

UNBOUND



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*Ari Freitag's "Rotten Hand" is featured
on the cover of this issue.*

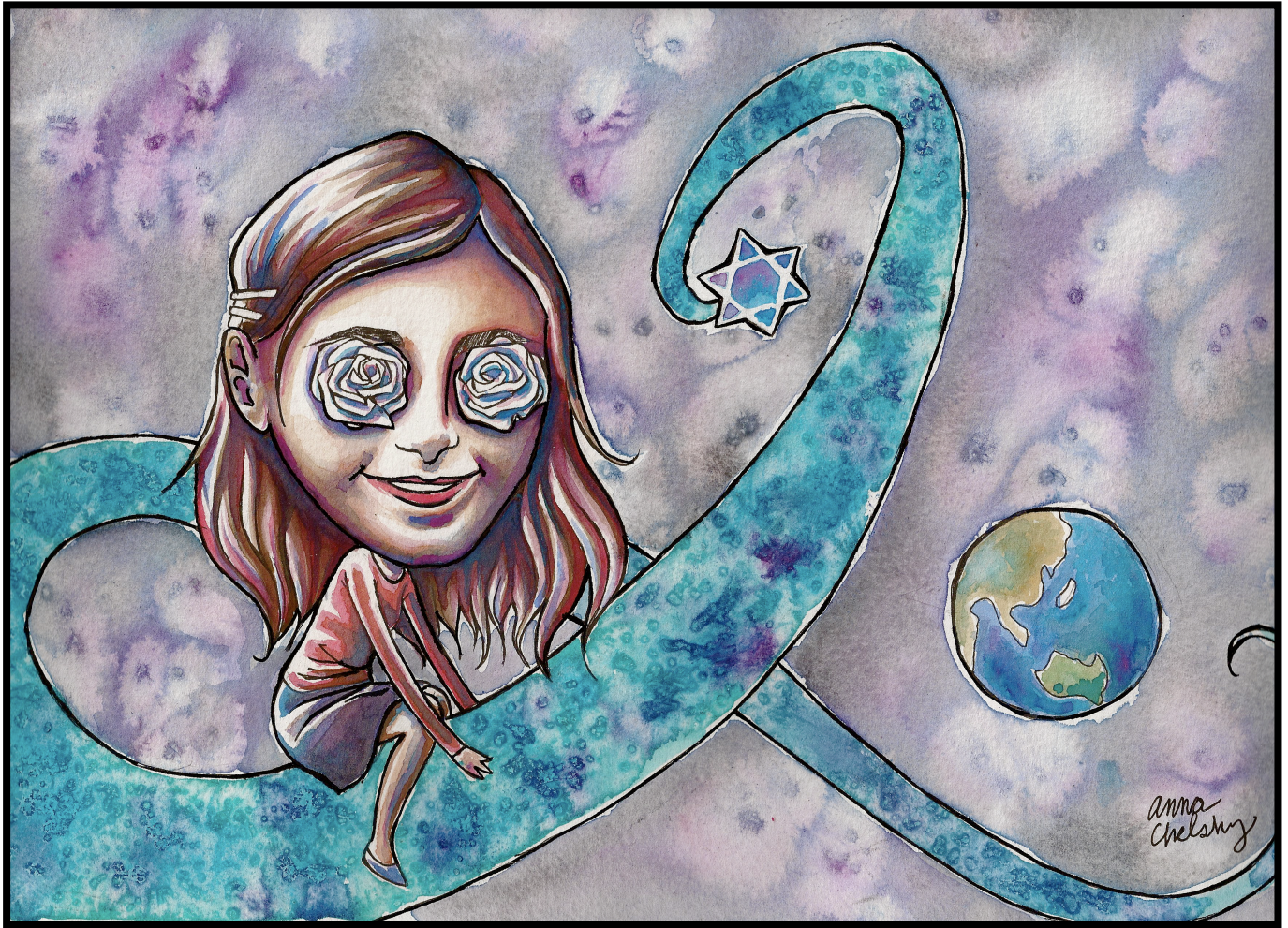
Ink and Gauche

5" x 8"

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ANNA CHELSKY

ROSES IN HER EYES

Watercolor

12" x 9"

Anna's piece "Roses in Her Eyes" is the art section winner of Unbound's Fall 2011 Song Lyric Contest. Anna is a sophomore majoring in Comparative Literature and has been previously published in Ephemera.

Artist: Neutral Milk Hotel

Song: "Holland 1945"

GRADIENTS

—AMANDA BERG

My father has his hand on the doorknob, all nervous energy in his coat and hat, when my mother calls to him from the kitchen. Her voice sounds muffled, as if the walls are compressing her, squeezing her lungs.

“Take the boys with you,” she says. Our lunch plates clamor as my mother scrubs them tenderly, hands in squeaky plastic gloves. I hear my father’s gruff response—a grunt. He’s annoyed—I can tell even from where I sit, Indian-style, at our ancient dining room table. I’m doing my algebra homework. I tap my pencil against my teeth idly, watching my mother through the doorframe as she whirls around the kitchen, dishes balanced effortlessly in both hands.

“Miriam, I have errands to run,” my father says.

He swoops into the kitchen, his long trench coat billowing out behind him. It’s already a bit damp and there are tiny flecks of snow in his hair like dandruff, as if he was already gone and has been forced to come back for my brother

and me, the stragglers. He must have been out on the porch when my mother yelled for him. In the kitchen, though, he stares at my mother, brows furrowed. His expression is grim, and he scowls, hawk-like. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

“So run them—with the boys,” replies my mother, unfazed.

I hear Simon before I see him. He thunders down the stairs and makes the final jump onto the hardwood. He bursts through the kitchen door and runs straight for my father, clinging to the pleats of his coat like he does with our mother’s skirt. My father looks nauseated, as if he is still, after all these years, surprised by his own child’s signs of affection. My mother turns on the faucet. The conversation is over.

We drive down Kent Street in my father’s car, the heat running full blast. I run my fingers nervously over the familiar cracks in black leather seats, peeling from years and years of abuse. My brother bounces in the back, practically vibrating with excitement, drawing pictures with his fingers on the fogged glass. My father lights a cigarette. He cracks the window and the frigid air slaps my face. It isn’t enough to get rid of the smoke and the air feels thick and tight in my lungs. Simon coughs, but I don’t. Half the kids in my high school spend their breaks huddled in groups, taking puffs from the same cheap

cigarettes. The smell doesn't make me sick like it used to, not anymore.

"Our little secret, eh Mason?" My father waves his cigarette next to my face before returning it to his lips, cracked and dry from heat, and taking a deep pull. The smoke swirls around him.

"Right," I say.

"I like secrets!" says Simon.

"Good," says my father. "That's real good."

We drive until we reach the edge of town and there's only one road and we're on it, lumbering along in my father's big, black car. With the snow, it's difficult to place where we are exactly, until my father turns on a private drive, lit by two lamp posts, the lights flickering. I realize where we, at the only house outside of town for miles. It also where she lives: the woman who has, since I was a kid, so often been the source of feverish whispers exchanged in grocery aisles and school hallways, the cedar pews in church.

"Why are we going to the Witch's house?" I ask. My father looks at me, confused.

"What?"

"Don't feed us to the Witch, Dad!" Simon clings to my father's seat, a monkey on his back.

"What are you boys yapping about?" My father shakes his head like he's clearing cobwebs out of his ears.

"We should head back. Mom's

expecting us for dinner," I blurt out. My father flinches a little, the only way I can tell he's heard me, but he says nothing, so I keep talking.

"I have homework." As the car rumbles closer to the house, I feel myself begin to panic, because there's only one reason men from town come out here.

"Then you shoulda stayed home," my father mutters, his knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel.

"But, Dad, " I start again.

"We're here," Simon says, smashing his face against the window.

We pull into the Witch's yard and it's not quite like the fantastic stories I've heard the mothers in town tell their children. There are no bones scattered about, no bloody animal heads on a pikes, warning curious little boys to stay away. No dusty spider webs—just ivy and creeper vines running around the shutters. The yard is neat, except for the garden, overgrown despite the snow and waging war on the house itself. Everything is frozen and perfectly still, except a lone tree flanking the house, trembling in the wind. On its skeletal branches, nstead of leaves, there are glass bottles of every kind—brown beer bottles, green Cokes hung by their necks with white string.

"The tree!" Simon hisses in my ear.

My father stops the car. He rummages in his coat pockets. He hands

me something and I take it without looking. He tells us to wait in the car.

When he's gone, I open my fist. A crisp ten dollar bill, now crumpled, lies in my clammy palm. Simon is humming, oblivious, while I watch my father, his shoulders hunched against the cold, walk up the front steps.

The door opens and I see her. She isn't witchlike at all, except for the long, white hair swinging down her back. Her face is young. She's pale as she leans in the doorway, her perfect white fingers outstretched. I see my father grab them, pulling her into his arms. He lifts her up and she clings to him like a child would, like Simon tried to, like my mother doesn't anymore. My father, despite his arthritic knees and weak back, carries the Witch into the house.

For a second, I see my mother's face in my head, and a wave of nausea hits me.

The door slams shut and I hear the tinkling of glass hitting glass, the bottles in the wind.

It's an hour before he comes back. The sun has started to set, the sky fierce reds and yellows. The glare hurts my eyes, so I shut them, and Simon kicks the back of my seat, over and over. I try to focus on the beat of his feet hitting the leather, find a rhythm in it. I look back at Simon, who grins. I hate that he's too young to know what's happening, but at

the same, I'm jealous of him. I wish I didn't see it.

"Ready to go, boys?" My father asks. Even in dim light, I see the changes. When he starts the car and the engine stalls before turning over, he doesn't swear or flinch. His grip on the wheel is loose, and he pulls out of the drive in easy, fluid movements. He's slack in his seat, as if he had forgotten to breathe and then suddenly remembered how. This, I think, is the Witch's spell: the remnants of her power under his skin. As we drive back into town, as Simon sings under his breath—some cereal jingle that's been on t.v. for months—I press my forehead against the window, and realize I cannot hate her for it. It's her gift.

My father clears his throat noisily, and I turn to look at him. There is a moment where all we do is stare at each other, blinking stupidly.

"Can we go for ice cream, Dad?" Simon asks. Only my brother would ask for ice cream in the middle of a blizzard.

"Sure we can," he answers. "Why not?" He laughs, and Simon giggles.

We stop at the candy shop three blocks from our house. It's one of the old-fashioned ones with big glass jars stacked floor to ceiling. My legs feel weak from sitting for so long, and I walk all wobbly-like, trying to shake the feeling back into them. Simon reaches for my hand and I squeeze it

reassuringly. I forget sometimes, how small he is, as my fingers curl all the way around his tiny wrist. The shop woman beams, her smile blinding white in her round, red face. We're probably the only customers she's had for hours. Simon smiles back, waves, and wanders off to stare at the kaleidoscope of colored sweets lining the walls. As my father pays, I look at the display case of special items, expensive candies and chocolates wrapped in crisp, shiny cellophane and gold foil. I see the pieces of marzipan my mother loves so much. She says they are more like tiny works of art than food, each one carefully crafted and hand-painted in a shiny glaze of egg whites and food coloring. She only gets them at Easter, a box lined with green tinsel and paper cups of marzipan chickens and ducks, spring flowers with petals of delicate spun sugar. She waits days before eating them. My mother says she always tries to make beautiful things last.

"Come on, Mason. Let's eat." My father pushes me towards a booth covered in striped vinyl where Simon's already sitting, swinging his legs and stuffing his face with his dessert.

"Thanks," says Simon. My father ruffles my brother's auburn hair before stealing a bite of his ice cream. He and Simon start to laugh again, and I just want to know what's so fucking funny.

"Eat your ice cream, Mason."

"I don't want it," I say. My father's eye twitches. It's a flinch, barely noticeable.

"I'll eat it!" Simon chimes in, chocolate sauce smeared at the corners of his mouth.

"We can get it to go, son. You'll eat it later." He smiles again, and my shoulder itches where his hand lay moments earlier. I take giant bites of my sundae, swallowing mechanically until it's gone. I don't really taste it, I'm eating so fast. It's a shame, because I really, really like ice cream.

We leave the shop single file, Simon leading us with exaggerated skips toward the car. I am the last one outside, the brass bell jingling happily as I pull the door shut behind me. It's dark now, the only light coming from the street lamps and the glow of the OPEN sign. I watch my father help Simon, whose hands are shaky from his sugar high, with his seatbelt. I stuff my hands into the pockets of my jeans and my fingers brush the ten-dollar bill I'd shoved in there only hours before. I imagine it burning, that my hand feels like the time I stuck my finger in that electrical socket when I was nine. I feel it, a shudder, all the way up my spine.

"I'll walk home," I say, my breath coming in short gasps. I can't see my father's face, but I don't need to. I know what it looks like. I imagine that vein above his eyebrow, pulsing in

annoyance.

"Mason, get in the car."

"Just let me walk, I need air," I say, and it's true. My stomach churns. If he comes any closer, if I have to look in his eyes, I think I'll be sick.

"Boy, come here and get in the da—get in the car." I can hear the tremor in his voice, the place where he's teetering, right on the edge. He takes a deep breath. "Please."

"It's three blocks," I say, feeling sweat on the back of my neck.

"Mason," he says slowly. His boots crunch the snow as he walks towards me, and my whole body stiffens when he grabs my wrist.

"Please." He's actually pleading. When light flickers across his face, the eyes I see are not my father's. He almost looks scared. I pull my hand away.

"She really did a number on you," I say, before I am suddenly sick all over the ground. Then I am laughing through the mess of hot tears and spit and sick, as my father drags me by the elbows into the car. I laugh because my father's just as much a coward as I am.

The next day, no one wakes me for school. I suppose my mother thought she'd let me sleep through whatever I had. She'd already thrown a fit over me last night when I'd stumbled through the door, pale, sweaty, covered in my own vomit, my father hurrying to keep up

with me while I hurried to get away from him. "What happened?" she'd demanded. My father had shrugged, saying, "He got sick. A stomach bug, I think."

I roll over in bed and wrap the blankets around me until I am cocooned in them. Maybe I'll die here. Maybe.

That afternoon, I am in the kitchen with my mother, and she makes me eggs. When she puts the plate down in front of me, she ruffles my hair like I am five-years-old again.

"I have to go pick up your brother," she says.

"I'll do it," I answer, between mouthfuls of food.

"No way, buddy." My mother shakes her head. I know she thinks I am foolish, perhaps delirious with fever. "You'll get even sicker going out like this."

"I'm better," I say. I don't want to be in this house. "I want to go."

My mother nods and pats my neck soothingly. Her hands feel cool, soft. Her fingertips brush my collarbone like I am something secret.

She makes me wear my heaviest coat, though the snow has melted some overnight. I am several streets away before I put my hands, stiff from the cold, into my jeans pocket to warm them. The bill is still there, wadded up like an old tissue.

I'm a few minutes late, so the yard is mostly deserted outside my brother's school. Simon sits on a bench where my mother tells him to wait every day. He's wearing this ridiculous puffy blue jacket and one of those hats with a wooly pom-pom on top. There's a scarf wrapped tight around his neck, so all I see are his eyes, big and brown, peeking over the top. It's almost heartbreaking how young he looks. He doesn't see me until I'm right in front of him.

"Hey, kid," I say. I pull the hat off, dangling it under his nose, but he doesn't crack a smile.

"Does Dad hate us?"

"What? That's—of course not." I sit down beside him, nudging him with my shoulder. The bench is damp and the moisture starts soaking my pants leg. It doesn't matter what he tells me, what he's afraid of. I love him, so I lie. It's easier, I think, for both of us, that way.

"Tommy Wilks said he must hate us. He says that's why people like Dad go to see the Witch," Simon's voice is as small as he is. He's sniffing. He's been crying.

"Tommy Wilks is a fuckhead," I say. He's probably right though, I think. I've seen the way my father looks at us, how he cringes a little every time Simon reaches for his hand. I stopped reaching a long time ago.

"That's a bad word," says Simon.

"Don't tell Mom."

"I won't. Can we go to the park?"

"Sure, kid. Let's go," I hold out my hand, expecting Simon to take it, but he doesn't.

"I'm too old for that now," he says, though he sounds a little unsure.

"Okay," I say. "That's okay."

Some of Simon's friends are at the park with their parents, but I keep my eye on him while he and the other kids play King of the Mountain on the hill overlooking the playground. I sit on a picnic table, tracing shapes into the untouched sheet of virgin snow on the tabletop. I'm quiet, just listening, and for a second, I think I hear the sound of glass breaking. Looking around, however, I only see a group of boys from my school, smoking, all hunched together against the wind as they try to keep their cigarettes lit.

I don't know why I walk toward them. I'm not even conscious of my actions until I'm right there, breathing in the sickly sweet scent of tar and nicotine as it streams from one their nostrils into the cold air.

"Fuck off," says the boy. I recognize him now, up close. His name is Mark, and he's an asshole, mouthing off to everyone that even looks at him wrong.

"Can I have one?" I motion to the cigarette hanging out of his mouth. There's a line of ash about to fall and I

have to squash the urge to reach out and tap it with the tip of my finger.

“Fuck off,” Mark says again, annunciating each word so much that flecks of spit fly in every direction. He takes a drag and blows the smoke right in my face, but I don’t cough. I’m back in my father’s car, the thick plumes of smoke curling between my father’s chapped lips as he smiles at me.

“Our little secret, eh Mason?”

I feel Mark’s nose crack under my fist before I realize I’ve hit him. Blood starts to pour down his face and he’s swearing and everyone around us is yelling.

Mark and I are both tall and long-limbed, but I know I’m stronger than he is. When he pins me to the ground, I stop struggling and go limp even though I could flip him over easily, if I wanted to. He doesn’t stop hitting me, and each blow is ruthlessly accurate. I close my eyes and feel my skin tear beneath his knuckles.

“Freak,” Mark spits. He stops throwing punches, realizing I’m not fighting back. When I open my eyes, the boys are gone. A new crowd of people stands in their place, gathered around me, staring. I get up slowly, the joints in my knees popping painfully, and brush the wet snow off my back. I taste the iron bite of blood, and my legs ache.

Simon is there, beside a girl I recognize from his class. She has pigtails

and pink snow boots, and she’s sucking her thumb, her free hand clinging to the zipper of her mother’s jacket.

“Will you walk him home?” I ask the girl’s mother. I don’t know her name. She nods, but she purses her lips like I am something she scraped off the bottom of her shoe. To be fair, I probably look it. I wipe my forehead with my sleeve and when I glance down, the sleeve is crimson. My wrist doesn’t even hurt. I think I am in shock.

When I walk away, I don’t turn around to watch Simon go.

People on the street don’t meet my eyes as I walk home. The cuts on my face finally start to sting and my eyes water, but I’m not crying, I don’t think. As I get closer to my house, I see the familiar neon sign, and stop, peering into the window. I remember what I have in my pocket. The shop is as empty as it was last night. Winter must be hard on business. I push open the door, and the bell chime. This time, however, I don’t think I will be a welcome customer. There’s no warmth in the shop-owner’s face when she sees me.

“Oh, god,” she whispers. There’s a wild panic in her eyes.

