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"LOST ERAS"

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*Mary Campbell's "Lost Eras" is featured
on the cover of this issue.*

Intaglio Printmaking
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CHAD HUNIU
THE MELT FILTER
photography with filters

THE BONES INSIDE BIRDS

— KELLY EDYBURN

The man I love stops to say,
I wish I had enough patience to be still,
and he reaches for the body of a bird frozen in the snow.

I wonder, does death feel heavy in his hands
when it's tiny and winged,
and oh, I remember, hollow!

How strange: empty bones,
impossibly hatched
with narrow teeth of mineral and air.

I had seen a picture of them once someplace,
the bones inside birds,
quietly yellow and cavern.

I stare at them now, still feathered in flesh,
and think, I want to fill them up with salt—
to make nice skinny silos out of those bones.

My man looks up and reads the sloping verses of the snow,
the wind-blown mounds a nursery rhyme,
lilting one into another, repeating into the horizon.

He does not look down, but feels
his hands are a cradle,
lulling to peace a dead bird.

I imagine the bones, a hundred little bones,
(back and forth) all full of salt.
He cannot stop and I cannot

imagine how to live on the air
(back and forth), draining everything
thick from my bones.

One day, he will be a father, and he will hold his children.
I will stay here and salt the bones,
so nothing new can grow.

*Kelly is a junior majoring in English and Spanish.
She has been previously published in Unbound.*

THE ENGINEER

— JEROME HIRSCH

Halfway down the line from Chattanooga to Atlanta, my train, aboard which I served as engineer, struck and killed two people. That was July 15th, one year ago today.

The first was a young woman, Claribel Winston. She was 19, the eldest daughter of a deceased tobacco magnate, and had been recently betrothed to some affluent Yankee who had begun his tour of the southern states, one could presume, in the search of just such a wife as Miss Winston. By all accounts, she was gorgeous and as intelligent as they come.

The second was a madman, known as Junior in his little town of Waleska. What descriptions I could gather on his character and history amounted only to hazy rumor. He had fought under the confederate flag, and during his deployment he either witnessed some horror befall a family, or he enacted that horror himself. Subsequently, he went insane.

July 15th, one year ago, was the zenith of an oppressive heat wave. I still remember the stick of sweat on my controls, the blast of the furnace behind me.

The swelter was still thick on the day of Claribel's funeral. So much so that even the most modest women took their hats off with the men. The widowed Mrs.

Winston, however, was the exception; she never let the slightest stream of light behind her veil, nor ever cast a glance in my direction.

I hear she filled her daughter's casket with dresses and sheets. You see, they had to cremate what remained of Claribel, but her mother insisted something be buried.

The reverend tried to engage me in conversation. He reckoned that I must have made out even in the Lord's eyes. A soul like mine, he said, one that bears the slaughter of an innocent and the execution of a crazed outlaw, might surely find some reconciliation come the day of our judgment. I could only nod.

The stopping distance of an average passenger train equipped with Westinghouse vacuum brakes and traveling at 45 mph down dry rails is 483 yards. Engineers, conductors, technicians —everyone in the industry with whom I have spoken has assured me that there was nothing I could have done. Now I sit, writing these lines as I look down the hill under me to the small marker they erected at the site. It's maybe five miles outside Waleska.

Surveying the scene, as I have done so many times before, a fresh thought springs into my head: "What if it had been winter?" What if Junior had waited till the trees had shed their leaves, and the cold

rolled in from the North? Perhaps, before I rounded the wood, through the skeletons of trees I would have seen him lashing Claribel to the rails. I would have had more time to throw the emergency brake, sound the whistle. That bellowing in the frigid air—it might have even penetrated the bitter froth of his deteriorated mind. I might have struck what remained of his humanity.

But minds, like trains, are heavy with inertia; once started, they are not easily diverted. And it was summer then, as it is now.

*Jerome is a senior majoring in English and Computer Science.
He has been previously published in Unbound and the Oregon Voice.*

BIRTHDAY FOR TWO

I stared at the birthday cake,
eyes lingering over the six candles
jammed into an uneven blanket
of poorly spread frosting.
Well here you go boy he said,
putting his lighter to the wicks
and his wide hand on my shoulder.
It was covered in blisters,
gifts from the unfamiliar oven
to the man who had never used it.
His stubble-forested cheeks
rolled up into a nervous smile,
it's just the two of us this year.

His butter knife dully freed
a corner piece heavy with icing
and with thick fingers he lifted
it onto my waiting plate,
never looking at the empty chair.
I couldn't bear to tell my father
that the piece was burnt and brown
and so I ate it all in silence,
a smile pinned to my face.

— KYLE LONG

*Kyle is a senior majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*



ANDY PRIEST
FOUR-HOUR OF A SNOWY ROOF

undeveloped silver gelatin print

5.6 x 5.6 cm

Andy is a sophomore majoring in English.

EULOGY FOR HOPE

We waited under the brightest of lights,
fumbled and folded our playing cards, yet
felt the sting of endings. Too many sights
passed by those faces, sullen with a debt
owed to the sun. This is our punishment.
Rather than beauty, than love, than motion,
give me a cold bean can spilled on cement
so I can scoop up the earth and ocean
and spread them over this plate to eat. We
waited under something larger than God.
I think it was the weight of apathy.
The burden of indifference. A brief nod
led us away in fragments, little beans
scattered in memory, in hope, in dream.

— COLIN KEATING

*Colin is a sophomore majoring in English.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*

DAISY CHAIN CAFÉ

LAUREN MERGE

We are all victims-in-waiting.
—The Cheshire Cat

When the curfew went down to eight, we started closing the café at six so Victoria and I could sweep up and get out in time. These days we get some customers for breakfast, maybe some at lunch. Our real money came when people wanted to unwind at the end of the day. Now there's only time for work and home; curfew means being there before the final alarm. A minute late and if you're seen you spend the night getting interrogated. It's for our own safety, I suppose, but it makes it hard to own a café.

"You're looking stressed again, Courtney," Vic says. "Breathe."

I wave her off. "Just because you've worked here a decade now doesn't mean you get to sass me."

A decade seems so long. What a strange thought. I've been here for three.

Victoria is restocking the Pepsi cooler. She's twenty-six, graduated from Portland's prestigious private college about three years back. But she can't get work anywhere else. The government doesn't hire people who majored in Comparative Literature. I'm surprised that major still exists.

Victoria hums to herself while she places the soda. She hardly looks any different to me, still the same brown hair

and freckles that she had when she first started here. The place would feel empty without her.

She started working at The Daisy Chain about a year after my husband and I divorced. Even though Vic works as much as I do, I feel a little possessive of this place. A sixty-year-old is allowed her weird quirks. I've given a lot to be where I am today.

The Pepsi cooler door suction shut as Vic steps away and tosses the empty box into the closet.

"Check my math." I replace the bills I've been counting in the register. It sits on a waist-high glass counter at the back of the café. Through the café's bay windows I see silhouettes of a few shoppers walking away from Pioneer Square, bags under their arms. It's been quiet in the Square since the riot two months ago.

The dining area is empty. The blonde wooden tables glow even in the winter sun, and the mismatched salt and pepper shakers shine. Vic's favorite, the Cheshire Cat, smiles toothily from the table closest to me. Today he's partnered with a top-hat wearing flamingo. The shoppers don't look in. I sigh and lean on the counter, rubbing my hands over my face. It grows softer each year as the folds and wrinkles grow deeper.

Vic puts her hand on my back. "What's up, Court?"

I gesture at the empty tables. I can

share this with her, in a way that I never shared it with Mike. Vic is the daughter I never had.

She squeezes my arm. “Don’t sweat it. We’ll stay afloat no matter what the Wardens do.” She whispers the last part and gives my arm another supportive squeeze. I frown at her. She moves away, blushing.

As the workday ends, there is a dinner rush. This cheers Victoria, but I know better than to think one day will make a difference. I sit in the office, which is tucked into the back corner of the kitchen on a loft that Mike built, flipping through the books. Vic vacuums, sweeps, and does the other closing chores, then comes up with the tray of day-old pastries: the scones I carefully frosted with white chocolate syrup yesterday, and the doughnuts which Vic always sprinkles. It’s been her favorite chore, ever since her first day. She goes through different color combinations. I know she’s been worried lately, because she’s mixing the clear pink and green ones again. That mix always cheers her up.

“Take them,” I say, turning back to the ledgers.

“You sure you’re doing okay, Court?” Vic is still standing on my stairs.

“Fine. This is old people worries. Go out and do what you young people do,” I say. “Have fun.” She needs it.

She sets down the pastry tray and stands beside my chair. “Trying to figure out what to cut?”

This girl knows me so well. “Yes, but I can’t see where.”

“What about bottled soda?” Vic says. She points to a line. “We hardly sell

any.”

“Martin always gets one,” I say. Martin, our postmaster, comes in every day for a bottle of Mountain Dew.

“So buy Martin some at Safeway. Come on, Court. Martin can survive with a cup instead.”

I shrug, and Vic puts her arm around my shoulder, side-hugging me. “You’re a sentimental old fart.” She picks up the pastries and goes. “Everything’ll work out,” she says.

I scratch at the ledger, thinking about our customers. I can’t cut ice tea because it’s the only thing Georgia will drink. Martin needs his Mountain Dew. Tracy is the only person who ever eats the Caesar bowtie, but she loves the special dressing I make, says it’s just the right amount of garlic powder.

I don’t know what to do. Mike could always make these decisions. I can’t deny any of my friends what they love about The Daisy Chain.

Five minutes later Vic calls from the kitchen that she’s leaving. “You want the lights on?” Her hand rests on the light switch, the bag of pastries tucked under her arm.

“No,” I say.

And then it’s dark except in my office, but my light can’t be seen through the big glass windows. No need for cops to see I’m here an hour before curfew.

When the curfew siren sounds, I jump. I set down the ledger and look at the clock. I don’t know how I missed the second warning siren. A ‘senior moment’ as Victoria would call it. I stand up and turn off the office light. I’m not taking chances.

I stretch; my vertebrae crackle. I come down the short set of stairs into the

kitchen. My eyes adjust to the dim light from the display cases and streetlight shining through the window.

Thirty years and it still feels like trespassing after dark. Like I'm spying on the ovens and the pastry and salad display cases. The refrigerators under the sandwich bar hum. In the front of the kitchen, I touch the clean counters, the shining drip-catch below the soda machine. My hands, covered in the stains that will become liver spots, are washed out in the display cases' nightlights. They almost look young again, as if I were thirty, standing here with Mike after our first day open.

Mike and I met a month after I finished college. I was at Forest Park with some friends, making flower crowns like we had when we were children. Mike had come, the brother of a girl I'd graduated with. I didn't think much of him that first time. I mean, he was cute, but nothing special. Pretty quiet, too. His sister kept bringing him around, though, and one day he asked me to dinner. I said yes, and that was it. He took me to Typhoon, my favorite restaurant, and we just hit it off. We married after a couple of years, around the time that I figured out a desk job wasn't for me. A café had always been Mike's dream, and I liked the idea well enough. He called it The Daisy Chain because of how we'd met. Cutesy and sentimental, that was Mike. Not surprising, coming from the man who'd built daisy chains with his sister's friends.

He was endearing, though. He took good care of me, and I tried to do the same for him. We ran this place for five years, just the two of us, occasionally hiring summer or weekend help for the busiest times of the year. We had busy times, then.

After really busy mornings I would fall asleep at our lunch table, and Mike would tie my shoe laces together. What a rogue, and he had such an impish smile.

