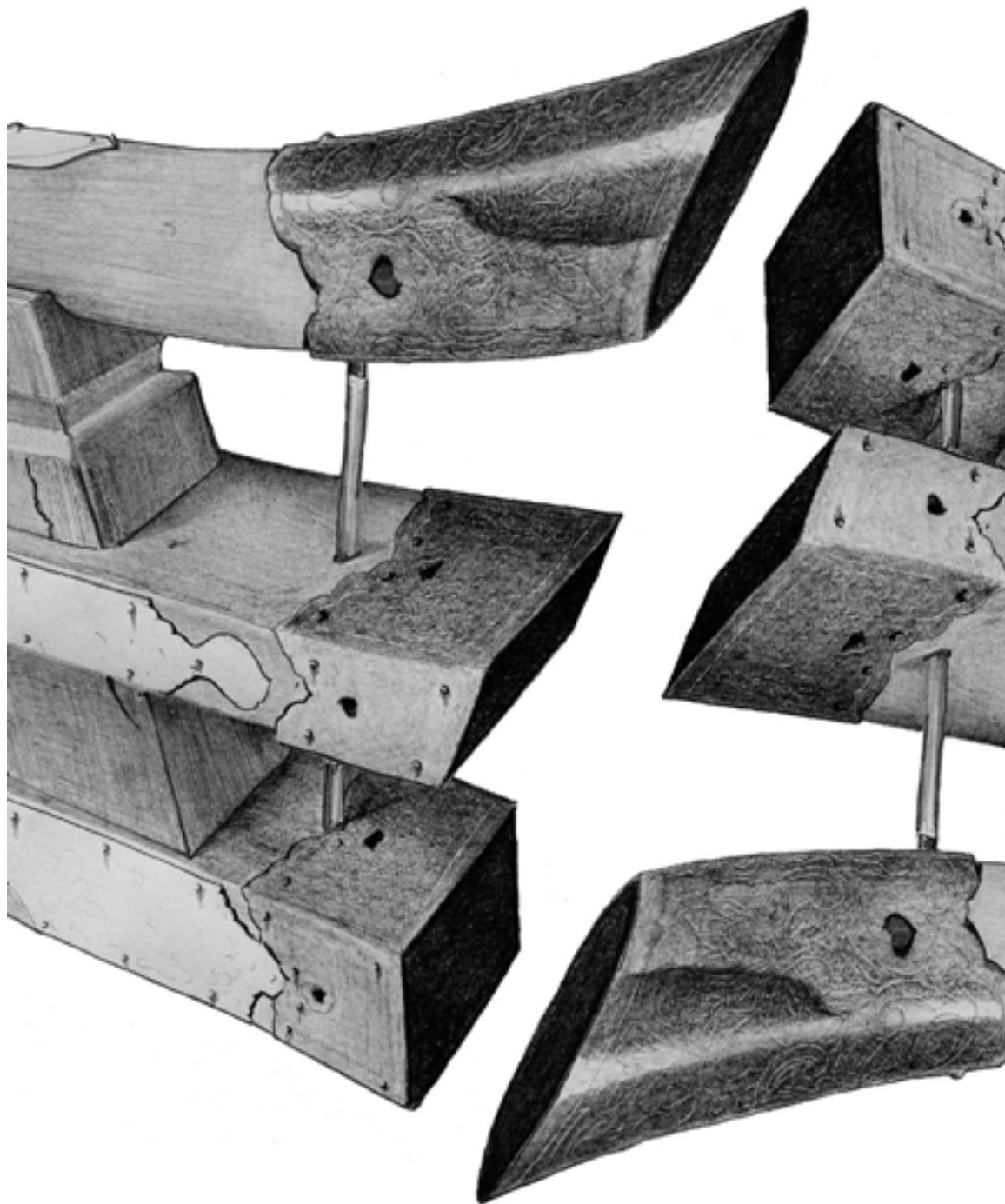
LOGO DESIGN

EMILY TEMPLE

Unbound is a platform of creative expression for students at the University of Oregon. We are a transistor for the prismatic creative voices on campus. We understand art as a continuous process and aim to engage in its development while respecting the integrity of the artists and their work. At unbound we endeavor to foster and enhance a collaborative creative process by opening a dialogue between the editorial staff and contributors. In addition to serving as a canvas for student art, Unbound allows its editors and staff to professionally engage in the field of publishing in an equally creative environment. We are thankful for all of our contributors because without them we would not have the opportunity to practice what we love.

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RYAN MARUYAMA

EVERYTHING CRUMBLES

AUSTIN BRANSON

They walked along the beach, the waves rolling in and dying as they approached. Great ocean rapids reduced to ankle deep pools, but these pools were deceptive. Like a lure for a fish, the ocean calls to us with swells, its power apparent from a distance. But in close, we focus on the cold water pooling across our legs, refreshing on a hot day. We lose sight of the anger that can consume an entire ship, the magnetic power that can pull someone down and never let them go, and especially the wintery cold. An icy breath of death only truly experienced when one breaks the visible plain, when they cross over from our world into the alien deep. That is what we forget about the ocean, that it is not ours. It is alien to us, a hostile entity slowly seizing our planet. We travel it, play in it, enjoy its beauty, but it is nothing more than a foreign land attacking our world with every wave. We fight back of course, we cultivate its resources, pollute its waters, map its depths, but in the end do we make any more difference than a wave that cleanses the sand? Ridding it from the poison of man, just as we baptize a crying child. They know the dangers of the ocean, the people who build their lives around its borders. They know that it is as angry as our God, and as forgiving as the Romans who crucified his only son.

"You're a fucking coward." She spat the words into his face as he sunk into his father's couch, one of the many worthless things that he had left him. Her face distorted, tainted by anger. She threw something at him, but he didn't notice.

"Booze was never my problem, and what's a guy supposed to do after he gets fired? Throw a fucking party? What did you want me to do, go find a needle to take the edge off?" His words so slurred that it sounded as if he was speaking some sort of dead language, spilling whiskey on the couch as he dropped his glass trying to throw his arms up in frustration. He saw that she saw through this, a woman who would no longer be manipulated. No longer a woman, but a lioness who was protecting her future cub.

"Eight months and ten days. That's how long you were sober for. I'm a week from my fucking due date, and you decide to get loaded?" She started to waddle up the stairs holding her belly, disgusted by the man who will raise her son. Her arms protecting him from the toxicity of his father. He heard the clank of a bottle from the stairs, and then he felt it whip past his head, shattering behind him. "Pick up your fucking beer bottles."