“I just want to buy some candy,” I say. “And then I’ll go.”

The front door is already unlocked when I trudge up the front steps. I am

sore all over. My mother doesn't meet me in the hallway, and the kitchen is empty. Gently I lay the box of silvery snowflakes made of almond paste wrapped in blue cellophane, on the table. A drop of blood drips from my nose onto the plastic, and I wipe it with my thumb. I don't leave a note.

When my mother asks who they are from, I will tell her they are a present from my father.

On the way to my room, my father comes into the hallway wearing a thin white undershirt and a pair of boxers. He stares at my face, but he says nothing—not a word.

I let the door to my room shut behind me.

I throw myself on my bed. I want to close my eyes forever. I pull the sheet all the way up to my chin. After awhile, I hear footsteps in the hallway, and the whine of the hinge as my door is pushed open. I open one eye, just enough to see that it is my mother.

"Mason," she says. "Dinner's ready."

But I don't answer her, feigning sleep.

Amanda's piece "Gradients" is the fiction section winner of Unbound's Fall 2011 Song Lyric Contest. Amanda is a senior majoring in English and has been previously published in SpokeWrite Magazine.

*Artist: Suffjan Stevens
Song: "Mistress Witch from McClure
(Or, The Mind That Knows Itself)"*

CIGARETTES AND

—MAGGIE BREES

RAIN

The cigarette was sweet but didn't do the job.

It made me wonder how to spell cigarette

cigarette cigarrett cigarret

and I couldn't remember.

The rain was making it soggy anyway,
like smoking a roll of used toilet paper.

Incessant bastard. I thought I'd
gotten rid of you. You look up
and there he is

poking you in the eye, jabbing your face
jab jab jab.

I think he follows me around like a needy friend,
asking for money on occasion
or company.

Like he'd be walking alongside me
and I would hear his wet shoes

squish squish squish
with each step.

His nose would always be cold, dripping.

We would go listen to music

jazz music funky music soul music,
music that smelled and felt like suede.

We'd walk into the club and his on and off girlfriend, Cloud,
would be there, drape herself all over him,
the slut. She gets around.
We'd sit at the bar and the bartender
would ask for Rain's ID and Rain would say
fuck off
or something stupid
and we'd get kicked out and be back in the streets,
looking for that jazzmusic funkymusic soulmusic,
anything so I wouldn't have to listen to
the incessant sound of his wet shoes going
 squish squish squish
all the way through town.

*Maggie's piece "Cigarettes and Rain" is the poetry section winner of Unbound's Fall
2011 Song Lyric Contest. Maggie is a junior majoring in Anthropology and has
been previously published in Unbound.*

*Artist: The Killers
Song: "All These Things That I've Done"*



SARA LEBECK
LADY STRINGS

Ink
8" x 11"

FIGHT TEST

—CLAYTON DAVIS

“You ready to get your ass kicked, sixth-grader?” Marcus sneers.

“Your bullying stops right now, Marcus Coleman.” Will says. It takes all of his willpower to keep a straight face, to keep from shaking. “We’re all sick of you picking on us.”

The gap between the modular classroom and the actual Apple Valley K-8 School building is small, only about ten feet across. The rectangular module’s long sides run parallel to the building, creating an alley lined with woodchips and weeds, a safe-haven from the adults, too busy to know what goes on behind Portable 3. Today, a crowd of children line the edges of the alley and seal the exits, staring intently at the two figures inside their circle. Marcus and Will stood at each end of the alley, eyes locked and unblinking, chests puffed out.

“Ooh!” Marcus says. “I’m so

scared of the little sixth-graders! If you all hate me so much, where are all your little friends?”

“No more words. I’m here to fight, not talk.” Will knows the longer he keeps talking to Marcus, the more nervous he’ll get. Marcus is two years older, two grades ahead, at least six inches taller, and has close to a dozen fights under his belt. He can’t show any signs of fear or apprehension; the people here need to see that bullies can be stood up to.

Marcus tears off his jacket and throws it to the ground. He cracks his knuckles—twice—and rolls his neck, springing from foot to foot like a boxer.

Will takes off his digital wristwatch and places it gently by his feet. He takes a deep breath, inhaling slowly, meditatively, and exhales. The stress and tension escape as he breathes out, and the tremors in his hands ease. A strange, new energy overtakes him, a tingling sensation of eager anticipation. Time dilates, and his senses heighten; he can feel every inch of his skin, and how every part of his body is interconnected, his muscles working together in perfect harmony like a beautiful and efficient machine. Feeling more certain of anything else he has ever felt in his life, Will raises his fists slowly and steadily. Marcus is going to lose.

Without warning, Marcus breaks into a sprint, closing the gap between

himself and Will at a terrifying rate. He raises his fist as he runs, poised to deliver a charging blow. Will is frozen, eyes locked on the fist flying towards his face. He knows to dodge the blow, to make an evasive move, but he's suffering a mental disconnect, a breakdown in communication between brain and body. Only his eyes move, following the trajectory of the terrible fury of Marcus Coleman and his right hook, growing larger and larger in his field of vision. A new thought strikes him: he is going to lose this fight. Then the fist strikes him under his eye, and he crumples down to the ground, blackness filling his vision.

"So what'd you say to him?"

"Yeah, what'd you say to Marcus Coleman that makes him want to beat you up?"

Garrett and Timmy asked excitedly. Their voices were straining to be heard above the din of the cafeteria.

"I said some bad words to him. Some really bad words. My mom says they're the worst words you can say." Will was speaking slowly, carefully considering each word. "I'm not supposed to ever use 'em, but I finally got so sick of Marcus Coleman and how he's always picking on us sixth graders, so when he kicked my ball over the fence during P.E. I just started shouting about how much of a jerk he is, only I didn't say jerk." Will takes a long sip from his milk carton. "He pushed me, and I

pushed him back, then he grabbed my collar, and I spit in his face. Then P.E. ended. He said he was gonna beat me up at after school, that he'd meet me behind the portable classroom and kick my teeth in."

"You spat on an eighth-grader?" Timmy asked, with wonder.

"You spat on Marcus Coleman?" Garrett said.

"Yeah. I shouldn't of done it, but I did." He took another swig from his milk carton. "I'm going to fight Marcus Coleman after school."

"You ever fought before?" Garrett asked. "You know Marcus has been in like three fights just this year, right? And when Robert Daniels in the seventh grade was actually winning at that fight in October, Marcus's buddies Mitchell and Jeff jumped in and really beat him up. It was bad."

"I heard he changed schools after that," said Timmy. He cast a glance across the cafeteria to the eighth-grade section, where Marcus Coleman perched, sitting on top of the lunch table, lanky legs dangling off the edge. On the benches below him on either side, Mitchell and Jeff sat, sipping coolly at their sodas and listening intently while Marcus gesticulated violently, explaining something. Every minute or so he cast a glance at the sixth-grade section, his eyes shadowed by his furrowed brow as he squinted, scanning for Will.

Marcus's eyes locked with Timmy's. Timmy jerked his head away with sudden force, desperate to avoid the bully's gaze. "You should tell a grown-up," he said. "If you try to fight Marcus, you're gonna lose. And even if you win, you're gonna lose because his buddies will beat you up."

Will turned to Garrett and motioned to his lunchbox: "Garrett, who is on your lunchbox?"

"Batman. Why?"

"What would Batman do, Garrett? Would he go tell on the bad guys to his mommy?"

"No."

"So what would Batman do?" Will asked.

"He would fight the bad guys and win."

"And does Batman always do what's right?"

"Yes."

"So I'm doing the right thing, and that's that. Our school needs people who stand up to Marcus."

"But Batman has ninja training!" Timmy protested. "He learned it from Qui-Gon Jinn in *Batman Begins*. You don't have training like Batman! You can't fight like Batman! You need to tell a grown-up!"

"I can't do that." Will took a long sip from his milk carton again. "It's not right."

"Why not?"

"If I tell a grown-up that Marcus and I are going to fight, then Marcus gets a detention, maybe two, or three, or he goes to the principal's office, or something else he's done before, and it won't change anything, you know that." Will was speaking solemnly, deliberate and precise in his words. "He's not scared of teachers and principals or detentions or any of that. Marcus isn't scared of anything, and if he's not afraid, he's going to do whatever he wants to do. But what if other kids start standing up to Marcus? If everybody he picks on fights him, he couldn't bully anyone. Nobody can fight that many people. That's how we get him to stop: we fight back. That's why I need you guys to come with me, to help me out in the fight, especially if his friends join in. Are you guys with me?"

They stared back in silence, each waiting for the other to answer. Garrett speaks, hesitantly: "Sure, Will. We'll be there."

Everything is black and silent. Will hears faintly, as if echoing through a cave, the familiar sound of someone falling on woodchips. The familiar sting of a high-speed impact with woodchips on bare skin laces his arms and neck. Will opens his eyes. An azure swath fills his vision, framed by the walls of Portable 3 and the school building on either side. Blue sky. He's on his back. His face throbs with horrible pain, and

he tastes blood. He raises his head and looks around. Marcus is walking inside the circle, arms raised, exalting in his victory. The crowd is silent. He strains his neck looking around, surveying the crowd. Timmy and Garrett aren't there. Did they say they would be? Weren't they going to be here to help him?

Will sits up. Waves of pain flood into his head as he moves, looking around at the students in the circle. "Timmy? Garrett?" Speaking makes his jaw hurt. The crowd says nothing, casting their eyes away from Will, nervously eying their feet or looking toward Marcus. Timmy and Garrett aren't there. He runs his fingers over his face. The skin under his eye is swollen and puffed. His fingertips are coated in gleaming, moist blood. Cautiously, he starts moving his legs, rising to his feet. His balance and coordination are returning, and he feels reinvigorated, and angry. Marcus has his back turned, still gloating to the silent crowd: an opening! Will raises his fist and charges.

Marcus hears the sound of Will running and turns around, making direct eye contact. Marcus has a look of pleasant surprise; he laughs derisively at his oncoming challenger. Terrible, black rage has overtaken Will. Moving at a full sprint now, fist raised above his head, Will throws his punch with the weight of his charge behind it. The blow

connects directly with Marcus's grinning visage. Nothing has ever felt more satisfying or righteous. Knuckles smash into gleaming teeth and the cartilage of the nose with terrible, shattering force. Marcus staggers backward, hunched over and clutching his face.

Marcus recovers, bringing himself to his full height. Blood gushes fast and thick from his nose, broken and bent at an impossible angle. His quivering, bloodied lips part and Marcus gives an enraged scream, a primal eighth-grade war cry. He charges at Will, throwing a left hook that sinks into his abdomen; Will, breath knocked from his lungs, lunges his knee into Marcus's midsection, knocking the bully back a few paces. With space between the two, the fighters raise their fists and lock eyes, circling each other, anticipating each other's move. The crowd is transfixed and silent, watching the blood-sport unfold with total focus. Will has given up any semblance of looking cool and taciturn, his bruised face carved into a scowl.

The bully makes the first move; he lowers his shoulder and lunges in a tackling position, trying to use his superior size to wrestle Will into the ground. Will steps back and launches a kick, his leg arcing perfectly from the ground straight into Marcus' chest. The blow knocks Marcus off his feet and onto the ground, dazed and breathless.

Mitchell and Jeff, standing in the circle, exchange a quick nod and enter the circle, flanking Will. Jeff delivers a solid punch into Will's jaw as Mitchell shoves Will to the ground. They pin him with their legs, his limbs crushed under the boys' weight. The whole maneuver is over in seconds. Marcus is on his feet again, standing over Will, smiling sadistically through bloodied teeth. Will spits at him.

Ms. Jenkins, the 7th-grade science teacher in Portable 4, arrives on the scene behind Portable 3 in time to find a little sixth-grade boy pinned to the ground by two much larger boys as Marcus Coleman, a very familiar face, is kicking the boy in the ribs, cackling with glee. Before she can finish screaming "WHAT HAVE YOU BOYS DONE NOW!" Marcus and his friends are running for the nearby fence.

With the precision and skill that comes with experience, they vault over it, off of school grounds and out of Jenkins' jurisdiction. She runs over to the little boy on the ground. Marcus can be reported later. The crowd of children watching the whole scene disperses, nervously edging away.

The little boy on the ground is wrecked; his nose is broken, shoeprints are etched onto his face, teeth are missing, cuts and bruises dot his arms and legs, and blood trickles down his open mouth. His swollen eyes turn towards Ms. Jenkins. With his hand, he approximates a fist (his pinky being bent horrifically out of its natural shape), raising it in the air triumphantly. "I fought the bully," he croaks. His broken teeth break into a slight smile.

*Clayton is a freshman majoring in Philosophy.
This is his first publication.*

EARTH SCRIPT AND GRANITE SHELVES

—JORDAN CHESNUT

The librarian's daughter wears a pair
of blue pleather boots, and stands pigeon toed
before a spiraled tunnel of beaten spines,
like crooked colored teeth, falling inward.

She paces the bookshelves,
chapped fingertips brush the ribbed walls--
a slow walk, so she can hear her soles
smack like lips as they lift with heavy steps.

While standing still she can hear the books
shift and push, fall against one another,
like rock crammed caves or tectonic plates.
She is burrowed in hollowed passages,

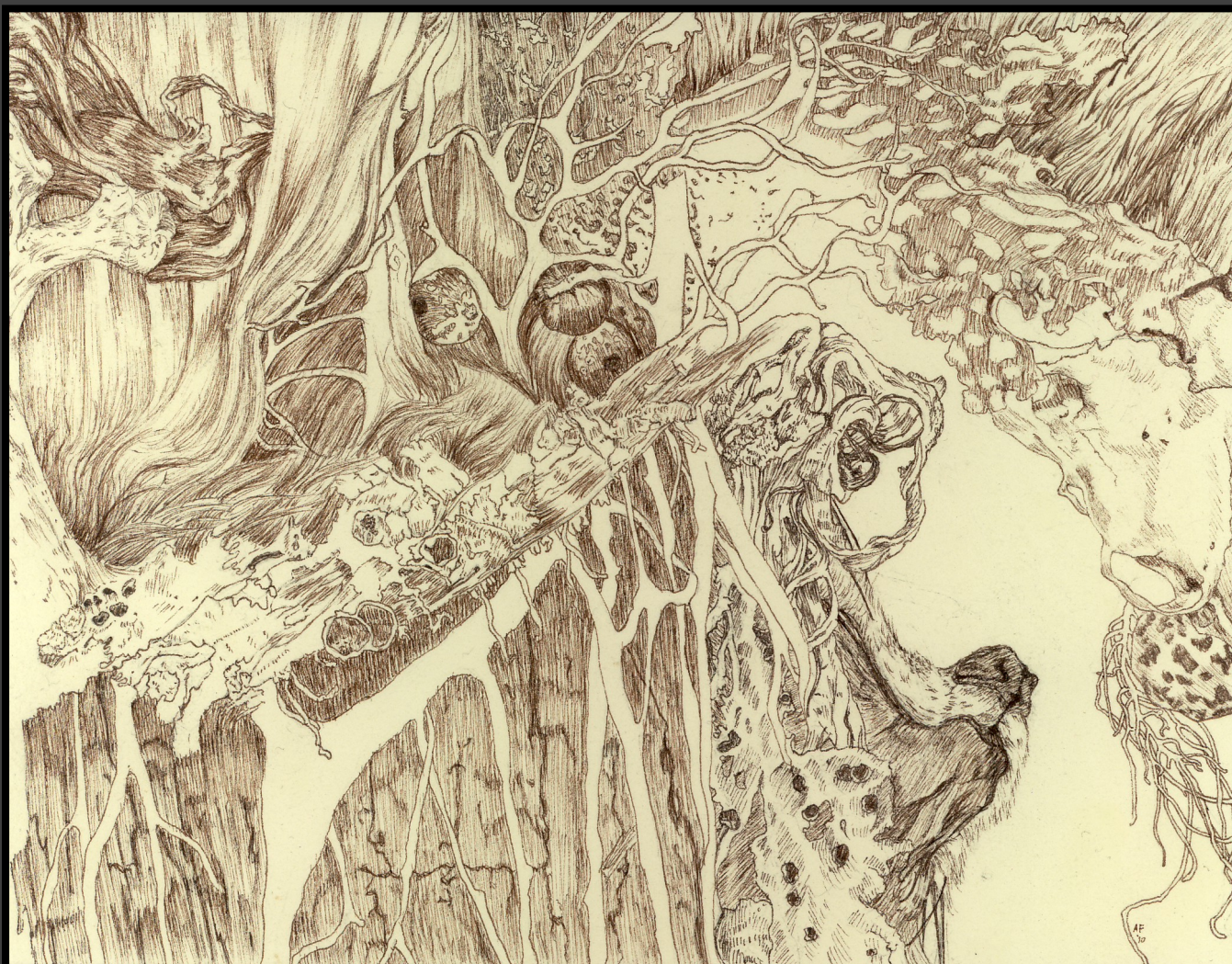
long rows, weaving through the shelves
where light packed with dust spills through book-less cracks--
diamond shaped reflections on scuffed carpet floors,
and pillars of jagged vertical texts mound around her feet.

Buried inside these ancient slouching spaces,
she thinks of things like language, and pockets,
the way wind moves in circles, and how at one time
every person fit inside someone else.

She clasps a heavy book back with worn skin,
its cracked gold title reads, “Evolutionary
Human Anatomy,” she bends the binding open--
thin paper pages fan with a hush, a gentle sigh.

A shard of light rests on the calf of her leg.
Once this girl fit inside someone else, but she knows
if she scraped her mind and pressed all her thoughts together—
it wouldn’t fit in this book, or patch a sun-crack in the shelf.

*Jordan is a junior majoring in International Studies.
She has been previously published in Unbound.*



ARI FREITAG
INTERNAL/EXTERNAL

Ink

6" x 4"

*Ari is a sophomore double majoring in Art and Biology.
This is her first publication.*

LOVE

How beautiful
to hear a hurricane

gently whisper verses
that a butterfly might listen--

and how much more beautiful
to hear a butterfly

rage fierce with open eye
and stir an ocean
to *frenzy*.

—MAX MILLER

*Max is a senior majoring in English with minors
in Creative Writing and Philosophy. He has been previously
published in Unbound and the Oregon Voice.*

THE STATUE

—MELISSA MCGLENSY

Miranda was rapidly passing the point of socially acceptable inebriation and heading towards that slurring, excessively hugging and making best friends with strangers type of drunk. It is the kind of drunkenness that is intolerable to be around, unless of course you yourself are equally intoxicated. Thankfully, Miranda's friends were. They had been in the Hostel bar for nearly two hours when last call sounded and the friends agreed that it was time they ventured out into the streets of Madrid. Miranda and Maggie wrapped up their conversation on the misleadingly slutty dance habits of American girls with their new German friends and met Zach at the bar. Zach had bought them all a last round of tequila shots, he had a tendency towards excessive generosity when it came to tequila, and they stumbled out the door

as they licked salt off their hands and stuffed limes in their mouths.

