



UNBOUND

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*Rafael Arroyo's black and white printmaking piece,
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10" x 14"*

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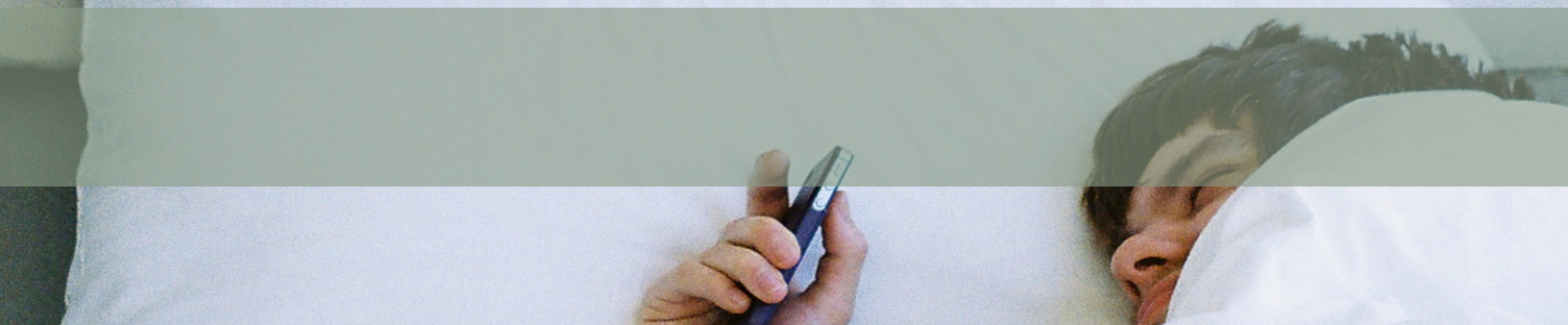


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A RECOLLECTION

—Brianna Persons

She is the heel to a loaf of bread, crumbled and residing in plastic
along the bordering kitchen counter.
Between cereal boxes and pots, she is cornered, relishing each crevice,
breathing in dullness, a fly hovering over the bulb.
What more could eyes say in the moment they see?

I've spied the odd tear or two on her wool jacket,
examined the lameness of her stroll,
like a buzzard starved of flesh.
I've cleansed my hands after ferocious pointing and
laughter, jabs at an inflamed putty face.
The fingers of ghosts will rarely vanish.

I used to walk from the classroom empty-handed
amidst the jeers of children, and see her
flat against the brick building, grey and bloated.
Would she ever ring a sound as depraved as those,
like bells jangling from palominos, like unbridled
hooves plodding the rural earth?

I witnessed it myself,
the hard press of hands against bodies,
swinging limbs, the tear of tears falling from the seams of her face.
The guffaws would disappear down the ascent of the playground, and
she would be left to cradle swelled knuckles
to her own sweet tune.

*Brianna is a sophomore majoring in English. She has been
previously published in Unbound's Winter 2012 issue
and Unbound's Anthology Print Issue.*

IN PLACE OF A YOUNGER MAN

—Taylor Koekkoek

First I say I'm sorry and then I ask if he's okay and he looks down at himself and rotates his hands and says, "I think so." I'm not sure what to say next so I repeat myself and the young guy looks himself over once more and rotates his dirty hands again and says, "Yeah. I think so."

"Thank God."

"Yeah."

"I thought for sure you'd—"

"Christ," he says. "Never mind." The guy pulls his hand from his side and it's thick with blood. He cranes about madly to assess his injury but isn't flexible enough. "What's it look like?" he asks, turning his back to me and peering over his shoulder.

"Red."

"Red?"

"Yeah. God, I'm sorry."

"Well, what else?"

"I don't know. Wound-like I guess."

"Wound-like?"

"I don't know. Your shirt's hanging over it."

"Should I take it off?"

"Your shirt? What if stuff spills out?"

"Could that happen?"

"I don't know."

"Christ. Alright. I'll leave it on."

"How does it feel?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't really feel it. Just warm and sticky."

"That's probably good, right?"

"Shit."

"What?" I grab at my hair.

He points to his shoulder bag in the street beside his bicycle. "This'll be my first late delivery." Then he says he is going to lie

down and he does and I ask what his name is and he dies and I'm still asking his name.

Cars pass us slowly, some with children pressed up against the back passenger windows. Neighbors open their doors and stand on their stoops, putting their hands over their mouths and shaking their heads.

A fire engine shows up first, even though there's no fire. The firemen come without their jackets and say, "Yeah. He's dead." They wait for the paramedics, who say the same, and wait for the police, who take my information. I say I was just laid off and my head was someplace else and the bicyclist wasn't there and then he was and then my windshield was all smashed and it was an accident. They say these things usually are. "Always a damn shame. A shame any way you look at it." In any case, they say they'll need my information now and I'll hear back from them in the coming week about next steps.

Another officer is waving traffic around us all: my car, the paramedics, the poor dead guy, me sitting some distance away at the curb.

"And what about right now?" I ask.

"Seeing as your windshield's all busted, probably isn't the best idea to drive. Better get a tow."

"But I don't have to stay?"

"Not unless you'd like to."

I point to the guy's bag. "What about his stuff?"

"What about it?"

"He said he was making a delivery."

"Was he? Like I said: a shame any way you look at it."

Two paramedics hunch over the dead bicyclist and count to three and heave him up

onto a gurney and roll him away.

"Will someone deliver his package?"

He walks over to the bag and picks it up and shakes it, listening. "Maybe you ought to. You're someone, aren't you?"

"Me? No. I'm nobody," I say.

"Now wait a minute. *Someone* hit this guy with his car." He holds up the shoulder bag. "You must be someone. You can ride a bike, can't you?" He pulls a thin cardboard package from the bag. "Let's see," he says, dropping his finger down over the label. "Twenty-one-thirty, Pinegrove. Ten-minute ride from here. Know the place?"

"I know it."

He hands me the bag. The fabric is dark. I can't tell if there is any blood on it.

"You did kill the guy."

"It was an accident."

"These things usually are."

Then they drive away, the fire engine, the ambulance, the cruiser. They leave me standing in the street by my broken car, holding a dead man's bag near the dead man's bike at the place where he died.

* * *

I stand his bicycle up and look it over. On the whole, it fared better than he did. Half of the front fender snapped off, leaving the remainder crooked and jutting into the brake cables. The fork came unaligned from the handlebars. The frame is fine. I pin the front tire between my heels and pull it back into alignment, then remove the dinged-up half fender and toss it into a bush. The seat height is too tall, so I take it down. The strap of the shoulder bag is too loose, so I take it in. The seat is still warm.

The ride is more like twenty minutes and takes me through a collection of look-alike neighborhoods. Wayward children sit on their porches with dull dog's eyes, watching cars pass. Old men sit in recliners with the backs of their heads visible in the front windows. Women in workout attire walk in pairs at the edge of the street, swinging their elbows. No

one asks me what I'm doing on a dead man's bicycle or why I'm crying.

Before knocking on the door of twenty-one-thirty, Pinegrove, I reread the address to be sure. I read the address a second and third time. The cul-de-sac is empty except for a man watering rows of plants, and he doesn't appear to be wondering what I'm doing here.

I knock.

"Hello," says the woman at the door.

"Hi. I—I have a—" I fumble through the bag, which seems to have grown larger and more full of things, then pull out the package.

"Thank you. Do you need me to sign for it?"

"Sign for it? I suppose so." I go back into the bag, where my fingers make out the edges of a half-sized clipboard. I hand it to her. She signs it and dots an "I" somewhere and hands it back to me, smiling. She holds the clipboard out, looking from it to me and back. I think about telling her I killed her deliveryman by accident.

"Is everything alright?"

"I'm not sure what I was expecting."

"Expecting?"

"I thought you wouldn't recognize me."

"I don't recognize you."

"I know. I'm not sure what I was expecting."

She puts the clipboard in my hand.

"Well, thank you."

"For what?"

"The delivery."

"Oh. Yes."

I want to ask her what's in the package. She closes the door.

I still have his bicycle. Returning it is the right thing to do. I need to spend the rest of my life doing as many right things as I can manage, or at least more right things than I would have. I never hoped to be a great man, not even a good man. Now I only hope to die having done as much good as bad. All I want

is to cancel out. When I'm gone, it'll be like I was never here.

Hanging beneath the seat there is a novelty license plate that reads, "Greenly's Green Delivery." Then an address. Returning the bicycle is the right thing to do. There's no getting around it.

This ride is thirty-some minutes and it's hot outside. I am in horrible shape. That's something I know but don't think about, like dying, like knowing I won't ever have kids or those sorts of things. My thighs burn and my chest goes all hot and rigid. I'm sweating deep V's into my shirt beneath my arms and around my chest. My ass is a swamp.

The store is one of those places you pass your whole life but have never been inside. It could be a backdrop for a movie set. I stop across the street from Greenly's Green Delivery and consider leaving the bicycle at the door with a note. Then I feel ashamed.

When I wheel the bike into the shop, a bell rings above me. A man with a short-billed hat is on the phone saying, "Just a second ma'am," and snapping his fingers at another man popping out from behind a doorway. The doorbell continues to ring as deliverymen come and pick up packages and leave. I let the man on the phone go on talking and snapping and writing things down and wait for a lull that doesn't come. He only goes on answering phone calls and snapping at a man always disappearing behind something.

Then he looks at me and puts his palm over the telephone receiver. "The hell are you waiting for?"

I open my mouth and then close it and think empty thoughts. He says, "Christ's sake," and goes back to the phone.

"I delivered the package to twenty-one-thirty, Pinegrove and I hit your delivery man with my car this morning."

"Alright," he says, either to me or to the telephone, then pushes a package to the edge of the counter and says, "Fourteen-seventeen, Harris street."

"What?"

He taps the package.

"I hit your delivery man with my car."

He takes the phone from his ear.

"What's that?"

"I hit him with my car. It was an accident."

The second man pops into the doorway. "What did he say?"

"This asshole hit one of our guys with his car."

"And I delivered your package."

"Is he alright?" the second man asks.

"And I brought his bike back."

"Is he alright?" the first man says to me.

"He's dead."

"He says he's dead."

"You killed him?"

"By accident."

"Christ, that's a fuckin' shame."

"A shame any way you look at it," I say.

The first man eyes me carefully and asks, "What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure."

The second man approaches the counter. "Which of our guys did you kill?"

"I don't know his name."

"You killed a man and never bothered to learn his name?"

"It wasn't on purpose." I open up the dead man's bag and pull out the clipboard. The first man takes it and shrugs before handing it to the second man who says, "This was Ian's delivery."

"Ian?" the first man asks.

"Yeah. Kid with the cowlick."

"Young guy, right?"

"That's right."

I ask how young.

"Couldn't have been out of his mid-twenties," the second man says.

"Of all the men you could have killed today," the first man says, "You went and killed a kid with a cowlick who had his whole life ahead of him."

"I didn't mean to."

"He was shaping up to be our best delivery man," the second man says.

"He might've had a family someday. Most men do."

"I never did," I say.

The first man asks me if I remember what it was like to be a twenty-something year old. "Not very well," I tell him.

The second man says they'll need another deliveryman.

"Goddamn." The first man scratches his nose and looks out the window. "Anyone dropped off an application recently?"

"Not recently."

"Goddamn," he says. Then he points at me. "What about you?"

"Me?"

The second man asks me if I have a job.

"Not anymore—"

"Don't have a job? You can ride a bike, can't you?"

"I can. But—"

"Then congratulations. The job is yours."

The second man congratulates me also, then tells me I'll start tomorrow.

"Look, I don't have a job, but I'm looking for something else. Something less physical."

"You kill a man and then you come here to say you're too good for the work he did?"

"I didn't mean to say that."

The second man asks me if I think my life is any better than the dead bicyclist's was. I have trouble with this question and consider not answering it, but the first man says, "Well? Is it?"

"No," I say. "No, I suppose it isn't."

"I wouldn't suppose so either. You'll start tomorrow."

"Alright." This is me cancelling myself out.

"Keep the bike."

"Sure."

Innocuous as silent letters.

"And take this." The second man hands me an envelope.

"What's this?"

"Ian's last paycheck. Was supposed to pick it up today. You can take this to his mother."

The first man says, "You take it to her because we sure as hell aren't. We didn't kill her boy."

I turn it over and back and pat it gently against my palm. "All right," I tell the two men. "Where does she live?"

Deaf but in a silent world.

The second man flips through a drawer of folders and writes an address down and adds, "She's blind."

"What's that?"

"Ian said his mother was blind. So, I don't know, don't be surprised if she wants to touch your face or put your fingers in her mouth or whatever."

"Fingers in her mouth?"

"I don't know."

I nod and begin wheeling the bicycle, now my bicycle I suppose, out the door when the first man says, "Just because you're working here doesn't mean we like you. You still killed our guy."

"Ian," the second man adds.

"Ian. That's right."

"Okay."

I am a joke that received no laughs and offended nobody.

My mother died during my early thirties. She died in a different state. She died far away, where she couldn't waste my visits complaining about never having any grandchildren and worrying that I'd never get married. As far as I know, all mothers worry about these things they have no control over. The only way for us to escape their worrying is by moving away and calling them only rarely

and visiting them even less. And even then, the escape is never complete.

Evening comes slowly, like sleep. Houselights go on and families sit at dinner tables passing plates and clattering silverware. The sun doesn't set, but slips closer to the hills, changing color. My tire spokes reel and hum in the wind and no one watches.

I wish she wasn't blind. I can't find a good reason for it, but go on wishing anyway.

The house is one story, with a small white porch and chimney coming up the side. The yard is mowed and healthy and cut through by a curving, brick walkway. There are two blooming hydrangeas set on either side of a moss-covered birdbath.

An accident is no reason to kill anyone.

After pressing the doorbell there is the quiet sound of feet in socks. The door opens.

"You're late," she says warmly. Her ghost-town eyes stare over my shoulder at things, following in the half light. "Come in, come in." She has one hand on the wall and the other holding a cane, beckoning me inside. Her socks are mix-matched.

I stand at the doormat, holding an envelope she doesn't see.

"Hello," I say.

"You're late. And so hoarse. I'll put the kettle on."

"I'm sorry? Oh no, please—"

She's already turned away. "It's no trouble. I was about to anyway."

"Please," I say, "I need to talk to you about—Maybe we could sit?"

"We can talk while you're working."

"Working?" But she's already gone past a corner, leaving behind only the sound of her footsteps and the opening and closing of cupboards from another room. With my feet still on the welcome mat, I lean into the doorway. "Working?" I ask again, louder.

"Would you come in already? You're letting the cool air out," she calls.

I glance out desperately behind me, to the dim-lit houses and the red sun sinking, to

the trees and the birds that make no sound except for the abrupt and horrifying beating of wings. I step inside and close the door behind me and have never been more terrified of anything in my whole stupid life.

"I tried to call, but if you'd believe it the telephone is being finicky again. I made sure the thing was plugged in, but that's about as much as an old blind woman can check for. I worried you weren't coming."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"I know. You're the big busy man now." She waves a hand about. "But if I don't get my sink back working I can't do the dishes. I can't make dinner. Can't even wash my hands. Who knows how dirty they are? Certainly I don't. I don't know half the things I touch."

"Sink?"

"Like I told you." She pats the outline of the enamel sink rim. "I've been without it since yesterday afternoon. A whole day."

"I need to talk to you."

"Then talk to me, but fix the sink while you're at it," she says. "If you're father were still here he'd have had this fixed last evening."

"Father?" And then I understand.

"If you're anything of a handyman it's all thanks to him. Least you can do is fix your poor, blind mother's sink. You owe me that much, don't you?"

"No. Yes. I owe you so much more, but I'm not your son." But she doesn't hear me. She only goes rummaging through a cupboard and continues talking to her son that isn't here.

"It's your turn to take care of me for a change. Earl Grey or chai?" Her hand goes patting along a shelf. I hold still as stone, except for my mouth, which I open and close as dumbly as a dying fish. "Actually, I'm out of chai. Earl Grey it is," she says. I forget how to produce words and how to mash them together in such a way that would mean: I killed your son and now you're all alone in the world.

"Go on then, Ian" she says. "I'd like to fix dinner soon."

Because no other words come, I say, "Is it only clogged?"

"How should I know?"

"Alright."

"Your voice. So hoarse. You don't sound like yourself."

"I'm not."

"The tea will help that much. I'm convinced it helps most things. I tried to get your father to drink more tea, but you know how he was." She puts the teabags in the kettle and traces the outline of the stove dial and clicks it on.

I stoop down and take cleaning supplies from beneath the sink and put them out on the kitchen floor, then lie on my back and shimmy up under the pipes because I don't know what else to do.

Nothing is leaking. Only clogged. I root through the kitchen drawers until I find a plastic popcorn bowl.

"You'll never guess what I found the other day," she says.

"I'll need a clothes hanger. The wire kind."

"You know where the closet is. Go fetch one."

There are only two hallways and one leads to the front door. I take the second, which ends in a bathroom and passes a bedroom. From the other room, she asks me to guess what she found the other day. I say, "Just a minute." Her closet is open and perfectly orderly, divided into two sides. One side is full of colorful women's clothing and the other is filled with old brown suits and muted polo shirts and cheap blue jeans. I take a hanger and unwind it.

I return to the kitchen. Ian's mother draws her hands over a row of mugs and pulls two away and brings them to the kettle. She pours the kettle slowly, with her forefinger dipping below the mug's rim to feel the tea rising, then wipes it on her thigh.

"Harriet was here three days ago, helping me clean out my closet," she says while she moves the mugs to the dining table. I climb under the sink. "It was becoming a mess. Being blind and messy aren't things that go well with one another." She laughs. I run my fingers along the curved, steel belly of the p-trap and turn the plastic washers holding it in place. "Harriet took something down from the top shelf and she said, 'Well look at this.' Next she's handing me this big old binder. Guess what it was?" The p-trap comes loose and grey water falls into the popcorn bowl. "It was your sticker book. Can you believe it? I'd nearly forgotten." Holding the piping over the bowl, I run it through with the hanger wire, dislodging colorless food pulp. "I put it here in the desk drawer. I wish I could look at it." I work the wire through the p-trap until it threads through the pipe smoothly and nothing comes falling out. Then I assemble the piping again and return the cleaning supplies.

"I'm going to run this out to the garbage."

"Did you make a mess of yourself under there?"

I look down at my shirt that is now dotted with light stains. "Not too bad."

When I come back from the garbage Ian's mother is standing in the center of the room. "It's one of you father's. Go on and keep it." She extends an unsure arm holding a t-shirt that reads, "I'd rather be fishing."

"I'm fine. Really."

"Go on. Your father won't be wearing it."

She only smiles again when I take the shirt from her, handling it gingerly. "Well put it on," she says. "I won't be peeking."