He rose from the couch, and stumbled into the kitchen. Though the colors of his father's kitchen were blurred by the spinning vision, he was able to see that the bottle of whiskey that he had left half empty was drained into the sink, along with the cheap half gallon of vodka. Not quite knowing what to do with the rest of his night now that the liquor was gone, he felt a flood of anger wash over him.

"Fucking bitch." He stumbled onto his front porch and dug through his ashtray to find an unfinished cigarette. Too drunk even to find his keys, he simply gave up and sat on his father's porch, watching the black sea flood into the bay. He wondered why the ocean looked so peaceful

from this distance, so still. Starting to feel his drunkenness take hold of his eyes, forcing them shut, he sank into one of the lawn chairs. Fading into the darkness, he saw a single light hovering over the bay, and heard the sound of the strong coastal wind being chopped into rifts. A search and rescue helicopter, scouring the waters with its floodlight. Yet, from afar the water looked so gentle. In his state, somewhere between the twilight and waking world, he hoped they found what they were looking for.

The next morning he woke up, damp from the ocean mist, his emotions sapped from his body by the hangover. He thought maybe that he should go up and apologize, but he was scared that he might not find her waiting for an apology. Instead he found his keys in the gutter, where she always used to hide them from him when he was zombified. She threw them there because she knew he could never make his way up the ladder without falling when he was high or drunk, and he respected the cleverness that only a natural born mother could possess.

His old beaten up truck pulled into the convenient store parking lot, the engine gasping and coughing as it always did. Getting out he felt the sun beating down on the back of his neck and he noticed two kids talking to the side of the store.

“Can we please just hurry up and get out of here? If it hits while we’re here, we’re absolutely screwed.”

“Oh please, don’t be a pussy. Why don’t you sit around and wait for the Book of Revelations to come true?” As the two kids bickered between each other, a hooded man walked over to them. It was Trevor Steiner, someone he knew too well. Trevor didn’t say anything to the two kids, simply handed them a paper bag, took their money, and walked away. He almost flagged Trevor down, he almost took out the fifty dollars he had in his wallet and sprinted after him.

The store was dead as usual, with the clerk staring at the wall. He knew her, just like most people know each other around here, and he knew that she would be on the opposite side of this country if her mother didn’t need a caregiver.

“Back for more already?” She didn’t look at him when she asked. He didn’t answer.

“Just a pack of American Spirits.” He impatiently put his money on the counter, suddenly feeling like there was some sort of urgency that he needed to account for.

“Hey, how’s that girl of yours? She pop yet?” He simply shook his head no, not seeming to know where he should turn his gaze to.

“I heard from them city boys that it won’t matter here pretty soon. That you better take that girl of yours and move somewhere far away, that this place won’t be here anymore pretty soon.” She seemed to savour the idea.

“Yeah, the quake. Everyone knows about that, but my daddy’s house is here and I can’t afford to live somewhere else.” He wondered how true that actually was.

He didn’t go home right away, still nervous to see what wasn’t waiting for him when he walked in. So he drove through town, looking around. Battered houses, torn up yards, junk littered everywhere about them. This was not the neighborhood where old men moved to spend the rest of their days, happy and tan. This is where people couldn’t escape, where people like good old Trevor lived. People who might spend their entire days on a boat, filthy and slick, crabbing for

dinner, or in a logging rig, hauling wood up the coast. People who might be sitting in their empty and broken down house with a needle stuck in their arm, or a meth pipe that had just introduced their lungs to a scorching poison.

By the time he was ready to go home, he thought he might go pick up some beer for the night. When he pulled back up to the familiar convenience store, the same girl was standing there. Staring into nothingness, patiently still.

“Didn’t I just see you?” She cocked her head at him, like a seagull expecting some sort of sustenance, cawing for bread when all he had to offer were crumbs.



TAYLOR
LANGELIERS

“I just needed some beer for tonight, something to keep me occupied.” He looked at the clock, realizing he had been gone for far longer than he intended.

“Talking to the old lady isn’t doing it for ya?”

“If she talks to me tonight, I’ll go light some fireworks off over the bay.”

He pulled into the driveway, just to see that none of the lights were on. Walking through his childhood home, he realized how little he had changed. Pictures of him as a boy, his father holding impressively sized crab, and even some of his mother. All of the furniture he had known since a young age was still present, the only real difference was that the wallpaper was even older now. He carried his beer upstairs, and concluded his walk through in his bedroom knowing he was alone in the house. Twisting the bottle cap off and letting it fall to the ground, he collapsed onto his bed with a feeling of pressure in his chest. A rising anxiety that could not be ignored, like waves of self doubt flooding into his mind. He took out his phone to call her, but no one answered. He waited seconds, thinking it had been minutes, and tried calling her once more. Not knowing what to put in a voicemail, he let silence fill the receiver as he thought about the helicopter hovering over the bay. Hanging up the phone, he began to dial a familiar number as he stood up from the bed. hurrying out of the room, he didn’t notice that he had spilled his beer.

He sat in his car, melting into his seat as he watched the rain glide across his windshield. He could get high in his house or even on his porch, but he loved the sound of a storm knocking on his car. His son was born earlier this week, and he had gotten to visit him the day of. A perfect being that had come from him, but how? He wondered if it was because the boy was a clean slate, not yet a victim of sin. Or did all children receive some of their parents sin, passed on automatically for the sake of cruelty? He watched the waves crash into each other, like liquid bulls expressing their mutual rage. There seemed to be something self destructive about the sea, or he thought perhaps it was just destructive and didn’t bother to distinguish between itself or whatever else it found in its way. Glancing at his arm he noticed the fresh track marks he had accumulated in the past two weeks, regretting being so careless as to take his jacket off in the hospital. He had a brief moment of bliss, before people in the room started noticing his lapses of will.

“You can’t leave, you can’t take my son away before I even have a chance to know him.” He pleaded with her as she loaded her aunt’s car, not seeming to take much note of what he was saying.

“I wonder if we should say you’re in the middle of a relapse or if you’re just done with your break?”

“That’s a little harsh, even for you.” He stood by the car, panicking on the inside.

“I can’t be around you right now. You just keep making the same mistake, and I don’t want to hate you for that.” She stepped into the car, and through the open door he could hear his son cooing. “I’m going to be back in a week for the rest of my things. If you’re really serious about quitting we can talk then.”

“At least call me when you get to Eugene, just so I know that you’re safe?” He looked through the window at his baby boy, feeling a little less panicked at the sight of him.

“Of course. We have to get going now though, we don’t want to get caught in the dark.”