The twenty-minute walk to the Puerta del Sol bar area had a slightly sobering effect on them. They bobbed and weaved their way through a sea of street performers, pushy Spanish men with gelled hair and clubs spewing neon lights and house music. By the time they stopped Miranda could walk a straightish line and Maggie had stopped eating flyers handed to her by club promoters.

They stopped in a plaza not far from their destination so that Zach could finish his road beer between fits of laughter. They were seated on the bench, laughing at whatever hysterical thing Zach had just said, when Maggie spotted the man. It was dark, but from the street lamps lining the plaza they could make out the details of his costume. He was one of those street performers that Miranda and Maggie passed everyday on their way to class. He had meticulously painted his entire body a metallic bronze color, from the top of his fedora to the little platform he stood on. They were a tricky bunch, this type of statue-impersonating entertainer. Miranda had watched a hundred times as children ran up to them with a euro to put in the tip

jar. The maniacal street artists waited until the child had deposited the coin before suddenly moving, sending the scared child running back to its laughing parents.

This particular entertainer was one of the better ones. His costume was detailed, no unpainted folds of fabric poked out and no involuntary movement gave him away. Zach and Maggie were digging in their pockets for change when a pack of Spanish teenagers moved through the plaza. They strolled past the bench and towards the man with that casual arrogance that comes with youth in a large group. One boy reached up and struck the performer on the cheek as he sauntered by. The slap was soft but it stung with contempt. Before her alcohol-dulled reflexes could process it, Miranda was on her feet and yelling curses in slurred Spanish. The relaxed way in which the boy had disrespected the man made her blood boil. Her rage was only fueled by the feeble dedication of the old man; he stayed true to his art and barely moved when he was struck.

Zach and Maggie held Miranda back from the retreating teenagers,

although equally enraged they had enough sense to remember that berating locals was frowned upon by the Spanish police. The boy turned towards Miranda, who was still shouting threats in Spanish, just long enough to throw her a look that could have been either scorn or confusion but it was dark and hard to tell. As Zach and Maggie calmed her down, Miranda found a two-euro coin in her pocket and decided to give it to the victimized street artist. She approached cautiously, keeping in mind that scaring children was a favorite activity of these performers. When she was no more than seven or so feet away, Miranda lost her nerve. Convinced that he meant to regain a little bit of his lost dignity by frightening a tipsy American girl, she tossed the coin from where she stood. The light from the street-lamps glinted off the coin as it made a graceful arch toward the man's bronze-painted shoes. Miranda would later have a hard time remembering which sound was louder, the uproarious laughter of her friends as realization dawned on them, or the soft little metal on metal clink that could be heard as the coin came to rest on the statue's feet.

Melissa is a senior double majoring in Spanish and English with a minor in Creative Writing.



ANNA CHELSKY
CANNIBAL

Watercolor

9" x 11"

BLANKETS

—KIRSTEN GOULD

I buried my cat in the woods, along the I-5,
somewhere I could visit on my way out
of town. The highway boomed nearby,
like a hard river running. I covered her
in a blanket of forest-floor debris, one final
goodnight. The surrounding limbs bent
double with the consequence of mist and thundering
green. Even amid the roar of cars, a whisper
could be heard—a secret tossed about the leaves,
foreign to the ears of the living.

Those trees bowed the way my brother's head
did once, as a child. On a dark night, he sat
at the foot of my bed, his eyes were glistening
sage. He said he couldn't sleep in his bed,
a biting fear had led him into mine.
He asked me what would happen if he
never woke up. I had no answer, not even
for myself, so I kissed his cheek and snuffed
out his young fear with billowy tufts.

There are solitary nights which summon
fears of my own, not so easily soothed. Unsettled,
I lie cold, and blind. In the dark, it is unclear
whether walls are a murky forest, or if my bed
is a hollow grave. That secret held between the leaves
seeps into my room, into layers which clutch me.
Foreign, still, its meaning staved. Its loudness swells,
until it fills my ears like soil.

*Kirsten is a senior majoring in Psychology with a minor
in Creative Writing. She has been previously published in Unbound.*

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

—STEVEN COATSWORTH

I didn't want to be part of the electronic world but it's what all of us are honed in on—and it seems to be perpetually honing in on us. It's a world that dominates and subjugates that of the true and fiery living realm.

There are a few older folks stumbling around the city, looking for things to keep 'em busy, searching for a lost community. An old man in high-water khakis and the courage to wear peach pastel shirts nods to me from underneath what seems to be a bonnet.

Then there's me. I didn't ever want to do anything with my life except read and write, and you don't need much to do that. Your health, your freedom, and sometimes a family. I've still got the first two without trying in the least and I sure as shit have never been possessed with the madness of a desire for the third.

Probability. Custom.

It feels good to write again—a bit foreign. My hands an arthritic gnarl

around the pen. The ink stain that signposts my existence. Even without a name scribbled on it, the analysts would know it was me. That is, if they had good reason. Anyway, it's a hell of a lot nice identifier than numbers or a deed.

Deeds. Those are the things one's to be judged by, and since I don't have any I must have a pretty low estimation socially and religiously speaking. Israel on the other hand, smashing the skulls of her enemies, is judged in the highest regard. For the Israeli state, there is only one deed that really matters: one given them from God and all—the Likud party, Ben Gurion and Jabotinsky safely resting now, though painted with wry and knowing smiles, snickering to themselves at the godless enterprise.

A man in whiskers and sandpaper voice tells me that if I ever go hungry in Eugene, I'm crazy. Visit the soup kitchen and they give you a calendar of availably free meals. So does the next. And the next. There is some overlap, but a person could eat three square meals a day without back-breaking work. But,

by god, I must be crazy because I let the pangs come and I'm grateful for them. Grateful for feeling something and grateful for the lack.

*Poverty of the writer's mind
is worse than of his belly
Damn the flesh the two does bind
I'll have toast and jelly!*

The concrete's getting too much for me. I've never had a taste for it. I always preferred a forest path, bark or dirt, the kind they had before things got too crazy. I'd even prefer gravel.

*The moose makes a trail
The indians follow the moose.
Trappers follow Indians.
Pioneers and wagons,
and then the deep scarring of
these old roads with asphalt.*

*But—oh! The yellows
nodding, slipping soft
nuzzling into static lullaby,

into the roaring pacific ocean!*

If concrete does what concrete must, at least keep the sides of the road lined with trees. Great big Hemlocks and Firs growing so tall and big to make tunnels of the streets. That's how they do it in

Portland—at least when I was there.

Part of me is sorry I ever left that town, the other part of me—my dreams—don't feel I did. In those dreams the city grows and runs nightmarathoning down my dark condemned hallways, concrete language and concrete chests. Running and running.

That's the way it is with every town in my dreams, and sometimes in my waking life I feel the earth start to tremble, shaking wild, wind screeching an apocalyptic chorale—a composition in three parts. The third movement never finishes, though, and usually hunger or Gary wake me up. More and more it's the stomach, and the now-ness and urgency which attends it.

This city is kind—if a city can be. **The people in it being what makes it kind.** It's hard for some, sure, those that are too sensitive or too crazy; there's not really any other place for them to go. The jails are sick with gut rot, dry-heaving in gutters, throwing up people into the November frost.

“Rise and shine,” says Gary, the security guard with a Scottish mustache and a wide grin chinked at the edges, folds just large enough to carry a rough kindness and folksy familiarity with those in my position. We worked out a deal, Gary and I, that simple kind of deal that two people can make without the authorities, without ingrained socialized hatred or the albatrosses of blind justice.

I could sleep on the grate each evening so long as I didn't give him any trouble when it was time to leave. He was my wake-up call each morning is the way I chose to look at it—choice is something that's still alive out West.

“Up and Adams! This is your wake-up call Dr. Peterson, time to hit the office. We've got emergencies, a man who lost his arm in the spin-cycle of a washer, another from the Johnson unit tried to hammer a nail up his nose like the human blockhead.” Gary was a jovial man, with a sardonic wit. I smiled—it was wry at first, but as Gary started telling me the schedule of imaginary patients and what each's ailment was, the warmth of the sunshine was conducted the whole length and width of it. I could feel it in the muscles of my cheekbones now—it felt good.

I was a lucky man.

The homeless are like just any other social class—some of them make you honored to be donned the title, and others evoke a shame, though the likelihood of the latter is higher, and usually paired with mental instability. Me, I'm a rock. I'd say I'm one of the few of us who set out to learn and perfect the hobo archetype—gliding across the dance floor in my elegant waltz Matilda. It's my life volition. I read as much as I like at the library, no master except my stomach (who I must occasionally indulge). There couldn't be more hours

in the day to write, either. Those half-pencils at the library work well, so long as you remember to sharpen enough of them before they call out closing time—and it's hard to remember to treat them like non-erasable instruments. This town has such a penchant for recycling everything that there's always enough paper to go around.

I heard that the early pioneers often did not have enough paper to write to their friends back home much. Reading some of those old letters, some came right out and said things like, “Welp, that's about all I can write for the week, until I get paid next week and can afford the postage and the paper Betsy,” or some such pioneer name. I often look at the microfilm of these letters at the local library. Some of these characters would write on both sides in incredibly small letters, squeezing in vain all the way to bottom of the page, then finish it with a “Well, I do not have anything more to write about today. Please write soon.” A quiet dignity. A saving face for oneself and offering grace to another by not troubling them so. Perhaps these men were embarrassed and frustrated that they had to work so hard and couldn't even afford to communicate with their loved ones. It must have been like trying to have a conversation while completely preoccupied with the pulling force of gravity. One thing is certain: the author of such bullet-point, sprawling

and linearly-contracting letters had much more to say and might explode if they kept it in much longer. I sometimes wonder if they did explode, and that such personal pyrotechnics added to bloodshed between the whites and the natives. Just think of it—hundreds of bloody and dead because some poor someone couldn't afford another sheet of paper.

I've always preferred pens. Something about pens fighting the good fight. It knows that nothing lasts forever but, damn it, it tries to make something of itself, make something last—gives permanence try after try. A pencil too easily gives up on itself and its words, as if words don't have weight and meaning as soon as uttered or written, and a big

eraser could just come along and give us a second chance.

Don't be deceived: if we're in the belly of the whale, that's where we'll die—every soul-baking bastard last one of us.

Oh, and I almost forgot: lighting. It's not really so bad. The orange-tinged glow of Springfield night-lights offers just enough to scribble down thoughts and ideas, but not enough for revision and reflection on what you've written. The words trudge like troubadours, or quietly persevere like those poor bastards writing in ramshackle log cabins, eyeing the wax of their very last candle, squinting, trying desperately to make the words fit.

Steven is senior majoring in English. He has been previously published in Unbound, Glow!Mag, the Eugene Weekly, and the Outspoken.

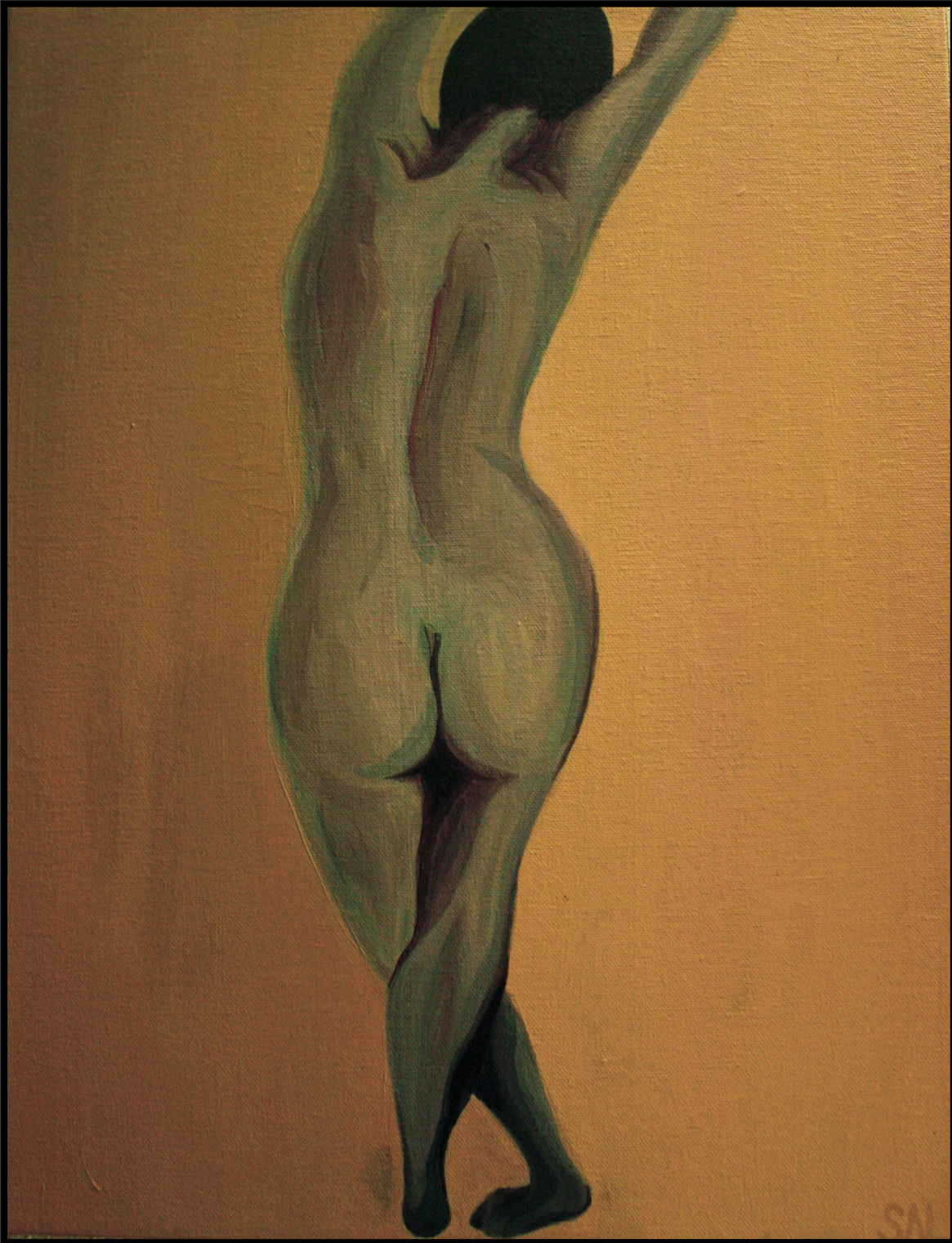
COMES FROM

WHERE SNOW

The cold sank in before I could feel it,
before my fingers stopped bending
as if they had been filled with water
and, in this storm, had frozen.
I think the birds went next
although they never did wrong to anyone
murmuring on wires over miles
of mindless river. They were too light,
their twig-like bones too hollow,
ready to snap, and the great frost
swallowed them up. As I walked
I could barely hear them
as they shattered behind me.

—NOELLE PETROWSKI

*Noelle is a sophomore majoring in Comparative Literature
with a minor in Creative Writing. She has been
previously published in Unbound.*

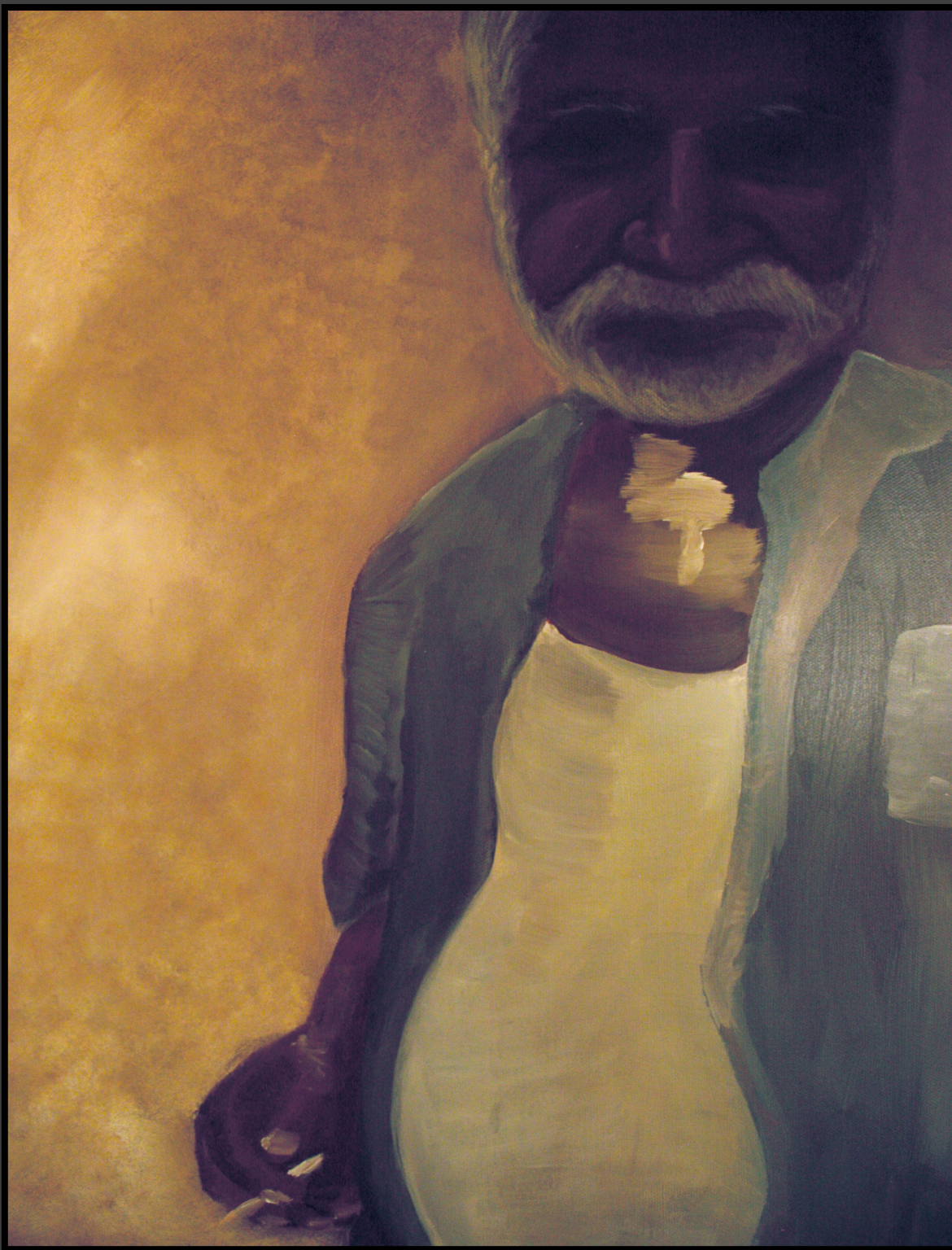


SARA LEBECK

PEAR

Acrylic

18" x 24"



SARA LEBECK
INDIA SMOKE

Acrylic
24" x 36"

HIDDEN PICTURES

—MADDIE DUNKELBERG

I wasn't too impressed with the view.

The weird neighbor's back yard, for example—not much to see there, all patchy grass, scattered with weather-faded plastic sit-n-spins and accented by a rusty swing set. I had never actually seen this eclectic lawn, I realized, only heard the WASP-y retirees next door complain about the “eyesore.” Like they could even see it.