Then the Boulder riots happened. The government lowered the curfew time, although back then it was still a lot later than it is now. It had been eleven before they lowered it, and we closed at nine. We'd been doing a good business. College kids studying late, frantically chugging shot-in-the-darks until I cut them off. High schoolers who wanted to stay out late; their parents knew we'd keep an eye on them. There were even a couple older folks who liked the nightlife, who would stand by the counter and tell Mike about their war days. Then the curfew went down to ten, so we closed at eight. It wasn't awful. Sometimes it felt nice to go home early, although I missed the college kids. Mike was mostly worried that we were losing money.

A year later they changed the curfew again, to nine o'clock, and we had to close at seven. Mike lost it. Started raging out, telling the old veterans about government bullshit: "The Baron was the worst thing to ever happen to small business. He can take his war and shove it up his ass. Hard enough to survive without the curfew," so on and so on. Sedition. I knew the Citizen Protection Agency would take him. I couldn't stay with him, knowing they were coming. It would have broken my heart except he wasn't my Mike anymore.

I went home early the night I left him, and I was packing when he came in. The look on his face, angry at first, then broken, soft. As if I could reach out and wipe his features away. I was sick,

watching him cry. I almost stopped packing, almost changed my mind. He didn't say anything, just watched me. I thought I would die, the way my heart compressed in my chest. I never wanted to kiss him so badly in my life. I couldn't tell him it would be okay.

Then he started screaming. No words, just incoherent, guttural sounds, half tears and half animal. He punched the wall so hard he left a divot, cracked and white under the blue paint. I ran from the room, the half packed suitcase under my arm. I dropped my keys on the mat on the way out. Fifteen days later he was gone. Taken.

I run my hands over the backs of the chairs as I approach the windows of the café. The streetlights illuminate the empty sidewalks and the dark wine bar across the way. Of course, no one is out. The glass is cold against my forehead; it is barely forty degrees outside.

I jerk at the sound of sirens. Two cars race away from Pioneer Square; the Wardens: the car doors are emblazoned with the leaping silver tiger. I press myself against the wall. All CPA vehicles have that emblem, but the Wardens' silver tigers have flaming claws. They're the most vicious of the Citizen Protection Officers; they only handle sedition cases. Being in my office after dark is not seditious, just illegal. I take a deep breath, crouched under the windowsill. My heart slows again as the sirens fade, but the adrenaline still burns in my stomach.

It's probably another domestic dispute. Those happen more and more often since the riot. Some people report their spouses and children and parents,

rather than run the risk of being disappeared for hiding their seditious relatives. It's dangerous to live in a house with people who don't share your philosophy about our government. My only comfort is that I didn't report Mike. I press my face into my knees, and my feet go numb.

My parents used to tell me that the police had to publish some kind of log in the newspaper recording their activities. That would be laughable now. You hear all sorts of horror stories about the Wardens and what they do to you when they find you. Torture doesn't even begin to cover it. Supposedly a girl escaped once. Story goes she was found dead in the street the next morning. They'd been cutting at her in awful ways. The boys in high school used to tell the story on Halloween night, about her exposed bones and her glossy innards. She'd been running like that, holding her insides in. Supposedly she'd been an instigator in one of the riots.

It doesn't matter if it's true or if it's just a Halloween story. Most of us know people who have been taken. Most of us have seen enough to fear that the story is real.

I slink back to my office, my bones aching as I ease down onto the small couch against the wall. I keep a blanket underneath it for afternoon naps. I pull it out, wrap myself up.

I roll sideways on the couch, facing the wall dividing my office from the kitchen. I press my hands against my chest and bury my nose between my fingers, smelling dirty dishwater and pickle juice. That smell used to bother me, the way it would never come off; each day it was renewed and deepened. Now the smell is

comforting. My apartment smells like it too, and my clothes. Everything about me smells like the café.

As I stare at the wall the story of the escaped girl keeps crossing my mind, bringing with it unpleasant images of my parents.

Thirteen, I'm crouching at the top of the stairs. The stairwell wall is lined with my school photographs and my mother's paintings. I look through the slats in the railing. The living room is dim, the lights low. There are about ten people sitting in a ring, on the couch and chairs. Mom sits next to Dad, each on a dining room chair. Their voices are murmurs. I can't hear them, but I know what they're saying. They have these meetings every week; it was these memories I thought of when Mike started losing it.

After the meeting is over, I am in the living room next to my mom. The chairs are empty. I am screaming at her. *You shouldn't be saying those things. It's wrong. You're going to get us in trouble. How can you let those people into the house?* My father appears in the kitchen doorway, watching. I think he's afraid of me.

Seventeen, my dad kneels before me on the living room rug. He explains we need to move, as soon as possible. He's trying to hand me a floppy suitcase. We have to leave for Canada, before it's too late. My arms are crossed, and I turn away. *How can you ask me that?* In my lap, resting on my flowered skirt, are the graduation announcements I've been writing. Outside, spring rain falls through headlights.

It's hot and dark outside. June. The night I graduated. A false dawn is visible on the horizon toward the city. I turn my back

on it, exhausted. I'm holding high heels, my feet bare on the concrete. My legs are white, skinny, young. I turn to wave at my friends. I am still sweaty from dancing at our Senior All Night party. Back then, you were allowed out past curfew for school events. My friends lean out the windows of the bus and cat call as it drives away. I trudge toward the house, tired, depressed. We leave for the Canadian border as soon as I change clothes. The burning taillights disappearing around the corner is the last sight I will ever have of my friends. I remember being angry, and so unaware of the danger. I had no idea what it meant when I asked if we could stay.

The front door is ajar. It is dark inside, quiet. I push the door all the way open. Our cat, Mr. Tigger, runs between my legs, flying down the street. He yowls. I call in the dark. No response. Their suitcases sit packed and ready to go by the stairs, my purple bag is there too, my jeans and stuffed giraffe sticking out.

I sat on the front porch and cried until the older couple next door came out to get me. There was no sign of a struggle, and that's why people call it getting "disappeared." The neighbors, of course, hadn't heard anything except my wailing.

The café clock reads two AM. I lie here with the sweet-spiced smell of my childhood home in my nose, feeling like the only person in the world.

At nine, about three hours after I got off the couch and started making pastries, Victoria shows up. She peeks into the dining room. Our regular old couple sits in the corner. They eat here every day except Sunday. Georgia always wears a

different brooch, which Vic loves. She's got a thing for knick-knacks, like the salt and pepper shakers. She waves at Bert when he looks up from the paper, and then passes me up to the office. She's pulling an apron over her head when she returns. I lean next to the phone, trying to do a Sudoku. I'm not really trying—numbers aren't my thing. It's just a way to pass the time.

"What's up this morning?" Vic leans against the sandwich bar, looking at my Sudoku puzzle.

"Just one CPO for coffee before Georgia and Burt got here."

"Haven't seen many of the Baron's Boys around these days," Vic says.

"Don't say that." No one drops the name of the Wardens any more than is necessary, and calling the President 'The Baron' is never a good idea. "What's gotten into you?"

Vic shrugs and grabs the clipboard with the daily chores. She checks the coffee levels. "No one here is going to say anything about it," she says.

"You shouldn't get into the habit."

Vic gives me the 'you're not my mother' look. She snaps the Tupperware lid on the coffee filters. "Yeah." She makes a mark on the list, then grabs the Windex.

I flashback to her first day on the job, asking me which cases she needed to clean. She was so cute. I liked her from the moment she came in for an application. She has changed, though, more than I thought. She has less freckles now, and her cheeks are narrower, her nose more slender, her features so grown up.

She sprays down the pastry case. "You doing okay?" she asks. A white flag.

"Why?" I scratch vigorously at the

Sudoku book with my eraser.

"You know, the books."

I shrug. She looks at me for another moment, then wipes down the glass.

"Court, can I ask you something?"

"Fire away."

"What happened to your husband?"

I drop my pencil.

"I was slicing the other day, and looking at the bulletin board. There's a picture of you with a wedding ring on." She stares into the glass.

I hesitate, weighing my options. "We divorced."

"How come?"

"He wasn't who I thought he was," I say. I try to make my tone sound final, but my voice cracks. "I don't want to talk about it."

Vic looks up at me, and I can't meet her eyes. She stands up, the wet paper towel loose in her hand. "Was he—taken?"

"Victoria," I say. It comes out stern, although I only feel shock and surprise. She can't know he was taken, but how is it that she is bold enough to ask? It's not for my sake that I am appalled; I have few secrets from Vic. My heart is pounding, and I can see Mike's soft face. "Do not talk that way."

Vic looks away from me, abashed, and goes out front to clean the glass door.

At lunch we get another CPO. He's plainclothes, but I know. They have this look to them. I'm not sure what it is: their roving eyes, their too-neat suit; they look like overly-eager accountants which makes them seem more benign than they are. The Warden's henchmen. Vic can tell too; I see her giving him the eye as she rings him up. He walks off to sit, and Vic turns around,

handing me his order for a BLT with avocado, no pickles and no hots. "I don't like this," she says quietly.

I shrug, pulling out the bread. "It's not unusual."

"Two in one day, when we haven't seen any for a month?" I finish and hand her his sandwich, and watch her watching him while he eats. She vigorously scrubs down the tables closest to him, switching around the salt and pepper shakers.

When the CPO leaves, it's time for our lunch break. No one else is in the café.

"What was that about?" I say.

Vic leans back in her chair at the table where we always sit. I pick up my bowl of potato and leek soup and sit across from her. She shrugs and looks down at the wrap she made herself for lunch. It's her favorite, the Caesar chicken wrap doused in my special Caesar dressing.

"I just don't like them," she says.

"Vic, what is going on with you?"

She takes a big bite of her wrap, then pulls the newspaper towards her and reads. I watch her for a few moments, but she keeps her gaze down. I lose all interest in my soup.

I miss the curfew siren again. If anyone knew I was here...but they don't. I'm okay, for now, but I can't keep up this pattern. It's one thing to have a senior moment and miss the curfew, it's another thing to let it happen too often. Anyone could tip them off: my landlord wondering about the mail I haven't picked up, a neighbor who notices I haven't been around. They won't disappear me for it, I don't think. I don't know exactly what they would do. It's not worth finding out. I should set an alarm.

Too late for tonight. I lie on the couch and stare up at the dark ceiling, worrying. Victoria has been acting strange, hiding things from me. I wonder what changed, if I've done something, if something happened to her. She's never kept secrets before.

I catch a whiff of the pickle juice and dishwasher smell of my hands. Then the deadbolt on the café door slides and clicks. They know I'm here. I've violated curfew. Someone reported me. It's the Wardens. After thirty years they've come to take me. I think about grabbing the paperweight on my desk, but there's no point in fighting back. They'll win in the end.

There are whispers now, and I can easily recognize Vic's voice.

"Hang on," she says. "Let me get the light."

After a wave of relief, I slide off the couch.

Vic moves through the dimly-lit kitchen and into the dark back room. Her shadow is framed in the doorway. The office light flicks on.

"Jesus, Courtney!" Vic says. Her hand is on her chest and she's leaning against the doorframe. "You scared the shit out of me."

I hear footsteps, and two young men come over. They're twins, black-haired and big. All three of them are dressed in dark jeans and sweatshirts. "What the hell, Vic?" Is she robbing me?

"Were you sleeping in here?"

"That's my right. What are you doing?"

Her mouth hangs open for a long moment. "We have a meeting," she says. One of the boys behind her hisses, but she waves him off.

It's dawning on me now, what she's hiding, and I feel sick and betrayed, like I'm thirteen again. "Is this why the CPO's were here?"

Vic looks at the two young men, then back at me. "Courtney, please. The others will be here soon. Please let us do this. It's important."

"No," I say. "Get out." She's ruined me. If they know, then I have finally lost everything. They'll take The Daisy Chain from me.

Vic's face turns pink, her eyes bright with tears. Her fists are balled up at her sides.

I can't look at her. This is where the seditious slang has come from. This is why the CPOs are watching the café. They know what she's doing. It's Mike all over again.