As he watched them head down the only main road in town, he felt panic rising in his lungs again. Like a single note, perpetually rising in pitch. He looked up at the dark clouds consuming the sky, just then feeling drops of rain splash across his face.

The storm beat on his car, the wind screaming for him to come out. Letting the the band that was tight across his arm loose, euphoria was instantaneous. The last of the drugs he had were flooding into his system, isolating him in his own world. This was it, his last moment of bliss until he saw his son again. Until he was trusted to be a father, something that he always wanted to be good at. He knew that many fell victim to the “one last time” trope, but he was different than the rest. He had something to work towards, it was something worth becoming better for; maybe it was even the town, and he just needed to get away from the twilight zone he had grown up in.

He sat there looking at the ocean as the storm raged outside his car, enjoying the isolation. Then all of a sudden the dogs were barking like crazy, it sounded like every dog on the coast was howling. He almost hit his head when his phone rang, the call from his family letting him know they had arrived safely. He turned in his seat, reaching for the phone, and collapsed into his passenger seat. His muscles locked up, and his heart was beating faster than the ring of the phone. The world felt like it was shaking, but maybe his chest was just convulsing as violently as the waves beating against the coastal rock. The dogs were silent, but it sounded as if the earth was screaming in his ear. He couldn’t tell the difference between the euphoria of his last high or the pain pulsing in his veins, wanting to die and live all at the same time. In that moment he thought of his son who he never got the chance to know, but his face was too numb to cry. All he could do was convulse with the earth, as his isolated world began to crumble around him.

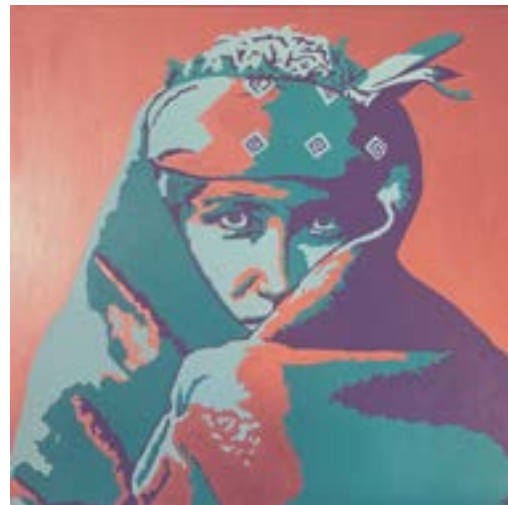
She was shocked by the timing of it all, by their luck. If they had left a couple hours later, they would have been stuck in Portland when the earthquake hit. They probably would have died, crushed by some house that had separated from its foundation. She hadn’t heard from him, but she still checked her phone hoping that he would return her last call. Oregon has a new coast, meaning most people who survived the quake did not survive the following tsunami that redrew the maps. Eugene was definitely hurt by the quake, but the damage was not nearly as severe as some other places. She looked at her sleeping son, scared the actual shaking had caused some unnoticed problem. He looked like his father, and she thought that would have made him happy. She looked at her phone and hoped that he had at least known they were safe in his final moments.



TRACIE
JACKSON

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I'm a Dine artist from the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. My work breaks stereotypes society has on Native American people while educating them about our history and culture. I put a modern pop art twist on traditional Native art by incorporating bright colors and abstract look to my portraits. I recreate photos taken in the late 1800s/early 1900s of Native people and tell their story. Our education system has done a terrible job telling the true history of Native Americans so I use my art as a way to break stereotypes and misconceptions we Native people deal with daily in our lives.



LIGHT

COLLIN BAXLEY

I grew up forty miles from Lazarus—
on those late August evenings
when the air rippled in the heat
and the pavement hissed like metal,
I could see the city's mark in the sky

like a purple bruise around the sun—
the smoke lingering on the horizon
would bend the darkling light
into a deep shade of violet, which flared
red along the edges of the clouds

with the memory of Sherman
and that old flame still rising
above the sullen reach of the pines.
I was too young then to understand
the burning as a baptism,

but I remember how I felt
the first time I saw Atlanta looming
out of the evergreen forest,
the skyline beaming like red gold
in the midsummer glaze—

I got the same feeling looking up
at the mural painted over the exit
to baggage claim at Hartsfield-Jackson,
nearly home after leaving Mayflower Hill
a dropout, drunk on airport wine:

there are kids playing in the water jets
in Centennial Olympic Park at sunset—
in front of them, there stands a girl
with outstretched arms and a lunar
smile—

Cristo Redentor in the halogen rain.



LILLY
SOLANO

HOLES

CHRIS WILLIAMS

Silver laced eyes
Powder soft nose

Realize it's all the same;
Sugar blue rose.

Music in the basement.
Did we
In the basement?

Dark lights flash
Against
Dirty white walls.

Rain in the streets,
Veins a flood.

"I like you."
You don't know.

Alright

Young

Thing.

"We're friends now."
O.K.

ONE DAY

ANNA HOFFER

on my reservation
in the back
of a school bus
she told me
Natives are the ugliest people
I got off the bus
walked through
tribal housing
and daydreamed
of my sweet
huckleberry-stained
squirrel-cheeked
black-haired ndn child
laughing in my arms
and I smiled

WHIPPOORWILL

COLLIN BAXLEY

I have heard you, night after night,
clear as moonlight in the darkness.

I have lain here in the arms of your
music.

I have felt its fingers trace my skin with
frost.

I have shaken off the hard rime in fifths,
letting it cascade over the bedclothes.

I have drawn it into the soil of my chest
like the cold, shallow breathing of rain.

I have cast it out of me again,
sprouting white-flamed petals in rows—

but beneath the green glow of your
foxfire,
it has never been enough.

You have echoed, restless songbird—

your song still burns like chilblains
under the skin of these winter-gar-
dens—

it has waxed vibrato, fragile in time
as the flickering wind—honeysuckle,
carnation, hydrangea—it has pared it
all back.

I have room now only for the moon

vines.

I have waited for their downcast eyes,
awake and shy in coldness, to turn up-
ward

again to face the star-gold glory of
morning.

I have waited here to hear your coda,

Whippoorwill, but you've already gone.
In your absence, the frost fades quiet,

softening along the flowerbeds into
dew—

into the warm, parting movements of
aria,

or just the breathy lapse before refrain.



RACHEL LEMME

I WOKE UP ALONE.

HENRY KORMAN

“I woke up alone.”

This morning there was no one next to me.

No tangled red hair to turn to... to get close to or smell. Your hair is gone, being done up for someone who'll forget its scent as quickly they learned it. I won't ever forget.

No still, breathing body to wrap myself around... to feel or squeeze. Your body is being touched by someone else, someone who won't despair at the thought of never touching it again. I will.