I was so fascinated by the dirty, forlorn playground equipment that it was a few moments before I noticed the creaking coming from the windowsill. I started, then half-laughed, seeing Kate awkwardly crouched there, one leg swinging off the ledge, the other stuck inside.

Kate frowned. “So you're just going to laugh at me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I was.”

“Alright. I see how it is.” Kate grimaced as she struggled to free herself from the frame, and with one clumsy heave, landed ungracefully on the roof's rough surface. “God, Lisa, I don't know why you did this voluntarily,” she said, inching cautiously over to me. “Dad know you're up here?”

I shrugged. He was too busy with floral arrangements and church reservations to notice. Probably too lost in his memories to care.

Kate's had on her Concerned Face as she scooted over to my corner of the brown shingled roof. “Why *did* you do this?”

“She never let me do it,” I said. Mom had been convinced that a trip to the roof would end with a trip to the hospital. Ever since a dicey encounter with bunk beds had left both Kate and I in casts, she had been wary of the children/heights combo to the point of paranoia. To the point of banning the roof long after we'd reached our teens. Now we'd lost that rule. But we'd also

lost her. I hadn't asked for that tradeoff.

"So you're not going to, like, jump, then?"

I snorted. "No. I'm not an idiot."

"I'm not saying—"

"I'm not going to jump, Kate," I sighed.

Kate stared at the spotty clouds overhead, twisting her mouth to the side like she always did when she was searching for particularly sage advice. I focused all my attention on the stray cat that was limping across the street. Roger. That's what mom had named the scruffy orange thing. The irony of it, of him being the live one, made my stomach flop. She was the one who plucked it from a dumpster, half dead, and revived the little devil. It had kind of been her trademark, that unnecessary attention to the struggling runts, like she was that chick from Scarlett's Web or something. Every scrawny stray had the potential to become Zuckerman's Famous Pig. It had bugged me. It had driven me crazy when she'd pull up to the softball field twenty minutes *after* practice had ended, all in a tizzy because she'd been running around crafting a splint for an injured pigeon. Used to, but—

"You know, I never actually asked, why Roger? Like of all names, *Roger*?" Kate said.

I glanced up to see that she, too, had begun watching the tabby's labored trek.

"I can't even think of any, like, famous Rogers," she said.

Ebert. Federer. The guy from 101 Dalmatians, I thought, but wasn't in the mood to say anything. And besides, that wasn't the point. I had never asked either. God, what had I been *doing* for the last 16 years?

Somebody's wind chimes clanged obnoxiously. Pretentiously, almost. They didn't seem to fit. Not the wind chimes, nor the almost-perfectly-electric-blue sky, nor being here, up high.

Kate's light scoff pulled me out of my brooding. "I always kind of resented it when we were little, not being able to go up here. I'd forgotten." She looked at me. "I like that you didn't." I followed her gaze as it skimmed the neighborhood's strangely warped landscape.

Again, I shrugged. "Yeah," I said, "But maybe...I don't know."

I thought about all the stupid

stuff—the roof, the amateur veterinary work, all of it—thought about how stupid it had seemed until it became a part of *her*. There were so many things my brain had just skipped over because I didn't realize they were *so her*.

"We were missing enough down there as it was," I said. "I missed...well, I missed...I miss..." my voice caught in my throat as Kate turned again to face me. Concerned Face had been replaced by a very un-Kate look. It was sad, it was lost, it was sorry.

She looked back out, and we both stared hard at nothing. I was glad. I was feeling enough of what I saw in her face. Seeing it staring back at me was too much.

"Lis?" Kate said. Neither of us broke our focus, but she knew I was listening.

And I knew what she would say.

My stomach dropped. I concentrated harder on the nothing. We both knew.

"Lisa?"

"Yeah?"

"I miss her, too."

*Maddie is a freshman and has not yet decided
on a major. This is her first publication.*

INSTINCT

—AUSTIN DIAMOND

I let the fire go out in flame,
the bed of coals danced with glow
as though a drum beat from beneath,
orange leapt within the channels,
almost invisibly. I saw Vega
secure the lyre, then the Summer Triangle
siphon off the sky...
late spring peepers plashing and cricketing,
Canada geese sweep deep into the night,
night-owls, pulsing, screeching, ringing across
the deep blue darkness scooped out
by the barrier glacial molten mountain-range,
fecund forest full of the swelled blue grouse
pounding twin tympanis of his chest.

Frame of a scarecrow,
cold obsidian skull,
sterile, futile, a marionette.

And, tying the snowcap's tent to a taut, still silence,
my small ears targeting every note,
frightened at what their freedom might suggest,
I placed the frogs at the shallow reedy slough,
the splashed wing-slap at lift-off the geese
not far from the soaked-root alders, though impelled
by some bright bolt to follow shooting suns.

The words I did not wish to hear,
my words, yearning, stumbling forward
like a timorous beggar:

Enfettered vagabond,

picked clean by yellow-eyed blackbirds,
windless as grounded straw.

Then just as I nearly slipped
onto the coals and snuffed the last ember out,
in the dangerous new blue darkness I heard
howling, yodeling, shrieking, keening, laughing
dancing on stilts on top of thrown-off clamshell jangles,
tilting, skipping, necks leaping darting
back-forth more wolfish than wolves
roaring to the foaming moon

sandhill cranes
courting hundreds, thousands,
bills ribbed with ivory flame

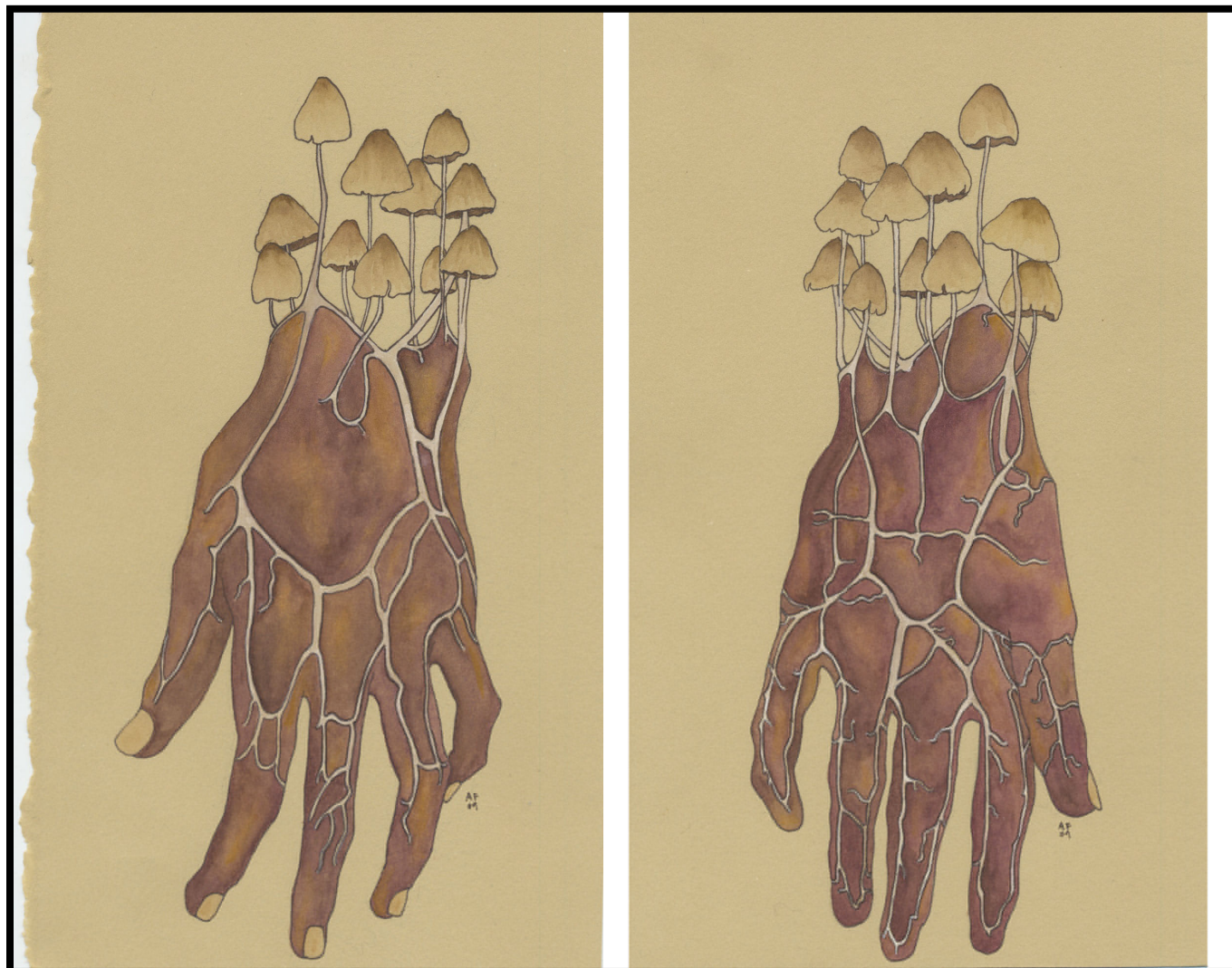
flashing, digging into the heavy pillow's feathers
needling for the talisman of the wildest passion's fang,

bubbling through the tree-frogs' swelled skin-pouches,
and their calls resounded through the amphitheatre
of mountain-lake and ridge behind the stage,
bounced off the mossy erratic boulders,
doubled back as echoes,
thousands of mallards, geese, grouse, dabbled
in the swallowed wake of those engulfing sounds,

Yellowed pine needles,
dance, leap, be the wicker man
breathing, break off the fire's chains!

And the cymbals crashed through the hollow silence,
I sung to myself, done fearing the repercussions
which the cranes sent back to me, beating,
beating, into my blazing heart.

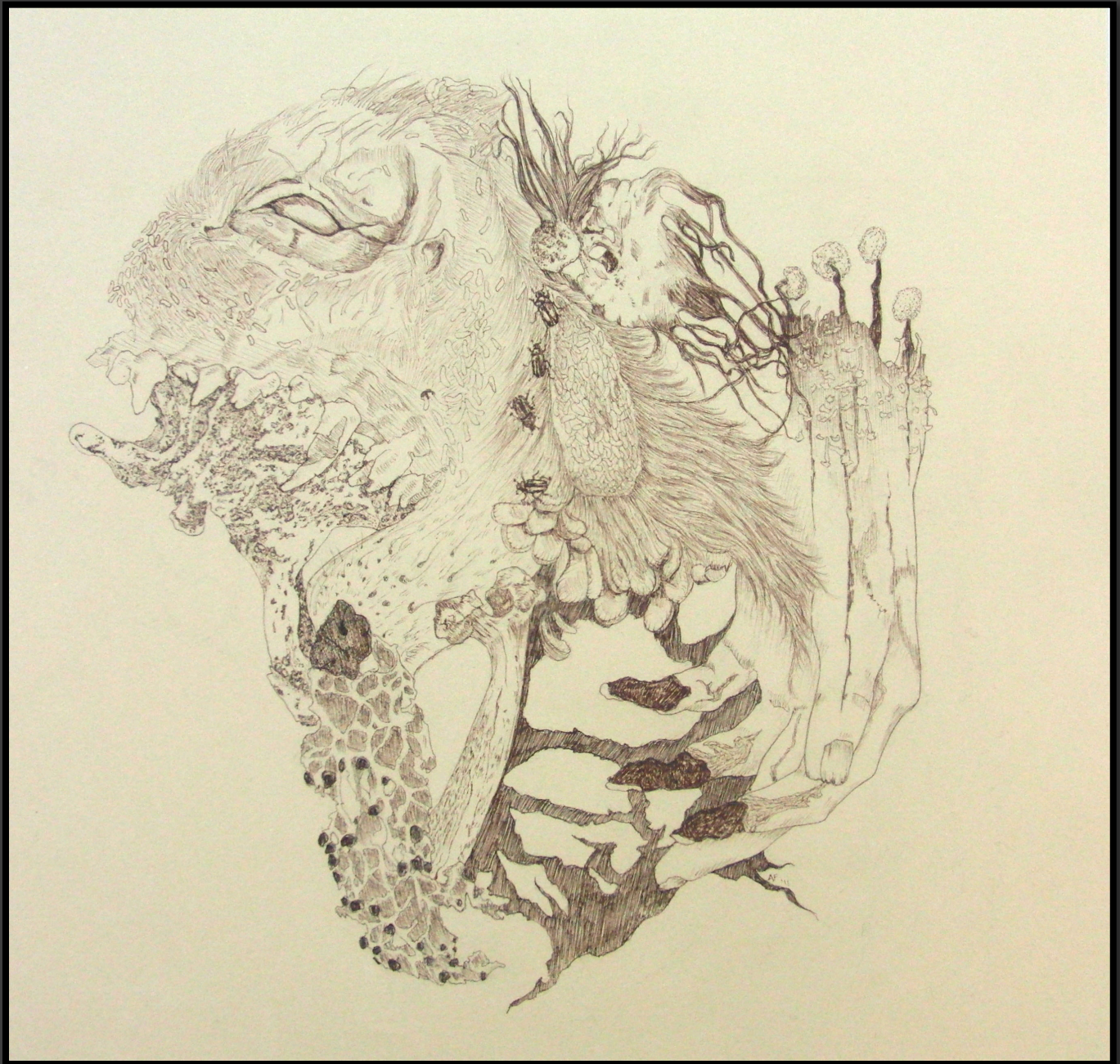
*Austin is a senior double majoring in English and Environmental Science.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*



ARI FREITAG
SYMBIOSIS

Ink and Gouache

8" x 6"



ARI FREITAG
DECAYING/CONSUMING
Ink
18" x 18"



ARI FREITAG
FEATHERS & FUR

Ink and Gouache

6" x 8"

THE MEANS

—JOSUEE HERNANDEZ

Corporal Jake Katsidis stepped off the humvee and was greeted by the intense bright light that was the Saudi Arabian sun.

A hot wind blew from the east, forcing Katsidis to lower his gaze so the brim of his cover would deflect the flying sand in the air. He was wearing his desert camouflage utilities to blend with the environment, but the dark green of the large seabag slung over his left shoulder stood out against the tawny-colored compound. When the breeze slowed, Katsidis looked up and saw a miniature barracks fifty feet in front of him, knowing it would be his home for the next year. A streak of sweat traveled from his brow down to his left eye; he blinked the nuisance away.

Katsidis turned to look at the Lance Corporal gripping the steering wheel of the humvee. The engine chugged heavily, filling the immediate area with its noise.

“That’s the spot right there, Corporal,” shouted the Marine over the engine, pointing with his free hand at the barracks behind Katsidis. “Just walk on up there and step inside. The password to the door is one-two-three-two-one. Gunny Bartlette should be arriving here shortly, so you’d best be on your way. Welcome to Jeddah.”

Katsidis thanked the man and turned toward the barracks. The large vehicle revved behind him and drove off, allowing silence to seep back in the vicinity. He arrived at the building and wiped away a layer of sand from the number-lock above the handle of the door, input the combination and went inside.

His eyes did not immediately adjust to the indoor lighting, but he was able to identify a basic living area with two couches and a television. A hallway extended to his left, and Katsidis had a mind to explore it. No sooner had he placed his seabag on the floor, however, that he heard someone fiddling with the combination behind him.

Gunnery Sergeant Brice A. Bartlette stepped inside, his figure cast in darkness against the brilliant sun. He shut the door, allowing Katsidis to more

clearly see his face. Bartlette was supposed to be thirty years old but looked at least forty. His hair was cropped short with patches of gray and seemed to naturally spike, as Katsidis was positive he wasn't the type to use product. His face looked worn and leathery, as if it spent extended time in the outdoors. Katsidis was suddenly aware of his own fresh face, smooth and bearing only the marks of superficial injury.

"You the new guy?" asked Bartlette. Katsidis stood at parade rest, placing his hands behind his back and feet shoulder-width apart, conceding authority to the higher-ranked individual.

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant," he responded. "My name is Corporal Katsidis."

Bartlette looked at Katsidis, assessing him. The combination of his features and gestures told Katsidis that Bartlette was not just an infantryman, but a hardcore grunt in every sense of the term.

"Keim!" he cried out. Katsidis didn't move as he heard feet rushing around the barracks. A tall figure appeared along Katsidis, also placing

itself in parade rest.

"Present, Gunnery Sergeant!" said the person named Keim.

"Listen up, Staff Sergeant!" boomed Bartlette with authority; Katsidis mentally noted the superior rank of the man next to him for future reference. "Get the rest of the Marines out here and make sure they're all in cammies."

"Aye aye, Gunnery Sergeant," responded Keim, and flew. Moments later, he returned with three individuals.

Bartlette turned Katsidis around to face his new detachment.

"Gentlemen, this is Corporal Katsidis." He placed a hand on Katsidis' shoulder. "He's new, and I can guarantee you he doesn't know a lick of the Standard Operating Procedures here. Do you all remember what it was like when you first got here?"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant," responded the four men in unison.

"You didn't know shit, did you?"

"No, Gunnery Sergeant."

"And there was only one way to learn, right?"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant."

"Which is why we're about to do a full Chemical, Biological, Radioactive

and Nuclear exercise, because the best way to learn how to defend this property is with drill, and Katsidis here is woefully out of practice.” Katsidis could not see behind him, but he felt Bartlette’s grin taking over the room. “Now go ahead and introduce yourselves.”

“Good morning, Corporal,” said the leftmost Marine, a medium-height individual with dark hair and a Hispanic tan. “My name is Sergeant Ramos.”

“Good morning, Corporal Katsidis,” said the next Marine, a short, muscular Asian male with a long haircut that pushed the three-inch regulations. “My name is Corporal MacBeth.”

Corporal Snyder, a blonde, blue-eyed individual nearly as muscular as MacBeth introduced himself next, followed by the tall, skinny Staff Sergeant Keim. Katsidis then introduced himself to all.

Bartlette cleared his throat. “GAS GAS GAS! You have twelve fucking seconds to don your gas masks or you’re dead!”

The Marines reacted quickly, running to a large closet near the entrance that housed their gear. Katsidis was right behind them. Keim was the

first to open the door, pulling out the gas masks. Someone handed a mask to Katsidis and he unconsciously put it on his face. He pressed the nozzle in front to ensure that the airway was open, then tightened the straps around his head. He could only see through two tunnels now, but the mask was properly fitted and he was confident it was on before the twelve second mark.

“You all made it,” shouted Bartlette, “but we’re going to MOPP level four today, boys. Keim, hand out the war-bags.”

Keim again walked into the closet and pulled out a series of camouflaged backpacks which were daisy-chained to all the Marines, Bartlette included. Katsidis unzipped his bag and pulled out a heavy set of trousers, a large blouse, two pieces of rubber shoes and two rubber gloves. Katsidis knew that MOPP was an acronym for Mission Oriented Protective Posture, and that the weighty gear was designed to be impermeable against radiation and chemicals. What he didn’t know was how to put the stuff on correctly.