"Get out," I say.

Vic turns, and the other two follow her. "Leave your key," I say. Vic drops it on the floor without looking at me. I bend down to retrieve it.

I grab her wrist as she moves to step outside. She turns, and the others do as well. "Not you," I whisper to them. "Whoever you are, scram. And tell your compatriots to do the same."

I shut the door.

"What?" she says. She won't look at me.

I take her arm and drag her back into my office where the light is still on. She sits on the couch, on my lumpy blanket, staring at her hands.

I sit in my office chair. "Are you nuts? Is this something you picked up at school?"

Vic looks up. "What?"

"This idea for a meeting." I keep my voice down, but my hands are shaking.

"No," she says.

"Why the café?"

"It was the only place we knew we wouldn't be heard. The apartment walls are too thin."

"So you came here, to ruin me? Do you know what they'll do to me?" I cover my face with my hands and then run them through my hair. She's still not looking at me.

She's crying. I reach out and put my hand on her knee, and she places her hand on top.

I squeeze her leg. "Vic, do you have any idea the kind of trouble you'll be in when they catch you?"

She withdraws her hand, her watery eyes meeting mine. Her brown irises look black in the dim office light. "Is that a threat?"

"No." I feel suddenly tired. "You have to stop," I say.

"You would report me," she says.

I nod, feeling the knot in my heart grow, knowing what she thinks of me now.

"I'll do it somewhere else, then," says Vic.

"No you won't," I say. "I'll call it in if you don't promise to stop. I can't let you do this to your life." And I can't lose anyone else. This is Mike and my parents again. I can't leave Victoria behind the way I left them.

"You know what this government is doing." She whispers. Her gaze does not waver. "The disappearances, the unconstitutional actions, the illegality. It's not right. They shoot kids, civilians. They took your husband, Courtney."

"Which is why you need to stop," I say.

"Which is why I need to keep going!"

You won't stand and fight despite what they did to you, but I will." She stands and storms for the stairs.

My chair groans as I stand too, my hand on the phone.

She stands still on the stairs, measuring me. I start to dial. "Give me a five-minute head start," she says. Her face is still wet, but her eyes are dry. "It's the least you can do, Court, after ten years." She says my name as if she could punch me with it.

I watch her disappear down the stairs. The café door shuts and I stop dialing, hang up. The soda machine hums.

I get up and look into the dining room. The door has bounced back open, and a chill breeze comes in. My stomach pangs. Vic didn't bother to secure it. I see the silhouettes of chairs, tables, the funky salt and pepper shakers. No sirens go by.

I pick up the phone in the kitchen and dial. When the Wardens' office picks up, I think about Vic out on the dark street moving from shadow to shadow. Her heart racing, her mouth dry, worried that every time she moves she'll be seen. She thinks this is my fault, but I am only trying to protect her.

When the Wardens' dispatcher answers the phone, I do what I should have done forty-three years ago. I tell him where I am, and that I am guilty. I tell him about my parents. What kind of daughter chooses graduation over her parents' lives?

I tell him about Mike, and how my biggest regret was not saying goodbye. I tell them where I am, what I have done. I tell them so that they will come for me, and not for Vic.

While I wait for them to come, I walk through the café one last time. I am calm now. The chairs are cool under my hands, their curved wooden backs smooth. I smile, seeing the salt and pepper shakers in their odd assortments. A goose sits next to a Hawaiian lamp post shaker, and today Vic's Cheshire cat smiles hungrily next to a country mouse. I pick the cat up and turn him over; his porcelain paint gleams in the streetlight outside.

I sit at his table, facing the café. Goosebumps move over my arms as the open door lets in the chilly breeze. I turn the cat over; feel the minute imperfections and bumps on his painted purple back.

Vic should be safe at home by now. My parents are long gone, but maybe Mike will be wherever they take me. Although, with what the Wardens would have done to him, I hope he is long dead.

I can't cry anymore. I'm dry, like an old corn stalk. There's only enough life in me to shiver in the wind from the open door. When the Wardens enter, the Cheshire cat slips from my shaking hand. He shatters, spreading salt and porcelain across the floor.

Lauren is a senior majoring in English with minors in Spanish and Creative Writing. This is her first publication.



BRAEDEN COX
PUZZLE

digital amalgamation

18 x 18"

FROM THE BELLY OF A 747 AT TED STEVENS ANCHORAGE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Trekking bags are baled into that steel pit.
I can't stop boiled-over sweat falling on that hot, infertile floor.
No wonder all the vets just want to drive Bertha.
That rusty lav-truck, freckled with blue juice, don't make you sweat.

But one time Big Paul got slushed by blue-dyed shit
and had to take a hazard shower, cleaning off the waste of post-modernity.
Yellow plugs cork most sounds except for Brit's roars.
"Connor hurry up, we've got 10 minutes to get this bird gone."
My life has become a concrete pastoral.
I still don't know what's harder to stack, bags or words.

In either case wide-eyed crowds make them too heavy.
Here I am, wrestling them into a clog of dollar store potpourri
--a mess for someone else to unpack, a mess, a mess.
But still I stack trekking words into the steel pit.
My sweat rains down.
Unable to stir dull roots
in that hot, infertile floor.

— THOMAS CONNOR

*Thomas is a sophomore majoring in English and Philosophy.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*



MARY CAMPBELL
GREYHOUND DAY

intaglio printmaking

17 x 22"

Mary is a sophomore majoring in Art.

LEAVING SULAYMANIYAH

— EDWARD EARL

At the edge of camp two men smoke and putter,
sometimes looking up from the kicked dirt
to speak to each other and exhale into the fading light.
The barren earth between their boots is red;
their bundled coats and covered heads are a sight
silhouetted by the sunset which also makes muted sparks
on the rusted barrels of their inherited rifles.

Inside the camp there is a boy with a ration of rice
and a cup of cooking oil tending foraged wood
he lit with leaves and grass and a photograph.
Mumbling, he eyes the flickering flame,
then sees to his and others' tea and dinner—
just as the woman whose face is ash had,
when she could still breathe his name.

When the last of the light retreats over the hills,
darkness falls across this piece of Kurdish steppe,
like a horde coming through the air.
The boy places a few coals in a bucket
and delicately takes two cups and a kettle
to the men at the edge of camp before coming back
to a soot-soiled blanket and his fire's humble end.

*Edward is a senior honors student majoring in Political Science.
He placed first in Poetry in this year's Kidd Tutorial writing competition.*

CARE AND THE ERA

— IAN GERONIMO

For seven weeks I have been working at an assisted-living home in a town called Albany, about twenty miles north-west of my apartment in the city. The long commute gives me plenty of time to think. I drive through the Willamette River Valley, past partitioned agricultural land spotted with dark cedar trees. Nothing leaps out at the eye. The winters here are drawn out and have a somber sort of mood about them anyway. The scenery blends together like rainwater flattening against glass. Lately, my time on the road has been occupied almost exclusively with memories of my childhood in Arizona. I find myself suddenly smiling, having stumbled upon one of these bright little revelations, without any recollection of how long I've been sifting through my subconscious to find it. It's as if I've grown physically and aged into the appearance of a man while my mind lives on as a child, liable to wander off through space and time, usually without asking for permission.

Sholly Residential Center is surrounded on all sides by rows of poplar trees and then miles of open sheep pastures. Though dwarfed in its isolation, it's a large compound. Built at the center of a four acre lot, Sholly is a single story rectangular

building with an indistinct courtyard at its center, finished in the style of a country home. If you drive by at night, you can sometimes see the forty or so residents set up through the yellowed front windows of the dining hall, many slouched in their wheelchairs, some drooling, some laughing or scowling or waiting patiently to be fed by one of us carers. As silent as Sholly is on the exterior, inside is always a din.

When I arrive in the afternoon, I enter through a backdoor with a key code, passing a long row of brown dumpsters reeking vaguely of antiseptic and human shit. When I enter, the other carers or staff nurses in the break room will usually be gossiping about people I don't know, waving pork rinds or pretzels or half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at each other as they converse. The mood is noticeably less intimate as I say hello to each of them, hang up my jacket, wash my hands and turn down the long hallway, pacing under the laminated sign that reads "Smile carers -- You're on camera," and out onto the floor.

On my commute today, I remembered the ceilings of my childhood room. They were acoustic ceilings with that painted on popcorn texture, and if you stared into them long enough in the morning, you could make out the faces of George Washington, Han Solo, Martin Luther King Jr. – anyone you wanted to see, really. I recalled with unusual clarity the morning I was supposed to go with my mom to her office for bring-your-son-to-work day. I lay on the carpet in my room with my small, brown feet up on the door jamb, picturing a band of mounted Indian War Chiefs grimacing back at me from the ceiling while the sounds of my parents'

escalating voices reverberated up the hallway walls.

I'd been stalling in the hope that she would just leave for work without me, but right when it looked like she might be out of my hair for good (*It's your choice, but it's a matter of character, John*), she'd gone out to the kitchen to get my father. Their yelling was louder than usual, so I slid up the hallway with my back to the wall like a ninja, and moved up the corridor until I could see my father's wide back as he sat shaking his head at the table, his hand at rest on the bright surface of the table.

"He's you're son too, Terry," my mom said.

I couldn't tell from my place in the hall how he was reacting to my mom's scrutiny, nor could I see her, but I listened to the hard bottoms of my mother's shoes receding along the wood floor, followed by the garage door motor sounding through the thin walls of our house. "You should try parenting him some time. I think you might be really good at it, if you tried it." With that, she let the heavy door into the garage slam behind her. I knew she wasn't referring to my little-brothers, Sam and Kerbin, because this kind of talk seemed always reserved for me: the Troubled One.

"Jonathan Tin, come here please," my father said. I knew then my mother's appeal had worked. If it had been her calling me I would've run back up the hallway to my room and found a slick place to hide. But my father didn't put up with my games, especially not on weekdays, so I let my arms go loose and stepped from the shadows and into the light of the front room.

I don't remember much else about that day, except that I dressed like it was

picture day, with a bow tie and gelled hair and a belt, and I distinctly remember wanting to stick close by my dad's side when we reached his office – an architecture firm in downtown Phoenix – because unlike the dorky women in scrubs at my mom's work, the people my dad worked with were smart and severe and scary, just like my dad. He was stern with me at first, while he waited for me to get ready, but sitting in the passenger seat of his dusty Toyota truck, he seemed to warm up to the idea of taking me with him to work. "You look good buddy," he said, goading my knee, "Don't look so worried. It's gonna be fine. Everything is gonna be fine."

I've always had a hard time "being in the present," as they say, but it seems only lately have my ruminations been so exclusively focused on things past. It took grueling practice, but over the years I learned to detain my mind, cursed as it is with wanderlust, so that I might actually focus on the task at hand and do a decent day's work. But it has never come natural to me, and I still marvel at how jovial my co-workers are at this job; they make being happy at work look effortless. I've worked many different types of jobs, and somehow, the question "why" creeps into the background of my routine without fail, giving me something to struggle against even at the most mundane positions.

That being said, I am quite good at my job. I'm slower than the others and often chastised somewhat passively for this, but it's only because I take the extra time to remain human in my caring. I have six residents under my charge right now, though this number fluctuates as residents

come and go.

I've been reprimanded for my friendship with resident Number 12, Michael Serge, who is about my father's age. I found out from his log that Serge was in a motorcycle accident in the late nineties that caused his severe traumatic brain injury. Despite his reduced capacities, Serge's former intellect still shows through if one takes the time to hear him out, which, granted, takes a very long time. I first noticed it during dinner one night, my second week on the job, as I was standing between him and another resident, alternating between feeding the two. Throughout the process, with gravy leaking from the drooping side of his mouth, Serge kept stuttering at me with a look of utter determination in his eye. I set the spoon down on his plate and dabbed his cheek with the adult bib he was wearing while I waited for him to finish his sentence.