I do because she asks and because I killed her son.

"How does it look?" she asks.

"Good."

"I wish I could look at you." She smiles with her empty eyes. "Come here." The mother pulls the binder from a drawer. She sits

at the table and pats the empty chair beside her. "Please. Come here. What does it look like?" She runs her fingers lightly over a corner of the binder.

"It's blue," I tell her.

"And what else?"

"It says: My Sticker Collection. The letters are all stickers. Most of them are shiny and sparkle. A couple aren't."

"And inside?" She smiles.

I open the book. The spine cracks. "The first page is mostly tractors."

"Describe them to me."

"There's a yellow steamroller with no one driving it and a red crane lifting a steel beam. There's a yellow dump truck and yellow backhoe. The only tractor that isn't yellow is the crane. In the corner there's a man with a jackhammer."

The mother is clasping her hands together and looking forward at something I can't see. "I remember." She tells me to go on and I do. The next page is all dinosaurs and I do my best. There is a page of farm animals and then astronauts and aliens. There are two pages of bugs and one page for airplanes. A page of dogs and a page of cats. Ian's mother closes her eyes and says, "I remember. I remember."

"This page looks like it's all jungle animals. There is a snake in a coil and sticker of three parrots. There are two monkeys. The lion sticker is fuzzy and soft."

"Show me."

And I do because she asks. I wrap my hand around hers and extend her forefinger to run it across the page, drawing it over the raised edges of the stickers until we reach the

lion. With my finger on top of hers, we trace the lion's silhouette and over his body. "Do you remember?" she asks me.

"I don't," I say, but I imagine.

"Don't you? This was your favorite. You saw this at a crafts store and came begging, wrapping your little arms around my thigh. Cost a quarter. And with a quarter, I made you as happy as you'd ever been, maybe the happiest you'd ever be." She closes her hand around my fingers. "The hardest thing about your little boy growing up is realizing you can't make him happy anymore. Sometimes the world is just too much. You'll understand when you're a father." She puts her head on my shoulder. "I wish you could remember, Ian. I bought you the world for a quarter."

"I do." I take my hands up to my face and weep. "I remember."

"Ian, what's the matter?" She runs her hand up and down my back. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I forgot, but now I remember everything."

She pulls me into her arms and runs her fingers through my hair. "It's alright," she says. "Everything is alright. Everything is okay. A quarter just doesn't go as far as it used to." She wipes away my tears and draws her thumbs across my cheek and then she goes still. Her fingers brush my face lightly, then pull away. She takes my head slowly from her breast as though to see me carefully.

"You," she says quietly. "Who are you?"

"It's me," I tell her. My face is leaking and slipping out of place. "It's your boy."

Taylor is a senior double majoring in Political Science and English. His past publications include Unbound's Spring 2011 issue, Fogged Clarity, The Avalon Literary Review, Forge Journal, The Chaffey Review, and Neon.

Ari Freitag

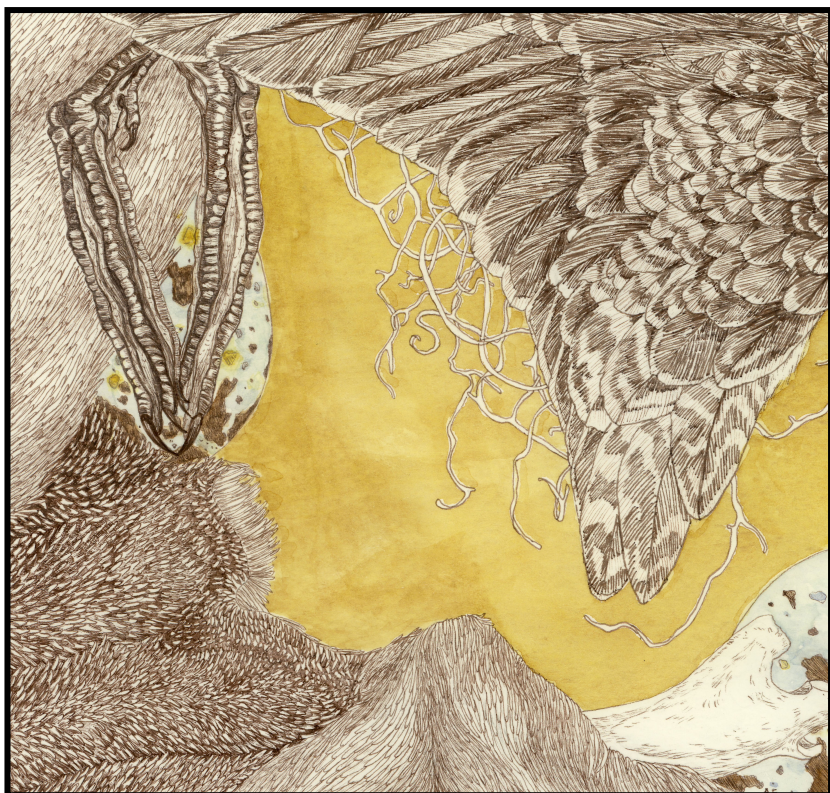
FOREST FLOOR

Ink and Gouache
6" x 8"



OREGON COAST

Ink and Watercolor, 6" x 6"



NORTH AMERICA

*Ari is a junior
double majoring
in Art and Biology.
She has been previously
published in Unbound's Fall
2011 issue and is Unbound's
Spotlight artist of the term.
You can find out more about
Ari and Unbound's Spotlight
section at unboundlit.com.*



3 ½" x 9"
Ink and Gauche

ZIPPO

is what they called him;
the little boy on the trail laid out
like an ascending prophet

and they all shook his hand
all eighteen of them in the jungle
because that was their punishment
and

it was difficult because the little boy
had given his fingers as alms
to the paddy workers

in hopes that his touch
separate from his body
would help the rice grow

but the eighteen shook his palms
and kissed his forehead where
flies were not sitting like a crown
and

becoming soldiers again they looked;
with his wings made of shrapnel
and pieces of leaves they wrote

—it's a sign, a call to justice
somethin' big, somethin' great—

—Megan Louden

*Megan is a sophomore Comparative Literature major with an emphasis
in Russian and Scandinavian studies. This is her first publication.*

THE DELIVERY BOYS

—Sam Mitchell

The doorknob made no sound as it turned. Montrose stepped into the main room, gazing with a calm satisfaction at the specimens ranged along the racks. They almost seemed to float in their plastic casings, and there was an air of patience about them, he thought. They were waiting to fulfill their purpose. They would, just as soon as they were ready.

As he walked, he ran his eyes fondly over the specimens. He felt a quiet swell of pride as he looked at them. Really, this was an ingenious idea; he would like to shake the hand of the man who came up with it. As it was, he was just happy to be a part of the operation, a cog in this great machine.

The only sound in the room was made by the soles of his shoes as he strode, unhurried, between the aisles. He wanted to check and see how the finalization process was coming along. There had been a few reported snags with the procedure and he wanted to make sure the experts understood that he would tolerate little in the way of mistakes.

As he arrived at the other door, on the far side of the main storage area, he thought he heard a faint rustling, like one of those African rain-sticks. He didn't turn toward the sound, however. There was nothing in that room to

make a sound like that. His mind was playing tricks on him.

On a bright summer's day in Salmondale, Oregon, Trevor Mestiff flicked the smoldering remains of his cigarette onto the sidewalk without breaking stride. A new one was already burning between his lips, ignited by the butt of the last. He sucked hard, tasting the smoke—like coffee and gravel—at the back of his throat, before expelling it in a grey stream through pursed lips.

He squinted down the street, wishing he'd thought to bring sunglasses. The sun was beaming down with an oppressive cheeriness; the dazzling light made the suburban lawns gleam and the windows of the suburban houses glitter on either side of the street. Trevor thought that if it weren't for the swarms of bees buzzing through the grass, nobody would be able to tell if the mathematically manicured lawns were real or plastic.

Trevor strode on, his cigarette held negligently between the first two fingers of his right hand. His pale skin was almost the same shade of white as the cigarette paper. What little conversation there was at Trevor's house tended to revolve around his mother's shrill fretting that he didn't spend enough time outside and would surely die of some kind of vitamin deficiency. Trevor tended to look even paler than he was because of his predilection for black clothing. His hair hadn't seen a brush or a pair of scissors for a good five years and it was usually so matted and greasy that no one could tell quite what color it was. His clothes and hair, not to mention the dilapidated sneakers, which didn't cover so much as drape around his feet, made him a *de facto* outcast in his little hamlet, and the focus of a great deal of raised-voice "discussions" between himself and the rest of his reluctant family unit.

As Trevor walked to the end of the road, he encountered a middle-aged woman

holding a small boy by the hand. He knew them; or rather, he knew who they were. The mother and son of a family who'd moved into the neighborhood around four years ago. The woman averted her eyes, a juvenile maneuver that made Trevor smirk, but the little boy stared at him with the grave fascination inherent to all children under the age of seven. In response, Trevor snarled and gnashed his teeth like a beast. He wagged his tongue and curled his fingers into claws, feinting toward the pair with a loud stamp of his sneakered foot. The boy squeaked with fright and clung to his mother's leg. The woman's eyes widened briefly with alarm before she gave him a sullen glare; the look of a black bear protecting her cubs. Trevor smiled toothily at her and walked on, humming softly. *That'll teach you to keep an eye on me, lady. I'm a savage, ma'am, and I will rip you to shreds.*

This thought hammered in his head like drumbeats, a pleasant soundtrack for walking. Bobbing his head to his own internal music, he made his way past the scatter homes and into what passed for "downtown." Arriving at the bus stop just in time for the #43, he climbed on, flicking away his cigarette and flipping a few coins into the tray in one motion. He settled down in one of the handicapped spots and fixed his eyes on an advertisement for a fast-food chain on the roof. As the bus trundled out of the small suburb and towards the bigger city, Trevor let his thoughts drift towards his destination. He could feel excitement thrumming through his veins and he found himself smiling at nothing. Before long, he'd be in the city with his friends. And then, the fun would begin.

He couldn't remember exactly when he first met them, but he remembered what happened that day almost perfectly. He'd been in the city by himself on a pale spring afternoon a few months back. He didn't have any place to be, and he couldn't really muster

up the energy to find something to do, so he just wandered. He ended up wandering down an alleyway in one of the rougher areas of the city. There was a convenience store on one side of the alley and a porno theater on the other. He had been shuffling along, kicking at bits of garbage on the asphalt, when suddenly, a voice shouted, "Go!"

The next thing he knew, something smashed into the side of the head, hard. He crumpled. When the cobwebs cleared from his head, he saw that he was surrounded by a group of people, most of whom looked barely older than him. They were dressed in leathers, chains, and masks and were all carrying weapons. They had stared down at him with expressions of demonic glee before one of them leaned down and hissed, "On your feet, little doggie."

Trevor staggered to his feet. His eyes darted from one face to another and he realized that they weren't wearing masks, but thick makeup. Their faces were deathly white and their lips blood red, with dark circles around their eyes and along their cheeks. They leered at him like sinister clowns. The silence in the alley was broken only by Trevor's ragged breathing, the occasional giggle from one of the gang members, and the distant sounds of traffic.

The one who had told Trevor to stand up stepped toward him. He bore a black star on his right cheek and wore a black fedora. He carried a baseball bat that was pitted and worn, with great ragged holes in the wood as though something huge had taken bites out of it; Trevor tried not to think about how it might have gotten that way. "What were you doing wandering down here, huh? Didn't your mother ever tell you to stay out of dark alleys?"

Trevor didn't reply, didn't even look at him. He was searching frantically for a gap in the circle, trying to find a way out.

"I'm talking to you, pussy!"

The one with the black star on his face,

apparently the leader, shoved his baseball bat hard into Trevor's stomach. Trevor coughed and groaned, trying to stay upright. "If you don't have enough sense to stay out of places you shouldn't be," said the stranger, "I guess we'll just have to teach you a lesson."

The gang advanced closer, clutching their weapons and sniggering. Trevor hesitated for a split second, and then leaped sideways with a feral snarl toward a boy to his right, who was gripping a long metal pole. He wrestled the pole out of the boy's hands before shoving him to the ground. With a wild kick, he felt the kid's stomach give and heard a loud grunt of pain. Trevor spun out of the circle through the gap the boy left, brandishing the pole before him like a sword. The rest of the gang, momentarily distracted by the fall of their comrade, charged at him with savage yells.

Trevor didn't know how he stood there, swinging the pole wildly at anyone who came near. He made not a sound as he fought; he could barely even hear the shouts and screams of his attackers, as though the sounds they made were coming from a badly tuned radio. He was completely focused on his hands wrapped around the pole and the jeering faces that floated towards him before he knocked them down. He had a fleeting memory of baseball practice, when he was very much younger. The round white shapes grew larger and larger as they flew at his face, before he swung at them and made them disappear.

Before he knew what was happening, he started smiling, then laughing. He couldn't seem to stop, so he just laughed and laughed as he struck out at his attackers. He was having *fun*, he realized. He *liked* this. He yowled in exhilaration before throwing the pole aside and pouncing on one of the gang members that he had beat to the ground a moment before. He felt the jolts in his knuckles as he landed two punches on the guy's chin. He seized the chump's shoulders and began slamming him into the pavement. The stranger's head

flopped back and forth like a ragdoll. The only thing Trevor could hear was a series of dull thuds, seemingly out of sync with the actual collisions of the stranger's head against the pavement, like a pumpkin being struck with a mallet. The sound was strangely hypnotic, and Trevor found himself drifting into a sort of trance. He was more and more conscious of the breath gushing in and out of his lungs, the blood rushing to his brain, the strength flowing unchecked through his arms as his biceps flexed and stretched. He could feel a sense of peace streaming through him, golden and gentle. He was fighting and he was winning, and the feeling was as soft and happy as springtime. He was only dimly aware of a tugging in his hands, as his hapless victim struggled to get away. The more Trevor slammed the guy against the ground, the weaker his struggles became...

All of a sudden, he was grabbed from behind and slammed against the brick wall of the alley. The boy with the black star on his face was pinning him against the wall. His teeth were bared and his eyes were wild. For the first time since walking into the alley, Trevor felt his stomach constrict with fear. He tensed, ready to defend himself.

For a long moment, they stared at each other. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the boy with the black star on his face released his grip. Trevor stayed still where he was, not trusting his legs to support his weight. He was becoming more and more aware of various aches and pains all over his body, as well as a throbbing ache in his head from being slammed against the brick wall. The savagery had mostly gone from the boy's eyes, and he seemed to be thinking hard about something. Finally, he jerked his head in a nod and straightened up. Still breathing hard, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Trevor."

"Trevor..." The boy considered him for a long minute, before giving him a small grin. "You fight like hell, Trevor. Why don't

you come back here tomorrow and join us?" He gestured to the gang assembled behind him. "You wouldn't think it to look at us, but we're not just a random pack of jerk-off thugs. Believe it or not, we get paid to do this."

"Do what?"

"We beat people up."

"What kind of people?"

"Any kind. Anyone who's dumb enough to wander down our alley. And when we take care of them, the Boss comes by, picks up what's left of them, takes them away, and pays us. Sometimes, he buys us drinks for a job well done. We're called the Delivery Boys, and I'm Marcus. Are you in?"

"What does he do with them?"

"Don't know. Don't really care. Are you in or aren't you?"

Trevor didn't answer right away. He could always use the money, and he felt the grin creep back on his face as he recalled how good he had felt during that fight. He remembered slamming that one sucker's shoulders into the ground, his head flopping forward and back, and felt a fresh wave of adrenaline crash into his system. He hadn't had that much fun since...ever.

The leader grinned back at him, but didn't say anything. They both knew Trevor was in. Before he moved aside to let Trevor leave the alley, however, Marcus pointed a threatening finger at him and growled, "Don't ever fucking touch my cousin again, though. Do you understand?"

Trevor nodded.

"Trev!"

Trevor grinned and turned into the alleyway. This particular alley, between Howard and Third Street, was the latest in a long line of alleyways in which the Delivery Boys had held court since he joined their ranks. Every time they met, they chose a different alley, yet they all tended to blend together in a gritty montage that had become

more familiar to Trevor in recent weeks than his own house. The white streaks of paint on the rough brick spelling out long strings of gibberish over too-full dumpsters, along with the assorted trash on the fading asphalt all combined to form a welcome sight as he walked toward the voice. But it was the faces that greeted him that made him grin wider. Looming out of the shadows, there they were. The Delivery Boys. Waiting for him.

Trevor greeted the other boys as they came up to him, trading insults and high-fives before Marcus stepped forward. He and Trevor embraced briefly, before Marcus slugged him on the arm. "You're late, asshole. I distinctly remember telling you to arrive at two o'clock."

"Screw you, no you didn't," Trevor replied without heat. It had taken him a while to get accustomed to the way Marcus talked, but lately he had begun to take it in stride. Marcus was fond of using long words with almost comically precise diction. Since anyone who decided to pick on him for it got a whack on the ear from Marcus' worn bat, the Boys mostly left him alone. Rumor had it that he was a dropout from the local performing arts college.

"And anyway," continued Trevor, "like you're so helpless without me."

Marcus grinned smoothly and gave an exaggerated shrug. "What can I say? I prefer to have my second-in-command with me, that's all."

Trevor rolled his eyes and held out his hand. Marcus, knowing what he was after, handed him a tub of white greasepaint. Unscrewing the lid, Trevor began smearing the stuff across his face to form a thick mask.

A skinny boy bounced up to them. "Hey guys!" He spoke with a bit of a slur and his eyes were slightly crossed. Trevor guessed he'd already had about four beers or so, but he could've been wrong. You never could tell with Derek. Nevertheless, his grin was always wide and friendly, and his step seemed

perpetually infused with a Tigger-like spring.

Trevor bobbed his head in greeting. Marcus slapped hands with him and said, "Are you ready to go, coz?"

Derek nodded like a wind-sock puppet, not stopping until one of the other boys called him away. He walked with a weave and a limp. As always, Trevor shot a quick look at Marcus, trying to gauge his mood. He knew that Derek, who was Marcus' cousin, had never walked that way before Trevor joined the gang and he could never help but wonder if Marcus was pissed at him for crippling the kid. However, Marcus' expression remained cheerful. No hard feelings. The gang had, after all, attacked Trevor in the first place.

"Dude! Incoming!"

The alert was delivered in a stage whisper, and Trevor immediately bounded to his feet. The Boys had scattered in all directions like cockroaches under a spotlight, disappearing behind the assorted detritus that lined the alley. Beside him, Marcus was standing, too, stretching out his neck and flexing his hands in a routine sort of way. Trevor grinned at him and punched his shoulder gently. "Ready?"

Marcus smiled back and grunted an affirmative before melting behind one of the dumpsters. Trevor did the same, and waited for whoever it was to wander down the alley.