No sleeping face to touch... to run my fingers along or kiss awake. Your face is smiling at someone else, someone who isn't me. Someone who won't appreciate your smile, your lips, and your eyes that are as green as the grass we used to walk on together.



MARNIE MANNING

ROOFTOP IN RETRO- SPECT

MATTHEW LEGER

As the virulent lilacs encircle
the manor, bereft of sound and
fervor
a dusty atlas, once full of life
and love and lines and languor,
now lies
like a sunken ocean liner
seeping up hope and despair
over the sunken infrastructure—

—But this is for another time,
another day, another year,
another lifetime, another beer—

For now, let us focus on the moon,
focus on the way it accompanies
our tunes;
the way it matches our silver
spoons,
the way the beams ignite their
fumes;

for we are free;
upon rooftop, upon tile
upon beams, upon rock,
upon magma, upon God
upon skin, upon rot . . .

Yes, we are free,
upon this rooftop;
and yes, we are God—
Yes, We Are God For He Is Not

Among Us.
and on leather backs with plastic
skin,
the Wind is high on us
as we coarse through Her cavities,
caressing every pore,
oh, how She wishes it were ever-
more—
and we grow,
and thus we gorge—
we infect Her sinuses,
spread to Her core;
for She is sick of our wanton rav-
aging.

and on this metal cloud
we see Apollo playing steel guitar
his notes resonating through the
stars
as my skin slings up like a dart—
the gentle indifference of the uni-
verse
humbles my heart—
—We are free.

and as we climb back in
virtue of broken window seal
weary, weak, but full of fury
we return to our muscadine room
as the silence overshadows the
radio.

AUTUMN LEAVES

ALYSSA PETE

“The smallest coffins are always
the heaviest,” the preacher says,
lowering his head towards the cas-
ket resting next to an empty grave. Scattered
throughout the grass are stone tablets with the
memories of loved ones forever engraved on
the surface. The wind rustles the fiery leaves
desperately clinging to their branches, inter-
rupting the eulogy.

“It is unfair that Amelia was taken
from her loving parents, Nelle and Josh,
after only six years. I know it is natural to
feel angry and blame the driver of the car.
However, we should all focus on the many
smiles Amelia brought to our faces over the
years. Recall the times she lept into recent-
ly raked leaves, or drew a beautiful picture
of the animals at the zoo. Let us forever
remember the love she had for us and
the love we have for her. Our dear, sweet
Amelia is now at peace as she deserves. Let
us have a moment of silence and prayer for
the dearly departed.”

Friends and family surrounding the
coffin lower their eyes towards the grass, re-
fusing to look at the shining oak containing
the body of the little girl.

Tears pour down Nelle’s cheeks.
She cannot meet the crying eyes of those
around her. A deep pain settles in her
chest, refusing to dull and worsened only
by the blank stare on Josh’s face.

She watches as the oak box is

lowered into the ground at an agonizingly
slow pace, whispering a final goodbye to
her beloved daughter. Nelle observes those
around her grasping the hands of their
family, spouses, and children, while her
hand hangs limply by her side.

Amelia’s room remains untouched
for a week. Nelle scans the photographs
with her smiling face covering the white
walls, and her stuffed animals sleeping atop
the ruffled

bedsheets. On her nightstand sitting in a
sparkling black and gold frame is a photo-
graph of their tiny family surrounded by
plump pumpkins. Each of them is bundled
up in scarves and hats to protect them from
the brisk October air. Amelia’s toothless
grin centers the picture as she sits atop an
enormous pumpkin twice her height. Josh’s
arm wraps around Nelle’s back, his hand
brushing her waist, smiles spread across
each of their faces.

Every year, the family drove to an
expansive farm on Sauvie Island where
they would traverse through the haunted
corn maze, Amelia’s hands tightly grip-
ping those of her parents. Then, Nelle
and Josh encouraged Amelia to find the
largest pumpkin in the patch to take home
for herself. Sometimes this singular task
took hours; Nelle and Josh’s hands clasped

together as they followed the wild path of their daughter zig-zagging between pumpkins. The two snuck sweet kisses when Amelia was distracted by her pursuit of the perfect prize.

Tears well into Nelle's eyes as the memories of her family, their happiness, and the innocence of Amelia swarm into her mind.

Each time Nelle attempts to remove the remaining pieces of Amelia, her hands shake and all air rushes from her lungs. So she stands, staring at what she used to have, the life she used to love, the life she ruined.

Josh refuses to step foot near Amelia's room, fearing he will remember; remember returning home to flashing lights and sirens piercing the dull fade of daylight; remember the skid marks weaving from one curb to another; remember the black bag carried into the ambulance inside the reflective crime scene tape. His wide eyes searched for the brown locks of his daughter among the chaos. Instead, he found Nelle frozen on the porch, one hand limp by her side, the other cupped over her mouth. Her cheeks glistened with tears below eyes shining with a mixture of salt-water and pain. Josh rushed to her side, his words attempting to break the wall of silent sobs around Nelle. Never able to meet his concerned gaze, she finally leaned into his arms, conceding to the desire for warmth.

"Where's our daughter? Where is

she? Nelle, look at me! Where's Amelia?!" Josh repeated, willing a response, anything. Fear swelled in his chest, the pressure becoming unbearable. It was not until the paramedics pulled Josh from his wife that he heard the news. She was alone in the leaves. He told her not to play in the street no matter what. He told her. Nelle should have been there to remind her. She wasn't. What the hell was she doing? Josh couldn't comprehend how she let this happen; she knew Amelia loved jumping into leaves.

The dining table no longer seats three for dinner. It now seats unopened mail and papers dragged from Josh's office to distract him at home. Remnants from previous dinners stain the couches as Nelle and Josh eat with the sounds of television filling the space between them.

"Can we please eat at the table tonight?" Nelle begs, wanting a return to normalcy, "It's been almost a month."

"No, I want to eat here." Josh's eyes remain glued to the television.

"But why? Why can't we just have a meal the two of us? Like we used to before all of this happened."

Without shifting his absentminded gaze from the lackluster scenes on the screen, Josh says, "Because, it's not the same. You can't just pretend to go back to the life you had before our daughter was killed just to make yourself feel better. You

let this happen, now you need to get used to the changes."

His monotonous tone pierces Nelle's ears and rings throughout her brain. She already knows this. She never should have left her daughter on her own, what horrible parenting. What mother would have ever left at the peak of rush hour, leaving her daughter helpless to the haste of others to reach the comfort of their homes? Nelle just wants one more embrace, one more laugh, one more good-night kiss from her beautiful little angel. And she turned her back on it all.