"W-w-what eth-eth-nicity are y-you John?"

I was astonished; it was the most friendly and intelligently posed question I'd been asked by anyone since I started working at the center, including care staff. Serge was visibly exhausted from the exertion it took him to ask the question. "I'm English on my mom's side, Thai on my dad's. Half and half," I said. "What about you?"

A sigh of pure delight escaped at length from his gaping mouth as he smiled up at me, the overhead light gleaming across his squinted green eyes, and I could see now this was a man who enjoyed conversation beyond the impersonal niceties.

"I am," he said, pausing, drawing his

contorted hand closer into his chest, then smiling and nodding slightly to let me know more was on the way. "Polish, an-and, and Irish. Th-thanks f-for as-king."

"Well Serge," I said, spooning some puree off of his plate, "we got a hell of a lot of heritage between the two of us."

He tried to laugh, but instead began coughing terribly, his face soon mottled red and imbued with pain.

The head carer, Bobby, whose scrubs and glasses have always struck me as altogether too small, peered over at us from his place at another table. "Don't worry, he does that a lot," Bobby said, nodding reassuringly, "just try not to get him so excited with conversation." Bobby leaned down to Serge's eye level and changed his voice to a higher, sing-songy pitch. "We all know how much Serge loves to chit-chat, isn't that right Serge?"

Serge was still flushed but had stopped coughing, a thread of saliva dangling from his lower lip. He looked sideways at Bobby with the light going out of his eyes, like clouds moving over the sun.

My lunch break during middle shift is at 8:30 at night, after we get our residents back to their rooms from the dining hall. In the heart of winter: This means it's long after dark by the time I clock out for lunch. Oftentimes I spend my break sitting inside the cab of my truck listening to the classical music station, opting not to sit in the company of the other carers in the fluorescent glow of the break room. I find it too depressing to stay in there. It was pouring rain the other night when I came out, and I stood around the corner from the dumpsters under the eave to stay out

of the deluge. I watched the drops falling unevenly across the orange halo of a street lamp and remembered the way my old room stayed lit through the night by a streetlight, which cast little bars of copper light across the comforter of the queen size bed I shared with Sam and Kerbin.

One night in that room I awoke to the sound of my parents shouting over each other and the sight of my brothers both upright in the bed beside me. Sam had his palms pressed to his face, as if he would clap them over his ears at any moment. Kerbin sucked the thumb of the same hand that clutched his favorite, ragged blanket, looking mostly unconcerned with the violent sounds coming from the outside room and probably just content to have an excuse to be awake with his big brothers. The bedroom door was open and light from the hallway illuminated the floor near the foot of our bed. My mother's voice cracked like a whip in the kitchen and we heard my dad trying to laugh her off.

"Is that what you think it means to be a man," she asked hoarsely, "being selfish and mean and petty?"

"Give me a fucking break Wendy."

"You're selfish!"

"Why don't you take a look in the mirror?"

It was the most awful thing to listen to – they both sounded like fools. I climbed to the edge of the bed, letting my bare feet reach the floor, then twisted around to look at my little brothers. Sam wore his concern on his face. Kerbin gazed at me over his tiny knuckle. "This has got to stop," I said, "and it's going to take a covert operation to stop it."

Kerbin hopped from the bed and

pressed in behind me as I slid the closet door open and lifted the lid off of our wooden toy trunk, and Sam came over reluctantly. The first thing I withdrew was an Indian headdress with a full crown of neon blue and orange and pink feathers protruding from a white pleather headband emblazoned with pueblo Indian patterns and tasseled with red plastic thread. I formed it as best I could in my hands and set it atop Kerbin's small head, pulling it snugly across his brow. Next I turned up a black cowboy belt with a holstered toy revolver dangling from a loop. I hoisted it up and told Sam to put it on. By the time Sam fastened the gun belt around his waist, Kerbin was hopping from foot to foot with his brow furrowed and Sam started to lighten up, despite the escalating sound of our mom and dad's argument from the hallway.

"Okay Sergeant Samuel, Corporal Kerby, you men have been chosen for a top secret recon mission," I said, cocking a rusted toy shotgun and looking between them with my eyebrows raised.

"Do you accept?"

They looked at each other and smiled.

"HQ said you two were the best there is. I just hope they were right."

We sneaked up the hallway in file. As we rounded the corner into the dark corridor between the hallway and the front room I slowed at the terrible pitch of my mother's voice, as she berated him viciously and he became silent. The kitchen light illuminated the wall in front of us and strange shadows were playing against it. I turned to tell my brothers to wait and found they hadn't made it any further than the edge of the hallway, where Sam

huddled against the wall and Kerbin was again sucking his thumb.

The sound of furniture crashing made my heart quicken as I peeked into the kitchen. I saw first the chair strewn sideways on the wood floor and then, above it, my mother trying to hold the telephone away from my father, whose brown skin was covered in a sheen that reflected the overhead kitchen light. They were both still wearing their dark work clothes and they looked like they were dancing, my father's right hand guiding my mom from side to side in front of him, the coiled telephone cord wagging out-of-control between them. For a moment she clung defiantly and shouted "nine-one-one" at the receiver, but then, with a singular, terrific motion, he whipped the receiver across her cheek and she flung to the floor at his feet. I sprung from the shadows and screamed, "Stop!"

Slowly my father's eyes, dark and devoid of reason, settled on me, the telephone clutched in his still elevated hand. I looked down at my feet and dropped to my knees, sobbing. The toy shotgun slid off my thighs and onto the rug. He exited through the garage door without a word.

The next thing I remember is my mother lying in bed with us, her arm across Kerbin and Sam, saying in a low voice – "Shh, it's alright now..." Until the startling flash of red and blue lights reflected epileptic against the edge of the bedroom window, captivating us all.

The next morning my mother woke me early to ask if I wanted to come with her to pick up dad. The traces of cigarette smell on her fingers and the purple, crescent shaped bruise under her eye were

proof that the night before had really happened. I rode with her in my father's truck to the jail in downtown Mesa, wondering what she was feeling as she looked at the road, her hands set firmly at ten and two on the steering wheel.

My father appeared from dark glass doors and approached casting a long shadow over the cement, looking old. The truck filled with the smell of his dried sweat as he got in. I settled into the bench behind the front seats and watched the milky sunlight bending shadows across the dash, stealing glimpses of my father from the rear view mirror. He said nothing to us the whole drive home. After a short time I lay back in the wedged space behind the front seats and imagined I was in the cargo bay of a train traveling to a far off city on the coast, and nobody knew I was there. I enjoyed this. But I'd seen the look in my father's hooded eyes, and it scared me; those black eyes in the mirror said whatever had happened last night to cause all this trouble wasn't only my parents' concern. We'd all betrayed him somehow, and there was nothing that could change that now.

The day I was reprimanded officially for my relationship with Serge, I'd been so struck by it as ridiculous that in my reaction I risked losing my job. Bobby and the rest of the veteran carers had an eye on me already for a series of minor slip ups that occurred early on in my employment. Bobby referred to these as "strikes," and warned me against their accumulation.

These errs on my part all seemed somehow attached to the special appreciation I had developed for Serge, as I

often felt inclined to do more for him than was required of me as his carer. For example, Serge liked to consider himself a politically savvy guy, but he suffered from memory loss, so he often requested that I write information down on a notepad or calendar so he would remember things come election season. But when one of my other residents, Number 28, Glenda H., fell out of her walker on her way from the bathroom to her bedroom and Bobby found me in Serge's room jotting down the date of a televised town hall meeting on his notepad during this minor crisis, that was strike one.

Strike two came even more casually. I'd noticed Serge's many posters of arctic landscapes and one day decided to bring him a book by Jack London. Bobby happened to be passing in the hallway as I read Serge an excerpt from *Call of the Wild*. He entered silently and clapped shut the book right between my hands and began pulling Serge's shoes off, preparing him for bed while lecturing me about how I needed to learn how to "hop to it." Serge stuttered in my defense but Bobby paid no attention to him. I shelved the book and apologized as Bobby pulled down Serge's pants and began changing him. Despite Serge's inability to muster a single coherent sentence in protest, he had the last word, in a way, by farting loudly in Bobby's face as he was rolled against the wall having Depends wedged under his naked ass. Serge hukked a few times about this vindictive gesture and Bobby shook his head and said "fine," then pushed the Depends into my chest as he left the room.

Strike three I'll admit did involve some greater fault of mine outside of inexperience and absent-mindedness.

Once again I was in Serge's room, this time helping him through his exercise routine. For this, I held steady one end of a rubber resistance band while Serge, gripping the other end, pulled the band as far over his head as he could. Serge's face got extremely intense during these workouts, as I think they represented to him a rare opportunity for self-improvement in the confinements of Sholly. On this occasion Serge, with his general tendency to get fixated on things, wouldn't let go of the exercise band after his twenty minutes of exercise were up. I was very conscious of the amount of time I was spending in room 12, because of my two strikes, so I demanded that Serge turn over the exercise band promptly after his allotted twenty minutes of exercise were up, but he just kept tugging at the exercise band, red-faced and wide-eyed. If not for his crippled state I imagine Serge would have been a formidable man – he had a long reach and thick wrists – and in hindsight I probably should have just left the exercise band with him and left the room. Instead, my temper flared and I began an attempt to pry it from him as he leaned awkwardly away from me, stuttering in protest. The way I was thinking at the time, I was doing Serge a favor and he was trying to take advantage of my friendliness, so I was taking a stand.

But Bobby came upon me in this petulant condition, which of course resulted in another condescending lecture moments later in the hallway outside of Serge's room. I'm sure now these talks were as embarrassing for Bobby as they were for me.

Bobby shook his head and pushed his glasses up over his tiny eyes, ignoring

the fact that Number 22, Betty Mae, had taken my hand and was staring straight at him as he gave me the spiel. Making a show of his reluctance he informed me that we'd have to talk off the clock about these "incidents" that had been occurring. After we'd agreed on a time to meet, I walked Betty Mae back to her room where I sat her down in a plush recliner and turned on her TV, which seemed to be tuned permanently to garbled Betty-Boop cartoons. She clutched my hand tighter as I tried to withdraw it from her grip to go back to work, and she looked up at me with her mouth open as if to speak. Then, slowly, she drew her mouth closed. It seemed the closest Betty Mae ever came to regular life anymore was to become momentarily aware that something had slipped her mind, before retreating into a blank stare. "It's all right Betty," I said, patting her hand, "everything is going to be okay."

Looking at this woman whose personality had long since left her made me think of my baby-sitter growing up, Catherine, who would probably be about Betty Mae's age by now. Growing up the son of two professional parents, Catherine did a lot of the heavy lifting with the parenting of us boys. She was the closest thing we had to a Grandma, even if our parents did pay her to be there. A Louisiana woman of the Greatest Generation, Catherine called the couch the *davenport*, the refrigerator the *Frigidaire*, and when my father wasn't around, she sometimes referred to him as an *upstanding Oriental*. As kids we never had any idea what the hell she was talking about. I wondered now what ever happened to her -- if she was still alive, if

maybe she was in some place just like this, being looked after somewhere by an anonymous, part-time caregiver like me.

On my way out of Betty Mae's room that day I noticed for the first time a ten year old newspaper clipping hanging on her door with a headline reading *Local Culinary Expert Brings World Recipes to Oregon*, and a picture of a younger Betty Mae standing outside in the grass, smiling genuinely into the camera, holding a tray of foody things -- her voluminous gray hair back lit by broken sunlight. Scanning the article I saw lines like "during her frequent island hops through the Caribbean" and "no stranger to the Andes." Apparently, Betty Mae had been an epic, traveling connoisseur in her day. I felt a smile spread across my face at this tidbit of Resident Number 22's history.