The day passed enjoyably enough. Since it was a Tuesday, the traffic down the alley was perfectly suited to the Delivery Boys' purpose; occasional and solitary wanderers, ensuring that there were no witnesses when the Boys struck. They would wait for their prey to wander far enough away from the main road, and then Marcus would give the word and strike the first blow. The rest would circle the hapless victim, while Marcus engaged in a little gratuitous taunting (which made Trevor roll his eyes, but he never said anything; let the man have his fun). Finally, the rest would fall

on the chump, striking again and again until the victim lay still, bruised and unconscious. They would pick the limp body up and heave it into one of the dumpsters, then relax until their next victim arrived.

As always, Trevor could barely keep himself from giggling as each new sucker groaned and sobbed under his fists and feet. He couldn't help it; each new fight filled him with a childlike glee. He called back and forth between the other boys as they beat the sense out of some faceless victim, thinking that this must be how other, "normal" people enjoyed soccer or basketball. He felt alive and strong and happy to be with his friends doing what he loved. Even the occasional stray knocks he got only served to spur him on to greater heights of wild violence, and he laughed as he beat each one down to a bloody, bruised mess. He often thought to himself, *This is perfect living, right here. Why does anyone ever do anything else?* But still, he was supposed to be a tough and terrifying street thug, the original urban nightmare; it would not do to giggle.

Time, as it always seemed to do when he was with the Delivery Boys, ran swiftly. He was just slamming a fist into the soft stomach of another victim when he heard a faint cough beyond the circle. He knew that cough, and once he heard it, he stepped away from the poor slob immediately and stood to his full height. That was part of the rules; when the Boss appeared and announced his presence, they were supposed to move aside at once.

Looking around, Trevor was surprised at how dark it had become. The alley was thrown completely into shadow and the sky above was dusted with the faintest traces of stars. Beyond the alley, the street was washed in the flat orange glow of the streetlights. The rest of the Delivery Boys stood as well, looking warily toward the man's silhouette at the mouth of the alley.

Trevor was amazed, as always, by the figure the Boss cut standing halfway between the mouth of the alley and the place where the

Delivery Boys stood gathered. With short hair that was neither brown nor blond nor black, he was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin nor fit, dressed in a suit that was neither expensive nor cheap, and he seemed entirely manufactured in such a way as to make no impression on the world whatsoever. Nevertheless, the Delivery Boys never failed to react to his presence in their alley with the utmost deference. They never spoke to him, or he to them, and whenever he decided to pay them a visit, all eyes remained trained on him. Despite his lack of remarkability, the Boss was the last authority figure the Delivery Boys respected and, if Marcus' impassioned reports were anything to go by, he did not tolerate much in the way of shenanigans or failures.

Marcus strode over to the Boss, trying to project as much ego as he could muster. As the leader of the gang, Marcus was the only one allowed to speak to the Boss. After conferring briefly, the Boss handed Marcus a sack and the pair of them walked back toward the Boys, still huddled in a ragged semicircle around their moaning victim. Marcus gave him a perfunctory kick in the head, knocking him unconscious. The Boss stepped forward, parting the crowd of Delivery Boys to pick up the lifeless body before slinging it over his shoulder and carrying it out of the alley. He would make several return trips for the other unconscious victims waiting in the dumpster. No one was quite sure what the Boss wanted with these random victims, but everyone had theories. Trevor's own theory was that the random victims weren't random at all, but had been sent there by the Boss or someone else who worked for him. Perhaps they were all enemies of the Mob, and the Boss wanted them to be roughed up, but didn't want to get his own hands dirty. So, he employed Marcus, Trevor, Derek, and the rest of the Boys to do the job for him.

Watching the Boss and his cargo leaving the alley, Trevor slipped his cash into the front pocket of his jeans. He had no plans

for the money, but it was still nice to have. Marcus slapped his shoulder to get his attention. "We're off to have a beer. Are you coming?"

Trevor nodded and grinned. Marcus grinned back and the two of them left the alley, with the other Boys following them in a ragtag mob.

As usual, the Boys ended up at a small, dingy bar on Brook Avenue. They liked the place for two reasons; first, because it was cheap, and second, because the bartender was almost completely deaf. As long as the rest of the patrons stayed drunk enough, there was no one at the bar to report the Boys' loudly shouted anecdotes of past violence.

Derek was always the funniest of the gang when drunk. Granted, that was the way he spent most of his existence, but something about watching him interacting with ordinary civilians was especially entertaining. Walking with a wobble and a swagger, he would approach some random patron and pretend he was a long-lost friend of theirs from high school or college. He would paw at them, affectionately at first, but gradually his gentle punches and cuffs would escalate into full-on smacks and kicks. He would get the poor drunk fellow into a sobbing ball on the floor and just before the rest of the (equally intoxicated) patrons would work themselves up enough to get pissed off at him, he would hold up his hands defensively and squeak, "I'm just playing!"

Chuckling at Derek's antics, Marcus leaned toward Trevor and muttered, "Oh by the way, the Boss told me that his employer wants to see me tomorrow and that I should bring my two best fighters along with me. That's you and Derek, man. Are you up for it?"

"Sure, man."

"Cool. One o'clock?"

"Yeah."

Marcus looked left and right, as if to make sure they weren't being overheard. The rest of the Boys weren't paying them any attention, of course; they were too busy laughing at Derek, who had a short, chubby guy in a punishing headlock. "Hey listen, man," Marcus began again. "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate you coming along tomorrow. I'll be honest, the Boss scares the shit out of me."

Trevor laughed. He could tell by his glazed eyes that Marcus was drunk.

"I'm serious, man. I really feel like I can depend on you, you know? Like, you're my second-in-command, right? We can rely on each other."

Trevor shook his head and laughed. "Sure, Marcus. We're partners."

Marcus grinned at him before his head jerked forward and bounced off the bar in front of them. Derek had rejoined the group and announced his presence by slapping Marcus hard in the back of the head. Trevor, along with Marcus and the rest of the Boys, laughed helplessly.

The Boss arrived at one o'clock sharp the next day, ready to pick up Trevor, Marcus, and Derek. He was in a limo. Of course he would come in a limo. Not much was known about the Boss or his mysterious "employer," but the general consensus was that they were both insanely rich. So, the limo wasn't a big surprise really, but the fact that the Boss would arrive in one to pick up three Delivery Boys definitely was.

Trevor did his best to lounge in the red velour seats and look unimpressed. Next to him, Derek was acting like a child; pressing every button he could reach and giggling like an idiot. Marcus was deep in conversation with the Boss, looking officious and grown-up. Trevor, lacking anything to do, rifled through a few of the cupboards and found an unopened bottle of whiskey. This distracted Derek from

his button-pushing and before long they were both grinning and feeling pleasantly buzzed.

Trevor had been expecting the limo to ferry them to some sort of fancy high-rise in the middle of town, with plush carpeting and secretaries in short skirts. Failing that, he would have guessed some sort of seedy bar, straight out of the 1930s, where the Boss' "employer" would be sipping champagne with a big-breasted blonde. Instead, they had arrived at an immense warehouse. Aside from a number of expensive-looking cars parked out front, it looked just like an ordinary warehouse, all gray cinderblock walls and no windows.

Trevor, staggering a bit, followed Marcus and Derek and the Boss out of the limo. The Boss, with a raised finger, indicated that they should wait outside before he strode toward the building.

"What the hell?" Derek brayed, but the Boss didn't even flinch. He disappeared inside, leaving the three Delivery Boys standing in the driveway.

"I dunno what he thinks we are," Derek muttered. "Like we're kids or something, like he can just order us around."

"Well, he is the Boss," Marcus reasoned.

"He's the not the boss of me!" Derek swayed where he stood. *Really drunk, then*, Trevor realized.

Derek was still talking. "I'm going in there. I'm gonna go talk to this guy myself. I have a lot of things I wanna say to that asshole." He jabbed a finger into thin air in an impatient sort of way.

Marcus shook his head. "Derek, don't be so juvenile. Just stay here."

Derek, paying no heed to his cousin, was already weaving his way toward the door of the warehouse. "Trev? You coming?"

"Sure, what the hell," Trevor decided, feeling spontaneous.

Marcus called after them, but they were through the door and had closed it behind

them before he'd said more than their names.

Trevor and Derek found themselves in a long, narrow concrete hallway; at the end was a white door. There was no sign of the Boss anywhere. They set off, exchanging casual punches as they went, before arriving at the door.

"What d'you think's behind there?"

Trevor snorted. "No idea. Never been here before, genius."

They sniggered for a bit, before Trevor said, "Open it, then."

"You open it! What are you, a pussy?"

"Who're you calling pussy? Alright..."

Trevor twisted the doorknob and threw the door open with exaggerated bravado. Derek, who had been leaning against the door, stumbled and fell flat on his back. Trevor was just in the middle of a good laugh when he suddenly realized exactly where they were.

The room was enormous, and precisely square. The ceiling was in shadow beyond metal rafters supporting fluorescent light fixtures. The sickly, colorless glow seemed to render the room in a curiously flat light, as though it only existed in two dimensions. This only served to amplify the pure horror of what was in that room. It penetrated Trevor's alcohol-soaked brain and made the bile rise in his throat.

Human bodies were strung upright from metal racks in precise rows all throughout that cavernous room. They were shrouded in plastic, so that the outlines of the bodies were blurred. Trevor thought, randomly, that they looked like old photographs of members of the Ku Klux Klan.

The plastic didn't hide the large, red circles that marred every single body. They were positioned in exactly the same fashion on each one; two on either side of the neck, two each on either side of the torso, and one on each thigh. Trevor didn't know what the circles were for, but he didn't have long to wonder about it before a hand grabbed his

elbow and spun him around.

He was faced with the top of a man's head, his short, dark hair slicked back with product. Looking down, Trevor saw the rest of the man, who was smiling widely at him, displaying white, even teeth. He was dressed in an expensive-looking dark blue suit, and his black shoes were polished to a shine that rivaled his gleaming teeth. "You must be Trevor," said the man in a voice that echoed through the room. "You can call me Mr. Montrose, I'm your Boss' boss."

Trevor managed a nod as Montrose pumped his hand. It felt strangely disconnected from his body. Behind Montrose, the Boss glared at him reproachfully. He could hear Derek struggling to his feet and mumbling apologies for entering the warehouse without permission. Trevor was amazed that the kid could even manage to speak when dead bodies hung from the ceiling like giant, pale bats.

"Quite alright, quite alright," Montrose said, shaking Derek's hand in turn. "In fact, I'm impressed with your initiative. I don't know how well you're acquainted with our operation here?"

Trevor shook his head, as Derek slurred, "Nah, the Boss never told us nothin'."

"Well," said Montrose briskly, "It's really quite straightforward. Ordinarily, I don't condone informing the delivery teams about this, but as you've found our base already... Here, let me show you."

He set off through the aisles between the racks of bodies. Trevor and Derek followed him, while the Boss brought up the rear in silence.

"As you're probably aware," Montrose was saying, "We're involved in a lot of high-risk operations abroad. When I say 'we,' I mean, of course, the United States. We've got conflicts going in the Middle East and in Asia, both of which are fairly hostile areas. It's very difficult for American soldiers to do their jobs in safety over there. And frankly, it recently

became a whole lot harder.”

The Boss grunted behind them. Montrose turned to face him and they shared a significant look before Montrose continued, “There was a security breach about a year ago and the identities of all our undercover operatives were leaked to a significant terror cell. We can’t afford to send anyone else over and all our agents have been compromised. You can appreciate, I hope, what a difficult position we’re in?”

Montrose wrapped an arm around Trevor’s shoulders in what was meant to be a friendly, fatherly way. Trevor stiffened, but managed not to flinch away. Derek said something about how they definitely understood what a “hard p’sishun” they were in. Montrose shot him a toothy grin in reply. Trevor found his voice and asked, in what he hoped was a casual tone, “So, what’s the deal with all these...” He couldn’t bring himself to say “bodies.”

Montrose snapped his fingers. “Precisely! Well, you see, we’ve had top scientists working on this and they’ve discovered a way of creating the most sophisticated disguise known to man.”

By this time, they’d reached a door in the wall, on the other side of the immense room. Walking through it in single file, they entered another huge room, containing a vat (out of which poured a thick cloud of noxious smoke) and a complicated-looking machine. On a rack next to the door was a row of black vinyl zippered garment bags, hung on coat hangers. Unzipping the nearest one, Montrose tossed the garment bag to the floor, revealing a naked female body. Or rather, Trevor realized with a wave of nausea, a naked female *skin*. All the muscles, bones, and organs had been extracted from the body, leaving the skin to hang, in an almost comical fashion, on the wire coat hanger.

Montrose gave him a wink before turning and stroking the empty skin. “It really is a miracle of modern science,” said Montrose

softly. “We dehydrate the body first, which makes it easier to remove all non-essential organs and muscles and so forth. After that, a healthy dose of commercial moisturizer keeps the skin supple enough to be usable.”

“So, basically,” Derek piped up in a voice like one who has just solved the secret of the universe, “You just use the skins of the guys we beat up, and then you send ‘em to your spies so that they can put ‘em on and disguise themselves.”

Through his nausea, Trevor was impressed with Derek for his uncharacteristic sharpness. Apparently, Montrose was impressed as well. “That’s exactly what we’re doing...Derek, was it? Yes, that’s exactly it. You might have noticed the red circles on our specimens in the main storage room? Those are the places where we extract all the blood and mucous and various other bodily fluids.”

“So, once they get here, you kill them, right?” Trevor rasped. It suddenly seemed imperative that this be true. If such a ghoulish business was to exist, then surely the victims must be dead first.

Montrose gave an uncertain little laugh and pulled the black garment bag over the female skin, as if the nakedness of the skin was suddenly shameful. “Not exactly,” he replied, and Trevor broke out in a cold sweat. With a glance at Trevor’s face, Montrose hastily elaborated, “But they don’t feel a thing, don’t you worry. We keep them very heavily sedated. In fact, if you were to examine any of the specimens in the main room, you’d swear they *were* dead. You see, the extraction process works much more efficiently if the heart is in operation, so we have to keep them alive. But I assure you, they are completely unconscious until they die of dehydration, completely pain-free. Quite a clever setup, don’t you think so?”

Trevor couldn’t reply. All he felt was an icy tingling in the pit of his stomach as he thought about the trussed up bodies in the other room. He could not reconcile his work with the Delivery Boys to the cold operation

Mr. Montrose was carrying out here. With the Delivery Boys, every fight was real, a struggle to take down the victims. They hunted together like a pride of lions, reveling in the visceral thrill of violence. Montrose, on the other hand, sucked the very life out of his victims, delivered to him in his lair, practically on a silver platter. *What a horrible thing*, Trevor couldn't help thinking, *What a horrible way to die!* Tied up, unable to move, while your life is slowly drained away.

At least with the Delivery Boys they'd had a chance to fight back.

With a sick thrill, Trevor recalled his own fight, the fight that had got him accepted into the Delivery Boys. If he had lost that fight, he would've ended up here, strung up and drugged, waiting to die.

Montrose was speaking again, leading them back through the main room. "I'd appreciate it if you boys would keep what you saw here today to yourselves. It's just that this is a top-secret project we've got going here. We're operating on a strictly need-to-know basis. You understand, I'm sure?"

Trevor nodded and Derek slurred something in the affirmative. Montrose beamed.

"Well then, I'll let your Boss show you the way out. It was nice to meet you both, and I hope we can continue doing business in the future."

Montrose turned to leave, but then snapped his fingers. "Of course! I forgot."

He pulled three pieces of paper from an inside pocket of his jacket and handed one to Trevor and two to Derek. "If you could give the other one to Marcus, I'd really appreciate it. It's just a little token of my esteem. You see, of all the delivery teams we've got going in this city, yours is by far the most productive. So, I just thought I'd say 'thanks' for a job well done in person."

Trevor examined the piece of paper. It was a check with his name on it. He took one look at the long row of zeroes in the value box

and felt sicker than ever. He couldn't block out the echo in his brain: *blood money, blood money, blood money.*

Trevor followed the Boss and Derek toward the exit. Looking back into the room, he wondered how many were there because of him, which ones he had beaten senseless before the Boss carted them off to this place to be sucked dry and flayed. In the midst of his morbid ruminations, he thought he heard a rustle of plastic. When he looked in the direction of the sound, he saw something that made his heart sink into his stomach.

One of the bodies was stirring in its plastic shroud. The cables strung under its (his? her?) arms made it undoubtedly difficult to move, but...whoever it was...they managed it. Trevor could just make out the person's legs, kicking feebly, before he turned and bolted out the door.

"Trev! What the hell are you doing?"

Trevor looked up vaguely from his spot on the pavement. Marcus was towering over him, his expression impatient, bordering on pissed off.

"That's the third one today you've messed up. What's the matter with you?"

Trevor shrugged one shoulder, not meeting Marcus' eyes.

"You're not participating in fights, Trevor, and I can't have that. This is your job, you indolent asshole, remember?"

Trevor suddenly felt an all-consuming desire to be anywhere other than where he was. "Hey listen, can I just head out? I'm still hungover from last night."

That much, at least, was true. After a zombie-like effort to beat up stragglers the night before, after his encounter with Montrose at the warehouse, he had gone to the Brook Avenue bar and gotten absolutely hammered. His head throbbed and his eyes felt like they were practically sizzling in the sunlight whenever he opened them. However,

neither of these was the real reason why he couldn't bring himself to fight that day.

Marcus considered, then nodded. "Very well," he barked abruptly. "You're no good to me if you're no good. Go home and sleep it off. You had better be ready to fight properly tomorrow, though. Understand?"

Trevor bobbed his head in what he hoped looked like an affirmative nod, before turning out of the alley as quickly as he could manage without looking too desperate.

Before he'd gone more than twenty paces beyond the alley though, Marcus reappeared at his left elbow. "Hey."

Trevor looked at him, unable to muster anything more than a grunt.

"Something's wrong with you," Marcus said sharply. "I've seen you hung over and I know that there's more than a headache bothering you. Come on, man. Talk to me."

Trevor felt a flash of anger. "What do you care? Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Marcus, to his credit, didn't shrink at his sharp tone. Instead, he body-checked him, slamming him back against the brick wall of the building they were walking past. His voice was a growl as he said, "Because you're my fucking second, alright? We're partners here. We're supposed to trust each other. Now what the hell's wrong? Did something happen yesterday with the Boss or something?"

His fingernails dug into his shoulders and the sharp sting helped Trevor to focus. He wished more than anything that he didn't have to tell Marcus what had happened. If he had his way, he would take the secret to his grave. But he couldn't help it; he had to tell someone. He couldn't talk to Derek about it. Derek didn't care. Whether it was because of his busted brain or his 100-proof liver or just plain sickness, he couldn't be moved to care about Montrose or the warehouse.