Katsidis saw that Snyder was the closest individual and resolved to do exactly as him. First he jumped in the

trousers, pulled two suspenders over his shoulders and cinched the belt around his waist. Next, he wrapped the heavy blouse around his upper body and zipped it to the neck. The hood was stuck on the inside of the blouse and he could feel the lump of material on his back, but he wrested it outside and pulled it over his head. He next put on the large rubber shoes, fastening any excess material around his ankles with the provided strings. Lastly, he placed the rubber gloves over his hands and tucked the ends under the sleeves. Were the gloves the first thing he'd donned, manipulating the small parts of the suit would have been impossible.

Katsidis looked up and saw the other men were in full MOPP, holding rifles and waiting on him. Bartlette handed an extra weapon to Katsidis, who inspected it to see that it wasn't carrying live ammunition for the drill. As Katsidis looked at the empty chamber, he noticed how uncomfortably hot he was getting.

"This is the situation," shouted Bartlette, his words unmistakable despite the muffling of the mask. "The compound has just been attacked by an unknown chemical. We need to get our

asses on over to the chancery and make sure that the consul is breathing and that all classified material is secured. We'll be moving in a modified fire team with Keim as the team leader. Katsidis, cover the rear, but make sure you pay attention to the layout of the compound and what the rest of the Marines are doing. You all tracking?"

Katsidis and the rest acknowledged their understanding through the muffling of the masks.

"Take charge, Staff Sergeant."

Keim opened the door and allowed MacBeth, who had his weapon at the ready, to clear the immediate area to the left. Katsidis was next, clearing the immediate area to the right. Keim then stepped outside, tailed by the other men, and signaled with his non-firing hand to be followed. Katsidis took his rightful place at the end of the formation, allowing at least ten feet of blast-buffer between him and the next person.

They were running at a leisurely pace, but to Katsidis it was a full sprint. He could hardly breathe through the mask. He checked to see if the air filter was clogged. It wasn't. Instead of surveying the surrounding area, he

looked at the ground and wondered why he was covering so little with every step. With all the gear he was carrying he felt like a lumbering target, slow and easy to pick off from a distance. He could taste salt in his mouth. Katsidis wondered if it was from his own sweat or if sand had somehow crept inside the mask. Worst of all was the sun, bright and heavy in the sky. He could barely see the camouflaged individuals running ahead of him. The light reflected off the sand and became a powerful shade of white, piercing through the goggles and obscuring his vision until he saw nothing but blankness.

“How long did he last?”

Katsidis blinked. He wasn’t running anymore. He was on all fours, staring at the ground. His gas mask was off and laying next to him.

“About ten minutes, Gunny,” said another voice above him. Katsidis lifted his head and saw the five members of his detachment looking down on him. He tried to speak, but his mouth was utterly dry. His tongue felt rough, like sandpaper.

MacBeth helped him up and slung Katsidis’ hand over his shoulder. Bartlette appeared in front of him, his

own gas mask swinging from his neck.

“Looks like the heat got to you,” he said, expressing no emotion. “We’re going to take you back to the barracks and have you rest up. The drill will continue tomorrow.”

Katsidis tried to speak again but could not. He felt woozy, but composed himself enough to not have MacBeth carry his entire weight. Bartlette led the way back to the barracks, all the men walking slowly in the hulking MOPP gear. Katsidis realized that he wasn’t carrying his weapon and looked around for it. Ramos was behind him, two rifles slung over his right shoulder. There was a look of disgust on his face.

Katsidis washed his hands and rinsed his mouth in the sink. Wet sand fell into the basin, leaving dark brown streaks on the ceramic. He took a few sheets of tissue paper and wiped the dirt away. As he threw the paper into a nearby trash receptacle, he caught sight of his face in the bathroom mirror. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot. He noticed the smoothness of his cheeks, how he had not shaved in twenty-four hours and was still within regulations.

He turned and stepped outside the head.

Ramos was waiting. Katsidis was about to speak when a fist crashed into his stomach, doubling him over.

“That was just to toughen you up, Katsidis,” Ramos said above him. Katsidis did not respond, trying to retrieve oxygen into his lungs.

“Get off your knees,” continued Ramos. “You look like a faggot on your knees.”

Katsidis grunted and took a stand. His head was swimming and his eyes were blurry, but he was recovering from the blow. He stood at parade rest against the Sergeant in front of him.

“Listen up, Katsidis,” began Ramos, inches from Katsidis’ face.

“Today’s display was pitiful. I’ve never seen anyone fall out of formation because they were tired. You knew you were coming to this fucking sauna of a country, right?”

Katsidis kept his head up. Although he had embarrassed himself earlier, he wanted to prove he was not intimidated by Ramos.

“Of course, Sergeant.”

“Then you should’ve known you had to fucking hydrate,” retorted

Ramos. “In

case you also didn’t know, there’s a lot of important information and important people in this compound that needs to be protected. If we were actually attacked today, then you would have been absolutely useless in battle. That means people would have died, all because you can’t do your job.”

Katsidis said nothing.

“Here, take this waterbowl.” Ramos shoved a canteen into Katsidis’ chest, which he accepted with both hands.

“Now drink,” ordered the Sergeant. Katsidis uncorked the canteen and put it to his lips. The water was cool and refreshing, and he knew from then on he would never go more than an hour without it.

Ramos smiled at him. “How about that shit? You’re lucky I didn’t fill it with my piss, Katsidis. I would have made you drink it and you would have liked it.”

Katsidis didn’t respond, intending to finish all thirty-two ounces of water in the canteen. When he was finally done, he screwed the cork back in and held it

out to Ramos.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Keep it," said Ramos, who had taken a few steps back to allow Katsidis to drink in peace. "That's my one act of kindness that you didn't earn, so you owe me."

Katsidis nodded his head and responded simply with, "Good to go."

"But if you ever pull the shit you did today during an actual," continued Ramos, "then best believe I will slit your throat before the terrorists get to you."

With that, Ramos turned and walked away, leaving Katsidis to stare at the empty canteen in his hand.

As Katsidis turned the corner of the main chancery, he pulled the brim of his cover down to shield his eyes from the sun.

The days had turned into weeks, and the weeks had turned into forever. The Marines had trained Katsidis well, and within months he was as proficient in his duty as the next man. He looked beside him and saw MacBeth spitting a wad of dip onto the ground. They gazed at each other, knowing today could be the day.

Early in the morning, a call was delivered to Bartlette from an intelligence officer in the area: U. S. Consulate Jeddah was to be attacked by Muslim extremists, who claimed that the American presence was too close to Mecca, the holy land. Beyond that, no more details were given.

This was it. After so many months of training, today they had a chance to finally see how good they actually were.

The temperature was over 110 degrees. Although the heat was terrible and had caused Katsidis to falter in the past, he'd grown accustomed to the aridness. Before Jeddah, he had spent several months training in the east coast of the United States, in places like Quantico and Camp Lejeune, where the humidity was a Marine's worst nightmare. At least in Saudi, the damp feeling that gathered around his neck and armpits was from his own sweat, not from the precipitation of a nearby river.

His gear was heavy, but he'd grown accustomed to that, too. In addition to his camouflage utilities with boots, Katsidis bore a mid-size Flak jacket that seemed to concentrate all of its weight on his shoulders. On top of his head sat a Kevlar helmet that always fell

forward into his line of sight. He was right handed, so a strap filled with sixteen rounds of shotgun ammunition was located on his left chest plate for easy access. He was not carrying his assigned M870 Remington shotgun, but it was standard operating procedures to have eight slug and eight buckshot rounds on your person at all times. Strapped to his right leg was a holster which housed his smallest weapon, the M9 Beretta. It was an accurate shooter, Katsidis thought, and he even preferred its compactness against the shotgun he was occasionally ordered to use.

This was all merely icing on the cake, however, for wrapped around his shoulders was a neat three-point sling that housed Katsidis' favorite weapon, the M4A1 Service Rifle. It was a gas operated, magazine fed rifle with an adjustable stock that allowed for both close quarters combat and long-range fire. When Katsidis first entered boot camp three years prior, he was introduced to the M16A2 service rifle; back then, Katsidis could not believe that a finer killing device could be made. Then he got to practice firing the M4 in Jeddah, and he noted the superior accuracy and consistent performance of

the piece. He knew he could never downgrade to a lesser weapon again. It shone brilliantly in the sun, its dark gloss and sleek figure belying its awesome power.

Off in the distance behind waves of heat, Katsidis saw Keim and Ramos walking towards his position. They were fully equipped with Flak and Kevlar as well, which meant they were ready to begin their patrol. Katsidis was glad that his shift was over.

"It's our relief," said Katsidis to MacBeth, who was busy using his pinky to remove sand from the iron-sights of his weapon.

MacBeth looked at the two men and spat onto the ground. "That's too bad," he said with a mouthful of dip. "I wanted to be out here when the sandniggers attacked."

Katsidis wiped sweat and sand from his forehead with his non-firing hand, and wondered what could possibly possess MacBeth to say such a hateful thing.

Inside the walls of the chancery, the Marines had a dedicated room that contained their primary gear. It was

small, to be sure, but each man had a generous-sized locker in which he hung his Flak and Kevlar when not in use. A large safe took up the most space, where all weapons were secured when the men entered the chancery. Nothing quite frightened the various civilians, both local and American, than a man walking around the building with a gun. Regardless, Katsidis thought it was a stupid rule. Even on a day with the potential for attack, they still had to be separated from their weapons because they promoted “anxiety” in some individuals.

Katsidis and MacBeth were busy downloading their rifles when Snyder entered the room.

“Good news, boys,” he said cheerfully. “Turns out the call was a fake. Apparently the intel guys mixed up some frequencies and actually heard dialogue from that one movie ‘The Kingdom’ and mistook *that* as the threat. Ain’t that some shit?”

Katsidis and MacBeth stared at him.

“We’re still patrolling,” continued Snyder, “Gunny’s orders. But you can rest a bit easier now.”

MacBeth finished downloading his

weapons and placed them inside the safe.

“That,” he began, “is the dumbest fucking shit I’ve ever heard. Those intel guys are morons. And here I got excited about shooting some fucking hajjis in the fucking face.”

Katsidis couldn’t stop himself.

“You should cool it with all the racist junk,” he said as he removed the last round from the chamber of his rifle.

MacBeth sat on a chair and leaned forward. “Since when the hell did you turn all politically correct, Katsidis?” he asked.

“Since now,” said Katsidis. He stood a few feet in front of MacBeth. “The shit you say sounds really prejudiced and ignorant. There’s no need for that.”

MacBeth began to remove his boots. “Did you get sand in your clit?” he responded. “I could care less about these sandniggers. You know, most of the 9/11 hijackers were from this shithole.”

“So how would you like it if people called you “chink” all the time?”

MacBeth stood up with untied boots and walked to Katsidis. “Take that shit back,” he said. The stench of tobacco from MacBeth’s teeth hit Katsidis in the face.

The irony of the escalated situation was not immediately apparent to everyone in the room, even Snyder who stood quietly next to the doorway. Instead of responding, Katsidis put an arm in front of him to reclaim his invaded personal space. MacBeth interpreted this as an attack and shoved Katsidis. Katsidis staggered back and saw that MacBeth was already moving to deliver a punch. He ducked under MacBeth's strike and under-hooked his arms around him. Driving with all his weight, Katsidis tackled MacBeth to the ground and immediately began to elbow him in the ribcage. He felt hands on his back, pulling him away from MacBeth. Katsidis delivered one last blow to his cheek as the hands finally succeeded in prying the two.

He turned to see Bartlette was the person who'd stood him up, his face an expression of pure anger. Behind him, Snyder struggled to hold MacBeth down, who was yelling obscenities and appeared to have plenty of fight left in him. The scrap had lasted less than a minute, but in Katsidis' mind he considered himself the winner.

The door closed behind Katsidis.

"Sit your ass down," said Bartlette. Katsidis located an empty chair inside the Gunnery Sergeant's office and did as ordered.

"There's a reason I'm not making your ass stand at attention," said Bartlette as he took his own seat behind his desk. "And that's because I want to talk to you like a man. Now tell me, what in the holy hell just happened in that response room?"

Katsidis cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Gunnery Sergeant. Corporal Macbeth made several racist remarks that offended me. I simply asked him to stop, and, well, the fight happened."

Bartlette looked at him with hard eyes.

"Is it really as simple as that, Katsidis?"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant. I didn't want him to keep using that language. Civilians could overhear us and think the detachment is nothing but racist idiots."

"Do you know why Corporal MacBeth says the things he says, Katsidis?"

"Because he's an ignorant racist," said Katsidis immediately. His gaze briefly flickered away from Bartlette's

eyes, afraid that he may have spoken too bluntly.

Bartlette considered his response for a moment. "That may be true," he said after a few seconds, "and I certainly don't approve of it. But you need to understand he does what he needs to do."

"I'm not sure I understand, Gunnery Sergeant," said Katsidis, and meant it. His hands were wringing up and down the legs of his trousers.

Bartlette maintained his eye contact. "That's what it takes for him to do this work."

Katsidis felt the slow, creeping feeling of realization now. It started by making his eyes grow wide, traveled down and made his lips slowly part in the manner of those who remembered a long, lost secret, and finally ended with a small lump in his throat. He knew now the culmination of Bartlette's reprimanding, but he let him finish anyway.

"Listen," said Bartlette, "our job is to kill the people who want to take what's here, plain and simple. This ain't Iraq or Afghanistan, but it hasn't been too long since this place was attacked and we need to be ready at all times. I

don't care what your views are on the war or whatever the hell democracy you think you're upholding or how politically correct you want to be. Fact of the matter is, we're here and we need to kill to do this job correctly. If MacBeth needs to hate people in order to squeeze that trigger, then so be it. Most people do. I'm still going to square his ass away and make him keep his comments to himself, but it ain't going to change him completely. I don't want him to change completely. I don't necessarily approve of it, but that's what works for him.

"If masturbating to drying paint makes it so that you can defend this post with your dying breath, Katsidis, I'll gladly buy you the next bucket. Hell, I'm pretty damn positive that's what Snyder does in his room all day. I'm sure you've seen Staff Sergeant Keim writing little science fiction stories on his little notepad when he's not in shift. I've read that notepad, his stories suck and he can't spell. But you know what? That's how he copes. You tracking, Katsidis? Is any of this getting to you?"

Katsidis swallowed and nodded his head in agreement. To him, the words made all the fucked-up sense in the

world. Bartlette sat back on his chair and sighed, releasing Katsidis from his gaze.

“Do you have any questions, Corporal?”

“Negative, Gunnery Sergeant.”

Bartlette wiped his mouth. “Good.” He pointed to three ammunition cans sitting in the corner of the room. “Take them shifts on over to the warehouse and make sure they’re filled with five-five-six. If you’re not back within the hour, I’m going to put your ass in a hurt locker. On your way out, send MacBeth in. Is all that understood?”

Katsidis stood up and responded simply with, “Good to go, Gunnery Sergeant.”

He picked up the green ammo cans and felt that they were completely full. A full can typically weighed least

thirty pounds. It was going to be a long trip to the warehouse.

Later, as he carried the ammunition from the warehouse and the wind stuck sand to his tears, Katsidis wondered how he could have been so stupid.

Something that he forgot long ago entered his thoughts. Images of his childhood, the only parts of him that mattered before the Corps, resurfaced. He saw himself and his friends in a construction yard at night, searching for stray dogs to shoot with his father’s pistol. But he was the only one shooting, because the others were scared. He was the only one who could squeeze the trigger so easily, and no amount of hate or prejudice was ever needed to separate life from the things he wanted to kill.

*Josuee is a senior majoring in English.
This is his first publication.*



BROOKE KULLBERG

YOU ARE ME

Watercolor, Pencil, Pen, and Ink

12" x 9"

Brooke is a junior double majoring in Philosophy and Spanish.

ENDS

—ANNA TOMLINSON

We pry smooth chestnuts from their spiny shells,
tease dry, speckled beans out of molding husks,
and gather striped delicatas from withering vines.

The sun softens as we work, falling away
from the dried fields. Twilight approaches,
cicadas hush, and geese rise like thistledown from the pond.

In the barn, heaps of color grow on the rough boards:
shining auburn, bird's egg, rough ribs
of green and dandelion.

These nuggets, soft inside, will keep the sunshine
as the rain strips the trees of leaves
and puddles the golden grass to grey.

Each bite of flesh, yellow sugar on my tongue,
will remind me of the dream
that I can run out, out into that infinite expanse of light.

*Anna is a junior majoring in English.
This is her first publication.*

DREAMSCAPE

—KIMBERLY STOTTLEMYER

They say that if you die in a dream, you die in reality. If that were true, he would have been dead long ago.

But this was different, this was not a dream. It wasn't quite reality either, but something else. And that made it dangerous.

It started like every other time had. Quiet. Still. Alone. And like every other time, he knew it would not stay that way for long.

The night was dark. No moon shone out from the cloudy sky and the stars were swallowed up, too. If it weren't for the single light bulb sticking out from the brick wall, he would not have been able to see two feet in front of him. But the light also cast shadows, making the narrow alleyway even smaller, closing in around him. Trapping him.

It was cold. He shivered underneath his coat, his breath coiled

upward like a wandering spirit in the dim orange glow. He guessed it was winter, but he couldn't be sure. There wasn't any snow on the ground. But he didn't really care about knowing what season of the year it was.

Time isn't important here. None of this is real.

...Or is it?

It was hard to know if this place was real or not. In a way, it was entirely fantasy. In another, it was more real than reality itself. At least for him.

A chill wind gusted down the corridor, causing his body to shudder violently. He knew he should walk a bit, warm himself up, but he didn't want to. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know where this street would lead him. He didn't know when *he* would appear.

Forcing his legs to move, he slowly walked down the alley. Brick

buildings lined each side, forming a wall. Cracked windows served as portraits and décor, trashcans were potted plants, litter was carpet. It was deathly silent, a deserted house that had grown accustomed to gathering dust.

Then, he heard it. A single footstep shattering the silence.

Adrenaline flooded his body as the flight instinct urged him to run, run fast, don't look back, just go, go, go until he could go no further. But instead, his feet grew into the ground, he couldn't move, he was a statue in this abandoned mansion. Behind him, he heard the footsteps growing closer, could practically feel breath on his neck. In his mind, he could see the crazed eyes, the eyes of a trapped animal that had gone insane within its cage. He could hear the voice, the grating noise in his ears, the harsh scrape of metal against metal. How a man could come to live in such a state, he had no idea. All he knew was that his pursuer, the stranger he had never met, blamed him for what his father had done to him.

And now, that man chased him. He wanted to kill him.

The footsteps slowed, ragged breathing growing louder, almost

deafening. A moment of silence, and a sharp click. Certain that his killer was pointing a gun at his back, his feet finally moved. Only half aware of his own movements, he was running down the alley, his legs pumping as hard as physically possible. He heard an angry shout behind him, but paid it no attention. The lights grew sparse the further down the corridor he ran, and soon there were none and he was plunging blindly into the dark. But even then, he did not slow down and the only time he came to a stop was when he crashed into the wall.

His body ached as he heaved himself back onto his feet, but he didn't have time to dwell on his injuries. He pressed a hand against the wall, the smooth surface was cold. He squinted in the blackness, trying to see the top of the it, but couldn't. But even if it was not incredibly tall, he would not be able to climb it, the concrete was too smooth, no foot or handholds to grab onto. Hearing frantic, stumbling footsteps drawing nearer, he knew he couldn't stand here, helpless for long. In a matter of minutes he would be laying on the ground, dead.