The day I came into work early for my meeting with Bobby the sky was so low that the black poplars were practically getting their tops snagged in it. I followed Bobby into the meeting room and was surprised to see the owner, Claire Sholly, and the head nurse sitting at the table, neither of whom I'd seen since my interview. I sat down at the opposite end of the table from the three of them, and promptly stopped myself from fiddling with the fake-wood finish splaying at the table's edge.

"So as you already know, John, the reason you're here is you've been a little absent minded, and you've had some lapses," Mrs. Sholly said, "and as a result of these lapses you've been given three strikes. Anytime a member of care staff gets three strikes, they wind up here." She slapped her hand down on the table and

smiled. As far as I could ever tell, Mrs. Sholly liked me. And anyway, they couldn't fire me – it would cost them too much, and that's what these matters usually come down to.

"What we're concerned about," Bobby said, "are close relationships between care staff and residents. It leads to problems." He laughed at himself to assure me he knew this to be true.

Mrs. Sholly continued:

"Your role as carers is to ensure the health and comfort of the residents, not to develop relationships. They will use that. Trust us, we've seen it. Too many times."

"It's not that we don't want you to be friendly. Friendliness is a crucial part of this job. But actual friendships can lead to un-guarded conversation, and conversation can lead to gossip, and gossip is as dangerous as germs around here."

The owner, the silent nurse and the head carer all chuckled quietly and nodded together at this last insight.

"We have a special function as carers," Bobby said after a moment, "we just have to be careful of the type of bond we're forming with residents. You understand that, right?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah," I said, "I think I do."

"Good, because you're doing a fine job otherwise – you just can't let Number 12 control your ability to be professional."

I understood that sentimentality didn't belong in the workplace, but I also had come to understand that most of my residents had been foisted onto Sholly because their families couldn't or wouldn't take care of them anymore. Serge in particular had nobody. He hadn't been outside of Sholly in over two months. His

parents had years ago passed the age when they came to visit him here regularly. Sure, somebody paid his tab, but without visitors, he never saw anyone outside of Sholly residents and Sholly employees. His intelligence was unique among the other residents and most of the entertainment set up at Sholly was for vegetables or those with the mental capacity of a three year old. Serge had nobody, and he was never going to have anybody again, and if I wasn't permitted to actually care about him then nobody else in this fucked-up world would.

I knew all I had to do was keep my mouth shut as everybody else nodded and got up and I'd still have my job, but suddenly I heard my own surprisingly resolute voice.

"But," I said with a thoughtful finger pointed skyward, "I take issue with the idea that there is a distinction between professionalism and basic, human goodness." The three of them stared back at me halfway out of their seats. They waited, petrified, as I stroked my chin, considering my thoughts. I wanted to take Serge on a walk outside, among the countryside. If I could be called in to work off the clock for a hollow meeting like this, then I should be able to come here off the clock and do something real. I realized suddenly I would take the walk with Serge, or my time at Sholly Residential Center was finished.

In the years after the divorce, I finished high school and applied for out-of-state colleges while living at my mother's house. Not once did I stop in to see him, though I passed his house every weekday on my commute to school. I heard from

Kerbin that he'd bought a motorcycle and stopped cleaning up the house. Any other dad might have called and left messages or showed up to one of my track meets to have a word, but not my dad. For two years he remained silent and out of my life. I came to suppose he felt like I did: tired of being this way we had always been. Tired of being my family.

Now we live a thousand miles apart and speak only slightly more often, maybe twice a year when we happen to remember each others' birthdays. No fury exists between us anymore. It isn't either of our birthdays today, but I pick up my cell phone from the twill seat in my truck and dial his number, certain he won't pick up. Fast moving clouds pass from the sun and the pastoral scene becomes momentarily brilliant. The sun shines like an old friend's miraculous return and glazes the wet highway in light and warms my shoulders through the windshield. An automated recording tells me the voice mail-box of this number is full, please try again later, and disconnects me. I pocket my phone and take a moment to marvel at the naked tree tops bedazzled in countless beads of light.

I enter through the front door in plain clothes and the foyer is full of the usual sounds of Sholly: electric wheelchair motors droning and two dozen televisions all playing at once. In the quieter space of room 12, I find Bobby adjusting Serge's baseball cap. Bobby stands up with his hands on his hips and then sees me in the doorway. "He's all set," he says, and I thank him. Serge has on a Sedona-red wool coat. In his lap is a leather fanny pack containing tissues, a compass and a disposable camera. I've got to give Bobby props – he's dressed Serge in some solid outdoor gear. Serge smiles at me, slouched brightly in his wheelchair, and continues to smile as we sign out at the nurse's station. I push him through the double doors at the front of Sholly Residential Center out, among the china blue puddles and distant green fields, into the crisp December day.

Ian is a senior majoring in English. He has been previously published in Unbound. Ian placed first place in Fiction in this year's Kidd Tutorial writing competition.



BRAEDEN COX
LOST MOUNTAINS
digital amalgamation
18 x 18"

*Braeden is a senior majoring in Digital Art.
She has been previously published in Unbound.*

PARKING LOT

— KYLE LONG

falling rain
hushes the night sounds
with whispers

black asphalt
takes in the moonlight
but shares none

faded lines
once perfect and white
time-worn raw

wind passes
lost creaking plastic
shopping carts

water trickles
unclean, unwanted
into drain

puddle forms
spreads oil-slick rainbow
no one sees

dark storefront
unlit since midnight
yearns for life

wet cardboard
held back gravity
now is weak

green dumpster
gladly takes refuse
then ignored

single light
warm and flickering
left wasted

old receipts
damp paper mache
on street's curb

in planter
plastic palm tree waves
silent goodbye

MR. DERNING, WE LOVE YOU

CHAD HUNIU

Distraction Disorder

February 2, 2023. 2:47 PM

Below, behind the mirrored windows of Führer Darning's NETAN, inc. tower, a city is bustling and chugging and gurgling and gasping and crumbling. Los Angeles is whimpering, People of the Internet. I wonder if Charles Darning can hear her moan?

In our city, machine-washed, waxed convertibles--Porsche Boxter 999s and Mercedes-Benz 750SLQs and Chevrolet Corvette Z90Xs, gas-guzzling material cocks--leave you whiplashed from smog and the memory of your empty pockets; bums, with missing teeth and cardboard signs asking God to bless you, beg for money halfheartedly from freeway offramp meridians; drunken 20-year-olds, fresh out of college, howl about failed relationships and the sorry, suicidal state of the universe as they stumble out of bumping clubs and bars; coffee-drinkers sip coffee in thousands and thousands of Starbucks Internet Pavilions, saying nothing, seeing only the inside of their netGog screens; and trendy, young couples enjoy each other's company for short periods of time as they peruse vintage clothing stores, trying on old costumes and t-shirts, making believe they don't actually live in the age that they do -- The Age of netGogs.

It is the same story Charles Darning

has read a thousand times in D.D.'s blog. But Darning always makes a point of reading each post; he likes to see how over-the-top his most fierce critic, an anonymous blogger who calls himself Distraction Disorder, will go. This isn't the first time D.D. has referred to him as a contemporary of Adolf Hitler's. Darning reads on, touching a finger to the sensor-pad on the side of his mirrored netGog-SilverDeluxes in order to scroll down the webpage.

With rumors of yet another damn model of netGogs on the way -- the gluttonous, capitalistic, suitably-named Golds -- netGogs are blinding us more than ever. People of the Internet, why do we continue to willingly accept Darning and co.'s electronic, stupidtizing blindfolds to the problems of the world, to the problems of LA?

Once, we used glasses to correct our vision, to clarify what we were seeing. Now we use goggles to divert our attention, distract us from reality, muddy our ability to see what is really there.

Fight for 20/20 vision! Go outside and play.

DD out.

"Mr. Darning. Mr. Darning. Sir?"

"Oh, sorry, Jon," says Darning, minimizing Distraction Disorder's blog and his YouNet page. "What's going on?" With all the web pages minimized on his semi-

transparent netGog lens-screen, Darning can see a fairly good image of Jon, overlapped by Darning's colorful desktop background, wearing his work pair of netGog-Silvers and sitting on the opposite side of Darning's metallic desk. Darning scratches his bristly silver head. His hair looks perpetually combed, though he doesn't use gel or pomade, nor perpetually comb it.

"This, sir," says Jon proudly. He lays the golden pair of NETAN, inc. internet-goggles on Darning's desk. It glints in the sun pouring through the tinted windows. Darning must look like a movie star to Jon. The nice gray suit, unbuttoned collar, no tie; the loose, easy demeanor, as if he isn't trying at all, as though all he does, all he has to do, is lounge the good life in his Silver Palace in the Los Angeles sky.

"Brand spanking new, Boss. The netGog-Golds," says Jon, his mirrored netGog-Silvers covering his eyes from ear to ear. "They are beautiful, sir. Really beautiful."

"They are," agrees Darning. "They are."

Bzzzzz, goes the intercom from Darning's netGog earbud. Darning pushes a small button on the side of his goggles to answer the call. "Yeah?"

"Nels is here," says Bessie, Darning's overweight secretary, a black woman who always wears bright red cardigans too small for her. Since she started working as Darning's secretary seven years ago, she has kept a tight ship around the office and been nothing less to Darning than a masterful secretary-angel descended from heaven. An angel who does all his paperwork for him and takes good care of the office when he isn't around. "Says you

called him in?"

"Yeah, send him in, Bess." Darning hits the button again.

"Jon," says Darning. "Jon. Jon. Jon!"

"Oh, sorry, sir. I was just reading this article that popped up and looking up what the exact definition of 'amnesia' is. Some doctor is saying netGogs are the cause of an apparent increase in amnesiac cases across the country."

"I'm sure it's all very interesting, Jon, but I've got somebody coming in right now. You mind?"

"Oh, right right. Well, I'll clear off then, get back to work. You want to keep the Golds with you?"

"Sure. Yeah. Course."

Jon trips on one of the chair legs as he leaves but catches himself. He walks through the door, fiddling with a few buttons on the side of his netGogs as he passes Nels Lankous, the janitor.

"Nels," says Darning.

"Hello, Mr. Darning."

"You know you can call me Charlie, Nels. How's your day going?"

"Good, I guess."

"That's good. How's that girlfriend of yours, my little niece?"

"Michelle's pretty good. Working a lot."

"Good good. Fantastic." Darning scratches his chin. Nels, with his light blonde hair and bony nose, the Cro-Magnon brow ridge, his skinny athleticism. Except for his small green eyes, beady and hawklike, Nels reminds Darning a lot of his younger self, before he went prematurely gray in his late 20s.

"Oh, how are the SilverDeluxes working out for you and Michelle? I didn't

know if we had all the bugs worked out with that model when Christmas came around.”

“Yeah. Thanks for those.”

“Oh, it’s no problem, Nels. My pleasure.”

Nels eyes dart to Darning’s right, then slowly meander over Darning’s head before refocussing on Darning.

“Sir. Why is it you’ve called me in today? I mean, I don’t work Tuesdays, you know.”

“Oh right, yeah,” begins Darning, minimizing his email and a few other web-links that have popped up--mostly business commentaries, the Dow Jones, other stock exchange news. He takes off his SilverDeluxes and places them next to the Golds; Nels sighs quietly. Darning smiles affectionately at the two pairs sitting side by side on his desk, then at Nels. Michelle, his niece, made a good choice with Nels and he is only too happy to help them, giving Nels a job and steady wage so they can pay the bills. He even gave Nels a pay raise last month just to give the young couple a little more wiggle room, a little extra cash to throw around, to live a little while they still can. Plus, Nels’ jazz band--Nels is the drummer, or maybe the trombonist--hasn’t been getting as many gigs anymore.