He swallowed and took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said bracingly. "Something happened."

Later that night, two young men in black clothing could barely be seen breaking into a warehouse by the river. One was bent over the doorknob, fiddling with the lock, while the other looked over his shoulder, eyes darting warily over the empty street. The sky was a peculiar shade of orange, similar to the color of macaroni and cheese, where the lights of the streetlamps reflected against the low clouds over the city. The only sounds that could be heard were the distant hiss of traffic and a faint bass throbbing—probably from a stereo system in a nearby apartment.

Marcus finished picking the lock and the pair slipped through the door without a sound. Down the grey corridor they scurried, their breathing loud in the confined space, until they reached the second door. This one was unlocked, and the two glanced at one another briefly before stepping through the door together.

Trevor looked down quickly. He knew that if he saw the room in its entirety again, he would be frozen in place, staring at the awful scene forever. He could hear Marcus swear softly as he walked slowly forward into the room. The silence was broken only by the buzzing of the fluorescent lights. At Marcus' soft call, Trevor looked up. For a long moment they stared at each other. Trevor could see that Marcus was struggling, trying to absorb the horrible scene before them. For a fleeting second, he thought Marcus might start crying. But the moment passed, and, as if someone had flicked a switch, a grin appeared on Marcus' face. He held up a switchblade and a disposable camera. His jaw was clenched and his head was tilted to the side in a look of cocky defiance. "Let's get to work."

Their plan was simple: get evidence and take it to the press. They knew that talking to the police would get them nowhere. Since this was a government-sanctioned operation, the cops would have exactly zero authority to shut it down, besides the fact that neither Marcus nor Trevor particularly liked or trusted the

city's finest. The papers, however, would die for a scoop like this, and if people knew about it, they would be in a position to protest, and possibly put a stop to the whole thing. It was, after all, a free country, at least that's what they said.

Marcus darted into the preservation room, returning periodically with armfuls of garment bags, while Trevor snapped photos of the main storage room from every angle he could think of. He found himself returning Marcus' smile as they worked. He was amazed to discover that he felt better, almost like his old self. Something about the fact that they were *doing* something to end Montrose's sick little empire made him feel liberated, powerful.

Hell with beating up on random nobodies, Trevor thought with a chuckle, *I'm kicking Montrose's sick little head in right now.* He felt like a god.

The feeling was unfortunately short-lived, for as Trevor rounded the corner of another aisle of racks, he was confronted by the sight of two tall figures, one nondescript and the other wiry. Trevor didn't know how they'd managed to get into the main room without making a sound, but they had. As they walked toward him, he realized who they were.

The Boss and Derek.

"Surprised, Trev?"

Derek sniggered and snorted, swaying in place. The Boss was stony-faced. Trevor quickly shoved the camera into the back pocket of his jeans and said, in a loud and aggressive voice, "What are you doing here, Derek? Having a romantic evening with your boyfriend?"

"I'm getting promoted, asshole," Derek shot back. "The Boss is gonna make me the leader of a new team in Chicago. Cool, huh?"

The Boss leaned in toward Derek and muttered something in his ear. Then, with a regretful look at Trevor, the Boss turned and walked out of the room. Derek grinned like a skull, looking ten times more demonic than he ever had when leering down at any of his

victims.

"Guess what, Trev?" The sniggering took over his voice for a few seconds and he bounced, like a drunken Jack-in-the-box, before continuing. "The Boss just said that since you don't have the sense to leave well enough alone, I've gotta torch this place. Burn it down, how cool is that? Because he doesn't want the story to get out, right?"

Trevor forced his face to remain expressionless. He heard Marcus running around the corner toward them. "Derek! What the hell are you doing?"

Derek wasn't done, though. "He also said—" he sniggered some more, "He also said that I had to take care of you two. Guess I can finally pay you back for smashing my head in, eh, Trev? And if my dear cousin has to get it, too, well..."

Derek shrugged, grinning wider than ever. "Too bad!"

Before Trevor or Marcus could do more than blink, Derek darted to a switch on the wall and yanked it down. To the astonishment of all three, flames erupted from the cracks between the slabs of cement on the walls and floor. The flickering orange tongues of fire easily trumped the sick glow of the fluorescents on the ceiling and a hot wind whipped through Trevor's hair like a breeze from hell.

Derek shrieked, "Have fun!" And he was gone, darting after the Boss through the exit. The lock clicking into place took echoed over his triumphant giggle.

Trevor turned to Marcus, who was frozen in place. "What are we going to do?"

He stared at him, his face a rictus of sheer panic. Trevor could feel the same panic rising in his chest, squeezing his heart and lungs beyond endurance. There were no windows in this room, only that single, locked door.

Backing away from Marcus, he tripped over his own feet and fell hard onto his back. Trevor's head cracked against the cement and

white stars popped in front of his eyes. Shaking his head and blinking hard to clear his vision, Trevor saw something that made his heart leap.

Up on the ceiling, peeping out of the clouds of acrid black smoke, was a small patch of pale, flat orange.

The same shade as the night sky.

Trevor struggled to his feet. He felt curiously absent from his body as he explained the new plan to Marcus in garbled language and mad hand gestures. *Climb. We have to climb the racks. There's a skylight. Get to the skylight. That's how we escape. Come on. Climb.*

He tried not to think about all the people in plastic, burning to death. There was no hope for them anyway, and surely this was a better way to die? Not sedated and shriveling like a raisin in the sun, but burned to a crisp in an instant cremation? The smell of burning flesh and plastic made his stomach clench, but he forced himself to ignore it. He was damned if it would be the last thing he ever smelled.

Unfortunately, the rack didn't quite reach up to the ceiling, but it did reach high enough so that they could pull themselves onto the metal rafters. Climbing like ungainly chimpanzees, high above the putrid inferno, they managed to get close to the skylight. Taking Marcus' knife, Trevor hammered at the glass with the butt of the blade until the window shattered. Ducking out of the way of the flying shards, Trevor folded up the knife and stuck it in his pocket before pulling himself through the skylight. Some stray bits of broken glass cut into his hands, but he felt no pain. Hauling himself out of the building, he turned back to help Marcus.

Alright, he told himself. This is going to be tricky. He's at an awkward angle. Don't let him fall, you useless asshole. You'd better not let him fall.

He reached back through the roof and held out a hand to his partner. He was farther away from the rafters than Trevor was, so he had to reach.

His fingertips stretched through the

smoky air. Trevor gripped his hands tight and pulled.

For a fleeting second, he felt elation flood through him. They were out! They had escaped! They were going to take the pictures to the press, everything would come out. They would be heroes, they would get rich as shit from all the publicity, they'd be able to get out of this crummy town forever—

Then, Marcus' hands slipped. Trevor noticed, vaguely, that his hands were slippery with blood where he had cut them on the broken glass. He clutched harder, but Marcus' feet scrabbled against the metal beams as his voice shrieked, "*Trevor!*"

Then he was falling...Falling through smoke and flame, through the metal rafters they had worked so hard to climb...Falling into the very pit of fire.

His scream spiraled through the air, up through the window, and out into the orange night.

Up to the invisible stars.

Trevor couldn't move. His hands were still reaching through the broken skylight, scrabbling for something that wasn't there. His scream seemed to go on forever...Abruptly, he realized that Marcus wasn't screaming anymore. Only him.

He stopped at once. He shoved himself away from the skylight to lie in a fetal ball on the roof slats. His thoughts whirled, his stomach heaved. He was helpless, shivering in shock in the face of this, of Marcus.

He didn't know how long he lay curled on his side, his stomach lurching as though it had been he who had fallen. He didn't even dare to blink. He knew that the minute he closed his eyes, he would see Marcus' face; his mouth erupting with his last scream, his eyes wide with terror. Did he imagine it, or was there betrayal there in his gaze, as well? *You let him fall, said the mantra in his head. You let him slip. He fell. Fell. Your fault. It's your fault he fell. He fell. He fell...*

Gradually, the shock gave way to pain.

He hurt more terribly than he had in his entire life, worse than he ever had when fighting with the Delivery Boys, even worse than he had during his initiation. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Red-hot pokers jabbed at his stomach, inflaming it with guilt. His head throbbed, his hands sang with agony as the broken skin flexed over his bones.

He's dead.

The thought sank like a stone through the chaos in his mind, and suddenly, he sprang to his feet. The pain was gone, as if it had never been. His head was clear, his body light. He could feel the camera in his back pocket (How had it managed to survive the climb, when Marcus hadn't?) and he knew that the building was going to burn to the ground with or without him. He had things he needed to do. He had to tell the rest of the Boys about Marcus and Derek. He supposed he was the leader of the gang now. He had to get the photos to the press. He had to get off the roof.

But how?

He saw, through the smoke, another building fairly close by. Another warehouse. He wondered if he'd be able to make the jump. He was worried, in an objective sort of way, to discover that he didn't particularly care whether he could or not. He still could not feel any pain, though he knew he should. The pain seemed to have taken his sense of self-preservation with it. He laughed when the thought crossed his mind, and then strode over to the edge of the roof. The camera was clutched tight in his left hand, and he could feel the impression of Marcus' switchblade in his pocket.

He wouldn't lose that, no matter what.

He backed away from the edge. A good running start would help.

He breathed deeply, shook out his hands, and stretched his neck. *Here we go.*

He jumped.

*Samantha is a junior majoring in English.
She has been previously published
in the Lake Oswego Review.*



JESSIE GUILFORD

A DREAM

Ink and Acrylic

26" x 40"

*Jessie is a senior majoring in Business.
This is her first publication.*

JULIE TWITCHELL



TAKE CARE

Collage
6.5" x 6.5"

Julie is a sophomore majoring in Biology. She has been previously published in the zine Friends and Acquaintances Alike.

RANTS WHILE CAMUS PAYS A JAIL VISIT

Sisyphus

#26284020

Rock roller

B.C. equivalent to the post-modern-absurdist-existential-post-neo-factory-line-worker

The people ask if I get bored here.
The same questions for 3 millenia,
they ask if my mind and back
sing and tangle in futility,
clipped wires.

They look down
from their glass boxes,
calling me pitiful,
while their nesting doll worlds close in.

They are liberated.
All with purpose,
they never realize the light refracts,
never realize they're taking their directions
from a terribly translated Ikea manual.

The Kings cannot rule on behalf of everyone,
even the Nuns know not every prayer
makes it to His ears,
and sometimes,
the Doctors misread lab work in the most critical moments.
Science will keep supporting calmly that
the Earth is melting.
Someone is standing in the corner holding a picket sign
yelling that it's all a theory.

All a theory,
the warm whiskey of a metaphor.
And maybe,
on the downhill path looking up,
having hoped
until the era passed,
I accepted disappointment.
The likeliness of metaphor ever providing what it bargained
seemed a naive and beautiful lark.

Doubt, not cynicism.
Those who equate the two forget the momentous meaning
of once again trudging up,
trudging up,
to the top with your boulder,
the feat of saying hello again
to the morning,
of reaching the dull and extraordinary reward of closing the dictionary
having read it cover-to-cover,

and then you realize
the Wordmakers are thinking new words every day.
And we do it again,

echoing paper doll cut outs of our condition.

—Marina Claveria

*Marina is a sophomore Comparative Literature major
with a minor in Women and Gender studies.*

The Pixel Babies Project



JAMIE WALSH

Acrylic on Canvas

Jamie is a Master's student studying Community Arts Management. Another piece from her pixel baby project has been previously published in Unbound's Spring 2011 issue. Jamie is the founder of The Quickest Flip (quickestflip.com).

PANOPTICONVICT

—Clayton Davis

“Here we are, Mr. Gaine, Viewing Room 48.” The receptionist beckons Tim inside, but he’s too busy staring at her ass and walks right into the rounded edge of the doorframe. His protruding belly flab hits the frame first, which softens the impact of the frame on the bridge of his nose. The receptionist blushes with embarrassed horror at the collision. “Oh my god, sir!” She covers her mouth to stifle a laugh. “Are you alright, Mr. Gaine?”

“No.” A pause. “Well, maybe. I don’t know. Am I bleeding?” She nods, and he wipes his nose, leaving a smear of blood on the crusted sleeve of his dirty sweatshirt. He figures this may be his only shot to impress or charm her, so he tries to joke about it, “You’d better hope I don’t try to sue this company, young lady!” in a mock tone of stern disapproval.

The receptionist doesn’t quite roll her eyes, but she does put them on a half-circuit, resting at about her two o’clock for an uncomfortably long second, sighs, and then speaks. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, Mr. Gaine.” An unfulfilling career’s worth of weariness is hidden behind the receptionist’s smile as she speaks. “Besides, you might not get that fifty dollars if you proceed with a lawsuit, Mr. Gaine!” At least she sounds *outwardly* pleasant, he thinks, as she crushes the fantasies he had been building while she led him through the labyrinth corridors of this office, bringing him finally to this unmarked door at the end of a lengthy hallway. The Viewing Room, she’d called it, back in that

halcyon time before the doorway collision, when he was still considering making her his wife. Alas.

The Viewing Room was done up in the same oddly futuristic style as the rest of the office: smooth, white walls everywhere, sleekly polished and rounded. No corners, no sharp angles. The wall opposite the door is a massive jet-black slab with the advertising company’s logo glowing on it: the viewing screen, presumably. A single white couch sits in the middle of the room with a table in front of it, the only pieces of furniture in the room. A halo of florescent lighting runs along the edges of the ceiling. There are no windows.

“Nice digs,” Tim says, looking around the room for others. “Isn’t there supposed to be a group of people at these focus-group type things?”

“As I said, this is all part of our new initiative,” she explains, standing in the doorway. “You will be the only one here in this Viewing Room. Now if you would please just take your seat, Mr. Gaine, the program will begin automatically. Follow the on-screen instructions and you should be finished within two hours.”

“And then I get paid, right?”

“Yes, as per the terms of this project, you’ll receive your \$50 when the testing is over. And please, remember to carefully consider your feedback on each advertisement. As a test viewer, your input matters greatly to us.”

“Do you guys make these commercials?” She’s already turning to leave

when he asks, but he tries to make a desperate save through small talk. Already halfway through the door, she only turns her head, speaking to him in profile.

"They're advertisements," she says firmly. "We make some of them. We're just as involved in general marketing research as we are in marketing, though. Now please, Mr. Gaine, if you would take a seat; I really must be going." She pivots and walks, her heels clicking down the hallway away from the Viewing Room and out of Tim's life. The door shuts behind her, sealing tightly around the edges.

Tim ambles over to the couch, looks around the empty room before scratching his ass, and sits. The couch is incredibly comfortable, more so than the couch at home that he'd slept on until noon this morning, and with far fewer stains. As he sits, the lights in the room gradually dim until he's sitting in near total darkness. The logo of the advertising agency on the screen is the only thing he can see now, colossal red letters casting a scarlet haze across the room, reflecting weakly off the walls. A countdown appears in the corner of the screen: 3... 2... 1.

Searing pink light pours out of the screen as a harsh buzzing sound fills the air. The sound reminds Tim of a detuned theremin, until he realizes, while writhing in agony on the couch, that theremins can't go out of tune; but if they could, it would sound just as awful as this ungodly howling racket. The brutal assault of light and sound triggers Tim's primal instincts, but, too frightened to fight and too lazy for flight, he chooses to curl up into a fetal position on the couch and cover his ears, humming as loudly as he can and trying to imagine a pleasant tune to overcome the screeching buzz, but he can only think of that song he'd heard on the bus ride to this office, ACDC's "Back in Black." This actually makes the noise more palatable by comparison, although it's still agonizingly painful. The light itself is bright enough to feel

blinding even through his closed eyelids, intense and unyielding. He hasn't felt this much overwhelming agony since his last attempt at physical exercise, which had landed him in the nurse's office. The seventh grade was a difficult time for Tim, although this current situation is probably worse.

But as quickly as it came, the blistering cacophony is gone and the light stops. The sudden release is as jarring as the sound itself, but it fades much faster. Tim finds himself feeling curiously soothed and attentive and eager to look back at the screen, which is showing a blurred blue rectangle on top of a white rectangle. He doesn't know what it means or what it is, but Tim figures that this probably isn't some kind of abstract art, because he's feeling calm and pleasant, rather than befuddled and gassy, which is how he usually is around the avant-garde. This must be the first advertisement, then.

As the lens focuses, blue and white colors on the screen grow more distinct, and he realizes he's looking at a desert. The Utah Salt Flats, by the looks of it, shown from a camera near the ground. The heavy buzz of a car's motor slowly rises in volume until it's roaring at a deafening pitch. Yep, he thinks, this is definitely a commercial. Meanwhile, a voice issues from the screen in a rich, deep baritone: "Not every truck is built with enough horsepower to haul ten tons and still stop at a moment's notice. But then," the narrator continues as an immaculately-polished pickup truck powerslides into frame with a train-car in tow, whiplashing around, "not every car is built like ours." It's a truck commercial from an American company, and the narrator keeps talking, going on about pistons and horsepower and transmissions and other boring gearhead terms while the camera lovingly pans over the truck, going over its contours and curves, exploring the vehicle's frame and form. As the narrator wraps up his spiel on macho automotive jargon (Tim knows nothing about cars), the truck shifts into drive

and roars out of frame, with the company logo is left floating behind the truck. The desert background fades to black, leaving just the logo and a block of microscopic legal print.

The viewing room is almost completely dark now, save for the logo on the screen. Tim is transfixed, mesmerized by the incredible vividness of the color on the screen, focusing so deeply on it he almost forgets that the lights have turned back on. Breaking from his reverie, he notices a clipboard on the table in front of him. Was that clipboard there before? And does the room seem a little smaller than it was earlier? The logo disappears as the screen fills with an instruction: WRITE.

He picked up the clipboard and examines the writing on it: *Describe what you liked in this advertisement.*

Describe what you did not like in this advertisement.

How much horsepower does this truck have?

What award-winning braking system is used in this truck?

And so on, asking his opinions on the format, style, and presentation of the ad, as well as quizzing him on random trivia, probably to test viewers' recall content. He filled out the questionnaire in about five minutes. Immediately upon setting down his pencil, a new prompt appeared onscreen.

SET DOWN THE CLIPBOARD.

He does. The room goes dark again.

The screen flares to life and the torturous light and buzz recommence for a few seconds, putting Tim into his counter-evolutionary defensive pose, although the impact is lessened somewhat compared to last time. And by the time the bizarre attack has subsided and he stretches out, he's feeling phenomenally well again, so well that the feeling largely overrides the massive confusion Tim feels about this whole process. How could something so immensely painful be immediately followed by such simple bliss? Was this pleasurable sensation the root of sadomasochism? This last question seemed

pressing, because if wearing a gimp suit and submitting to emotionally-disturbed women could regularly produce this result, Tim would need to reevaluate his sexual preferences. And his bank account; leather isn't cheap.