Silence fills every crevice of the house. Waking to the dull light of the sun rising behind a sea of clouds, Nelle rolls to feel the indent of Josh's body in the mattress. In the back of her mind she pictures her old routine: light bursting through the window to wake both her and Josh; Amelia throwing open the door begging for pancakes before school; the joyful atmosphere among the stress and speed of the family's busy life. Instead, she crawls out from the warmth of her memories into the crisp morning air. She mentally and physically prepares herself for the first day back at work, with all the sympathetic stares and apologetic embraces. Nelle paints on a smile in plum lipstick and closes the door behind her with a soft click.

Throughout the morning she

busies herself with mindless chores: reading through emails from her staff, filing away old publications of the magazine, and flipping through this week's proposed issue. She refuses to chance a glance at anyone around her for fear that the sadness in their eyes might spark her own. Her obliviousness prevents her from seeing a man approach her desk. His shadow towers over her hunched body as her fingers slide across the keys. He attempts to get her attention by clearing his throat.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Jeremy. I didn't see you. How long have you been standing there?" She asks with a forced nonchalance as her isolation is inevitably disrupted.

"Not long." He smooths the hairs on the back of his head. "Uhm, I was hoping we could talk. I know it's your first day back, so I understand if you need space..."

"Yeah, we can. Is there something in particular you want to talk about?" She notices the sympathy present in the curve of his smile and downcast eyes, contrasting the glint of reprehension present in her husband's constant expression.

"Why don't we get lunch, give you a break?" He shifts his body to the side, allowing for her to lead the way.

Nelle looks at the photograph of her family gathering dust next to her computer. Her husband so joyful, holding sweet Amelia in his arms while she leans to kiss her lovely newborn. Twisting her ring



round and round her finger, Nelle nods.

A soft breeze blows Nelle's caramel locks in all directions as the two sit outside a cafe a few blocks from the office. Gentle warmth from the sun spreads across her face; deep grey clouds threaten to smother the little sunshine left in autumn. Conversations from surrounding tables blur together, creating constant commotion that fills the void between her and Jeremy.

"So what did you want to talk about?" she says, staring through the wafting steam at a full cup of coffee in her hands.

"Well, so, I know you recently lost your daughter—"

Nelle's grip on her mug tightens, turning her knuckles white.

"—and that it's a sore subject right now. But, I want you to know that you're not alone."

He moves his hand through his stiff black hair, breaking strands loose that flop to the side.

"I lost my younger sister recently. I know it's not the same as losing a child, and that I can't imagine the pain you feel right now, but I'm happy to listen."

Nelle glances up, breaking her stare from the cup, "I had no idea. I'm so sorry, Jeremy."

"No, no. It's okay. I only wanted you to know I'm here for you with whatever you need." A forced smile plays on his lips, yet his eyes glisten with the hint of tears. Nelle shifts her eyes back to her cooling coffee while Jeremy glances towards the

bustling traffic driving past.

"Hey, we should probably get back to work. Can we continue this conversation tonight?"

Nelle's lungs tighten and a tingling sensation travels from her chest to her hands. Her eyes lock on her ring, a glistening diamond encircled by sapphire studs. She fidgets with it for a moment, moving it up and down her finger, eventually agreeing to his proposal.

"Drinks at Jay's after work. It's a date." Jeremy places cash on the table. The two walk back together, listening to the sounds of the city.

Throughout the day Nelle watches the hands of the clock, as their ticking matches the pace of her heart. She wills them to slow down; wills her breath to fill her body, releasing all tension as she exhales. As the end of the day approaches, her heart pounds against her chest. Doubt floods her mind as Nelle questions her agreement. The thought of addressing her hidden pain churns her stomach, especially with someone outside of her family. She has worked with Jeremy for a few years now, slowing piecing together information about him. Though they were never that close, she saw sincerity in his golden eyes, in the twist of his mouth when he smiled. She wants more. Why can't Josh do this; why can't he allow her simple solace from

her own sadness; why can't they mourn together? But he is family, the only family she has left.

Nelle sees Jeremy's silhouette strolling her way, hands swinging by his sides, marking the end of her deliberation: "Ready to go?"

"Let me just pack up my stuff. I'll meet you out front in a few."

Jeremy nods and meanders away while Nelle lingers at her desk, aligning each object to perfection. She walks down the blue and green checkered carpet and sees him perched outside the front door, waiting.

She is welcomed by the familiar atmosphere at Jay's. Overhead lights dimmed to the brink of darkness accentuate the grand television on the wall showing the Cubs game. Cracking wood stools surround a nearly empty bar where a pair of women sit chatting and giggling, nearly spilling white wine on each other. Most people choose to sit in the red vinyl booths sticky with a myriad of spilt drinks.

"Where would you like to sit?" Jeremy says, hinting towards a booth near the back of the bar. Instead, Nelle leads him to the bar where they join the tipsy women. "Rum and coke, please."

"Make that two," Jeremy calls as the pair shuffle into the stools and start watching the game.

Nelle lets her mind wander, eventually landing on her husband. She wonders if he notices her absence, envisioning him sunken into the couch with the news murmuring in the background.

Microwaved dinner sits on his lap as he watches the daily tragedies to distract him from his own. Nelle gulps her drink, hoping to numb her mind.

Jeremy attempts to break down her walls with questions about her family. Yet upon resistance from Nelle, he orders drink after drink to push her deeper into a haze of laughter and incomprehension. Every sense in her body is dull; her heavy arms swing around her uncontrollably; a smile forms easily across her face for the first time since Amelia left. Words flow from her mouth without pause, spewing stories about anything from her first pet squirrel to her wedding day. Thoughts about her marriage flood her mind; through thick and thin, she promised. But how thick does it have to be to finally give up?

Jeremy suggests returning home before they lose all consciousness and the two get into the cab, which drops them off across town. Nelle realizes she never gave her address to the driver when they arrive at Jeremy's home instead of her own.

He helps her up the porch steps and sits her on a chair next to the door. The cool metal feels refreshing against her

clammy skin. It is ripped from her too soon, replaced by the enveloping cushions of a living room couch. In front of her is a glass table with a stack of books in the center. She feels the couch shift as Jeremy joins her.

"How're you feeling?" he asks.

"I'm good, how're you?" she mutters, her mouth barely able to form the words.

"No, how are you *really*? Talk to me, I'm here for you."