Looking around him in the murky

dark, he almost didn't see the black steel ladder on the side of the alley. Losing no time, he began to climb up, giving no thought to how high he would go or what he would do once he reached the top. He just climbed. *Maybe it'll all end soon.* But he knew that to put all his hopes on something so inconsistent and unreliable would most likely get him killed. A gun wasn't the only danger in this place, no matter what this place really was.

The frozen steel bit into his hands, causing his skin to stick to it and his fingers to grow numb. Still, he climbed. He had no idea how much time had past since he stepped onto the first rung. A minute. Ten minutes. An hour. All sense of time had fallen away as soon as he had appeared in this place. For all he knew, he could have been here for days, days full of endless night, and he wouldn't even notice. It was oddly silent and still up so high, not even the least bit of a breeze, not even the sound of a stray car driving past. The only thing he heard in the night was his breathing. And the breathing of his pursuer.

Finally, the ladder came to a stop and he hefted himself up onto the roof. Up here, the wind gusted, chilling him

inside out. But he didn't notice, didn't even notice how exhausted he was. He looked around the flat area, searching for anything that he could hide behind, anywhere he could run to escape. But there wasn't. He heard a clanging sound and growling and he began to run, not really in hopes of getting away. More stalling for time, hoping this nightmare would end.

Soon, other running footsteps joined his, and he ran faster, with all the strength remaining in him. Suddenly, the edge of the roof loomed right in front of him and he just barely stopped himself from toppling over. But was it all that good of a thing? Either way, staying up here or falling to the ground below, he would die. Behind him, the footsteps came closer, the breathing grew louder. He felt a rough and cold hand grasp the collar of his shirt and twist him around.

He had never seen the face of this madman before. Only his eyes, which haunted him in reality as well as in this dream-like place. The man's face was peculiar, solid and visible in the dark shadows, yet at the same time a half-phantom effect, a trick of the eye. *Even he's not completely real...*

"Now you can't escape." He had

never heard the man speak before, either. His voice, like everything else about him, was only half there, an odd wispy sound in the air.

The man lifted his gun, pointed it right between his eyes. On reflex, he squeezed his eyes shut, even though he knew what he must do, what he had to do. Even though he would still die, at least it wouldn't be by this vengeful crazy man.

Pushing the man away with the last bit of force he had, he threw himself over the edge of the roof. Darkness swooped up around him as he plummeted down, down, going faster and faster, heading towards the ground, towards his death. He opened his eyes, wanting to see for the last time right before—

Peter blinked and sat up. He was not falling, he was not in darkness. It took him a moment to realize where he was, that he was home, in his bed. It took even longer for him to understand that he was still alive.

Inhaling heavily, he cradled his head in his hands, trying at the same time to both recall and forget the dream. The early morning sunlight warmed his body, which was drenched in cold sweat.

Over and over in his mind, he thought, *It wasn't real. It was just another stupid dream, a nightmare.*

But even though he told himself that, he did not believe it. He knew it wasn't true. And he knew that the madman would return again, the next night, every night, until he had succeeded in finally killing Peter.

"Be careful today, honey." His mother stood in the doorway, a dish towel taut like a tightrope between her clenched fists.

"I will," Peter said, giving her a small wave and a smile. Like every other mother, she recited those words every morning before he went to school. Unlike every other mother, her sixteen year old son took her seriously.

Peter knew that he and his mother were in danger. They were *always* in danger. He followed them, tracking them down like a bloodhound. And he always found them, no matter how far away they moved. They could be living in a tiny backwards village in Indonesia, situated right next to a volcano, and he'd *still* find them.

Sometimes— no, all the time—

Peter wondered if his father's experiments had done something else to him, something that gave him a supernatural power allowing him to track their every move. Some kind of internal GPS.

His foot crunched deafeningly on bits of glass, one of the many decorations adorning the sidewalk. The sudden noise acted as a gunshot, jarring him out of his thoughts. He shook his head and left them behind. It was silly, *he* was being silly. That psycho had just been lucky so far. Really, *really* lucky.

Even though he had tried to arrive on time, just this once, he was five minutes late to Economics. He had left the house on schedule, but despite his best efforts, Peter kept seeing those horrible images from his dream inside his mind, distracting him so much that he only barely realized that he had overshot the school by two blocks. He didn't even try to sneak into the back of the room. Mr. Goffin saw everything with those beady black eyes. Peter even reckoned he had another pair on the back of his shiny smooth head. Goffin hardly glanced up at him and said not a word to him the entire class period. However, mere seconds after the bell rang the end of the

hour, the silent teacher slid a pink slip face-down on Peter's desk, then floated noiselessly away. He didn't have to turn it over to know it was a detention notice. *Late three times in two weeks. Figures.*

The images continued to creep inside his head all day long, but this was something he had grown accustomed to. These sorts of afterimages happened often enough. He'd be in the middle of Chemistry, half-listening to yet another lecture concerning pH, and suddenly there he'd be, right in front of him, holding a hypodermic needle and rushing at him full speed. "*You did this! You're to blame!*" he'd scream, running after him in his father's laboratory. Peter wanted to scream and tell him he had nothing to do with it, it had been his father, his brilliant theory he just had had to test. He wanted to scream back, "*Don't hurt me! He did the same thing to me! I know what you're dealing with, the nightmares, the visions, the dizziness, the vomiting, everything!*" But each time he opened his mouth he found it dry and empty.

And then he'd lurch back into reality. But it wasn't his reality. *His* reality was that nightmare world.

Psychologists would and had told him

that they were only dreams, that they were nothing to worry about. But they were wrong in both respects. He *had* to worry about them. They weren't just dreams. Dreams couldn't kill you.

3:20 PM. He was late to detention. *Oh, the irony.* He yanked the door of Room 421 open, careful not to make eye-contact with the shrewd-looking teacher poised behind the front desk. He could feel her stare bore into his skull, could almost hear her thoughts. *Another slacker, not even responsible enough to arrive to detention on time. When he eventually graduates, he'll have a shock when his boss fires him for such tardiness. Not everyone will be so lenient and give you a slap on the wrist when you're irresponsible and lazy.* Peter knew Mrs. Shrewd Prude was thinking that, it showed in her clenched face and sharp eyes. But he didn't particularly care. As far as he was concerned, he had bigger problems than being on time. *She wouldn't survive five minutes in my situation.*

To add to his irritation, he saw that his usual seat in any class room—the back right-hand corner—was already occupied by a bony girl. He bit his tongue, holding back a terse comment, and sat down two seats over. The girl didn't look up, her head was bent low

over the desk, her lank brown hair acting as a curtain around both her face and the subject of her interest. Peter tried to convince himself that he wasn't interested at all in what she was doing, but found himself stealing glances every few seconds.

"You know, you could just ask." The girl's soft but firm voice made Peter nearly fall out of his seat. He was only able to save himself by sacrificing his knee, which banged against the desk leg with a loud *thud*. Mrs. Shrewd Prude's eyes flew up and locked on him, and although he wasn't easily intimidated, he felt his face blanch.

Once the teacher's eyes returned to her book, Peter leaned over the desk and whispered back, "What?"

The girl sighed and tipped her head in his direction, remaining behind the shield of hair. "You keep looking at me. At what I'm doing. It's distracting and rude. It'd be better if you just asked." Her head snapped back down.

"Oh." Peter's face now grew hot. "Sorry."

"SHHH!!" Mrs. Shrewd Prude now glared at him. They weren't allowed to talk during detention. Actually, they weren't allowed to do *anything*. They

were expected to sit there and think about how they should never do the horrible thing they did to end up here again.

As soon as it was safe, Peter moved to the desk next to the girl and whispered, “What *are* you doing?”

One thin hand pushed a piece of paper from behind the hair curtain. She had been doodling, but it was the most intricate doodling Peter had ever seen. The paper was covered in so much black ink, there was hardly any white left. It was a picture of a Victorian-style house, so detailed and perfect it was as if it were a real house, only shrunken.

“Damn.” Peter forgot to whisper and was met by yet another “SHHH!!” from Mrs. Shrewd Prude. Lowering his voice, he said, “This is amazing. You in Art?”

“Nah.” The bony hand took the paper back behind the curtain. “That’s for ‘serious artists’.” Peter could hear the air-quotes in that sentence. “This is just a hobby.”

“Well, it’s some hobby.” A long moment of silence followed, filled only by the sounds of pen raking against paper. Peter felt stupid, not being able to think of anything else to say. Apparently, the girl didn’t mind the

silence at all. Mrs. Shrewd Prude loved it.

The hour took years to pass, but finally the bell freed Peter from that stuffy prison. He stood up, cracking his stiff back, and slung his messenger bag over his shoulder.

“Jenny.”

He turned back around at the girl’s word. “Excuse me?”

“My name. Jenny.” For the first time, her face was visible. Framed by the limp curtain, her eyes were large and green, her nose sharp but small. Her thin lips made a half smile. “With a ‘G’. Genny. It’s short for Genevieve. Most people get it wrong when it’s spelled out. They say ‘Ghenny’.”

“Um, that nice.” He was taken aback by this sudden bombardment of information. “I’m Peter.”

Genny’s head bobbed up and down, a brown blob jutting out of a thick black sweater. *Why’s she wearing that in the middle of April?* “That’s a nice name. A bit... common.”

Peter nodded back, shuffling his feet at the awkward pause that followed. “Yeah, well—”

“You two!” Mrs. Shrewd Prude’s voice was sharp, just like her eyes. Peter

stifled a groan. “You were *talking*. And you, young lady,” she directed her death gaze to Genny, “were *drawing*. As both of those actions are *against the rules*, you will have to attend detention *next week*.” She spun around and stalked out of the room, leaving them staring blankly after her.

“But— that’s not fair!” Peter said, a delayed reaction. A million curses and insults directed at the evil teacher rushed into his mind.

Genny merely shrugged. “See you next week, then.” She glided out of the room, as if they had just finished a Poetry Club meeting instead of detention.

Peter lugged himself home and stomped to his room. The house was empty; his mom didn’t get off of work until five. Flopping himself onto his bed, he wondered if his life could get any worse. But he was too exhausted to be angry for long. He was asleep with three minutes.

He took a step towards him, the needle pointing up at the ceiling. “This won’t hurt a bit, Peter.” Peter had heard this same thing from nurses and doctors many times before, and all of them had

been lying. But this was his father. He trusted him.

Cradling his son’s arm gently, he slid the needle under his skin. Peter didn’t watch, instead he stared at the large wall clock as it ticked closer to six o’clock. His legs hung off the side of the hard counter, barely reaching past the cabinet handle. At five years old, he was short for his age, but his mother always said he’d grow soon and be the tallest in his class. “Just look at your father,” she’d say. “He’s the tallest man I know.”

“All done.” His father put the needle down and stuck a Band-Aid on Peter’s arm. It had Superman on it. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?” He smiled down at him, a reassuring, warm smile.

Peter nodded and looked down at his hands. Under any other circumstances, he would have been delighted to come to work with his daddy, to see the lab and watch the magic made here. But all Peter wanted to do now was go home.

“Did I hurt you?” Peter shook his head. His father left his big hands on both of Peter’s shoulders and he looked up into his face. When he saw that face, he wanted to believe everything would be all right. But he wasn’t sure. “Then let’s have a smile, okay?”

He tried, he really did, but all he could manage was a cross between a grimace and a frown. His father sighed, kissed him on the head, and went back to work. Peter watched him for a few minutes— disposing of the needle, checking some of the machines he called “jean sequencers”, mixing some solutions that were warming in a glass cabinet. But he couldn’t stay silent for long.

“Daddy, what are you doing to me?”

His father looked up from the beaker he was adding white powder to, took off his goggles, and walked over to him. “I wish I could tell you. I really do. But don’t worry, it’s safe.” But Peter had always been strangely in-tune to other people, could pick up on the little things they never said, and he could hear the hesitation after that last word and knew his father was thinking, *I hope*.

“Does Mommy know?”

“Of course she knows.” But his father had said that too quickly, dismissing it before he could have slip that she did know that he was bringing their son to work with him, but nothing about the experiments he was conducting.

Peter bit his lip, more distressed than ever that Mommy didn’t know what was going on. No one did, except for Daddy.

His eyes began to sting and his face grew hot. He didn’t want to cry like a baby. He wanted to go home.

“What’s going to happen to me?” He managed to get the words out without bursting into tears, but his voice wavered and his throat was tight.

His father placed his hands on his shoulders again and slouched down so that they were at a level height. “Nothing is going to happen to you. I promise you, you’re safe.”

“You promised me that same thing, Doctor.” The voice that spoke was deep and cold, winter personified. “Don’t you remember?” Peter tried to look over his father’s shoulder, but all he could see was a bulky shape of a man before the lights flickered off. Whoever it was took a few steps forward, heavy footsteps rattling the delicate vials in their plastic stands. “Do you?”

Peter looked into his father’s eyes and saw they were wide and scared. It was the first time he’d ever seen his father scared. He didn’t think it was possible. His father swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bouncing up and down, and whispered so quietly Peter almost didn’t hear it. “Run when I tell you. Just run. Get out.”

A loud crash came from behind him as a glass beaker fell. “DO YOU?!”

Another sound echoed through the room. The snap and rattle of a gun.

Peter felt his father push him off the counter and Peter struggled to remain on his feet. His father shoved him in the direction of the back door. “RUN!!”

His legs felt like jelly and he couldn’t move. Not until he heard that deafening bang, the sound he had never heard before but knew it meant that his father was dead. He began to run.

“DON’T THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY, YOU LITTLE BRAT!!” The thuds of running feet came close behind him and Peter thought he’d surely die. “I’LL MAKE YOU PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID TO ME! YOU’LL ALL PAY!!”

The sky overhead was a dreary grey and the light wind made it colder than it should have been. Peter dug his hands further inside the pockets of his jacket and walked a bit more quickly. He had no idea where he was going, had no destination in mind, but it was better to be outside, even in this weather, than to be stuck at home. It was the weekend. He wanted to do *something*, even if he

was by himself.

He came to the playground and stopped. It was a run-down thing, forgotten perhaps, even by the children in the neighborhood. Cracked concrete and bits of gravel sprinkled here and there, a teeter-totter, a metal slide, and a pair of swings, all encased in a cage of chain-link fence. Usually it was empty, which made it even more surprising when Peter spotted someone on the swing. He walked up closer to the fence and then the surprise disappeared as soon as he saw the skinny legs and the limp brown hair.

Peter wasn’t sure why he sat down on the other swing, but guessed that it was out of loneliness. It sure wasn’t because he wanted to get to know this strange girl better. Or at least, that’s what he kept telling himself.

“No one ever plays here anymore,” Genny said. That was one thing he had noticed about her; she never wasted her time with formal social conventions such as greetings. “Not even the little kids. They just stay at home watching TV and playing video games. But I still come.” She ran her hand up and down the swing’s chain, as if consoling an old friend.

Peter kicked the gravel with his sneaker. "It's too bad." He tried to think back to the last time he had been to a playground. He tried to think about the first time. Or anytime at all. He couldn't. *Must have been before I was five. Before everything changed.* He conjured up an image of his father holding his hand, leading him to a playground much like this one— only cleaned up and new— on a sunny afternoon, pushing him on the swings, chasing him around the slide. But he knew it wasn't a memory.

"You're doing it again." He jumped at the voice, having forgotten that Genny was right there. She stared at him with her narrow eyes through that brown curtain.

"Huh?"

"You're spacing. You have that funny look on your face, a blank look. It's like you've drifted off to somewhere else. You did it during detention, too." She continued to stare at him, waiting for an explanation.

Peter looked down at the ground and muttered, "It's nothing. Just thinking."

Genny frowned, the nostrils of her thin nose flared. "I don't like it when people lie. And I can always tell when they're lying."

"What if they're lying for a good reason?" He kept his eyes on the ground and began to kick the gravel again. "What if it's something they really don't want to tell anyone about? Or if it's for the other person's own good? For their own safety?"

"What are you—"

A pain like nothing he had ever experienced before erupted in his head, causing him to fall out of the swing. He grabbed his skull with his hands and rocked on his heels, crying out. The pain only lasted a few seconds. Then came the images. A man in the shadows, gun in hand. All that was visible of his face were his eyes. Those mad eyes.

He's here.

Despite the dull aching in his head, Peter rose abruptly to his feet, swaying from the sudden shift of blood. Genny, who had knelt beside him, stood up and glared at him. "What the hell's wrong with you?" He paid her no attention. Pushing her aside, he took a few steps away from the swings, staring in between the two abandoned buildings only a few yards away. At the alleyway.

"Peter?" Genny's voice sounded worried. "What's wrong?"

"Sshhh!" He held up his hand to

silence her, listening hard. But all he could hear was the wind and the sound of a running car engine.

Must have overreacted. It was only a dream. He's not here.

But maybe he's coming.

Still staring at the dark alley, Peter said, "I'm fine. Just thought I heard something. Guess I was wrong."

Peter turned around and saw that his worst nightmare had found him. He *was* here, wearing a black ski mask and black clothing, one gloved hand clamped over Genny's mouth, the other holding a gun to her head. His crazed eyes, those of a rabid animal, glinted with victory. "Guess again."

They stood there, gun aimed at chest, not moving for what felt like an eternity. Peter was frozen to the ground, on the verge of outright panic, and yet he was confused. This man had hunted him for so long, yearning to see him lying in a pool of his own blood. This was his chance, so why wasn't he dead?

Licking his cracked lips, he decided to do an experiment of his own. "Well?" Peter spoke sharply, trying to sound far braver than he felt. "What are you waiting for?"

The man tightened his grip on

Genny's neck and jerked his head towards the street behind him. "Get in the van."

Peter looked past him and saw a plain white van parked on the street, engine still running and headlamps glowing. He wanted to take them somewhere... but why? So there wouldn't be any evidence of the murders? To tease their minds by dangling the hope that they'd survive in front of them for just a bit longer? No, that wasn't it. It couldn't be. He knew this man, had shared nightmares with him, shared the thoughts inside their own heads with each other. He wasn't the kind of person to waste time with unnecessary displays of power.

He must want me for something.

He had hesitated for too long. The man's eyes narrowed and the anger burning inside of them intensified. He rammed the gun into Genny's head. Her eyes grew wide but she didn't make a sound. Each word he spoke was firm and clearly told Peter there was no use in arguing. Not unless he wanted to see Genny dead. "In the van." The gun's hammer locked down with a malicious *click*. "Now."

As the van took another turn, Peter's

shoulder banged against the van's back doors again. *If I ever get out of this, I'm gonna have one hell of a bruise.* With his feet and hands bound, there was little he could do to avoid future afflictions.

Genny scooted over to him as best as she could, bounded up as she was. She shot a glance up to the front of the van, but the man took no notice. "What's going on?" she hissed, sounding more irritated than frightened. "Who is this guy?"

Keeping his eyes on their driver, Peter said, "When I was a kid, my dad was doing some experiments. He was a scientist, a neurologist. *He,*" Peter nodded to the front, "was one of his test subjects."