Meanwhile, the next commercial is playing on the screen. An animated, anthropomorphized bear is walking into kitchens where sullen and tired people dressed for work sit glumly at their table, frowning towards a bowl of oatmeal. "Feeling down?" A perky female narrator asks. She sounds insufferably cheery, but Tim, normally offended by enthusiasm, doesn't even mind. This pink light stuff is potent, he thinks to himself. The bear, smiling warmly in a very unbearable fashion, is pouring coffee into their empty mugs. Penciled-in smoke lines waft from the rim of the mug, emphasizing its warmth and aroma. Or carcinogens. The weary people each take a sip and grin. "Start your day right with Friar's Coffee. We use only the best, naturally-grown coffee beans for the rich taste and strong brew that you deserve!" The screen shows richly-colored and tastefully-lit coffee beans cascading across the screen as the narrator speaks. "Friar: because you've earned it!" The company logo appears, featuring a giant brown bear (an actual bear, though, instead of the cartoon ursine barista from earlier).

The lights come on, and a new clipboard is waiting on the table for him, with a new exhortation to write, so he does. Again he dutifully fills out the form, checking boxes and answering questions with as much detail as the short lines afford. He sets down the clipboard, the lights go off, and another advertisement airs.

For what seems like hours, this process repeats itself: lights off, panic attack, euphoria, commercial, lights on, WRITE, and repeat. The length and potency of the panic attacks seem to diminish with each viewing, though the pleasure doesn't seem to dim quite as much, which doesn't surprise Tim; building up

tolerances is old hat to him. He watches ads for cigarettes, beer, a video game, and a minivan, with no indication of when the session is expected to end. And the room seems to be shrinking, almost imperceptibly, every time the lights go off. But he persists in watching ads for basketball shoes, suits, ties, jeans, and detergent. The monotony of the routine would be more crushing if he couldn't rely on these occasional bursts of euphoria and the promise of fifty dollars, the two driving forces behind most of Tim's actions.

Disorientation, commercial, WRITE, repeat.

After writing a summary for an office supply company's commercial, Tim sets down the clipboard and sinks back into the couch, waiting for the next ad. Instead, the screen fills with a new instruction.

SLEEP.

That can't be right, he thinks. Or maybe the screen has gone into sleep mode and the viewings are over. Tim rises from the couch and turns to leave, but the door is gone. There's nothing there but smooth, blank wall. He knocks nervously at the spot where he thinks the door was. "Hello? Hello?" he says, rapping at the wall. He tries speaking into the wall, hoping to be heard on the other side. "I think there's something wrong with this room. Anybody there?" No response. He leans his ear against the wall, hoping to hear something, anything, on the other side. Have they just forgotten about him, still in the viewing room? But if they did, why is the door gone? He checks his phone; no signal. And, he notices, glancing at the time, that it's nine o'clock, which means he's been here for seven hours. The secretary had said it would only take two hours; of this he is sure, as he was listening obsessively to her small talk as they walked through the office, trying to find the perfect opening to organically brag about himself. He was going to boast about giving up his seat for a disabled old woman on the bus ride to the office. There was no old woman, but that was

irrelevant to his purposes then and particularly useless now.

He knocks harder on the former door, trying to make noise and be noticed. "Hello? What the fuck is going on here? Where is everybody? Or anybody? And where's the goddamned door?" No response. He tries variations on this for a few minutes to no avail, so he takes a step back to calm down and survey the situation: he's stuck in a room with a large television, alone on a Friday night and without any money. Add in a bag of cheese-puffs and Tim could be back in the eighth grade. Or last Friday, come to think of it. The only real difference between then and now was the difference between being incapable of leaving, despite desperate pleas for it, and seeing no particular reason to do so (which also reminds Tim of the relationship between himself and his last girlfriend, respectively). The thought of food (or rather, semi-edible cheese-puffs) makes Tim aware that he's dreadfully hungry, and that his bladder is close to bursting, which adds an extra urgency to the situation. How could he have not felt any of this until now? Food and urination hadn't even crossed his mind since the viewings started. He slams the wall with all his strength, panicked and furious in equal measure. Tim keeps at it until he's exhausted from the effort (which took about fifteen seconds), and collapses to the ground.

Splayed on the ground, tired, hungry, and dangerously close to wetting himself, he takes to screaming. "When I get out of here, I'm suing you fucks for everything you're worth! Fuck you!" he shouts toward the ceiling, repeating that last phrase with force and menace for a while. His old standbys, profanity and unsubstantiated legal threats, soothe him somewhat as he lies on the floor of a strange, sealed room yelling "fuck you! I'll sue!" at the ceiling for what seems like an hour. When he gets tired of that, he cries for what seems like an hour, and after that, Tim stands up and walks over to the table.

He grabs the clipboard, still sitting on the table, tears up his responses, and sprints toward the screen, wielding the clipboard like a javelin. He may not be able to break through the wall, but he'll be damned if he's not breaking something tonight. At about three feet away from the screen he hurls the clipboard with as much force as he can muster. The edge of the clipboard strikes the screen, bounces harmlessly off of it, and into Tim's forehead, the shocking force of which knocks him onto his back. The screen, unharmed and looming over him, still bears the same order as before.

SLEEP.

The lights in the room shut off. Tim stands up, unzips his pants, and pisses on the screen, glowing in the dark with the order to sleep still displayed on it. It feels pretty good for a variety of reasons. Then he sits down on the couch, curls up, and sobs for another hour or so, which doesn't feel nearly as good and also reminds him again of his last relationship. As he slips into troubled sleep on the couch, the screen flickers briefly before shutting off, plunging the room into absolute darkness.

The first thing Tim notices is the smell. Soup. Chicken noodle soup, and not the cheap kind he usually shoplifts. He opens his eyes and finds himself lying on the same couch, in the same room. It feels smaller, though. Sitting on the table in front of him is a bowl of soup, a loaf of bread, a glass of milk, and assorted fruits. Without thinking he bolts upright and eats the entire meal, forgoing his usual habit of forgoing fruit and milk. He hasn't had anything to eat since lunch yesterday (cheese-puffs on white bread), after all.

After the food is finished, Tim moves from the couch, and checks the walls again, looking for evidence of a door or exit. His urine from last night, which had pooled along the wall under the screen the last time he saw it, is gone. No sign of a stain, or even of an

effort to clean it. The clipboard is gone, too, along with the torn questionnaire he had scattered in front of the screen. The walls still look as smooth and as creaseless as they did when he bruised his shoulder on them last night, but he feels around for a door anyway.

Running his hands along the wall opposite the screen, his fingers feel a break in the smoothness of the wall. It's a handle! For a door! He pulls on the handle, and a door, disguised to blend with the wall, opens. It's an exit! Freedom! And financial compensation! This brief, bizarre nightmare is over!

Of course, Tim knew later, he shouldn't have gotten his hopes up about it, and should've known it wouldn't be that easy. For the next hour or so was raging again, hurling his empty plates at the walls and unleashing more obscenities, but somewhere below the fury, his more pragmatic side was at least glad that he had found a bathroom.

It was about two hours after finding that dark, unlit cubicle with a toilet in it that the screen flickered to life again, displaying a command.

SIT.

He does, grudgingly. In no mood for the weird pink light of disorder, Tim barely even screams this time, and doesn't feel particularly pleasant afterward. An advertisement for paper towels started playing, which he watches bitterly, arms folded and feet on the table. When it's finished, the lights turn on, and a new clipboard is waiting.

Describe what you liked about this advertisement. Fuck you, he wrote.

Describe what you did not like about this advertisement. Fuck you, he wrote again.

And so on throughout the form, and in the margins, and between the lines, and backwards, and upside-down, and in word-jumbles, and in acrostics, and haikus, and so on, on a dozen other forms he's given to fill out as he watches more commercials. Saying it

feels good. Writing it is cathartic. He writes it again after the next commercial, and it still feels pretty good, so he writes it again on the questionnaire after that, and the next one, too, and on at least two dozen more throughout the day. Not that he can tell what time it is; his phone, nearly fully charged only yesterday, had suddenly lost all power and ceased to function overnight.

After an interminable period of commercials and questionnaires with liberal amounts of angst and screaming in between, Tim finds another meal, steak and potatoes, waiting on a table at the back of the room after an insurance commercial. The table hadn't been there before, but he doesn't give it much thought as he devours the meal. While this whole scenario is certainly turning into a hideous, repetitive nightmare of involuntary confinement and lousy television, he thinks, at least the food is certainly good. He had always said the exact same thing about going to his grandparents' house as a child, come to think of it. After finishing his meal, another message is shown on the screen.

SLEEP.

He ignores it, determined to stay awake and defy the screen. He sets the plates by the clipboard on the floor in front of him, and begins pacing around the room, keeping an eye on the clipboard and the plates as he moves. Somehow they (whoever they are) have kept entering the room when he's not looking, so he resolves to catch them. As he patrols, he ponders the dynamics of his situation: He's trapped in a strange room, held against his will by some mysterious and nefarious person or group that can observe his every movement and apparently predict his actions. They freely enter and leave the room whenever Tim isn't looking, which means that there must be a way out of the room. And they leave him delicious food, so they certainly want him to stay there and not starve to death. But what's their goal? Did they really take marketing research this seriously? Is this some malicious CIA

experiment? If so, are they going to give him LSD? Or just turning him into a secret assassin with a subliminal trigger? It probably isn't a CIA plot to turn him into an LSD-infused assassin, Tim thinks, but he can't rule out the possibility, which he fantasizes about for a few minutes before getting back to his ruminations.

They had sent a generic letter to Tim last week offering fifty dollars for a few hours of watching commercials. Tim, who had been watching around nine hours of television a day for a net gain of zero dollars (he pirated his neighbor's cable connection, so it didn't cost him anything), couldn't resist the opportunity for enough money to buy two or three weeks' worth of ramen noodles and prolong his inevitable descent into either cooking meth (he'd seen *Breaking Bad*) or prostitution (he'd seen *Midnight Cowboy*) for a stable income. So he called the number on the letter, and an appointment was made. But what if that letter wasn't generic? Could he have been specifically targeted to become some kind of human guinea-pig? But for what? Why he would be targeted by them is beyond Tim: he doesn't have any enemies, or a twin brother, evil or otherwise, that might lead to a mistaken targeting. He's never broken any serious laws. He doesn't even know enough people to really have enemies. Why would a slob who sat on his couch all day watching television be targeted for this scheme? It doesn't add up.

No matter what the reason for this situation, Tim resolves to rebel in whatever way he can, to actively and passively resist his apparent captivity to the best of his meager ability. This resolution fills him with a swelling sense of pride and purpose. He was being like Gandhi right now, he thinks to himself. Or that one lady who was on that bus. He's asserting his will, preserving his honor, providing a stiff front of dignified and conscientious objection to this dehumanizing absurdity. Then he giggles childishly when "stiff front" passes through his mind.

Pacing the room interminably as the screen commands him to sleep, Tim keeps himself occupied however he can during his march for freedom. He talks to himself, argues with himself, and sings as many songs as he can remember to stave off boredom. Most of the songs are themes to TV shows, which he only realizes as he's halfway through a cranky and off-key rendition of the theme song of *Cheers*. He tries to determine how long he's been patrolling, but his sense of time is muted and distended, and he can only estimate the elapsed time to be somewhere between two and ten hours. Somewhere between the four and twelve hour mark, he collapses in exhaustion, and as he slips into blissfully-forced unconsciousness, he can already hear himself snoring.

When he wakes up again, the whole process repeats itself, from delicious meals in the morning to Tim collapsing into sleep again after another long march. Days pass, and the cycle continues. The commercials keep playing, and Tim keeps up his front of resistance. Every day was like the last, starting with a grand breakfast and ending in unconsciousness. As he patrolled every night, Tim gave grand monologues and orchestrated speeches to the empty room, extolling his pride and his unwavering will to rebel. They were quite beautiful speeches, in his estimation, and he desperately hopes that whoever is monitoring him is recording it all.

Meanwhile, he has continued to scribble profanities in the questionnaires that follow the commercials. Eventually, though, they must have become displeased with his useless input, as he awakes one morning to find that his lavish breakfast has been pared down to a single bowl of cheap alphabet soup, the letters in it arranged to spell out a message.

BE CONSTRUCTIVE IN YOUR CRITICISM.

He dumps the soup onto the floor. In

the evening, they leave a single fortune cookie on the table. He cracks it open and reads the message inside.

You will find yourself in a difficult situation soon. Cooperation and humility will save you from great harm.

He tears up the note, but eats the cookie.

When he wakes up the next day, he gets another bowl of soup and another fortune cookie. He doesn't dump the soup anymore, though, because when he does the hunger pangs become so intense that he can't even think of clever insults to write on the clipboard. They stop airing new commercials, rehashing the old ones that he's offered no constructive criticism on.

After a few more days of this, they stop sending him any food. Having had nothing but alphabet soup, water, and fortune cookies for a week, Tim is too exhausted and hungry to last more than three days. Dazed and weak from hunger, he sits hunched on the couch, eyes transfixed on the swirling florescent colors and patterns of a laptop commercial, too weak to look away or move from his position. The ad shows an assembly line manufacturing laptops. The whole thing is a smorgasbord of retro-future kitsch: smiling robots, sprightly and cool electronic music, workers with jetpacks, etc. They're still repeating the ads he's left no input on, so he must've seen this clip two dozen times, but he's never paid any real attention to it until now. It's actually very pleasant, he thinks to himself, absorbing the images onscreen. The camera work feels so rhythmic, perfectly in sync with the action onscreen. The whole sequence is so busy, vivacious, and bracing, infectious fun. He feels happy, gratified by the vivid, kaleidoscopic colors and upbeat music. His weakened feet start tapping along with the music, and he laughs at the colorful play of light and action on the screen. After weeks of confinement in here, he's actually having genuine *fun*. He'd never felt this kind of

childlike glee even when he was an actual child. Has he really been rebelling against this for so many days now? Forgoing food merely to protest against *this*? By the end of the advertisement, his defenses have completely crumbled.

The lights come on, and the clipboard is sitting on the table, like always.

WRITE.

He does, his hands trembling from hunger as he composes eloquent praise. When the screen switches back to the pink glow that he'd grown immune to over the last few weeks, he felt ecstatic and amused, with no hint of shock or pain. How had this ever been painful? The rest of the advertisements for the day were all just as thrilling as that first one, exciting and pleasurable.

The next day, they send him alphabet soup, with the soggy noodles arranged in a new message:

GOOD JOB, TIM.

The morning after that, they send him an entire pizza.

Time passes. The commercials, once so harsh and bright on the screen, are pleasant and comforting to him now. He watches all kinds of advertisements: deodorant, soap, wristwatches, televisions, movies, TV shows, running shoes, toasters, mattresses, language software, vinyl siding, carpet cleaners, car insurance, life insurance, flood insurance, web design, hotels, motels, lamps, wine, beer, whiskey, video games, ice cream, beef, tortillas, milk, computers, suits, socks, underwear, couches, headphones. He bathes every day in the warm glow of the screen, lovingly enveloped in its florescent brightness. While the brief blasts of pink light and noise don't inspire as much ecstasy as they first did, they came to be a reliably amusing distraction, albeit somewhat dull and predictable, and they have been used more and more frequently after the first month to pad the time between

commercials. Tim doesn't mind, though. The pink light is harmless and mildly pleasant. The advertisements, on the other hand, are much more exciting, unpredictable, and invigorating.

Tim can guess what month it is now by what he's watching. The first wave of July Fourth ads aired not long after his entrance to the room, and the second wave of July Fourth ads had come much sooner than he thought they would. That was about six months, ago, he figured: the last Christmas ad was a few weeks ago, but Valentine's Day ads haven't aired yet, so it must be early to mid-January. He's really looking forward to some saucy Valentine's Day ads after two months of sexless Christmas ads, although after that L'Oreal shampoo commercial debacle, he's learned to internalize his excitement about such sensual content. They'd taken away his food for a week after that slip-up. And they were right to do that, he thinks; what he had done, or tried to do, during that shower scene, was an embarrassing loss of control and professionalism, and a betrayal of the trust that they had put in him to provide honest critical evaluation of the advertising arts. Such unsavory reactions only compromised his critical integrity and debased the dignity and broad appeal of the medium.

Occasional mistakes aside, he's getting pretty proud of his critical work. After watching an ad just a few times, he can write essays about the form, content, and presentation of an ad, scrawling several pages' worth of thoughts on how to properly aestheticize a subject and make it appealing. He feels intelligent when he analyzes an ad, probing its weaknesses and faults, and he often surprises himself with his cleverness, saying "Oh, Tim, you've done it again!" after a particularly cogent passage. Tim feels like a luminary on the subject, a master of concise and powerful analysis of mass communication, a bold intellectual who can peer into the heart of the average American consumer. He can look into a crowd and divide them not by

gender, age, or the color of their skin, but by their probable demographics: housewives, students, retirees, stoners, obsessive-compulsives, social climbers, toddlers, closeted homosexuals, anorexics. All were welcome, if they had the disposable income, which Tim found to be comforting and democratic.