Some mixture of his tone and the rum warming her insides draws everything into Nelle's brain: her daughter, her husband, her unhappiness. Her mouth refuses to cooperate as thoughts whip through her brain. Tears fill her eyes as the two sit in silence, eventually broken by her sobs. Her chest heaves with each gasp for air; snot from her nose runs down her face, mixing with tears. The pain from the day she found her daughter dead comes flooding back, pulsing through every inch of her body with each beat of her heart. She can see the body of her daughter, lying in the street, half covered in leaves. She couldn't tell whether the leaves were red from autumn or Amelia's blood.

"I killed her," Nelle sobs, "I just wanted to bring her a snack. It doesn't take long to cut up an apple. I don't know how it happened. I came out and... and she was gone. It's my fault. I could've stopped her! I *could* have--" Nelle heaves forwards gasping



for air. Jeremy rubs her back as she focuses on her breathing, but her brain is still fuzzy.

"Hey, hey, hey. Deep breaths, it's okay. It's not your fault, not at all," he slurs through the comforting words, repeating them until she calms down.

The world spins around her as she sits upright, confessing, "Josh blames me too. It must be my fault."

"It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself. You weren't the dumbass driving the car through a pile of leaves. You couldn't have known that in the short period of time you went inside that would happen. It's not your fault at all. Even if you were outside how would you have stopped the car?"

"I...I don't know. I could've told her to come back...to get out of the street... I

could've--" Nelle's words are interrupted by her own wracking wails. "How'd you do it? When your sister died?"

"My sister?... Oh, right," he mumbles, unable to meet her eyes, "This isn't about me."

Jeremy's hand rests on her inner thigh, stroking with his thumb, whispering, "I promise. There's nothing you could have done. Breathe Nelle. Relax. It's not your fault."

His hand begins to wander up Nelle's leg. The heat of his touch calms her; finally, someone doesn't blame her; finally, someone wants her the way her husband hasn't in months; someone wants her at all. He leans forward; Nelle focuses on his face with immense concentration. His golden eyes stare into hers as she sits,

unmoving. His lips meet hers, unresisted.

Nelle stands frozen in front of her home wondering what her husband will think. She unlocks the door with a slight click, watching as it creaks open. Sitting at the table, newspaper in hand, is Josh.

“Welcome home, I just brewed a fresh pot of coffee. Get it while it’s hot,” his eyes remained locked on the paper.

“Thank you,” she says, pouring herself half a cup. Nelle sees the glint of her ring for the last time as she places it next to the coffee maker; its reflection in the sun leaves a soft sapphire hue on the counter.

DANNY BATTLE

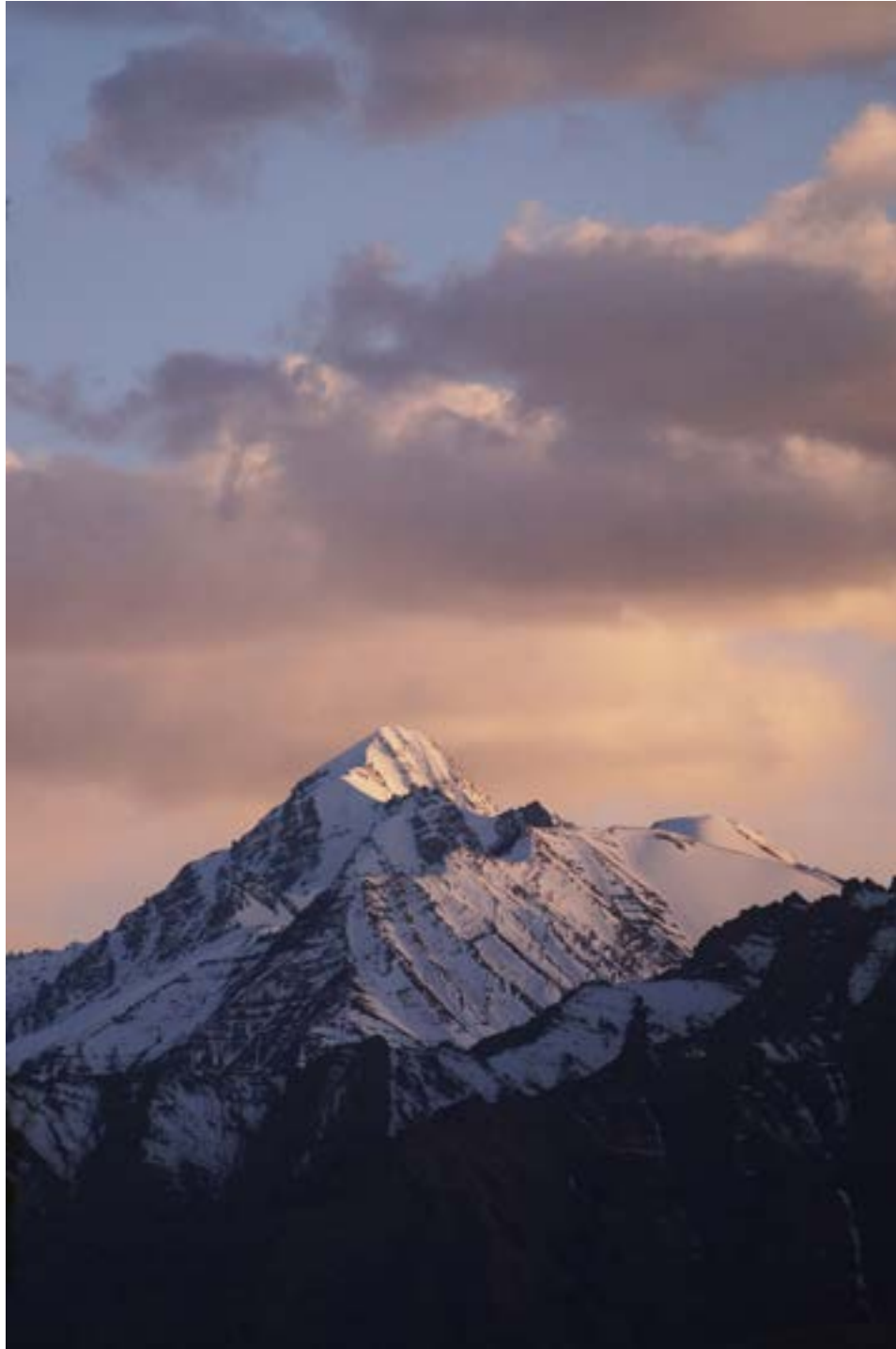


STRATIGRAPHY

SYDNEY VALDENS

The law of superposition
states that the closer to the bottom
something is, the older it is.
Dig a hole
and look at the sides,
you will see layers of dirt,
each one revealing something different
about what happened before.