“Look, Nels. I know janitorial work is not mighty tough and all, and that you’re certainly a bright kid. But, the thing is, company policy says you’ve got to wear your work-assigned pair of netGog-Silvers while cleaning the building, or at the very least while you clean the netWalls and some of the other, more finicky machines.”

Nels glances to Darning’s right again.

One day, perhaps, Nels will really begin to take an interest in the company, in NETAN, inc., and discover the fiery ambition inside him to succeed and create something in this world. And Darning will be only too happy to promote him, to see him rise, and maybe one day, when Nels is ready, to take the mantle from him.

Nels looks at Darning, puzzled but silent. Perhaps he never knew that Darning had such blue eyes, or that his eyes were set so deep into his skull under a prominent Cro-Magnon brow ridge, much like his own. Nels must have seen him without his netGogs a few times, thinks Darning. Darning tries to remember the Christmas party he and his wife threw at their three-story Art Deco-style mansion in the Hollywood Hills. Was he wearing his netGogs for the whole party? He can’t remember.

“There are very specific instructions regarding the way you clean those machines, and the netGogs are there to guide you through it all. To simplify. Make it easy, you know? Nels?”

“Oh, sorry,” says Nels.

“That’s all right, Nels. So you see, you’ve only got to wear the netGogs during working hours. That’s all. No harm, no foul on these last few weeks. What do you say? Think you can handle it?”

“So you want me to wear the Gogs to wipe down a few screens?”

“Well, what about the machines you have to take apart to clean?”

“I’ve been doing that for four months now,” says Nels. “I’ve memorized how to take them apart and put them back together. Backwards and forwards. But if you want me to wear the goggles, I mean, no big deal, I guess I will.”

Alright, Nels, thinks Mr. Darning. Thata boy. You see? You're not that stubborn after all. You could make something of yourself in this company. Play the game. Get ambitious.

"Fantastic, Nels. I apologize for calling you in for this on such short notice, but it was just one of those things that had to be taken care of. Jon was getting all, you know."

Nels nods.

"Anyways, you're a hell of a smart kid. You've probably got a good father, don't you?"

"Sure. He was alright."

Nels glances to Darning's right, this time Darning following his gaze directly to the minibar. Three bottles of Glenfiddich scotch whiskey and four crystal glasses on top. One bottle is half-full.

"You want a drink?" asks Darning. "You like scotch much?"

"Uh," says Nels. "Uh, no. That's alright."

Nels rises to leave.

"Oh! Nels, don't forget to tell Michelle about my birthday party next week. I'll be expecting the both of you there."

"Ok." Nels leaves the office.

Bzzzzz, goes the intercom faintly. Bzzzzzz. Bzzzzzzzz. There is a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"Uh, Boss? You alright in there?"

"Yeah, just fine, Bess. Thanks. Would you hold all my calls and cancel all the rest of my appointments for today?"

"Sure. No problem."

"Fantastic."

Mr. Darning grabs the new Golds from his desk and puts them on a shelf

above the minibar. He pours himself a scotch on the rocks, Glenfiddich, aged 18 years, lots of ice. He swishes it around in the glass as he stares down at the city, the netWalls lining the sidewalks like bus stop billboards, playing advertisements or showing highlights from SportsZone. A few are surrounded by small huddles of high school kids, betting on football games, perhaps, or maybe the Lakers' Playoff chances. On the other side of the street, he spots Nels by the Chase Bank building looking at a netWall. Nels forces his way into the high school betting ring that surrounds the netWall and throws a few folded bills into the center. The glass in Darning's hand begins to perspire. He finishes it.

At home, Darning nurses a scotch on the rocks, Glenfiddich, aged 18 years, lots of ice. His wife, twelve years younger than Darning, with short brown hair and thin, yet seductive lips, drinks vodka martinis. They never had children. But it wasn't something they could help. She always said she didn't want any, anyway.

They drink in separate rooms, watching TV or stumbling through the internet inside their individual netGog-SilverDeluxes.

When they were married in the luxurious Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills nine years ago, she was 29 and he was 41. Soon after the marriage, Darning convinced his young wife to have a baby. She quit using birth control and, though they tried and tried for over a year, she wouldn't become pregnant. Darning was furious and made an appointment with an

obstetrician. After countless tests confirming the fertility of Darning's wife, there was only one more test to run. Darning sunk in his chair when the doctor told him that he, and not his wife, was the one who was sterile.

"What do you want for dinner?" asks Darning's wife, walking into Darning's home office. She wears custom netGog-SilverDeluxes that are painted light pink and engraved with a row of roses on the top and bottom of the mirrored lens-screen.

"I don't care," says Darning.

"Ok. I'll order in sushi."

"Again?"

"I thought you said you didn't care."

"Fine. Whatever."

"I'm going out in a few hours."

"Oh?"

"I'm going out with Cassandra and some friends for some drinks."

"Isn't Cassandra pregnant?"

"She just had the baby, a son, last week."

"Oh. Shouldn't she be resting and with the baby and not barhopping her way down Sunset Strip like a damn teenybopper?"

"If you care so much, why don't you give her a call? Tell her the Great, childless Darning has a few words of advice for her. I'm sure she is very lost and would love some advice from you."

"Shut up."

"Fuck you, Charles." Darning's wife struts away, swinging her ass in Darning's face.

Of course, thinks Darning. Cassandra, of all the people in Los Angeles, should be granted a son.

After Darning was informed of his

sterility, things went steadily down hill between he and his wife. She apparently found him less of a man for being unable to create an offspring, even though she never wanted kids in the first place. And adoption was out the question. She wouldn't hear a thing about it from Darning. Then, she started sleeping around with Trent Greene, Darning's old business partner, the only other co-creator of netGogs. But by that point Darning already felt hardly married to her at all. So little did he care that you couldn't even call it cheating. There was no sting, just a vague numbness.

Darning had first met Trent, who was two years younger than him, when they were in graduate school together at UCLA – Darning for Business, Trent for Product Design and Computer Engineering. They had been drinking buddies then and would hit the hip clubs and bars every weekend, always hunting for gorgeous LA one-night stands. Trent would always joke that Darning was going to knock up some annoying, stupid chick one day and be doomed forever since he refused to where condoms, preferring the pullout method. But Darning never did. Of course, he didn't know then that he was sterile and was always concerned that he might forget to pull out and his life would actually be over. He thought he was terribly lucky.

Shortly before Darning finished his Masters degree, at a bar one night in the middle of week, Trent drew up the first model of netGogs. They were very drunk and didn't return to the idea again for six years. Darning stayed in Los Angeles and got a job with a Electronics company called NETAN, inc., and, after he finished his Masters, Trent moved to Houston to work

for NASA. When Darning called Trent one night, six years later, telling him that he better take the first plane back to LA, he had the forgotten penned drawing of “the Internet Goggle” clasped in his hand.

Trent flew back to LA, having sketched a whole notebook of further designs and another notebook laying out, in detail, how the contraption would and could work.

Darning presented the idea to the president of NETAN and the idea immediately took off. Darning made a point of writing the contract with the company so that NETAN couldn’t screw him or Trent over by stealing their product from under them, or by splitting the profits unevenly between the two and the company. But he was sly, as he had learned to be in his six years with NETAN. Lost in the ocean of deceitful, vague, business contract wording, Darning allotted himself far more power than Trent. It was all in the fine print.

When Darning and Trent had risen to the top of NETAN, officially taking control of the entire company, Darning easily pushed Trent out of the business. Trent threatened to sue, so Darning bought him out, generously. Though Trent would never have to work a day in his life again, he remained bitter. When Darning married at 41, Trent quickly began making his move of revenge. He was surprised to find it only took two years to do the job, a job that is still going on to this day. Darning has never been able to get himself to care about their affair.

Still in his office, waiting for the sushi delivery, Darning opens up his YouNet and goes to his event list. He opens up the event marked, “Mr. Darning’s 50th

B-day Bash,” and mindlessly scrolls through guest list.

He exits out the YouNet birthday event page and turns on the TV, which streams live in Bronzes and Silvers and SilverDeluxes. He switches the channel from FOX Wall Street coverage in HD to CNN where a wrinkly Anderson Cooper reports live from the scene of a massive Los Angeles pile-up. Another accident. Another netGog accident.

Darning calls the office, Bessie answers. They are closing up shop. He tells them about the news report. Bessie tells him that they’ve all been watching and not to worry. They have already got the ball rolling on countermeasures to the problem and have called the lawyers. It’ll be handled like the last few freeway pileup situations, the company coming off completely clean.

He pours himself another scotch, straight, Glenfiddich, aged 18 years, with no ice since he’d have to go to the kitchen for it, and sips it slowly.

“Boss.”

“Yeah, Bess?”

“Sir, I think that kid Nels, your niece’s boytoy or whatever. I think he’s drunk.”

“Bess, that’s absurd.”

“I’m sorry, Boss. But this isn’t really the first time, you know.”

“I mean, he’s only twenty! Wait, really?”

“No, he’s twenty-one. And yeah. Maybe you should talk to him.”

“Alright,” says Darning. “Send him in.”

Nels walks into Darning's office, his gray regulation one-piece janitor suit unbuttoned halfway. On a patch on the front it says, "NELS Lankous: janitor." On the back, in bright red and blue block letters, it says, "NETAN, inc. / netGog-Silvers: Don't get bored, get fried." It looks like Nels has been working hard, thinks Darning, noticing the sweat stain on the exposed part of Nels undershirt and that he isn't wearing his assigned netGog-Silvers.

"Nels," says Darning. "You're not wearing your Silvers."

"Oh yeah. Must have forgot 'em, Mr. Darning, sir. I'm real sorry."

Nels is drunk, realizes Darning, and that sweat stain is not sweat, it's gin. Darning can smell the acidic, piney scent of the juniper berries from across the table.

"That's alright, Nels. Hey, why don't you take the day off? Go and take Michelle out somewhere nice on the Strip?"

"Uh, alright then. Thanks, Mr. Darning. Guess I'll see you tomorrow, or wait, uh, Friday. Yeah."

"Hey, you take the bus to work, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Oh. I was, well, just remembering what it was like when I used to take the bus to school, to UCLA," says Darning. "Back in the day." He points backward with his thumb toward the tinted windows.

"Oh."

"Well, see you later, Nels."

The next week, on Darning's fiftieth birthday, Nels shows up to work again

drunk. Wasted drunk, black-out drunk. The poor kid could barely even stand. When Darning fired him, Nels only said that Darning was a creepy, old man.

Actually he had said much more. His exact words, as he pronounced them, were, "Yer justa old cuh-reep, Mister Dernin' sir. Uncle Chaarrrrlie. Dirty, old faggit man tryin' to take advan-nage of me proolly! Thas what you been doin' bein' so nice to me, *huh?* Fuck! Givin' me this job and shit, *huh?* *Huh?* You're the fuckin' reason my fuckin' jazz band is fucked. Nobody comes to our fuckin' shows anymore. *They don't have to anymore.* Fuckin' netGogs, pieces of shit. Come on Dernin' sir, Uncle Charlie, take a looksies in the mirror. Oh, butcha can't, can yuh? *Huh?* Cuz you got 'em on yer face! Haw haw haw! Oh no..."

Nels preceded to puke across Darning's desk, spoiling Darning's SilverDeluxes. Luckily, the Golds were on a shelf out of Nels' line of fire.

Before Nels passed out and the building's security guards took him home, he said, "howz that for-uh BEE-day present, Dernin' sir?"

That was earlier, only four hours ago.

Darning parks his black convertible Mercedes-Benz 750SLQ in front of the Hilton. Despite the hankering of the valet parking boy through the open window, he sits in his car, the motor still running, staring at the sparkling, new netGog-Golds lying silently to his right on the leather passenger seat. *I did this*, he thinks. *I did this to Nels. To everybody, didn't I? Maybe*

D.D. is right.