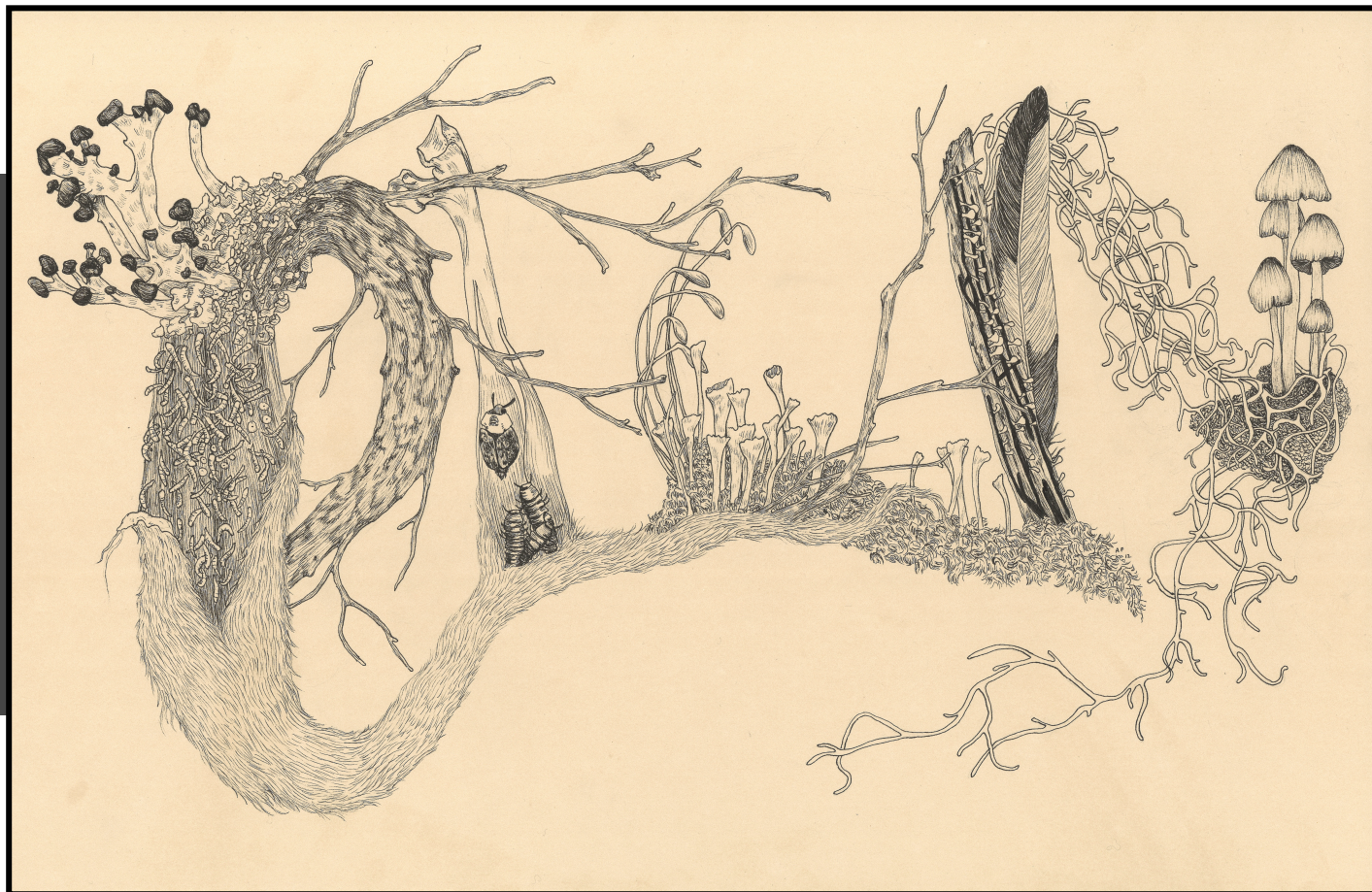
They must be pleased with him and his work, too; not long after they sent the pizza, they sent him a brand-new track suit, and from the instant he saw it, he loved it; its brilliantly-orange color and incredible comfort was simple and immediately pleasing. He discarded his old, clothes, which had been filthy even before he'd worn them for several weeks straight, and they were never seen again, thankfully. Every other day, they'd send him a new suit in a different color and wash the old one, all while he slept. The food, of course, continued to be excellent, and cycled through a full range of delicious and nutritiously-balanced cuisines from around the world. Some days, after really good write-ups, they even open a window for a few hours, and he looks out the window at the city skyline, basking in the warm radiation of the sun, completely and utterly content. The window, hidden behind a panel on the wall, only opened when he wasn't looking, and occasionally depicted different scenes, offering slightly different skylines and streets laid out far below him, but Tim didn't worry about this inconsistency too much: they were just giving him new views to look at because they, in their careful considerations, knew that Tim would

get bored if he had the same window and the same view every day. Their perceptivity and promptness in addressing the needs that he doesn't even know he has is remarkable, and a clear sign of their marketing genius, he thinks.

How meaningless his old life was, trapped in his apartment all day, passively watching television and eating those disgusting packs of ramen noodles! He had been a shell of a man, hollow and shallow, hiding behind a hideous veneer of juvenile humor and irresponsibility. But they, those who cared for him now, they had seen potential! They knew that they could make Tim a better man, and they had succeeded! How incomparably better his new career was, so much more valuable and fulfilling than anything he'd accomplished in the meager life he had led before, a pathetic life marred by desperate passions, which had only brought him fear and self-loathing. But now, Tim has sunshine, entertainment, a comfortable couch, free room and board, eats well, loves his job, never gets rejected, and never gets sick. Nobody can bother him in here. Nothing ever hurts. And most importantly, his work matters. Every once in a while, as he sits gazing at the screen, he stops taking notes, sets down his pen, and marvels uncritically at the sheer beauty of the dazzling florescence emanating from the screen, broadcasting desires and needs to the masses, who, like him, had struggled for so long to find anything of value in the aimless consumption of television.

Clayton is a sophomore majoring in Philosophy. He has been previously published in Unbound's Fall 2011 issue and Ephemera.

ARI FREITAG



DECAY

Ink

11" x 17"

CHILD OF THE FUTURE

—Kyle Long

*Kyle is a senior double
majoring in English and Spanish.
His poem, "Child of the Future,"
is a spoken word piece. Kyle has
previously been published in
Unbound's Spring 2011 issue,
Unbound's Winter 2010 issue, and
Unbound's Anthology Print issue.*

I am a child
of the future,
a future
fully free
of flippant fantasy
because the future
is now
the future is wrapping
me in its arms
in a firm hello
of cell phones
and cellophane
a hello of
holographic games
put a controller
in my hand
and a picture
in my brain
because the future
is now

I want to be
one instant message
away from falling
in love
and one text
away from being
left alone
I want to be
one right click
away from spellcheck
and one
turn left on broadway
from being home

I want
to be
connected

(dialtone)
Boo-eee
bo-am bo-am bo-am
beeeeeeeee-

NO
I think not
I need my data fast
my games online
and my *coffee hot*
I need my email
on my phone
my phone
on my computer
and my computer
on my lap
I need my 1's and 0's
moving
my movies
from point A
to point me
at the speed
of infinite
improbability

because patience
is not a virtue
when you
can *get it now*
and humanity
just says
that you don't
know how
to unite
the individual
and the digital
to accomplish
the subliminal

your mind is a machine
upgrade
your memory fast
or like
a year old computer
you'll be a thing
of the past

I'll burn my video
to DVDs
rip my CDs
to MP3s
I'll send them
over P2P
and LOL
before I GTG
I will frag newbs
stare at boobs
browse the news
and watch youtube
culling kilobytes
from the comfort
of my couch
pull my iPod
from it's iPouch
content to set free
the cacophony
of cybernetic
symphony
inside of me

because I
am a child
of the future
and the future
is now.

JULIE TWITCHELL



CONSUMED

SCAPE

Collage, 4" x 4"



TWENTY-ONE GUNS

*Up in the mountains ashes are scattered.
Pine beetles sing death songs
while widows lie weeping.*

—Camille Ogden

Jenny stood outside St. Charles emergency room entrance. The September air was hot and dry. It suffocated the sterile chill lingering on her skin, but Jenny still felt cold. She heard the automatic doors rattle along their tracks and suction together. Sealed behind the thick glass doors and cement walls of the Redmond hospital was Dr. Lancer's toothy smile, her paper gown and a grainy black and white photo of her baby. *Healthy. Normal. December due date.* Jenny chewed on the tasteless words as she stood on the edge of the sidewalk. Jenny didn't blink as the white-yellow light poured into her retinas. She picked at a hangnail until it bled. The black pavement rippled under the weight of the high desert sun. She could taste the heat. The melted tar of the parking lot sat thick and acidic on her tongue. A fire thirty miles south in the Deschutes National Forest ravaged dry ponderosa groves. The sky was a cloud of orange and the smoke clung inside Jenny's throat.

Jenny fished in her purse for keys. She found a sack of half eaten ginger chews, her threadbare wallet from Costa Rica and a pair of scratched sunglasses. She flung the oversized bag off her shoulder and felt around the abyss. She found a nail file, her stack of worn letters from Adam and a stick of melted

gum, but no keys. Jenny turned the bohemian bag upside down, squatted on the sidewalk and filtered through the debris. Tissues, a cell phone bill, and an orange bottle with Dr. Lancer's number scattered as a tube of mascara fell into a storm drain. She could hear the keys clinking as she shook the purse. *Don't panic,* she whispered to herself, *You got here somehow...* A thin line of sweat beaded at her brow as her dark curls expanded with the humidity.

A shadow fell across the sidewalk, blocking the sun. A large man with short black hair stood behind her "Check the side pocket," he said to her back.

Jenny unzipped the small pocket, slid a finger through the ring and pulled out her two keys, giving them a twirl. "Thank you," she said. Her shirt stuck to her skin like saran wrap, she tugged it loose and looked up at the stranger as she stood. "I always forget—" She registered a man's silhouette before a wave of nausea rocked her forward. Calloused hands gently gripped her elbow and led her to a metal bench. She pressed her fingertips hard against her eyelids until white dots appeared. *I don't care what Lancer says, this is not normal,* she thought.

"Good, panting helps." the stranger said.

Jenny blew short breaths, her tongue felt swollen and tasted like stomach bile. The stranger brushed her damp hair aside and pressed a cool bottle of water against her neck. It felt good but far too intimate. Her heart sped up, like a grenade racing to an explosive end. "Thank you, but—" Jenny reached around to shove the stranger's hand away but a gush of vomit filled her mouth and she gagged. She choked it down and swallowed. "Gr-gross." she said, meekly wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist. The stranger laughed loud and hard.

Adam. His laugh. His hands. His voice.

"Feel better?" Adam asked.

Jenny felt him lean into her. She didn't move as he kissed the top of her head, then her shoulder. His warm breath on her damp flesh brought back the goose bumps. He reached around and laced his fingers with hers. His gold wedding band winked in the sunlight.

He buried his face in her hair and inhaled. "You're home?" she asked, her voice a whisper. She turned toward him, her eyes on the ground. She saw his dusty boots, laced up past his ankles and remembered the sound they made running along the wet tarmac. It had been March, a short weekend together before war called him away from her, again. Then and now, she could smell the foreign sand and wind on his skin.

"Yes," he said as he straightened his back. "Jenny, please look at me."

"This tour was too long."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Will you go back?"

"No. I'm yours."

Pulling his fingers to her lips she kissed them. She knew his taste, his touch so well. He wrapped his other arm around her and placed his hand tenderly on her round belly. "Please Jenny. Let me see you." Jenny tugged at her top again and looked up. She saw his grey eyes first, clear and silver in the sun, full of life and longing. He smiled his half grin as a single tear wove through the stubble on his cheek.

Adam tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "I like your hair," he said and the ice in her chest shattered. It could have been three seconds or ten days that they stood in silence, the quiet laced with regret and burdened by unspoken promises. Either way, it wasn't long enough.

Jenny took a tiny step into him, "You're really home?" she asked.

Adam laughed again. "Yes. Touch me, darling," he laughed, "I'm real." Jenny hesitated. She looked around the parking lot. There was no one around. The orange sky hung heavy with forest ash and stilled the air into silence. Only a few parked cars and the red, white and blue reflection from a soundlessly flashing ambulance siren surrounded them.

Jenny wound her slick hands around his waist, moving up his back. Ropes of muscle tensed and relaxed under her palms. She felt his stomach hard and long against her belly. Deep inside her their baby woke and knocked against her womb, somersaulted and knocked again. Adam gasped. Jenny hopped back instinctively. She drew circles where the tiny toes touched and stretched her flesh taught. Her husband kneeled in front of her. Together, they laughed and cried until the high desert sun sank low and pine beetles sang their night song far off in the lonely Blue Mountains.

Adam had been home five weeks. They barley left the apartment, let alone the bed. Together they bathed in a too small tub and made scrambled eggs for dinner. Jenny ripened and bloomed as the pale gold and dark ruby leaves fell from branches. Flower petals turned into brown ash and the air became crisp as her stomach swelled and her breasts grew heavy. They painted the nursery soft yellow because Adam thought it was a boy and Jenny insisted it was a girl. Yellow seemed neutral. When Adam would run to the Minit-Mart, Jenny

would listen to the voicemails from her mother.

Jenny, please call me back. We are all very worried about you. I know you wanted space and time, but this is too much. It's not good for the baby. You're due—

Jenny would never listen to the whole message. Instead she would delete it and listen to even less of the next.

Jenny. It's your mother. This child is happening with or without—

Jenny would call back when she knew her mother would be at work, or the spa, or her too-young boyfriend's futon. She sent one-line emails, never mentioning Adam. She wanted him all to herself. She'd shared him too long with a war that wasn't hers and now he belonged to her alone. They'd surprise everyone at Thanksgiving. Only over green bean casserole and steaming turkey would she be willing to share him. They would pass baby names and mashed potatoes around the table. She'd even apologize for her secrecy over his safe return with a forkful of pumpkin pie. Everyone would be rosy-cheeked from red wine and the open fireplace. They'd go for a family walk before having seconds of Lucille's famous stuffing. They'd be happy and Adam would still be home. He'd missed so many Thanksgivings since the towers fell.

Their days continued easily with slow strolls through the park, movie marathons and breakfast in the middle of the night. She felt warm. After carving pumpkins, Adam sat on the worn sofa rubbing Jenny's feet as she flipped through old CD cases. "Why don't we go see Lucille early?" he asked.

Jenny held up an Al Green CD and laughed. "Now *this* is a classic."

"Do you remember when I first introduced you to The Reverend?" he asked.

"Our first date. You took me to that crappy deli and said maybe two words the whole time."

"Shlotzkie's Sandwiches."

"Romantic." Jenny stood and placed

the CD in the stereo. "Let's Stay Together" began playing. "You reintroduced me to The Reverend, on my nineteenth birthday. Remember *that*?" she said brushing her fingers along his arm.

Adam stood and pulled her into him. They swayed slowly in the living room.

"You need Lucille, Jen. Hell, you need your mother. Let's go to Baker, stay at the cabin."

"It's barely November. We'll be *really* early for Thanksgiving."

"It might be our only chance before—"

"Okay." She looked up and shrugged. "If it means this much to you..." Adam's expression was grave. She had only seen him look this way twice, both times he had talked about the war. "I do miss Lucille. Let's go mushroom hunting in the hills. Did you know Morels are the secret ingredient to her stuffing?" she asked.

Adam snorted. "No, it's saffron. She told me."

"Liar."

A full smile split Adam's face in half. "You'll see." He ran down the hallway. She heard him rummaging through a closet.

"You want to leave now?"

Adam walked back into the living room, "Why not?" he asked. Jenny's face dropped and she swallowed the lump in her throat. "It will be okay. You will be okay. I promise. But Jenny this baby is coming and—"

Jenny started collecting melting glasses, crusted dishes, and loose silverware. "I'll clean the kitchen. You start packing," she said with a too-wide grin. Adam kissed her cheek and headed for the closet. Jenny thought his grey eyes held something distant and unfamiliar but she said nothing and started the dishwasher.

Forest fires lingered in the rearview mirror as they turned off Highway 97 and onto East 84. The wind whipped along the side of Jenny's station wagon. The edges of the

Columbia River Gorge drew sharp, jagged lines across the blue-sky canvas. A few windsurfers had tipped on the white-capped waves of the river. Adam pointed out a bighorn sheep and Jenny swerved into the other lane trying to catch a glimpse out the passenger side window. A semi honked.

"You just drive. I'm on the lookout," said Adam. He swept his gaze from the river back to the rocky edge on the right. Jenny's eyes followed his and she spotted the white butt of a bighorn and squealed.

Around Hermiston, Adam began yawning. The gorge flattened out into farmland. The patchwork quilt of greens and browns covering the land was a familiar blanket to Jenny; she could smell the onions and plowed earth.

They stopped for gas in Pendleton, across from the newly renovated rodeo grounds. The gas attendant took her debit card and she got out to stretch. Leaning back inside the driver's window she asked, "You want some jerky?"

"What's a road trip without some jerky? Extra pepper please," said Adam.

"I'll get you a Pepsi too," she replied.

The gas attendant tapped Jenny on the shoulder, "Uh, you okay miss?"

Jenny shrugged his hand away. "I'm fine," she said tightly. "Put the receipt on the dash when it's done," she started quickly towards the little market. The shaggy-haired gas attendant fumbled with the nozzle, "Please and thanks," Jenny hollered over her shoulder. The bell over the door jingled as she entered the store.

Adam chewed the jerky and looked at a billboard advertising the Pendleton Roundup. Jenny watched the sign pass as she pulled back onto the highway. "Do you remember unloading the horses at the roundup?" she asked, "You know, before you left the second time?"

Adam laughed. "What I remember about that night involves you, a mechanical

bull and some very nice-fitting jeans." Jenny swatted his hand off her thigh. She felt his grey gaze on her face. "Of course I do. It was the first night you said you loved me."

"You said it first."

"...and I had been wanting to say it for about three weeks," he said, slinging an arm behind her headrest. Jenny thought back to the spring of her senior year. She remembered talking to him briefly under the football stadium lights, still in her cap and gown. She thought he seemed nervous but figured war would change a boy. It was late May. He had left Culver two years before, enlisting right after high school.

"Graduation?" she asked.

Adam smiled, a faint pink coloring his dimples, "I was surprised you said yes."

"To our first date," Jenny asked with a laugh, "or to marry you?"

"That too," Adam chuckled, "but I meant our first date."

"Well, *Lieutenant*, you did have a war to hurry back to. How could a girl say no?"

They traveled quietly, passing cattle grazing and square crop fields lined with empty rows. Cabbage Hill dawned in the distance; the narrow road was like an iron belt circling and chiseling itself around her waist, then disappearing into the wide eastern sky.

"Mind if I rest awhile?" Adam asked with a yawn.

She missed his company too much to want him to sleep, but he looked so tired. "Sure," she said, patting him on the leg. Jenny listened to the rhythm of his breathing. She wanted to lie beside him and feel the gentle rise and fall of his chest against her. She turned on the radio and flipped through the endless country stations as they began to climb Dead Man's Pass.

Adam woke up as they turned onto the gravel drive of Stices Gulch. The sun was starting to set and a purple light shone through

the trees. "We're here already?" He positioned the seat upright. Jenny didn't say anything, just smiled. Adam turned down the radio, "Sorry," he said.

"I almost woke you outside La Grande. There was a huge herd of elk."

"You should have."

"You need your sleep."

Adam looked at her and she didn't see any humor in his face. Jenny whistled playfully, "Hello... Are you awake?" she asked.

Adam chuckled, but it sounded sad to Jenny. "Yes, love."

"Okay, well quit being weird. Less than a mile to go, Lucille is going to have a heart attack when she sees you." Adam sighed and held her hand as they bounced down the gravel road. A veil of dust clouded behind them, shrouding where they had just been.

Turkeys scattered as they pulled up to the gate. A cow mooed loud and long as she put the car in park and hopped out to unlock the latch. A mud puddle splashed as she pulled under the carport. Lucille stood on the porch with a damp kitchen towel draped over her shoulder. Jenny turned the engine off and looked at Adam. "Here we are," she said. The keys dangled in the ignition.

"Go give her a hug. I'll grab the bags." Jenny opened the driver's side door as Adam's grip landed on her arm. "Jenny?"