A pile dirty clothes on the ground.
Dig through you can guess at activities of the
past.
The bedrock is jeans worn to work
the day after,
a little black dress, still smelling
of vodka and cranberries. Sweatpants on top
of a black lace bra, another date
that didn’t go so well.
The two sizes too big
t-shirt never given back
after the breakup.



THE LIFE PATHETIC

WITH ALLEN SHOE

IVY LONG

As a break from writing, Allen Shoe prepared a midnight snack of chips and salsa. He munched on a chip as he walked from the refrigerator, peeling off the lid of the generic-store brand salsa. Just as the lid pulled completely off, he tripped over his own feet, and the full container of salsa went flying. It splattered all over the linoleum, too thin for any pathetic attempts at shoveling some of it back in, or even just eating it off the floor. Allen stared at the catastrophe, still in shock.

"Oh no. Oh no no no. That salsa wasn't even expired yet, and I had to pay full price. Now my chips will be all dry, and they'll cut up the inside of my mouth. Oh geez. What a mess. It'll take ages to clean all this up. Why did I choose an apartment with such narrow grooves in the linoleum? I'll barely have time to write with all the Q-tip work I'll be doing. My first good idea in weeks, and I'm spending the night with airborne salsa. Oh, who am I kidding? No one wants to see a movie about an insurance salesman who can talk to trees."

Allen stared at the salsa some more. *Oh, I'll just leave it until morning.*

Allen retreated back into his study—well, it was really just a corner of his living room he stayed in while he was trying to write. He had stuck his laptop on a small filing cabinet, found a folding chair lying in the gutter, and called it a day.

After staring into space for a few minutes and realizing he had no clue how to continue the story, Allen made the executive decision to read over what he had written so far.¹

A few moments later, Allen was on the verge of tears. The slimy slugs of humiliation oozed down his neck, the tapeworm of insecurity nestled deeper into his intestines. Where was the precocious, freckled boy who won third place in his local library's junior fiction contest? Where was the pimply yet amiable, Salinger-touting teen who time and time again was proclaimed a "literary genius," a "prodigy with a strong sense of voice"? He had failed everyone who said they believed in him, everyone who had foolishly purchased stock in his artistic prowess. *I wish I'd been a doctor*, he lamented.

Surveying his dismal surroundings in this unproductive state of self-pity, Allen's bloodshot eyes spotted a dusty, enticing bottle resting serenely on his bookshelf.² The bottle of vodka (or gin, who knows) had come with the apartment, a housewarming gift stowed charitably deep between the couch cushions by the previous tenants. The whiskey now sat diligently across the room, awaiting the special occasion it had been informally reserved for. To Allen it seemed that this bout of artistic angst was a good enough time to

indulge. He took down the bottle of tequila and squinted at it, unsure. Allen had never actually consumed alcohol before. In college, he had perfected the technique of either lifting his Solo cup to his firmly sealed lips, or simply spitting his Bud Lite back in the bottle when no one was looking. But tonight he courageously unscrewed the top and took a swig of America's favorite pastime.

One overzealous gulp later, Allen staggered back to his desk and collapsed in front of his laptop. He narrowed his eyes at his pathetic attempt at prose. Glaring at his futile endeavor to capture grand themes and symbolism and explorations of the beauty and anguish of the human condition, he made another executive decision. *I'll show them, I'll show everybody! I'll write the worst screenplay ever! You won't be able to reject me because I've already rejected myself! Now who's laughing?* With this drunken, circuitous logic, Allen began to write, not ceasing until the cock crowed at the first rays of dawn. With his final burst of consciousness and rebellion, Allen emailed the fresh screenplay to his agent with a subject line that rivaled his usual boundaries of incoherence. He immediately slumped in his chair, slowly sliding down to the floor into a snoring heap.

Six hours later, Allen awoke from his slumber on his wooden mattress, half his face covered in drool, his back aching, and with a hangover rivaling that of Nathan Lane the day after opening night. Momentarily concerned that his recurring nightmare of turning into a dust bunny had finally been realized, Allen bolted up with a start and hit his head on the filing cabinet. Two different yet excruciating pains forced him to remain on the floor and reflect on his present situation. He recalled the punctuation-deficient email he had sent his agent, and felt a hot wave of embarrassment wash over him. *I have to tell him I know that script is no good.* God, what if he's insulted? Allen stumbled to his phone, trying not to retch as the secretary sent him through.

¹This is a common technique used by writers, myself included, and only serves to prolong the moment at which one must actually begin writing. Little do these writers know that, in the context of the artistic process, what they wrote previously has no effect on the present story arc, as they are the ones who wrote the preceding storyline, and can simply alter it to suit this new direction as easily as it came to them before. Ah, writers, you hopeless sacks of artistic inhibition. When will you learn?

² Who are you kidding, Allen? It's just a shelf.

"Hi, Jack, it's Allen. Listen, I'm so sorry —"

"Allen! It's about time you called! My phones have been blowing up down here!"

"Yes, I know, it was an insult to the entertainment community—"

"You better get down here right away so we can sort through all these offers together."

There was a very confused pause.

"What do you mean, offers?"

"Ha! Natural comedian, not just on paper. But you better get down here so we can talk negotiations."

"I . . . I don't think I'm in a condition to drive right now."

"One hit screenplay, and already he's requesting a chauffeur service! Ha! No but Allen, I'll send a cab down right away. You've earned it." Jack hung up.

Allen stared at his phone for a long time. Then he went into the kitchen and got an aspirin. He put a blazer on, locked his apartment, and waited for the cab outside.

Jack's secretary waved Allen into the office, smiling a wide, knowing smile that showed off her gold fillings and made Allen instinctively check his fly. He walked in and was greeted by Jack with the heartiest handshake of his career.

"Allen! The man of the hour! Take a seat, take a seat."

Allen gazed at Jack from across an impressive mahogany desk. The last time Allen had found himself in this uncomfortable chair in front of this mahogany desk was during another conversation in which Jack had not been maniacally grinning, but instead addressed Allen with a furrowed brow and tented fingers, voicing concerns over Allen's "questionable" and "confusing" and "uncalled for" content.

"Jack, about that screenplay—"

"That script touched me in ways I have never been touched before. I don't think there's anything out there that so perfectly captures the essence of the human condition. It's a work of pure genius, and I am so honored to represent you as you navigate these bids."

Allen massaged his temples, concerned his hangover was affecting his perception.

"Just to—just to clear a few things up. What exactly happened with the script? You keep talking about offers and bids . . ."

"Playing coy, eh? Well, I'll just tell you the whole story."