"Experiments? Studying what?"

"Dreams. This guy, he was suffering from post-trauma. Some kind of shooting or murder. My dad was trying to get rid of his nightmares. He developed a solution designed specifically for the patient, for his DNA. It should have made the dreams go away. Only they didn't."

Genny was silent a moment. "What happened?"

"The opposite. They intensified. And strange things started to happen. He'd

wake up bleeding or with wounds in his chest, bullet wounds. He was convinced the dreams were real, that they were coming *alive.*" Peter's face was grave, showing the tiniest hint of pity. "The dreams *became* his reality. So they put him in a mental institute. But he wasn't crazy."

"How'd you mean? How can you know—"

Peter looked at Genny and for the first time, she noticed how tired he looked. His face was pale and a sickly yellow, dark circles under his eyes stood out like bruises. It looked like he hadn't slept for days.

"I know," he said, "because my dad did the same thing to *me.* And I have those dreams. They're real. More real than reality. That man got lost in those dreams. He couldn't tell between them and the real world. He got angry. He murdered my father." Peter turned away from Genny and stared at the killer's head. His eyes seemed flat and cold, all the fire of life sucked out. "And now he's going to kill me."

"Maybe he won't. He hasn't yet."

He shook his head. "He needs me for something. And once he's got that, we're dead."

The sound of the engine stopped and there was silence. The back doors swung open and this time he held both a gun and a knife. “Out.” Peter and Genny obeyed. They had no other choice.

The building looked like an abandoned warehouse, bare flat walls and roof, the white paint streaked with the grime and smoke of many years. The windows were smashed and shattered, the front door’s once vibrant orange paint flaking and faded. Prodding them forward, the gun and knife constantly there at their backs, the man kicked the door open and shoved them inside.

It was dark, the only light coming from the dirty windows and the door. The man flicked the light switch with his elbow, keeping the knife pointed at Genny’s back, and a buzzing sound filled the black space. Naked bulbs—dirty and hanging solemnly from the ceiling—flickered to life, casting just enough dull light for them to see most of the narrow hallway. Kicking their heels, the man directed them forward. Their footsteps echoed loudly on the concrete floor, *shuffle thud shuffle thud*. At the end of the hall stood a white wooden door, filthy like everything else. The man kicked this

one open as well and thrust them inside. The door creaked shut. They sprawled on the floor in the darkness.

After a horrible moment that lasted forever, the lights flickered on, a brighter yellow glow. Peter lifted his head and looked around. The room was much larger, possibly what was once a storage room. Empty cardboard boxes, crumpled and molding, lay scattered around. The rest of the room was empty, except for one thing that clearly did not belong. Two things, actually. A chair of some sort, heavy steel and streaming wires everywhere that led to a larger machine, a generator. He had no idea what that was or what it might be used for, but something told Peter that he didn’t want to find out. Growing frantic, he searched for a door or a window, some means of escape. But the only door was the same one they had come in through. The man took a key out of his pocket and locked it.

The man approached Peter, kicking Genny sharply in the side to get her out of the way. He grabbed onto the boy’s wrists and dragged him towards the chair. Peter flailed his legs and tried to fight against him, but there was no way for him to win. Soon, he was sitting in

the steel throne, wrists bound to the chair with thick leather and wires imbedded into the skin of his head. The man strode back to the machine, setting down the gun and the knife on top of the flat surface. He worked silently the entire time, turning knobs and adjusting levers. Throwing a large switch, the generator whirred to life with an electrical hum.

Peter squirmed in his seat, trying to tug free from his bonds. "What are you doing?" The man looked at him and smiled, but said nothing. Slowly, he attached wires to his own head. Then, Peter understood.

His father had come up with a theory, early in his research, that the solution was at the brain stem, the area of the brain active during REM sleep. During REM sleep, the primary visual cortex is inactive, making it so that the images the person "sees" are imagined, not actually seen. He theorized that he could switch from the secondary to the primary using an electrical shock, emitted by a small microchip that he would implant at the base of the brain stem. He implanted these microchips in both his patient and his son. But his theory proved to be wrong, it didn't activate the primary

cortex, it only made the images from the secondary more "real". The patient started to believe that the images he "saw" actually existed.

Peter's father had been in the middle of activating the microchip in his son's brain when he had been murdered, so the images he saw were more intense, but he still knew the difference between them and the real world. For now. But wired up as he was, he could guess what this insane man intended to do. *He wants me to suffer like he has.*

But one thing remained unexplained; why did he wire himself up? Peter could only think of one thing, *Maybe he thinks that if he stimulates his own chip again, it will reverse the effect.* It was a desperate move, and a totally inaccurate one. The effect of the chip wouldn't be reversed. The only thing he would accomplish would be damaging the chip beyond repair. In other words, he'd be stuck in his current situation with no hope of fixing it. *Maybe he's so far gone, he doesn't know it'll ruin him, kill him.*

Peter felt a prickling sensation develop all along his skin, starting from the area where wire met flesh, then slowly permeating out in all directions. At first it was ticklish, then somewhat

uncomfortable. Then, it was painful. Unbearable. He clenched his teeth down, grinding them against each other, doing his best to keep in the scream that yearned to rip from his throat. Through the haze of pain, Peter heard manic laughing, rising and falling in erratic pitches. He managed to turn his head and see through the wince that screwed up his vision. But he already knew who was laughing.

The man must've felt the electricity pumping through his body as well. But instead of experiencing pain, though he must have felt that too, he only thought of victory. Unfortunately for him, the victory was misplaced.

The battle didn't belong to him. Not anymore. It was Peter's turn for glory.

Even before Genny darted over to the machine and flung him the knife, he knew what he had to do. It had all been in that dream, the one he'd had a week before. Plummeting to his death off a high-rise building. Making a choice between death by his own hand or death by this madman. He had another choice to make.

Peter grasped the handle of the blade and maneuvered it underneath the leather binding his right hand. It split in

half neatly. The laughing stopped abruptly and he heard a scream and a *thud*. He glanced up quickly. Genny was on the ground, her head bleeding, her eyes fluttering as she fought to retain consciousness. The man glowered at him, his eyes red with fury and madness. He didn't have much time. Peter cut the second leather binding and launched himself towards the man. They both went down and rolled across the floor. Peter sprung up and pinned the man's arms down to the ground, punching his face repeatedly. But the man was stronger than him and ripped an arm from his grasp. A fist flew into Peter's jaw, his head spinning and the floor rushing up to meet his face. The next thing he knew, the man was above *him*, punching *his* face. Only half aware of what he was doing, Peter's hand groped around on the ground. At last, it rested against cold metal. His fist closed around the blade, not even aware of the sharp edge slitting open his palm. Using the last of his strength, Peter flung his fist up, releasing the blade. It burrowed deep into the madman's side, all the way up to the hilt. The man screamed and jerked backwards, claspings his side that was now drenched in his own blood.

Losing no time, Peter scrambled up to his feet and ran over to the machine. He stumbled a few times, his vision out of whack and red with the blood from ruptured eye vessels. But he made it. Peter grabbed the gun and shot at the man. The bullet hit his thigh and another screech echoed in the room. He squeezed the trigger again, but there was only a *click*. *Shit*, Peter thought. No bullets left. He had no weapon. And the man was still alive and struggling to his feet despite his injuries.

Peter felt his body shake and a wave of weakness washed over him. He planted his hands down on the smooth surface, propping himself up. That's when he saw it. The wires were still embedded in his skin, even after the amount of struggle and movement that had just occurred. He looked over at the man. Wires trailed out from him as well.

He had no knife, no gun, no weapon to defend himself. But he did have one thing. He had an electric generator.

With his cut hand, Peter grabbed onto a lever, the one that controlled the electric flow. At least, he hoped. The man had managed to get to his feet and began to shuffle his way over to him, his

shot leg dragging and leaving a trail of dark red blood behind. Peter had only one shot at this, so it had better work. He spent no more time hesitating. He was dead either way.

He threw the switch and the hum of the generator grew deafeningly loud. A great sharp burst of energy swept through the machine, down the wires, and into their flesh. Skin and hair burned, screams ripped through the air. The pain was incredible, greater than anything Peter had ever experienced or even imagined was possible.

Then, a strange thing happened. The pain stopped. Not a gradual ebbing or fading. Sudden. Abrupt. Even stranger was the feeling that took the place of the pain. For the first time in over ten years, Peter felt at peace.

Darkness filled his vision and this time, he embraced it. Peter knew that no bad dreams would haunt him in this sleep.

The sky overheard opened up and rain came pouring down, as if to make up for the lack of her own tears. But for some reason, she couldn't cry. It was the saddest day of her life, the funeral of her son, only sixteen. The saddest day and

not a single tear.

The service had ended over an hour ago. It had been simple and short, not only because she didn't have the money to spend but because that was the way he would have wanted it. Peter didn't like extravagance. Maybe that was an effect of all the moving, the running, or maybe that was just him. She could never be quite sure. His father had done so many things to him, she wondered if she had ever gotten to see the real Peter, the unaltered Peter. She wasn't angry at her husband, not at all. Not anymore. What was done was done. There was nothing else she could do.

She was alone.

She had been able to cope with his murder because Peter had been there, they survived it together. They ran away together and tried to live on together. It was hard, but at least she hadn't been alone. And now she was.

She looked down, but aimed her gaze away from the grave. It was too much, she wasn't ready to be on her own.

Light footfalls came from behind her. She tried to compose herself, make herself look stronger, but the effort was too much. Whoever it was didn't say anything, only stood and looked.

"He did it to save you."

At last the stranger spoke. She turned around and saw it was a girl, about fifteen or sixteen years old. Peter's age. She wore a black sweater and skirt that drifted past her knees, black socks and shoes. The black wasn't that surprising, she was wearing it too after all. It was the girl's hair, lank and mousy brown, hanging in a curtain that reduced her face to a pale sliver. Both her body and features were thin and sharp.

"What?" It was the only thing she could think to say in response.

The girl nodded down to the grave. "Your son. Peter. He sacrificed himself to save you."

These words both warmed her and ripped a gaping hole in her heart. She wasn't sure she was ready for this.

Looking down at her hands, the girl continued, "He was really brave. You ought to be proud." Her large eyes shifted up to focus on her face. "I just thought you should know."

Without another word, the girl drifted away, a black specter in that hazy, grey morning. She continued to watch her until she disappeared, then looked back down. At the grave of her son.

With trembling hands, she laid the semi-wilted bouquet of wild flowers next to the gravestone. She tried to think of words to say, something meaningful. But what were words to the dead?

Instead, she laid a shaking hand on the smooth polished stone. And she thought of him, how much she loved him, how much they had gone through to protect each other.

Then, she whispered so quietly, only the dead would have been able to hear her words.

“Thank you.”

Kimberly is a freshman majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She has been previously published in Piedmont High School's literary magazine, The Highland Piper.

THE SLOTH

—KATIE DWYER

She slumbered there in a low crook of palm fronds
for all the world like a child's stuffed animal,
tucked lovingly there in the branches,
and forgotten.

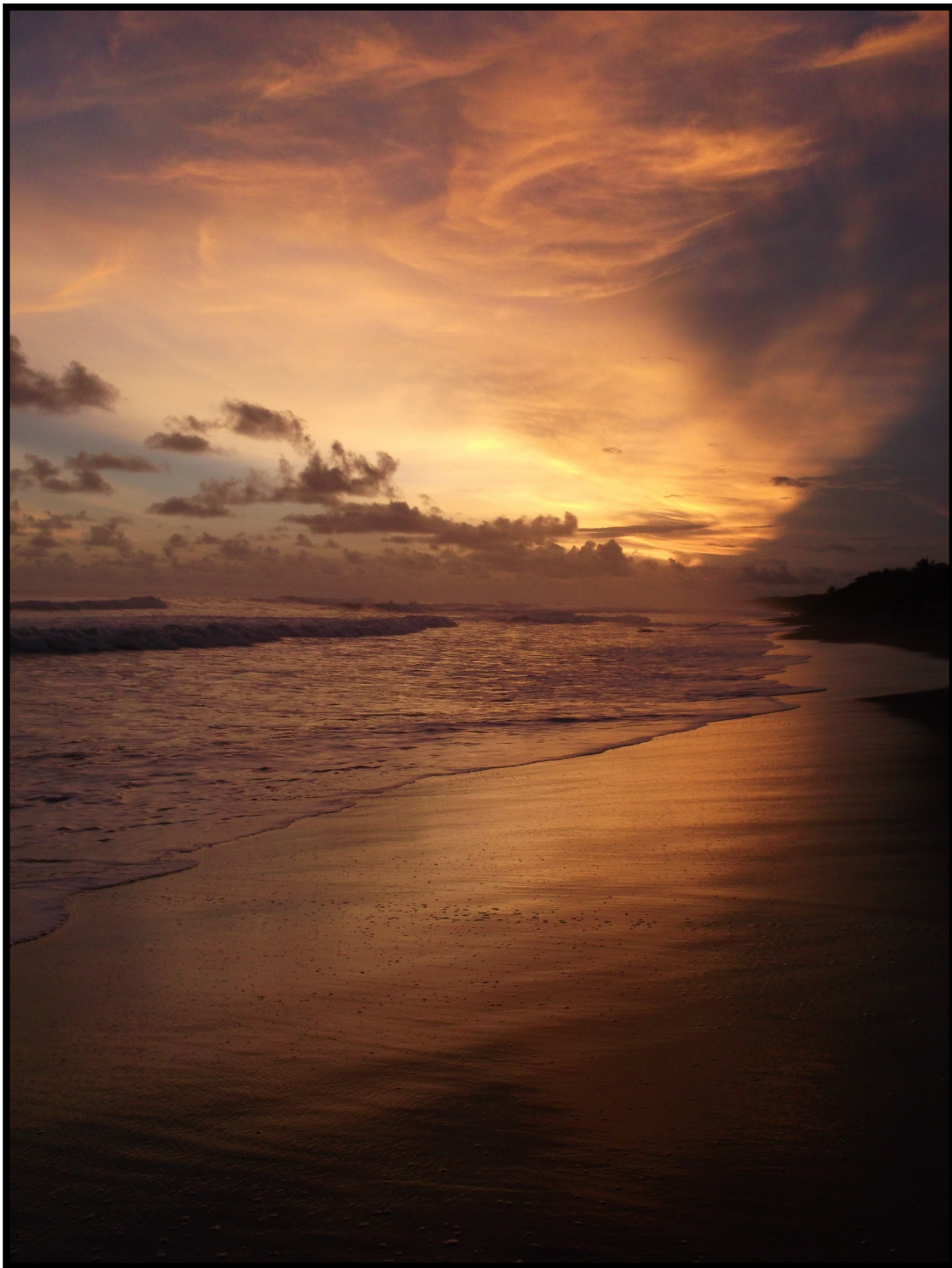
And, like a child, I wanted to run my fingers
through her long, long hair,
to shake the branches and pound the tree,
to watch her strange elbows lengthen
to reach upward and pull skyward
with her hooked claw-fingers
and soft pink face.

I imagined her arriving at that tree,
pulling slowly through leaves and grasses,
to find the perfect afternoon perch,
where I left her,
untouched and undisturbed,
imagining what a sloth's dreams might be
amid the tangle of her fur
and the swaying of the palms.

*Katie is a second year Masters student studying Conflict
and Dispute Resolution. She received her Bachelor of Arts
at the University of Oregon and has been published in Ephemera.*



KATIE DWYER
WASHED ASHORE
Photography



KATIE DWYER
SUNSET AND SEA
Photography

A CLOCKWORK HEART

A steampunk reimagining of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, Act II, Scene IV

—ASHLEY REED

He did not understand. That alone was enough to give him pause.

Angelo stood silently at his study window, face blank as he gazed into the street. A pair of mid-aged women strolled down the road, bonnets rimmed with unnecessary frills, fervently gossiping about matters that were undoubtedly none of their concern. A steam coach stopped for a shifty-looking man, the sort whom the ever-seeing eye of the law would likely not regard kindly if it looked closer. A young lady, traveling alone, dressed fashionably—her intent, her *profession* could not have been more obvious if she had been walking with bare ankles—spoke heatedly with a salesman carrying a crimson and brass case; Angelo's brow furrowed as the man subtly drew from it a pair of minute globes and held one up in place of his eye. These streets were his streets now, left to him in the Duke's stead. The stench of impropriety wafted

from them. How he swore that they would know the law. The people had grown too comfortable with their sin; he would do unto them what he was made to do.

But he did not think on that, now. His mind was lost on darker things.

The study door groaned open behind him. "Sir Angelo," his servant hailed, "one Isabel desires to speak with you."

He did not turn from his view of the outside, keeping his eyes on a pair of unscrupulous lovers shameless enough to weave hands on the walkway below. He simultaneously strove to ignore the way his heart rolled in his chest. "Show her the way," he answered dismissively, and the door clicked shut.

Isabella. He gritted his teeth behind his lips. He knew what he was to do, and oh, how it plagued him.

Far too quickly, before he had rightly steeled himself (how versed she

was in that lamentable skill, unhinging him to see the churning of his parts), he heard her delicate knock, that quiet and demure trill as it rang through his office. “Good evening, sir. I come to know your pleasure.”

That you, fair lady, might know it for what it is would please me much.

“Your brother cannot live,” he said instead.

The door creaked to a close behind her, and they were alone. Now, even as pale sunlight gleamed through the clouds and the bustle of steam engines below penetrated his window, Angelo became entirely unaware of the outside. “Even so,” she answered. He heard the soft pad of footsteps, the sway of her skirts as she came closer. The hairs on the back of his neck would have stood on end, if they could. “Heaven keep your soul.”

“Yet,” he started, and found his voice shamefully high-pitched. He cleared his throat, pulled an oil pellet from his pocket to swallow, and began again. “Yet he may live a while. And it may be as long as you or I.” He shrugged as nonchalantly as his stiff shoulders would permit. “Yet he may die.”

“Under your sentence? For what

crime?”

“Yea, for such filthy vices as a man can indulge,” he said with an accidental hiss. “It is easier to forgive a man murder, that he may disassemble one already made, than it is to pardon counterfeits of God's image. A bastard recreation is your brother's crime.”

“They are so-called in Heaven, but one is kinder here on Earth.”

Finally and slowly (encouraging fluid movement into his rigid form) he turned, commanding his parts to their assigned tasks. Legs, stand firm. Eyes, be stern. Mind, go quickly. Heart, be still.

She stood before him in humble dress, collar high about her fair neck, dark habit concealing her champagne hair. All the fluid to run his components instantly mustered to his heart, his knees left weak, his mind watery.

“Say you so?” he went on with a clearing of his throat, shaking his voice of its quiver. “Then I shall pose this to you.” Strength, man. Stay the course. “Would you rather that most just law took your brother's life, or, to redeem him, would you give up your body to such sweet uncleanness as she that he has stained?”

Her delicate brows rose and

furrowed, hands folding together before her. “I, I would say, sir, I would sooner give up my body than my soul.”

“No, no,” he said with a nervous wave of his hand. “I do not speak of souls. The sins we are compelled to commit are no sins at all.”