"Yeah?" she could feel red marks forming under his urgent grasp.

"Remember how happy *we were*. How happy we are. Promise me you'll find it again." Jenny's door dinged.

"I—"

"Promise."

"I do."

"Promise." Adam's voice hitched, "Promise me you'll tell him how much I love him." Adam said as he placed a gentle hand on her stomach.

"Adam—"

"Promise."

"Of course, but—"

Adam stopped her with a light kiss on the mouth. His lips were feathers—whisper soft. Jenny sat motionless listening to the repetitive alarm. Adam tucked a curl behind her ear. "Meet you up there beautiful," he said with a half grin. Jenny watched him climb out of the car without a sound, smile and wave to Lucille on the porch and walk to the back of the station wagon.

"Jenny? Is that you, darling?" Lucille's voice rang from the porch. Her grandmother's sight was going. On bright days, she wore funny green-framed spectacles that made the world look pink.

"Yes, Grammy, it's me. Surprise! We're here."

"Good lord, child. Look at you! You're big as a house but pretty as a peach. Come here." Lucille wrapped her strong arms around Jenny the best she could and squeezed tight. Jenny's grandmother was under four-foot-eleven, but she claimed an even five feet. She said her hair made up the extra inch or two and that was true. Lucille wore her hair spiky. She called it "chicken hair." It was mostly white with a few lingering streaks of sooty black. Lucille had tanned leather skin that crinkled around her mouth. The only time Jenny saw her grandmother wear make-up was at her wedding. Jenny loved her grandmother's perfume of fresh herbs, garlic, and sweet spices. Today it was basil and thyme with a hint of ginger.

"I've missed you so much." Jenny's nose was running and she blinked back a tear. "Sorry. The hormones."

Lucille pulled back and examined her granddaughter with a sharp eye but a soft smile. "I just made gingersnaps. You can tell me all about it with a cookie."

Jenny started up the slanted steps. "Oh wait, Adam. Lucille, you'll never guess who's home... Adam, come up here."

Lucille dropped the ragged dishtowel onto the cedar floorboards of the front porch and whipped around. Her drooped eyelids

pulled up and she stared wide-eyed at her granddaughter.

"I'll find him. We'll get the bags later." Jenny headed down the stairs and walked around to the open trunk. "Adam?" she came around the other side of the car and looked around the front yard.

Panic stung her chest. "He was just getting the bags... Where did he go?" she asked under her breath. "Adam?" she said louder running into the side pasture. Lucille stood beside the open trunk. Her fingers folded and pressed to her lips. She looked at the two duffle bags. Jenny paced the front yard again, then took the stairs two at a time and flung the front door open. She searched the bathroom, bedrooms, dining room, kitchen and back porch. She ran through the living room, full of family photos and mismatched furniture, yelling his name. A framed picture of Adam in his dress blues sat alone on an antique side table. Jenny slammed the cabin door and stomped back to the car.

"He's gone," she said, breathless. Lucille had opened the duffle bags. Jenny's had her toothbrush, socks, underwear, pajamas and several sets of clothes. Adam's was full of white undershirts and a few dress ties. Lucille began to pull out the contents. Gently, she set each silk tie down and folded each white undershirt. In the bottom of the bag was a carton of eggs, a pumpkin carving knife and a small wooden box. Lucille held it in her wide palms and extended the box to Jenny. Jenny looked away. Her face was crimson and tight. Lucille opened the box and inside was a gold wedding band and a Purple Heart.

"No," Jenny screamed as she knocked the box out of Lucille's hand. The purple light was deepening, bruising the horizon. The pity she saw in her grandmother infuriated her. She glared at the luggage, "No, he's here." The air was turning brittle and Jenny couldn't fill her lungs. "We got beef jerky and painted the nursery. He just wandered off. He was sleeping. He loves the mountains. You know

he loves the mountains. He probably needed to stretch his legs." Jenny spoke too fast. The forest walls were closing in around her. She felt lost, a hostage.

Lucille walked over to the mud puddle and retrieved the Purple Heart and the fallen wedding band. She wiped both off on her flannel shirt and placed them in her breast pocket. She walked across the soggy grass and took her granddaughter's arm. Slowly, she led her to the front porch steps. Lucille sat first, her knees creaking. Lucille patted the step beside her and Jenny sat too. Lucille pulled Jenny's hair into a ponytail and let it fall down her back. She brushed each curl, loosely winding it around her fingers. Jenny relaxed under her grandmother's hands, though her heart beat wild.

"He's gone," Lucille said, soft but stern. She smoothed Jenny's damp curls as Jenny frantically wiped her tears, forbidding each drop to stain her cheek. "I'm so sorry baby girl, but Adam..." Lucille paused, steadying her breath, "He died March 17th in Iraq, shortly after he came home on leave. We held his memorial service in town, remember?" Lucille continued winding Jenny's curls around her fingers, letting the strands fall across her granddaughter's thin t-shirt. "Come inside. Let's get you cleaned up."

Jenny followed her grandmother into the house. A teakettle whistled, but Jenny didn't hear it. She didn't smell the warm scent of bread baking or the fresh fire burning; she didn't feel Opal brush against her calf, her white tail twitching in welcome. Jenny could only see a single framed picture, standing alone on a narrow chestnut table. Inside the gold and silver border was a young man with grey eyes. He looked somber and serious, but Jenny recognized the hint of a proud smile at the corner of his pale lips.

She stood there a long time with her grandmother silent beside her. She searched the photo for answers. Above the table was a flag, folded tightly behind glass. Jenny cocked

her head. The stars were mocking her. The stripes were the torn fabric of white flesh and red blood. Jenny had been numb for so long. Now all she sensed was fire; *this war, her child, this land, Lucille, this mountain* and *Adam* were all lashes of flames, licking her, binding her to a burning pyre she could never escape. Jenny leapt onto the couch and tore the flag off the wall. By the time Lucille got to the front door, Jenny had the four-wheeler in gear.

"Jenny, wait. You're too far along." Lucille shouted.

Jenny slammed the triangle frame against the metal wheel well of the four-wheeler. Glass shrapnel shattered and scattered. "Where are you going?" Lucille yelled as the four-wheeler spat gravel.

"To find my husband."

Jenny knew the mountain well. She anticipated each dip in the trail and braced her belly against the shock. Lucille's small cabin disappeared behind dense evergreens. She had only gone a few miles, but the mountain grew colder and her bare arms rattled against her sides. Free-range cattle scaled cliffs and tripped on forgotten logs and loose roots as she climbed higher and faster. Adam's ghost chased her, begging her to stop. Jenny's hands were blue by now, but she held the throttle down. The trail parted and Jenny exploded into a wide meadow. Night surrounded her. Jenny turned the engine off and dismounted. She dropped to her knees and began clawing at the soft green earth. "Adam. *How dare you?* Don't do this to me! *God, please...*" She wept and dug, dug and wept.

A Cheshire moon dangled high in the sky; a silver smile in a black face, as Lucille trotted into the meadow. She wore a headlamp over her knit cap. Her gray appaloosa snorted white mist and cantered towards Jenny. In the center of the meadow her granddaughter plowed the ground with grief. Jenny's nail beds were bloody and caked in soil. Her arms and

face were splattered in salted mud. Lucille picked up the flag, which lay crumpled and smeared in the dirt. Shards of the glass frame fell from its folds.

"You went away," Jenny sobbed as she dug at the ground. She felt him in the earth, in the wind, in the November night and knew Adam was somewhere on this mountain.

Lucille placed her rough hands heavily on Jenny's digging fingers. She moved with her a moment, then applied more pressure. Jenny slowed her digging under the weight of her grandmother's hands and said, "I can't find him."

Lucille cupped Jenny's fingers in her wide palm. Looking at her granddaughter, she eased both their hands over Jenny's heart. "He lives in here," she said. Jenny felt every muscle and bone in her body pull tight and snap. She wanted to sink into the earth, never stand again. Lucille moved both their hands to Jenny's pregnant belly and said, "He lives in here." The baby turned, moving closer to their touch. Jenny moaned as she fell back onto the serrated ground. She was numb except for her womb.

"I can't do this without him."

Lucille lay on the ground beside Jenny. "You're not alone."

"Adam said this mountain was God's country," said Jenny as she traced the little dipper with her eyes.

Lucille smiled. "So that's why you wanted to scatter his ashes here, in this meadow." Jenny nodded but she didn't say how this was where Adam had proposed, or how they had shared cheap deli sandwiches and Coors Light here just a few weeks after their first anniversary. She didn't say how they stomped this ground with angry words when they fought over his reenlistment, or how they made up in the prairie clover. She didn't tell her grandmother how one of Adam's letters said this was where he wanted to lie. The secrets of this meadow belonged to her and Adam, memories shared only with the

ponderosas and pine beetles.

Jenny watched the stars grow brighter and her stomach growled. Lucille chuckled.

“Do you put saffron or Morels in your stuffing?” Jenny asked.

“Why?” Lucille asked.

Jenny said nothing.

“Once we’re home, I’ll show you.”

Lucille said looking at her granddaughter and winking.

Together, Jenny and her grandmother lay silently in the meadow. Jenny imagined the ground beneath her as soft and warm and strong as her husband’s embrace until the black night faded into dark denim, then pale pink, and the sun rose in a sky of soft yellow.

Camille is a post-baccalaureate student majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She has been previously published in Unbound's Fall 2011 issue.

“JAMÁS RETORNARÁS”

Secure fingers against ribs.
Pressing, we're fighting to
touch. Corset my ribs, love.
Urge them to cave in, to fold in
on themselves. Peel off our
layers of skin and use your fingers
as new ribs.

This is our conversation of touch.
Our syntactic dance.
We're writing the story of connection.
We're taking off our language clothing.

The bandoneon sighs. In close embrace we glide,
painting the floor with the heaviness of our steps.
I'll dance around you.
A spiraling molinete.

Match my breath.
Let our ribs expand.
I'll sink fingernails into your back.
We're dancing poems. We're the flowers of
Baudelaire. We're falling into each other,
choreographed by Caló's heartbreak.

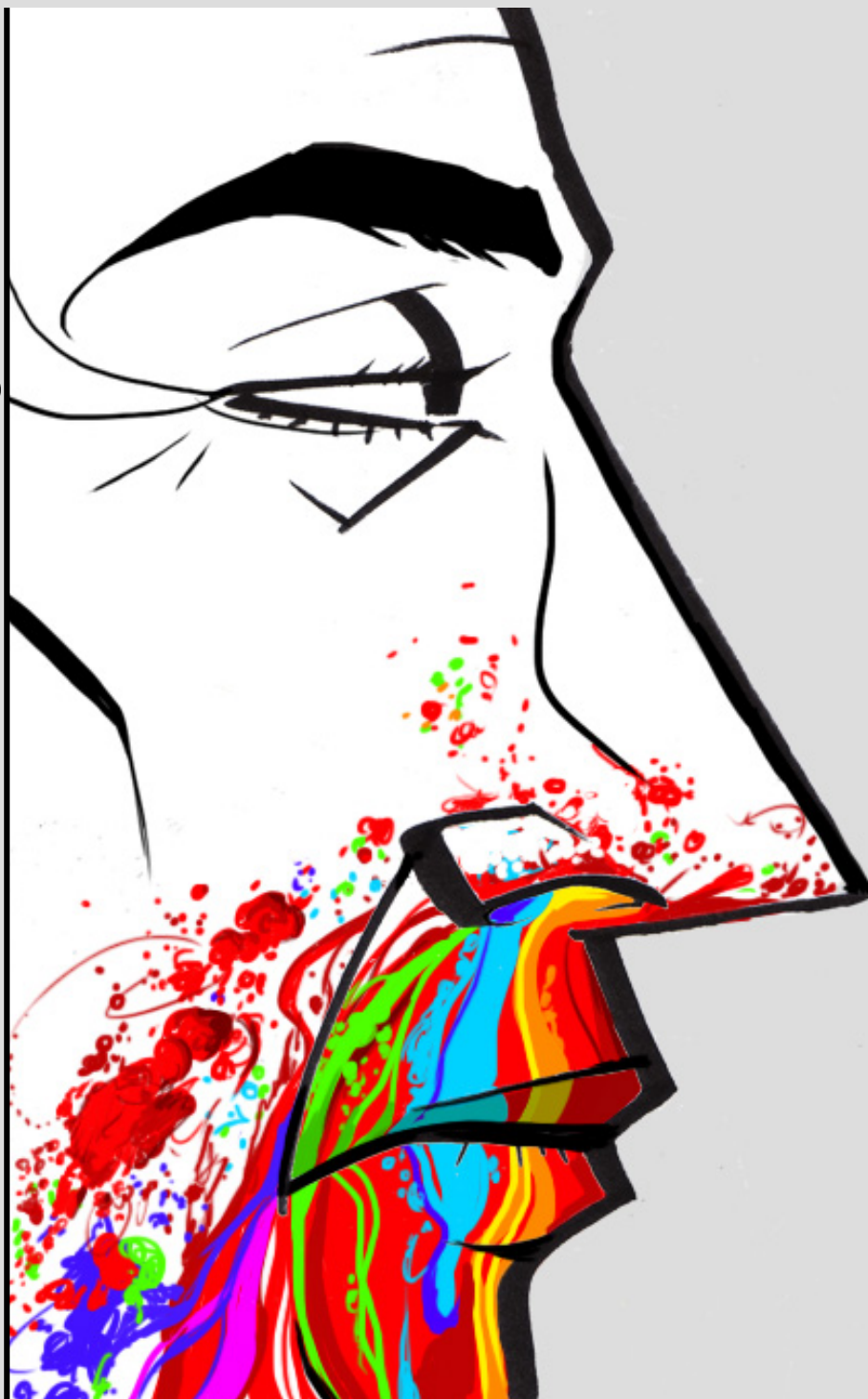
My closed eyes clench at the mixture
of tobacco and cologne.
My face against yours, catching the sweat
that pools in my collarbones,
between my breasts.

The song ends and I peel myself from you,
dripping with sweat and breathless without my
new ribs.

—Jazmine Dake

Jazmine is a junior majoring in Philosophy with a minor in Creative Writing.

MEGAN KELLEY, Digital Art



it's

all in your head .

mk

SALT

—Erin Weaver

This could be our France, where we'll sit on train tracks with champagne in our hands, dripping down the curves of our wrists. Maybe you'll turn to me and say something about the brass of the rails, that crescent moon smile making its way across your face, or maybe our ankles will touch as we sit there in silence.

This could be England, with the rain and sleet, our boots shoved up by the door so the mud doesn't track inside. It's bitterly cold and the windows frost over, but there's warmth in our pockets and occasionally the bathtub, and we will survive on take-out curry and artichoke hearts.

In Norway, we might wander down sidewalks and find holes in our gloves; there's always a shortage of money. Restaurant lights will bleed through the night and out onto the asphalt, their foreign letters boasting specials that are still beyond our means. Instead we settle with dipping spoons into our mugs, coaxing the last bit of color from fading tea bags.

Then there is Egypt, so crowded that I might be afraid of losing you. Throngs of people push against our chests and drink up all the air while stray cats and barefoot children occupy the alleys we might have escaped to. The heat is oppressive but there is music everywhere, always.

In Germany, we'll see the trees grow around bricks in the sidewalk, curving to fit their roots around the stones. Heaven feels closer here. Stars, like tiny grains of salt, are startlingly vibrant against the indigo sky. Maybe we find a vacant roof, and watch the moon arc until the coral sun edges into morning.

In Scotland, we might notice the little things: raindrops caught by the threads of dandelion skeletons and ink residue on our fingers. The walls are so thin and the windows so flimsy that any passing downpour will sound like a hurricane. Maybe we sit on the floor and watch the shadows trickle down the paint, blinking through the darkness and the ricocheting thunder.

Or maybe we'll forget the countries altogether, just stay in a houseboat and drift off the coast. Spider webs of rust twist up the mast, but we might have camping chairs and lukewarm coffee that blooms in the ocean when we throw it over the stern.

For now, we settle with pushpins in our sprawling maps, miniature flags stuck along the continents. There are postcards taped to windowsills and we leave the curtains open so we can watch our own country shuffle by in front of us. The night that comes outside the glass is an impressive black, thick and murky, but it's familiar. Somehow, the stars will always be brighter wherever I'm with you.

*Erin is a freshman majoring in English.
This is her first publication.*

EELS



Digital Art, **MEGAN KELLEY**

SATURDAY'S SIX O'CLOCK SKY

—Molly Ponkevitch

Saturday's six o'clock sky;
a screen, spread
with scarlet sherbet,
melted,
cirrus puffs curdled
above the sour breath
of hungry crows,
a distant, sinking orb
infused with neon blood,
divided by a silhouette
of a geometrical
stern metal
pretend bird
and his Nike banner
chasing behind,
making circles
like a bored dog.
"Run Happy,"
slobbering for recognition
behind a wisp of fog.

Saturday's six o'clock sky;
Sun down redefined,
intrigue the mind
with purchasable words
in the sky—

"It's such a beautiful backdrop,
which can I buy?"

*Molly is a senior majoring in English. She has previously been
published in Unbound's Winter 2011 issue.*



MEGAN KELLEY DOODLE DROP

Ink, 9" x 11"

*Megan is a sophomore majoring
in Women's Gender Studies.*

FLYTRAP

—Natasha Cobb

I don't kill insects; I'm very Buddhist that way. In fact, that's the only way I'm religious in any real regard—or I guess spiritual is more like it. But I think it's a telling trait of mine regardless o' where it comes from. Sure, I leave a shot glass of wine out for them to sink into but I don't feel bad about that 'cause that's the way I wanna go myself: drowning in booze. My man says it's likely to happen, too. But he's a drunk so what does he know?

I'm leaving him anyways. He doesn't know it yet, but if he didn't have an inkling of suspicion then he deserves even less credit than I've been givin' him. Just the other night I explained things the best I know how when I told him, an' I said, "I love you more than the world, more than myself. But that's not saying very much right now." I don't know if he got it, though; poor guy never got much 'cept me.

But really we were just two people who happened on taking up with each other; I out of necessity—hell, maybe him too. Roaming the desert like misfits, like Mongolians, or motorcycle riders who don't turn back. I blame the background, really, for how far things got; how companionship got to meaning more to one person and all of a sudden I was mustang-made glue stuck in a relationship that continued on with a steady burn as languorous as the mountains near

where we set up our little home. It's the landscape that did it really; in that it's literally breathtaking, suffocating on dry air and forced, freeing seclusion. For all our desert's intolerances, it really is mesmerizingly beautiful, so truly American. I think of this and almost wish it wasn't time for me to leave. But it is. The way I see it, I can't be a moth hovering towards the only flickering light I see until I'm electrocuted, till it kills me, even if it is a kind light. More to the point is that I don't wanna miss out on bigger, brighter lights. I know they exist because I want them to. I believe in the woman I want to become.