Finally, he grabs the damned, beautiful pair of golden goggles that represents all he has accomplished in sixteen years as president of NETAN, inc. and steps out of the car, tossing his keys to the valet. He has always ‘unveiled’ the new model of NETAN internet-goggles at his ‘surprise’ birthday party, thrown by his employees and wife at the Hilton downtown. He doesn’t know why he does it. His employees are the one’s who design and produce the damn things.

His dark gray suit, lightly pinstriped with lighter gray stripes that shimmer at the right angle, exaggerates how lean and tall and bony he is. He’s a handsome man, has always been considered so, told so, even when he went prematurely gray. But being handsome, Dering has often thought, doesn’t automatically make one a functioning male specimen full of good sperm, the fertile kind that can knock-up a woman and yield a child, a son, or even a daughter, now, does it? Later tonight, as he stands in the middle of the dance floor of his party, he will again arrive at this revelation.

He passes through the lobby, the golden goggles swinging from his middle finger, where one of the receptionists notices him. “Hello, Mr. Dering!” he says. “Happy Birthday! You’re looking as handsome as ever. I trust you know where to go.” The receptionist smiles at him plastically behind a pair of mirrored netGog-Bronzes. Dering walks on.

The door to the Grand Ballroom is cracked open. He can see all his employees, wandering about with their goggles on, meandering and colliding, some drinking, some eating, many dancing.

They all wear the office-standard, netGog-Silvers, which they all had a hand in designing, programing, advertising or, at the very least, distributing. He scans what the room. By the bar in the corner, Dering sees his wife mindlessly fingering her short brown hair as she drinks vodka martinis and flirts with Trent Greene. Both have their mirrored netGogs pulled far over their eyes. Dering doesn’t care.

He hovers a minute longer before the cracked door, then lets out a deep, collapsing sigh. He puts on the goggles, pulling down the gold-mirrored lenses, but refrains from switching them on, and pushes through the doorway into the fiesta-themed party.

It is loud inside, perhaps too loud. But nobody seems to notice. Red and green streamers, ruffled and papery, hang from the walls. There are sombreros at the center of each table, each turned upside down and filled with colorful flowers. Mr. Dering makes his way through the crowd to the middle of the dance floor without so much as a “Hello!” for nearly five minutes. It is only when Bessie runs into Jon in a sluggish head-on collision that Dering’s presence is at all noticed.

Dering cocks his head back toward the ceiling and stares at a hundred red and green balloons gathered in a net as Jon fumbles with his netGog-Silvers in his big, clumsy hands.

“Mr. Dering!” yells Jon. “Um, SURPRISE! Everybody, everybody! Hey! Cut the music! Our golden-begoggled Guest of Honor has arrived!”

There is an awkward rumble through the crowd when the music is turned down to a low simmer. A booming, enthusiastic and deep male voice pulsates

from the ballroom monitors. It says, "Alright, folks. You know what to do. Let's give a big shout and round of applause for our beloved birthday boy, the man who brought the netGog craze to life in America, the one and only, Charles Bryant Darning! On the count of three: One! Two! Three!"

"SURPRISE!" the room yells almost in unison, which they follow with cheerful shrieks and woos for joy and for the life of their boss, Mr. Charles Bryant Darning. The flock of red and green balloons descends breezily from the ceiling as everybody yells "Happy Birthday!" and "We love you, Boss!" and the music picks back up.

"Happy fiftieth, Mr. Darning!" says one of his employees. "Happy birthday, sir!" say a few more, each taking their turn to shake his hand from the incongruous, gyrating mush pot that has formed around the birthday boy.

"Happy fiftieth, Mr. Darning!" says a girl with short red hair and crimson lips who fumbles into him. "How do you feel?" He has never seen her before.

"Well, I feel like I'm not really here, to be honest," says Darning.

"Okay! Great!" says the girl. "I bet you are having a wonderful time! Love the new model, by the way. They're really stunning, really. Oh! Have you seen the viral vid that is going around the office? I'm watching it right now! It's to die for!" She attempts to give him a peck on his cheek, but misses and hits the lobe of his ear. She smiles cutely anyway, believing she has done exactly what she's set out to do, then laughs into the air and walks away. The kiss feels good and wet on his ear.

"Uncle Charlie!" The voice is sweet and crisp. Darning looks down.

"Michelle, hey!" he says, trying to be enthusiastic, but his shoulders slouch like dripping wax. If Michelle could see his eyes, she'd know how hard he is trying. "My little niece. I'm glad you came."

"Of course I did." She hugs him.

Michelle looks sweet in her short blue dress. Her long, bright blonde hair, a dyed area of pink behind her ear, shines. She has crisp, blue eyes like Darning's. They glisten.

"You look beautiful tonight," says Darning.

"Thank you, Uncle Charlie." Michelle smiles that big wide grin of hers, her teeth sparkling white. She gives her uncle another hug, a big one, squeezing him tight. "Happy Birthday." Her face is warm on his chest. "The Big Five-O," she says pulling away. "How's it feel?"

"You know...Or, well, I guess not."

She laughs and then says, "I'm so sorry about Nels."

"How's he doing?"

"He's sleeping it off right now. At our apartment. Says he doesn't remember a thing. I'm so sorry. He's so sorry, he apologizes profusely. I'm furious with him. I'm so sorry. He doesn't usually get like that. He deserved to be fired. You did the right thing."

"It's okay, Michelle. You know what. In a few days, talk to him. Tell him to come see me, that I'll consider giving him his job back if he's up to it."

"You really don't have to do that for him, Uncle Charlie."

"I know. But do what I said anyway."

She smiles that big wide grin of hers again. Of all his nieces, his sister's three girls, he's always liked Michelle, the eldest,

best. Darning smiles as she dances away, a frosty yellow-green margarita in her hand.

Everybody continues to stumble and collide and dance around him. His height allows him to scan the room easily. He looks back at the bar in the corner. His wife and Trent are gone.

Darning is handed three different drinks by three different people. He holds a vodka martini in his left hand, a whiskey and soda in his right, and a margarita in the middle. He drinks them all quickly and grabs someone else's drink, a scotch on the rocks. He drinks it and feels it warm his stomach first, then go to his head. Everything rushes to his head. It is overwhelming. The people around him like a mindless whirlpool, clumsy and fumbling about, running into one another, smiling and laughing behind their mirrored netGogs. He finishes the scotch and, from his anchored spot in the middle of the dance floor, he says, "You all are a fantastic kind of people, you know that?" He says it loudly, resolutely. "*Fantastic*. You're all fantastic and you know it!"

Nobody seems to hear him. It doesn't matter much to him; it doesn't matter much to them. He smiles. He turns on the netGog-Golds.

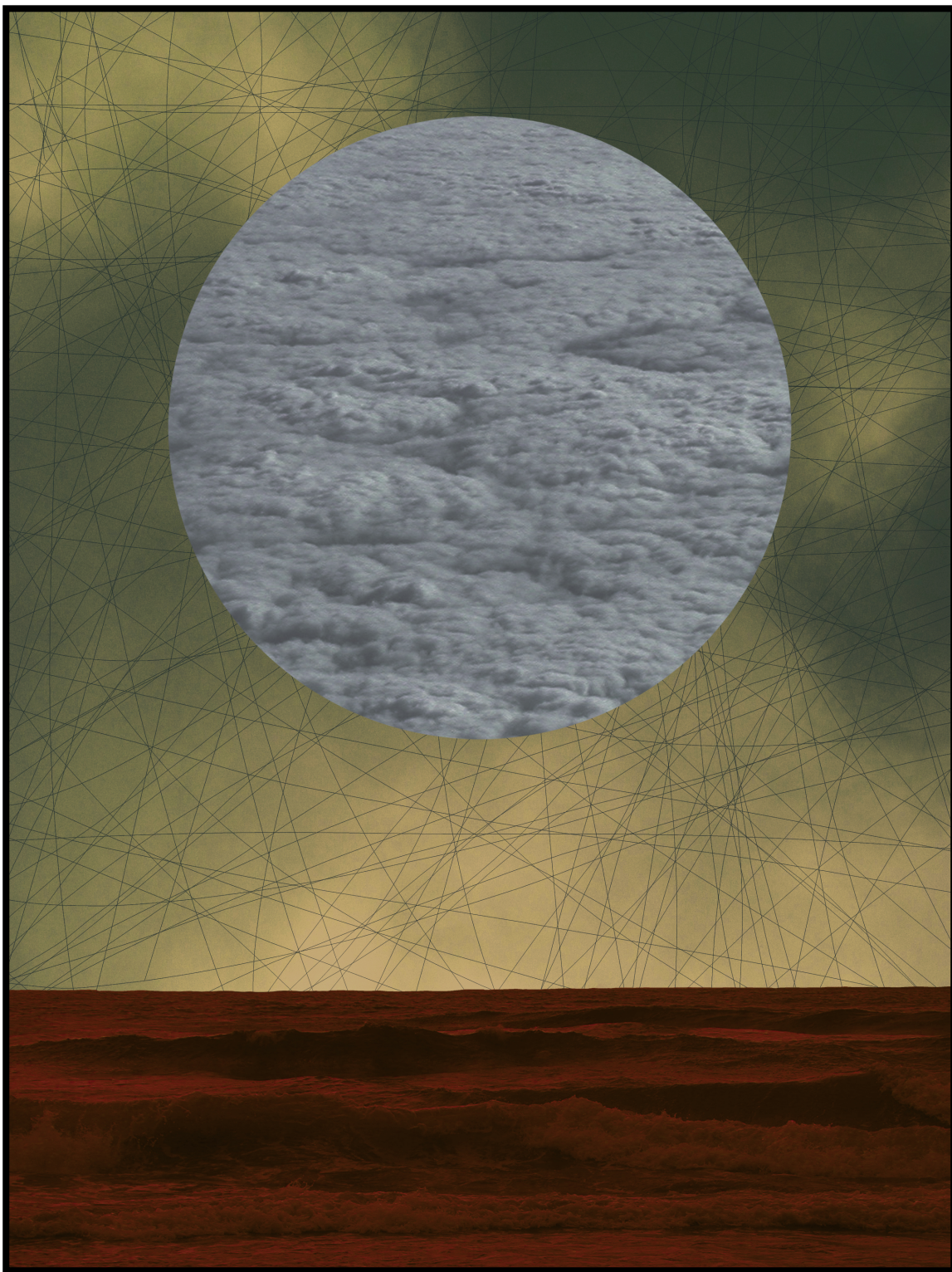
*Chad is sophomore majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*

CHRYSANTHEMUM SUMMER

You stained me, but I forgive you
for the blackberry juice that dripped down my legs,
tinting my new white shorts, unseen,
sweating behind a pale birch tree
while we played hide and seek in Cook Park.
I saw dust rising from the weight of my steps
on the trail, that morning I grew up.
The chrysanthemums tickled my nose
and the sweltering heat on my back
cooled by the time our sunset wade
into the lagoon in front of Apple Court
bathed us in pink light. My shorts burned, tainted,
but I did not look you in the eye.
And I did not want to tell the cascade of frogs
we caught that they live in a lie.
I now see the delicate chrysanthemums
—the way they fill the space of my palm—
that only haunt me now that you have gone.

— NOELLE PETROWSKI

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



BRAEDEN COX

THE SEA BELOW

digital amalgamation

18 x 24"

SHE-MOTH

— KIRSTEN GOULD

Galaxies rest between
the shoulder blades of a woman:
Nebulae of questions
unanswered swirl,
milky, intangible,
and out of her reach.
Her unborn children
play hide and seek
and fear the dark within
worlds that continually
expand and retract
as she inhales and exhales.
Novas, compasses for the lost,
which could guide
anyone home, leave her
dizzy and floundering
in her own solitude.
Moons, always objects
of her own affection,
ascend the vast pool
of opaque dreams.
With clumsy resolve,
she carries this cargo
in her desperate search
for illumination
and anti-gravity.