“Sir?”

Oh, God. The words rang in his head like the unpreventable snapping of springs and squealing of broken pistons. This—this was not going well. “Nay, nay—forget these words. You’ll pardon me, my lady. By them I mean only—I, now the voice of the recorded law, pronounce a sentence on your brother’s life. Might there not be charity in what sin is committed to save him?”

“If sin you do commit to allow his life,” she said, and oh, how her eyes did shine with happy moisture, true and organic, “I take it upon my soul, that it is nothing but charity.”

“If *you* do commit it,” he corrected as carefully as possible, “sin and charity would weigh equally in your action, before Heaven’s eyes.”

“If it is a sin to beg his life, I will bear it before those eyes. If it is a sin for you to spare him, I will add it to my morning prayer that He add it to my

own faults, and none of yours.”

Slowly, he blinked, mind temporarily grinding to a halt at the mercy of her words. These—these people. He truly could not understand them sometimes. “I—I believe you miss my meaning, or you are crafty enough to act so. That is not good.”

“Pardon me, sir. Let me be ignorant and, by divine grace, know I am no better than that.”

“Let me be plain, then.” Logic, clear and true, would surely win her over. “Your brother is to die.”

“So.”

“As it is writ by the law, he shall, by its letter, be punished in this way.”

“True.”

Good. They seemed to be at pace. “Grant that there is no other way to save his life—not, not that I grant assent to this way, or any other”—no, no, stay the course, let his intellect guide these wretched words; let that reason which had moved his life serve him in some small way now—“but that you, his sister, finding yourself desired of such a person whose credit with the judge, or own great place, could fetch your brother from the manacles of law, and that there were no earthly means to save

him but that either you must”—he paused for a split moment, swallowing imperceptibly—“lay down the treasures of your body, or else let him suffer. What would you do?”

Her face was blank as she nodded her understanding. “Rather,” she said, her voice even as a philosopher’s, “the impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies, and strip myself to death as to the bed longed for by he who asks. This, before I’d yield my body up to shame.”

He stared. Beautiful, stripped—stripped to—crying out for—oh lord. He needed a moment.

“Your,” he said weakly, edging over to his desk chair, fighting the images that appeared with crystal clarity before his eyes—more defined than he knew any man’s vision should be, and—how. How could this—how could she hold this power? “Your brother will die.”

“Better for a brother to die once, than a sister die forever to redeem him.”

“Is that not as cruel as the sentence you have slandered?” He fixed his gaze to his desk rather than look at her. Gently, he prod with gloved finger his brass Newton’s cradle, listening to the clockwork *clack* of the spheres as they struck each other. Predictable, scientific,

judicious, rational, cogent.

“Lawful mercy is nothing kin to foul redemption,” she said, and he lifted his head to find her slitted eyes, folded arms, every bit the strict abbess she was meant to be—her logic clear, even tangled with emotion; her resolve solid; her rejection of the bodily all that should be hers, all that should have been his.

“Be that you are,” he hissed again as his eyes dropped, caught the pendulums as they slowed. Nervous and difficult fingers plucked them, sent their movements off-kilter into a jumble of erratic knocks. “A woman. Plain conceive I—I love you.”

“My brother did love a woman,” she answered without hesitation, “and you tell me that he will die for it.”

“He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love.”

She opened her mouth to speak. Teeth, tongue, lip, beautiful in body—bawdy, *stripped to that longed for bed*—yet straightforward, unwavering as the ticking of clockwork, the relentless grinding of an engine. She had a machine’s heart, a nun’s scruples, a woman’s supple form. *Desire her foully, for those things that make her good.*

“What if—”

“Sir, I shant be moved—”

“What if,” he pressed, in perfect monotone, “he who laid hand on you laid not a man's hand?”

Her tongue stopped in her mouth. Confusion weighed down the center of her brow. His breath held little of that quivering shame—he was beyond feeling it, now; he should not have felt at all. Slowly (he fought back his hesitation, strove for that cold heart of hers), he plucked at the fingers of his glove, and after a moment's refined pause, pulled the thing away.

Quietly, she gasped. He stretched his fingers, showed her the thin brass joints that held them together, clicking and whirring as they moved. Behind his glasses (shrouds carefully manufactured into the lenses) he blinked with miniscule, interlocking sheets of metal, camera shutters to impress upon his mind. Gears ground to move his legs, letting him stand to walk around the desk.

She moved back but a step. She did not flee as he took her cheek in that hand. She stared at his face, moved her eyes over his chest, shoulders, abdomen, legs, feet. That hardness to her eyes, when they found his again, was gone, but the steadiness remained. The clacking in his chest churned faster and the gears sped in their turning.

(A clock to keep him wound, gears to make him run, and why had the builders chosen to make an unmovable arbiter of the law in their own form, if it was so flawed?)

“Can you sin,” he asked, “with that which is not a man?”

Be that you are, he told himself, again and again, and yet his heart—a clock to keep him wound, and no more—would not stop its quickened ticking.

“I'll have your answer,” he said, but with no demand. He was content to pause, wait, watch those curious, hard, human eyes—until, slowly, she opened her mouth to speak.

*Ashley is a senior double majoring in English and Psychology
and a participant in the Northwest Undergraduate
Conference for Literature.*

CHINESE POETRY

After dawn but before day break
When the first rays of sun
Shine like spotlights through the thinning branches,
Lighting the rising mist,
I read Po Chü-i.
I hear from him that “one hundred years
Are but a moment of sleep.”
I lift my head to look
Through my kitchen window
To study the passing cars,
The glimmering frozen street,
Knowing that in a moment
The field across from my house will be covered
In one hundred freshly fallen leaves.

—OLIVIA AWBREY

*Olivia is a junior double majoring
in Comparative Literature and History.*



HANNAH FULLER

SMOKE

Photography

*Hannah is a freshman and has not yet decided on a major.
She has been previously published in her high school's
literary arts magazine.*

HOW TO HOP A FREIGHT TRAIN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

—JOSH WHITE

I'm betraying the well-guarded secrets of old white men. Secrets carried to moss covered graves beside worn out churches. I'm telling you how to hop a freight train.

First, find a girl.

She'll be bored and impatient and foxy.

Start a romance with her.

This might take a while. Maybe even a year.

There might be a boyfriend involved.

She'll be a tough nut. You'll need to be dating two beautiful, thin women. One blonde. One brunette. This will be enough to inspire jealousy.

Persevere. It will be worth it.

Okay, so now once you've become partners, start the planning. It's like a marriage. Till death do you part. Or till mental breakdown. In America, the latter of these two usually comes first now.

Remember, this whole thing I'm proposing is illegal. And possibly fatal.

So, first, the two of you pick a destination. Nothing specific. You just have to agree exuberantly. Like you'd formed a religious cult of two on the idea. Now unfold a map and see what sparks your interest. The route should be something that is a little scary to you, something new, something that will hold your interest. And, a technicality, it needs to be connected by land at all points between.

Next, tool up, save up, and get ready to disappear. Let out your room and put things in storage. Arrange to go on leave from your jobs. Treat it like you're in the national guard and you've been called into service. You don't know when you'll be coming back.

Freight train hopping is the greatest of all sports. Some people will tell you it's a felony offense.

Tool up. Put together your travel pack. You should carry no more than 38 pounds. You will have two sets of

clothes. One is your travel gear. The other is your townie gear. Find the perfect sleeping bag, one that brings you peace of mind in the craziest situations. Make sure everything, from your shoes to your choice of hat fits into some sort of fashion aesthetic. Create an identity for yourself visually. And change your name if that helps. You will want to become someone that you can change out of when it is all over.

Buy a super reliable and indestructible nationwide phone with touchscreen internet and GPS.

Prepare mentally. Begin a meditation practice. Doesn't matter which one.

Read *Dharma Bums*, *The Sheltering Sky* and *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Pay your bills through their contract dates or keep all the login info with you so you can keep them paid up while you're gone.

Learn what you need to stay sane, food, drink and med-wise. Do you have to have an espresso every morning? The Italians make a great portable espresso maker you can use over a fire. So on like that. Pare it down to the bare minimum of what you need. If you do this right, this adventure will leave you in the best physical and mental shape of your life.

Practice being nice. To everyone. All the time. Bone up on your conflict resolution skills. When you are on the road all you have, all you possess, is your

personality. If your personality sucks you are damned from the start. You'll end up in the ditch or under a bridge. You'll be a bum. I'm not judging. Bums have their place, and they'll admit it. They are the mentally ill that our hospitals can't take care of. They are the wayward Republicans who have wandered from their rabid flock, failing to make the millions guaranteed to them.

Being nice to everyone all the time is a difficult and learned skill! Think about how hard it was to learn to accept your family. Strangers are even worse. But it can be done. It's part of the adventure.

Get your hygiene in order. Figure out how to keep all your sexy bits and plumbing clean and in order on the bare minimum of supplies. This will make your journey a treasure.

Okay, now that you've prepared yourself, it's time for some legwork. You will want to get a hold of an underground publication known as the Crew Change. Due to labor regulations (thanks, Unions!), a freight train's operation crew (usually one or two surly dudes), must stop and do a shift change every 8 hours. When they stop, you get on. It's that simple. Well, it is and it isn't.

You are now ready to hop a train. Don't go in the winter, of course. Or in the middle of summer. Mild climate is good

for you.

Pick a hop-out spot on your map. Where all the train tracks are grouped up, that's the station. Also known as the 'the yard'. The yard is 8 miles long or it is a mile long, depending on how large the city is, how much business goes in and out. In the middle of the yard is the station. That's where the motion sensors and bulls are. A bull. I can't believe they still use that depression-era term! This activity holds on to its nostalgia. The bull is the guy who is paid to beat bums off the cargo. The trains have a job to do, move vast quantities of goods from one place to another. This is part of America's pulse--the pulse of our steel church, our economy. The trains are civil servants and they don't care about you. It's not that they dislike you, it's just that you don't exist to them. Have you been on the Amtrak lately? The Amtrak has to stop and let the freight go by, now. Now that the Union Pacific has bought all the tracks. I watched a mother give birth to a stillborn child in the luggage area of a marooned Amtrak in the middle of one of the Dakotas. The mother cried while her baby died in a blood of bath on the luggage car's floor. Did you know that only half of the legislators in the Dakotas are college educated? The train is god. You are the speck you are.

So, the bull is like you. Just a spec. A creep. A specification. Like a cop. He

doesn't belong. He does nothing useful to the business, but he's necessary to the business. He's the bad guy, or you're the bad guy. You are the protagonist, if he is the antagonist. If you do it right, you two will never meet. We are not trying to write his story, or play cops and robbers. You're just a sightseer along America's pulseway.

That's why you pick a hop-out spot that is at either end of the yard, where the tracks ween down to just two. One coming in, the other going out.

In a Metropolis, like Chicago, it's different, more complicated. But the same if you just think of it as a multiple-yard system. Just pick a yard, and then go as before. A train will come out of the yard and stop to let you on, or it will be moving slow enough that you can get on. Check it out. If the train is moving faster than you at a brisk walk with full gear, then it is too quick for you.

Pick the right car. The following are the types that are acceptable for decent folk.

The unit. This is the engine. There will be two on the front and two on the back of the train. Get on one of the units at the back. Walk up the steps, get in the compartment. Don't touch any of the dials. Get a bottled water out of the fridge. Open it, enjoy it. Look out the window. Watch America go by.

Or the grainer. This is the one that looks like a trapezoid. There's a front

porch and a back porch. The front porch has the best view, the back porch gives you the best protection from the elements. You'll be moving at about 60 mph tops, so treat it like you're about to get on the back of a growling godless motorcycle for 8 hours. What would make you comfortable?

There are other types, but they are so dangerous they are not for the civilized types of people I'm talking to.

If someone finds you, tell them exactly who you are and what you're doing. If it's a worker, half the time they won't care. If it's this type, pump him for information. Find out where the train is going, how long it will be stopped, how long it will take to get to the next town. This information will help you keep tabs on your sustenance rations.

If it's a worker who's afraid that they'll get in trouble from you, just get off and ask directions to the nearest town.

Remember, be nice to everybody and avoid the creeps. Learn to read people. Look into their eyes. Are they bright? Are they sad? Are they angry, deranged? If you have trouble with this, go to an art supply store and get a facial expression book and practice drawing the different kinds. The book will also tell you how and why we make these

different expressions. The face betrays everything inside the mind. It's physiological. I'm sorry, it just can't be helped. Any observing person can tell what you are thinking.

If it's a bull that finds you, just act like you've been pulled over by a traffic cop--yes sir no sir etc. and do exactly as they say. But go further than that. Fire up your acting skills. Put on a steeled front of kind determination. This is where your belief in the adventure will be put to the test. Bulls are trained to defeat the hardest cases, the career bums. The ones that career knives and who are too drunk on malt liquor to care about anything—the blow of a club, loud shouting, or even the strike of a moving train against one of their irreplaceable limbs. But you won't run into any bulls.

When you get to your destination, perform your victory parade. You will be loved, taken in, fucked, fed and made drunk for a week. You will be the savior, you will be the solution to each of the day-to-day problems. You will be better than television. Then it will be over. Change into your street clothes and buy a plane ticket home.

You will return to your normal self. No one will care that you got on a freight train, so don't tell them. It was your secret coming-of-age rite. It's between you and your soul.

Josh is a senior majoring in Digital Arts.

SHE MET A SPIDER

—CAMILLE OGDEN

Along a winding path through November trees
she met a spider with a crushed velvet face who carried her bones upon her back.

Good Morning Spider, she said in frost bitten words.
The spider bowed low and long on folded cashmere legs.

She met a spider who anchored her home beneath a maple umbrella
One returns to the place one came from... She thought to herself
as she watched the spider climb the slick rungs of a fern ladder.

She met a spider who called herself a widow and howled for scattered babies.
I fear becoming a mother, she confessed.

The spider blinked black petal eyelids
and crouched on the branch draped in moss tapestry.
She met a spider who swaddled her prey.

She met a spider who drank the morning dew and serenaded the moon
a nightfallen alto.

She met a spider with swollen glands but tensile strength, who spun kaleidoscope sap
and stitched the constellations into a snowflake of beaded pearls.

Your thread the seasons into feathered lace, dear spider,
she said with a smile.
The spider laughed a poison ink
“*Thank you.*”

Her dark hooded cloak spun
as she said goodbye to the spider she met:
Until tomorrow my friend —

At home by her fire,
with eight hands
she knit silver prayers.

She met a spider she honored.
She met a spider she knew.

*Camille is a post-baccalaureate student pursuing a second Bachelor
of Arts degree in English as well as minors in Creative Writing
and Philosophy. This is her first publication.*



SARA LEBECK
CLOCK EYED

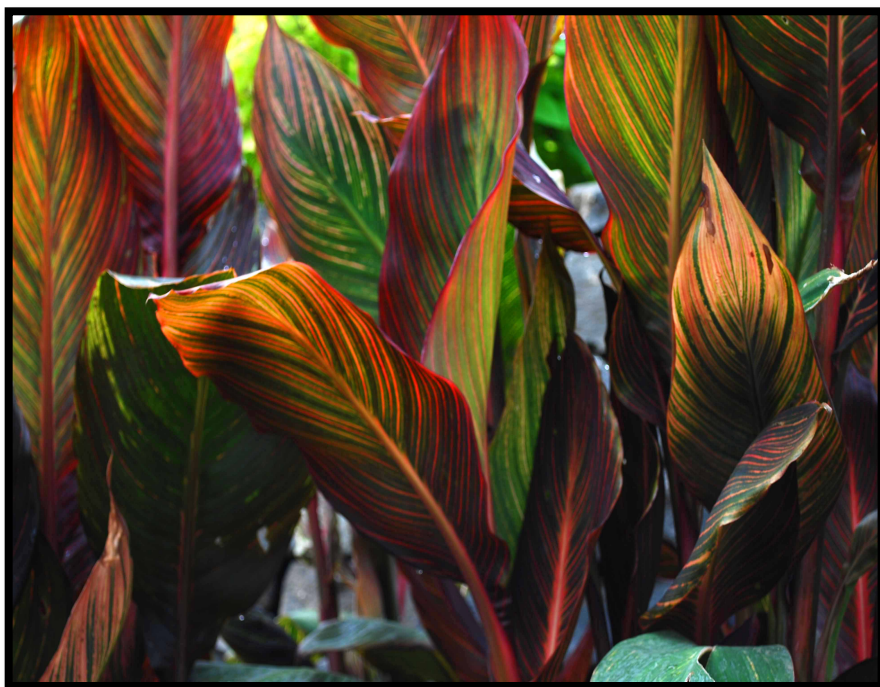
Ink

8.5" x 10"

Sara is a junior majoring in Digital and Fine Arts.



REFLECTION



LEAVES

HANNAH FULLER

Photography

KAJA

—ADINA LEPP

Up in our tree we used to throw dead leaves down at unsuspecting pedestrians. Rarely did we ever make contact. The leaves were light and the wind often strong. We targeted people we felt deserving of a little extra attention, or people who caught ours. Usually it was not the leaves that got us noticed, though; it was our legs dangling off of the lowest branch and our voices, often caught mid-story, mid-giggle.

“I hope this is only an intermission,” you said to me after one of our earlier dates. I was on the street, next to my orange rust colored racing Schwinn. You were on the sidewalk. When we hugged, I felt small. Small and lucky.

I wore green polyester pants and a boxy red wool sweater to our next date. “Tomato,” you commented. “A little tomato.” I handed you my offering: a bag of fresh baked oatmeal cookies. You looked at them like they were art; you looked at me like I was art. I smiled. I liked the world through your eyes.

The old oak tree on the corner of Oak and Park Street was hugged by a wrought iron fence dividing the tree and all of the other trees in line with it from a parking lot. It was our intersection. Romantic friendship, you called it later.

You had taken me to the tree, made it appear on a block where I only saw sidewalk and homeless people, so it was your tree. I went there alone sometimes. Sometimes I brought new people, new interests, always pretending that the tree and the game of picking dead leaves off the tree and flinging them at unsuspecting pedestrians had been my discovery. I saw strange bicycles tied up around the city and knew that if the bike were charming enough, you would decorate it with a cryptic note. I biked past Le Bistro Montage where you washed dishes and was tempted to open the back door, take the old stairs down to the basement and check out your secret library of classic literature against the far wall.

You brought coffee in an old thermos; I brought pastries. Whenever we met, it was in that tree. I don’t remember what we talked about. I don’t remember ever kissing you in the daylight.

Long afterward, I would wonder about you, and so you lived in my mind. The one email you wrote me was cryptic and poetic and not addressed to anyone. I studied it anyways. And then pretended

that you didn't exist.

I climbed the Oak tree after a long period of silence. I made things easier by bringing both coffee and pastries, and waited. You were too much of an artist to arrive on time. I expected you eventually, and not any sooner. I wore the red sweater again. It wasn't flattering, but you liked it. Once the coffee cooled, I poured it out on the sidewalk. I decided to leave the pastries in the tree. Bird food.

*Adina is Masters student studying Education.
She has been previously published in The Walrus,
Willamette Week, Just Out, and qPDX.*

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