Selfish? Yes, but the more I think about my life here the more I feel like a trapped bug, a fly on a paper strip stuck on honey that goes bad—it always does go bad no matter how sweet it was to start with. And while I'm here cleaning—my consolatory, morning-before chore to my poor, dear friend—I won't swat any of the many flies swarming about our teal-coated kitchen. I just can't hurt what I understand.

I knew I'd be out by the end of the week. I just felt it sure as I feel when you reach that *click* in your cartilage that tells you the alcohol is doing its job—down beneath the bones of your joints and deeper than the peaceful lie you get in your head around the same time.

"I want to get out but mostly I want to go back.

Monogamy/monotony,

It was exactly what it needed to be,

But I've found home within myself,

So I no longer need to seek it another person,

In a new place,

In a different time,

Moving, perpetually.

But not from myself. Not anymore.

I'll only take one bottle...

At most two

And save the rest for you.

I'll only pawn what I must,

(Though too much sentimentality has no place in the

*newly-cleared contents of my head)
Always have been too full of sentiments.
Like wishing you farewell,
But I really do."*

That's the note I was thinkin' I'd leave him with, but I might edit out some of the overly-honest shit or dig a little deeper to extract more of it. Of course, there's no one I'd want less to be honest to than him. Too much honesty is enough for a decent person, and he really is one. I do hate to hurt him.

Of course, he knew what I'd been doing for money up until we went off together, but I don't believe he's ever been the judging kind. He's not exactly in any position to judge. Who among us are? Anyway, I owed him a pretty hefty favor that I feel I've repaid in time instead of dollars, and if anyone tries to make any trouble for him over it then I hope he buries them in the arid sand of America's Mexico. But I can't think about that now.

It's been hard, but hell, everything's hard. We've had fun, though. The nights here are always summer and the margarita-maker gets the most use out of all the appliances. Poor Johnny—he never tried to make me useful around the house. I never had to perform any of the boring wifely duties—not that I'm his wife. I don't know much about common law but I never wanted there to be anything common about me; it just sorta turned out that way. Only sometimes does he remind me of the

circumstances of which I've been more or less bound to him for these years and only then when he's insecure. It's me who takes care of him in those insecure times and as I'm packing my modest belongings—a toothbrush, some paperbacks, some pieces of mostly turquoise jewelry, and the sundresses he always loved me in—I wonder whose job that'll be after I'm gone. But I can't think about that right now because I haven't had enough to drink yet.

Sun's up. I gotta leave soon if I'm ever gonna do it. I'm leaving him with no other living things in the house but the insects I spared the night before. I guess I'm so merciful to the flies 'cause I can't get over that they can't help being flies; they just hatched outta the eggs like that. And I can't think of many things crueler or more pointless than hating something on account of it exists, for just being what it is. People too are just the way they are and I can't help being me any more than a fly can help being a pest so I don't think we should be judged so harshly. I hope he thinks this way when he wakes up and I'm not there. I just couldn't stand to think of him not thinkin' well of me.

* * *

I was sorry to hear that he drank himself to death in a few years after I left. I really was. But I couldn't let myself feel too personal about it, involved as I was. I just felt like rescuing myself for a change.

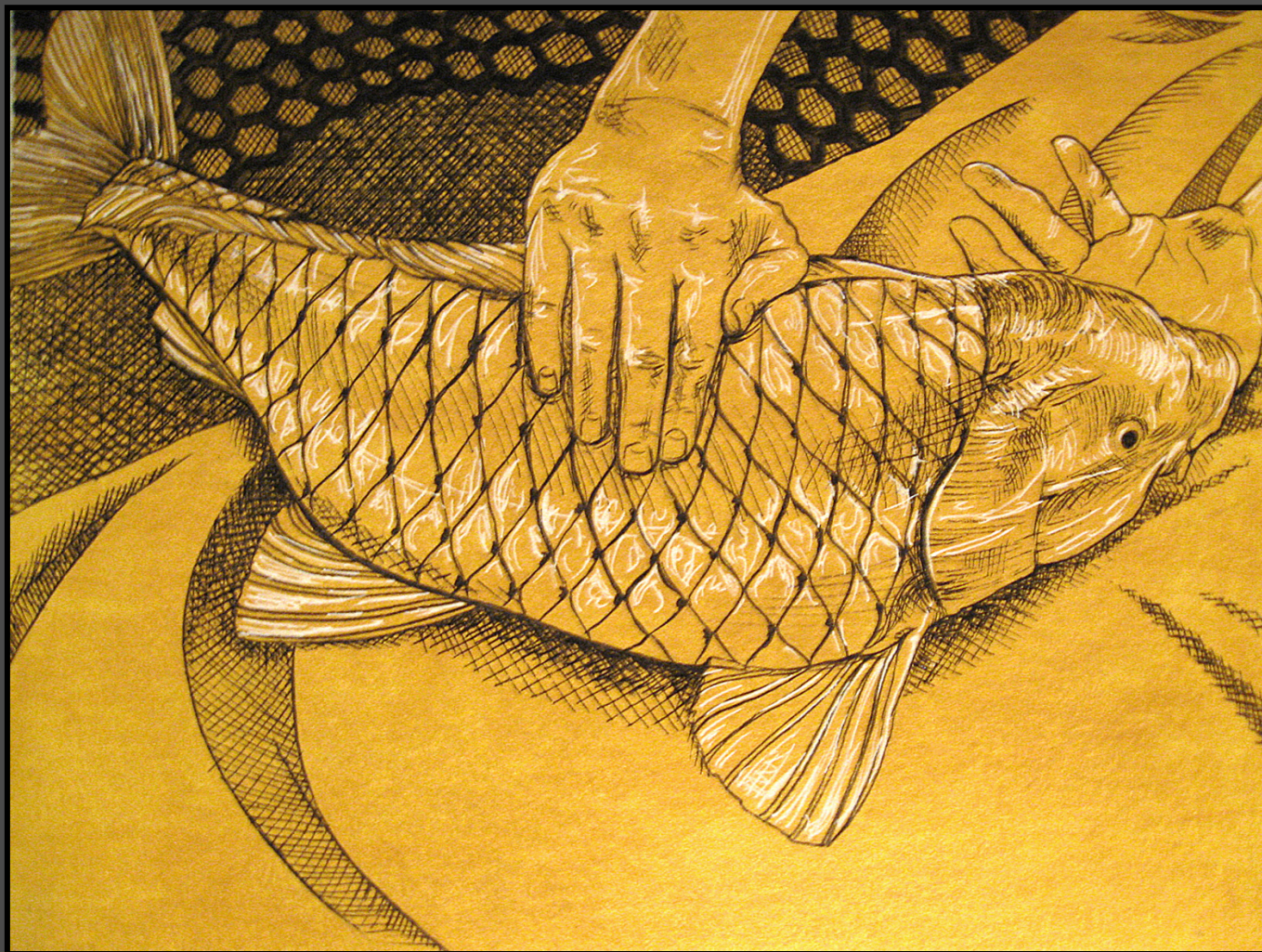
*Natasha is a junior majoring in Planning, Public Policy,
and Management. She has previously been published
in Unbound's Spring 2012 issue.*

JESSIE GUILFORD



MAN WITH TULIPS

Ink and Acrylic
18" x 24"



THE CATCH

Ink and Acrylic
8" x 10"

ORIGINS/MEMORABILIA

—Elie Hoover

fingers drenched in honey and milk, counting walnuts and scraps of midnight baklava.

halcyon porcelain i poured myself into, my chest aching, one thousand times in one thousand days.

steam rising from the earth and dancing with gentle rainfall, an intimate catharsis.

airy silences fanned out like lace on my stepmother's table, eyes narrowed to a pinpoint, threaded through me.

spotlights hot and dry on crow black brows, shoulders bowed, feathers tucked away for applause.

overgrowth I learned to love only in water-stained photographs, retracing dirt pathways in my mind a decade after my toddling feet led the way.

shattered glass, gooseflesh, entangled in musky, sunset-colored sheets.

foam rising to the tops of our cider, pressed with oak and rusted steel. i twist my tongue around it, savoring its autumn sweetness.

illuminated red letters, their glow dulled on the dark brick, mirrored on the wet pavement: "emergency".

electricity surging sharply into my core, then out of me, blood pooling like gasoline on the linoleum. i spread my toes to accommodate it. it grows beyond my liking.

curtains closing like eyelids, heavy and ephemeral.

Elie is a sophomore majoring in Theatre Arts. She has previously been published in Unbound's Spring 2011 issue.

ANNA CHELSKY

LUNG MONSTER



24" x 36", Acrylic

Anna is a junior majoring in Comparative Literature. She has previously been published in Ephemera and Unbound's Fall 2011 issue.

LILY THE WIND

—Tate James

She's run all this way for all these years,
and still she isn't out of breath.

* * *

"Wake up."

"Wake up," her mama says.

The sun seeps through the curtains, through the cloudy sheets, seeps into the creases of Lily's eyelids. Mama puts her hand on her shoulder and it's warm. "Lily," she says. "Lily, you've got that whole school waiting for you."

Lily sits up. She yawns and stretches her arms while the sun settles into the spaces between her fingertips. She smiles at Mama and Mama smiles back.

"There are eggs for you downstairs," Mama says. "Come on, let's eat."

Downstairs, there are bright yellow eggs and toast and parmesan cheese all laid out across the warm wood table. The eggs are still hot when Lily tastes them and the toast has too much butter and the parmesan is grated on top like a tiny mountain. Kettle steam and soft sleepy chewing fills the kitchen air.

* * *

September was always more like the end of summer than the beginning of fall.

The school flaps its sideways lips like a fish and Lily walks into it.

* * *

P.E. class is hot and sweaty and everyone boils beneath their gym clothes.

Mr. Gregson is shouting something about

running, something about endurance. Lily listens to him through the uniform squeaks of forty different tennis shoes. Her throat feels cracked like a crumpled-up tin can and she's running, running, running—

The ground tips like a tilt-o-whirl and smacks her. Lily sits up. Her hands sting, and while they search for whatever else is hurting, new hands hold themselves out to her.

"Come on," a girl says. She has hair the same color as redwoods. "Let me help you up." When Lily lets her, her hands are warm. They stop hers from stinging so much.

* * *

October comes, and fall begins to feel more like fall. Mama starts to dress Lily in layers, sends her to school with hot cocoa thermoses. Red leaves dip toward the car as it drives.

* * *

Lily wonders how to begin to talk to Sam Porter. She's sitting in class and some teacher is talking about something to do with English, something to do with books, and Sam Porter is paying attention the way a cat pays attention to warm milk. Lily starts thinking that something about that hurts her, but she doesn't know what and she doesn't know why. The rain slaps against the windows like it wants in.

* * *

A few days later, Sam Porter smiles at

her through the redwood forest of her hair.
Her smile is warm.

* * *

Winter comes. It seeps through walls,
through skin, seeps into the lining of people's
bones. In the mornings, Lily wakes up. She
yawns and stretches her arms while the cold
settles into the spaces between her toes.

* * *

Sam Porter's arm is a tower.

The English teacher calls on her, says,
"Ah, Sam. Go ahead and read your story."

Sam Porter smiles with all of her teeth,
takes a deep breath, and begins to read. Her
voice is the same color as her hair and it
swallows Lily up like a rainstorm and Lily hates
books and words and written stories, but god,
does she love this one.

My god, Sam Porter, she thinks.

My god.

Class ends and Sam Porter's voice ends
with it, even though Lily doesn't want it to.
She packs her things slowly because Sam
Porter is packing her things slowly. She begins
to leave at the same time Sam Porter begins to
leave and as they almost bump into each other
at the door, Lily whisper-speaks.

"I really liked your story," she says.

"What?"

"I—your story. It was really good. I
liked it a lot."

Sam Porter laughs. "Thanks. You're
Lily Finch, right?"

"Yeah," Lily says. "And you're... Sam
Porter? Right?"

"Yep," Sam Porter smiles. "Anyway, I
bet whatever you wrote was good too, you
know."

"Um. Thanks," Lily says.

A pause.

"So, you know, my friends look like
they've ditched me already. So looks like I'm
eating lunch alone. *Unless,*" Sam Porter says,
"you want to eat with me?"

* * *

It doesn't snow in Lily's city. This year,

it snows anyway, and Mama bundles Lily up so
tightly that she shouldn't be able to breathe.
Lily's breath keeps coming though, the same as
always.

* * *

On Tuesday morning, Sam asks Lily if
she can taste her hot cocoa. Lily says she can,
so Sam tastes it, opens the lid carefully so the
heat won't get out.

"Thanks," she says.

There's a little bit of lip gloss left on the
thermos' rim. Lily drinks from that spot, but
only once.

* * *

Mama stands on the tips of her toes.
Lily bows her head and Mama kisses it, then
pulls her into a hug. Its warmth swallows her.

"I'll be back in two weeks," Mama says.
"I love you."

"I love you too, Mama."

Mama leaves and lets a little bit of winter in
through the door.

* * *

It's the second-coldest day of the year.
Lily Finch and Sam Porter are pushing their
legs back and forth, back and forth, like ballet
dancers or kick boxers or moths. The swing
set creaks from carrying people too big for it.

They swing too long, and when they
walk back home, everything is the blue of
street lamps. Lily huddles into herself.

"I'm so cold," she says.

Sam bends to her, rests her forehead
against hers. Their cloudy breaths get tangled
up inside each other.

"Sorry," Sam says. "I'd give you my
coat or something, but hell if I'm taking any
layers off in this weather." She laughs and the
twigs of her hair tickle Lily's skin.

They stand there for a while as the
snow melts into their shoes and their faces
steam up like car windows.

Sam kisses Lily's cheek, then her lips.
It's warm.

* * *

At home, Lily curls up beneath all of

the blankets she can find. She falls asleep
holding her hands to her lips.

* * *

Lily can hear two thousand footsteps
cross the school hallways. None of them
belong to Sam Porter.

* * *

“It’s the coldest day of the year.”

Lily leaves the weather channel on to
fill up the silence of home. She curls up
beneath all of the blankets she can find and
she’s still cold and Sam is still gone and she’s
alone.

* * *

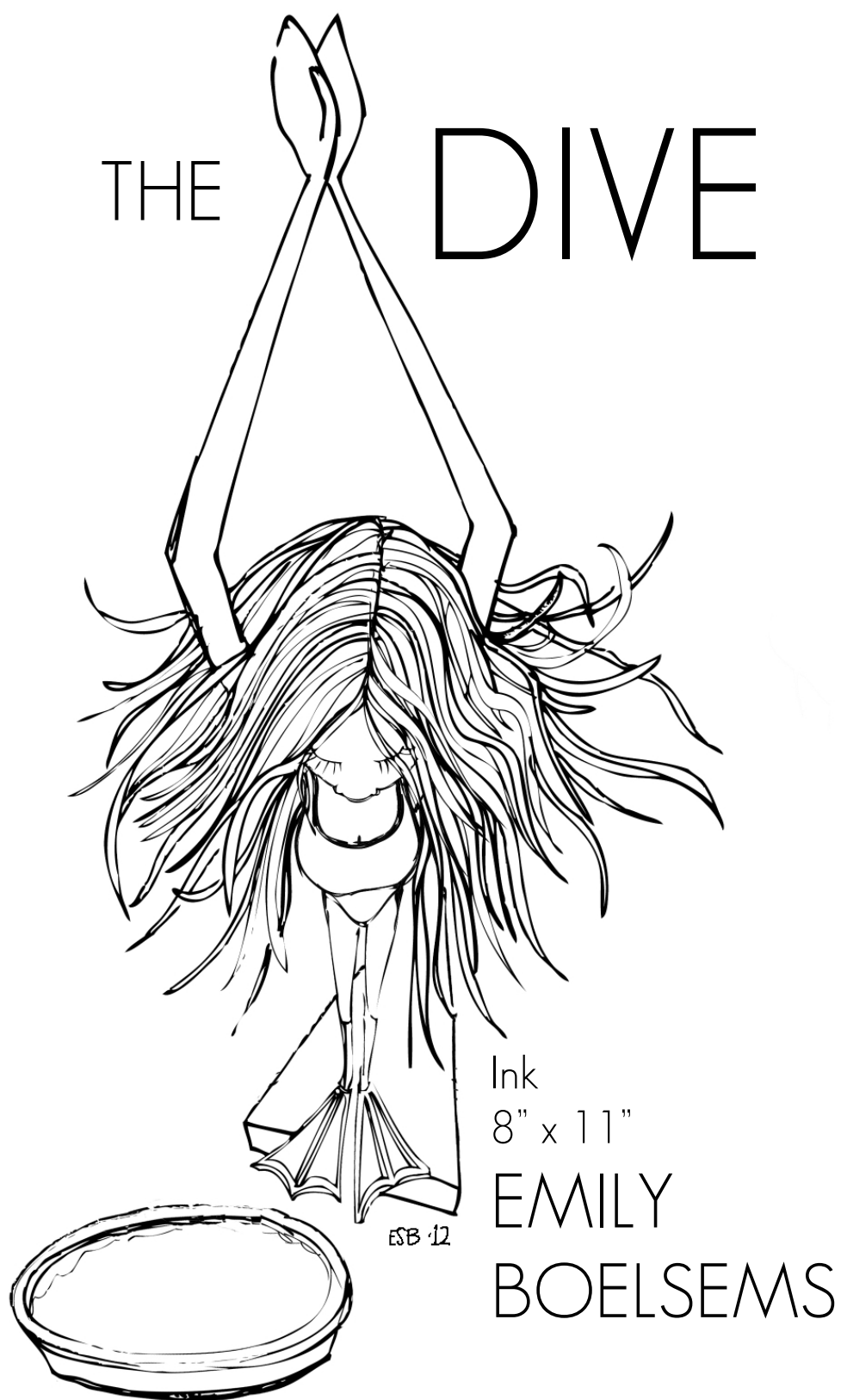
The trees are begging beside the road
with their empty arms and Lily is running past
them.

It’s the coldest day of the year and Sam
is gone and Mama is gone and her breath is
getting tangled up inside the caverns of her
lungs and she’s running, running, running, and
she doesn’t stop running, not for anything.

Lily Finch keeps on running until her
breath gets tangled up with the rest of her and
she isn’t Lily Finch anymore. The air settles
into all of the spaces she has until all she has is
spaces. She loses herself to them in her
running, running.

The wind keeps on running, searching
for Sam Porter. It’s run all this way for all
these years, and still it isn’t out of breath.

*Tate is a freshman majoring in Comparative Literature. She has previously
been published in Swansong Magazine and Figure of Speech.*



Ink

8" x 11"

EMILY
BOELSEMS

Emily is a graduate student studying Interior Architecture.

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