"Luckily, I was checking my email during my morning jog and saw that you had sent me a new script at four a.m. Now, normally I don't actually read my clients' work, and I just send it off to a handful of desperate directors recovering from some failure or another. But I had a special feeling about this one. I read the whole thing, ended up running an extra four miles I was so absorbed. Absolutely blown away by it, a really 'hoppin,' as the kids say, piece of artistry. Outstanding. Simply outstanding."

Jack rifled through a file folder.

"So, I sent it off to every hotshot studio and producer and director in my Rolodex, and by the time I got back here, Janice had ordered eight extra phones and an unpaid intern to field all the calls."

Jack located the script, and slapped it on his mahogany desk. Allen stared at it, numb. There was a cover page all right, with all the trappings of standard Hollywood formatting, but the first few lines of scene description had leaked onto the bottom of the page.

Allen looked up at Jack, who beamed at him relentlessly.

"So . . . people think it's a good script?"

Jack laughed uproariously, his booming guffaws rattling the pictures frames on his desk.

"Of course they do! Haven't you been paying attention? And I would trust that an artist like yourself knows the quality of their own work."

The telephone on Jack's mahogany desk suddenly buzzed, and Janice's staticky voice came through:

"Jack, Universal is on Line 2." Jack looked at Allen.

"Tell them to hold. Now Allen, I understand geniuses like yourself can't be rushed, but—" He motioned to the telephone emphatically. "We can't exactly let this sort of thing fly out of our hands, now can we? This is your big break!"

Allen remained silent, and took to fingering an emerging hole in the knee of his pants. During Allen's mute cogitations, Jack took the time to helpfully correct "Allbn" to "Allen" on the cover of the script.

"Jack, I . . . I can't."

"What do you mean—"

"My answer is no, you can't sell it off to Universal or anywhere!"

"Allen, let's not make any rash decisions . . ."

Allen stood up abruptly, upsetting his chair.

"Geez, I don't know what you're trying to pull here—this script is complete gar-

bage, how can you and half of Hollywood not see that? I wrote it while I was drunk, for crying out loud! This is an insult to literature itself! I can't let it get out, with my name on it. And what about all my other scripts? Can't you people see that this isn't art?"

Before Jack could schmooze his way into a compromise, Allen bolted from the office. It wasn't until he was two blocks away that he began to slow down. The last of the indignation- fueled adrenaline had left his body, and his head was killing him again. He plopped down at a nearby bus stop, put on his sunglasses, and habitually checked his phone for the time. What he saw on his notification lock screen made his blood run cold. *Twenty-seven missed calls from Rocky's Rockin' Retro Roller Skate Diner.*³

One twenty minute cab ride and a nearly fatal jaywalking incident later, Allen burst through the doors of a greasy, overdecorated diner. He made a beeline for a man sporting a tangerine tank top and buzzcut who glared at Allen from behind the cash register with a mighty fury. Allen reached the counter, and tried to defend himself.

"Brad, I—"

"You're late."

"I know I'm late, it was an emerg—"

"You're three hours late to your shift. You know Thursday afternoons are our busiest."

"Yeah, you get a whole half dozen people in here—"

"You abandoned your responsibilities in a time of need, and forced your coworkers to pick up the slack."

"Hey there Allen!" A waitress, balancing a platter of chili fries, clapped Allen on the shoulder as she skated past them. Allen gave a friendly little wave at her back as Brad continued his lecture.

"You had a responsibility, Allen. You let everyone down, including me. But I'll be honest, I didn't really expect anything less deplorable from you."

³ Founded by an ex-accountant who felt a dearth of cheap fast food restaurants with a singular, impractical gimmick, Rocky's Rockin' Retro Roller Skate Diner has been a landmark of the Burbank cuisine scene since 1979. If its fluorescent lighting, chronically sticky counters, and periwinkle bar stools aren't enough to draw you in, the suspiciously

symmetrical hamburger buns will.

"Listen, I'm sorry I forgot to call, I had a meeting with my agent. And you know I've never been late before—heck, I even worked Christmas!"

"Allen, I know you're Jewish. And here at Rocky's Rockin' Roller Skate Diner, we have a strict 'one strike, you're out' policy. You've struck, and now you're out."

Allen balked. "What kind of policy is that?"

"A zero-tolerance policy." Brad pulled a mortar board out of his pocket and began filing his nails.

Allen could feel it all slipping away from him, and struggled to develop a closing argument. "You can't just fire people for one minor attendance violation! I'll—I'll call the union!" Brad snorted, and continued to shape his index finger. "What union?"

Allen, sensing his defeat, began to shuffle dejectedly to the kitchen. Brad caught sight of him, and pointed at Allen with his nail file accusingly.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Allen turned around. "I got to get my skates!"

"Oh no you don't. Those skates belong to Rocky's Rockin' Roller Skate Diner now."

Allen threw up his hands in exasperation. "What are you talking about? I've had those since high school!"

"Yeah, yeah, tell it to the judge." Brad turned away from Allen to take the order of a couple who appeared to be suffering from the munchies. Allen, realizing there was no way of reasoning with an inexplicably vindictive, ruthless, tangerine tank top-wearing robot like Brad, slumped his way over to a stool at the counter. The waitress who greeted him earlier skated over to Allen, deposited a cutlery-napkin bundle, and poured him a glass of water.

"I'm sorry about your job, Allen."

"Eh, it didn't pay too much to begin with. Say, you don't think my employee discount is still valid, do you?"

"I'd love to help you out, Allen, but Brad would probably fire me, and I'm trying to put my oldest through college."

"Make it a kids' order of pancakes, then." She skated away, and Allen dropped his head into his hands. The hangover, the screenplay, his fresh unemployment. They played a violent match of racquetball inside his skull.

A plastic plate clattered down on the counter, and Allen opened his eyes to see a small mound of misshapen pancakes which had somehow managed to be both burned

and slightly undercooked. They reminded Allen of himself, in a funny sort of way. As he tore open a single serving cap of maple syrup, Brad zoomed past him, menus in hand, smirking slightly, and wearing Allen's skates. Allen rolled his eyes.

After polishing off the pancakes, and pocketing the extra maple syrup tub in what he hoped was an inconspicuous manner, Allen opened his wallet. He was devastated to find only a couple of two-dollar bills. Allen glanced out the window. The sun was beginning to set. He looked back into his sad wallet, and, after a moment, took out his phone and began to dial. As the phone rang, he took the maple syrup out his pocket in disgust, and flung it back on the counter.

"Hello, Jack? I'd like to reconsider those bids. Oh, and send a cab."