Even her tears enclose
the wings of a moth;
wings beating furiously,
madly desiring light.

Kirsten is a junior majoring in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing.



CHAD HUNIU

THE LAYERS OF FRANK, BROODING AT A PARTY

photography

*Chad's photography and fiction can be found
in Unbound's Spring and Winter issues.*

COURSE

OFF

— NICK DREYER

I'm waiting for this chick, Beth, to pick me up from the Beaverton shopping center to take me to Spokane. I'm sitting on my duffel bag. The contents: two dirty shirts, one pair of jeans, a towel, three sets of underwear, a nine millimeter pistol, not an insignificant amount of heroin pressed into a square brick but no socks. I always forget to bring socks.

Standing a few feet away from me in front of the liquor store is a man hugging himself and pacing back and forth, mumbling as he ricochets from one imaginary wall to another.

"Of course, Nancy," he says.

This dude is tweaking. Thank your lucky stars you didn't live that long, Jeremy.

"Of course, Nancy," the man says, twitching. "Of course." Aw shit, he's staring at me.

Crack-head asks, "Nancy?"

"Sorry," I tell him. "No Nancy here."

"Of course. Of course." He says. Shoo, cracky. Go on, g'it. He turns around and catches his reflection in the liquor store window. He asks himself if he's Nancy.

He obviously likes drugs. Do I sell him some heroin? Is there some sort of

ethical code I follow? How'd you go about it? Think it's sketchy to make a drug deal in broad daylight in front of a department store, Starbucks and Oregon state liquor vendor? People are buying shit anyway. Electronics, produce, clothing, morning coffee, whiskey, maybe some heinous intravenous opiates on the way out wouldn't—

"Are you Marcus?"

Ah. My ride has arrived in a new silver Prius hybrid. Fancy. Naïve. Perfect. We speak through her rolled down window.

I say, "Yep. Beth, right?"

"Right. That all you got?" She says pointing at my duffel bag.

"I pack light." Clothes, drugs and firearms. No socks. I jump up, grab my bag and offer her a bill through the window. "Gas money," I say.

She accepts the tenner and then looks at it and I swear to Christ she furrows her brow for a split second before she resumes her mask of nauseous cheerfulness. She says, "Thank you," and probably tries to mean it. She reminds me of an older version of your high school girlfriend, Jeremy. The freakish, thin one.

I say, "I know it's not much, but..."

"Oh no, don't worry about it," she says and I don't. I open the passenger-side door and sit down on the leather seat and set the bag at my feet. Dibs on shotgun. We pull out of the parking lot and I look at the side view mirror to see the dwindling image of the crack-addled man, still hugging himself, still bouncing back and forth and still agreeing with his ghost.

Then I show Beth my sincere gratitude.

I say, "Thank you SO much for

picking me up short notice,” laying it on thick, emphasizing all the right words. I say, “I didn’t have enough money for a bus.” This is true. I don’t know how to sell heroin. My bank account is empty. And travelling with hard drugs is probably difficult. All this is your fault.

Beth says, “No problem.” She tells me that she usually doesn’t offer rides on Craigslist. She tells me that she read in her horoscope to try new things, meet new people. She tells me that she’s starting a new chapter in her life and made a resolution to become a more open person.

She also clutches the steering wheel like a goddamn vice.

Beth asks, “So what do you do?” Good question.

I say, “I’ve been looking for work the past couple of months.” Beth gives me some variation of a sympathetic nod and I get the sense she’s never had much trouble in the money department—or if she did, she doesn’t remember it.

Beth says, “Yeah, I’ve heard times are tough right now.” She’s *heard*.

I say, “But I think I might have found something back in Spokane.” I’m not really sure who I’m trying to impress here.

“Oh yeah? What in?” Beth says a little too politely.

I say, “Local marketing,” and resist the urge to poke my duffel bag with my toe. When I get to Spokane, I guess I’ll need to find your dumbass junky friends from high school and figure out how to move this shit. So I add, “possibly a management position.” Beth *hmmms* at my future.

I ask, “So what do you do?”

Beth says, “My job is working on myself.” Ugh. “Now that I’m a free

woman.” She smiles and holds up her right hand so I can see the tan line from where she wore her ring. “It’s my business now to go out and meet new people.” Because a fortune cookie or some shit told her to.

“Is that what’s in Spokane?” I ask. “New people?” They buying?

“Maybe,” says Beth. “Would you trust a man you met on the internet?” Jesus, really?

“Like me?” I wouldn’t trust me.

“No,” Beth said. “Like a man you met on a dating site. A woman in your case. Would you trust a woman you met on the internet?”

“Hard to say. How would you know if they weren’t some serial rapist or deranged murderer?” This probably isn’t the proper venue for those kinds of jokes. “Ha ha,” I say, but Beth gets quiet and focuses on the road to get that thought out of her head. She tells me to find something on the radio.

I fiddle with the radio knob.

There is a song about “me” and “you.” Another about “my baby,” whoever in the hell that may be. A few songs were just a singer thinking aloud, largely about what he would do on the dance floor. A mother in Maine is being charged with murdering her son. Dow was up, now it’s down again. Three were found dead in Texas, foul play. Mississippi warns against possible floods. A man tried to detonate a children’s doll in an airport. A Beaverton man was found dead in a motel room due to a drug overdose. Looks like they’ve found you, Jeremy.

I switch the radio to some fuzzy contemporary pop station that neither Beth or I will enjoy. I zone out, watching the panoramic view from my window

change. Trees turn to bushes, grass turns to dust, the river turns to nothing and the sun gets a little higher. Remember that time we stole dad's booze and got fucked up in the dugout by our high school? Do you remember calling me while you were completely deranged and telling me you were in Beaverton? That you had my money and wanted to meet and "negotiate?" Do you even have memories in hell? You fucked up, Jeremy.

We pass a blue road sign and Beth says she needs some coffee.

Beth pulls into a parking space and I hear the horrible jagged noise of the bottom of her fender scrape against the concrete curb.

Beth says, "Whoopsie-daisy." She actually says whoopsie-daisy. Then Beth asks if I want anything from the store as she gets out of the car.

"I'm fine. Aren't you getting gas?"

Beth tells me no. She tells me it's a *hybrid* and asks if I'm sure I don't want anything. She wants me out of her car.

She asks, "Stretch your legs a little bit?"

"I'm fine."

She asks, "Bathroom break?"

"I'm fine."

Beth clucks her tongue but says, "Okay then," and goes into the store. Wow. I bet she'd give me her goddamn car if I protested enough. But with Beth gone and no one pumping gas in this Podunk town, I'm alone. And I have to hold it. I unzip my duffel to take out the crumpled, misshapen brown paper bag and I unsheathe the pistol. Dad's Beretta M9. I made sure to scrounge it out of his garage before some jackass bought it for

five dollars at auction. Or before you found it. I figured it was my responsibility to salvage it after he died. I also figured you were my responsibility. But you fucked up, Jeremy. Dad left me a gun. You left me a brick of hard drugs. You fucked up.

Your motel room door was open as you said it would be. I didn't bother knocking. The entire place smelled like rotten milk. Trash everywhere—mostly empty orange juice cartons and pizza boxes from when you remembered to eat something—but otherwise empty. Then I checked the bathroom. Viscous fluid smeared the mirror. Piss soaked the floor. The toilet seat was down tabling a lighter, a syringe, a spoon, a length of rubber hose and the brick. And there you were in the tub.

I looked down at you sitting in the murky water, your body all bloated, purple and soggy. It was like a preview to your funeral with a bathtub for a casket. Your arms were crossed and awkwardly crowded against the porcelain. You still had that dumb dope-sick grin plastered on your face and dried vomit on your chin. Your eyes were still open, swollen and sunken, but open, still staring at the faucet. The faucet was the last thing you saw? Motherfucker, you probably didn't even know you were dead. The faucet, though? What was so goddamn amusing about the faucet?

Beth comes out of the store holding two cups of coffee and I scramble to put the gun back in the bag before Beth begins her endeavor to open the door without spilling either of the coffees. Come on, Beth; just put one of the cups on the roof. Oh for fuck's sake... When Beth finally

figures out how to use a car door like an adult she eyes me somewhat suspiciously for a moment and then hands me one of the cups.

"I got you one," she says. No shit.

I say, "Thanks."

"No worries," says Beth.

That probably isn't true. But I sip my coffee and place it in the cup holder. Beth takes us back to the highway.

"So what were you doing in Beaverton anyway?" she asks. I can't tell whether she's eyeing my bag or if I'm just paranoid.

"I was visiting my brother."

"Oh, that's nice." Yep. "What does your brother do?" I almost smile.

"Not a whole lot these days." Come on, Jeremy. You know it's funny.

Beth tells me that she has family like that too. She tells me that her sister never was a go-getter. She tells me that her sister just naps on her couch all day like a cat—her words. She tells me her sister won't find a real job and she tells me her sister eats all her food and won't move out.

I say, "Your sister sounds like a heroin addict."

Beth tells me that isn't funny. Some people just don't get it.

I say, "Yeah, I suppose not." Ha ha.

She tells me she follows her dad's philosophy on drugs. She tells me a dope fiend isn't a real person inside, that they gave up the ghost long before they die—or so her father told her. Her dad told her "no sympathy for the devil." Our dad told us once never to let a wounded animal suffer. And then he made us watch as he shot an injured deer between the eyes.

Truth is, Jeremy, if I found you still

alive in the bathtub cooked off your ass, giggling at a fuckin' faucet, well... never mind. But there you were all bloated, purple and soggy. And there I was standing over you with dad's gun, ready to sink a nine millimeter bullet into your stupid fuck-up head.

"No sympathy for the devil," I say. "I like that."

"Words to live by," Beth says.

"My dad told me once—"

There's sudden a crackling sound and then there's smoke spilling out of the hood of Beth's car. Beth takes the car to the shoulder and shuts off the engine. We check our phones and of course there's no reception in the desert. Beth takes a deep breath. And then her cheerful façade breaks completely and she starts sobbing onto the steering wheel.

"God," she says, "Why am I so fucking hopeless?!" Because you live a life of quiet desperation, Beth. I would have thought that was obvious.

"I'm coming up on forty, Robert didn't love me, I have no children, no career..."

"Get it all out," I tell her. I have all day.

"And I'm stranded on the side of the road in the middle of the desert!" Like a wounded animal.

"On the way to meet some strange man that I met on the Internet in Spokane? Who for all I know could be a goddamn serial killer or rapist or whatever..." I unzip my duffel. Beth says, "All on a whim! For God's sake!" I feel the crumpled paper lunch bag and think of the deer's eyes already milking with death, but still suffering. I touch the cold, reassuring metal.

“Marcus,” Says Beth and I jerk my hand from out of my duffel bag.

“Yes?”

“I’m so sorry about this. Could you please check under the hood and see what’s wrong with the car?” Her eyes are swollen.

“Of course, Beth.” Of course.

The hood’s still warm when I lift it up. Don’t judge me, Jeremy. Dad taught you the same lesson. Beth lets out a yelp and a few more sobs from inside the car. I bet Beth snagged the radiator hose when she hit that curb. I hear the car door open and I hear Beth get out. Where’s that smoke coming from? It’s a hybrid. Does that make a difference?

I hear it before I feel it, that is, the dull clunk of the gun stock against my head. My legs turn to jelly for a second and drop my body. My head bangs against the engine and I bounce off the car, collapsing to the ground. Can see blood mix with puddle of antifreeze. Pool of red and green liquid collecting under the car. Red green yin-yang. Heh heh. One little pool.

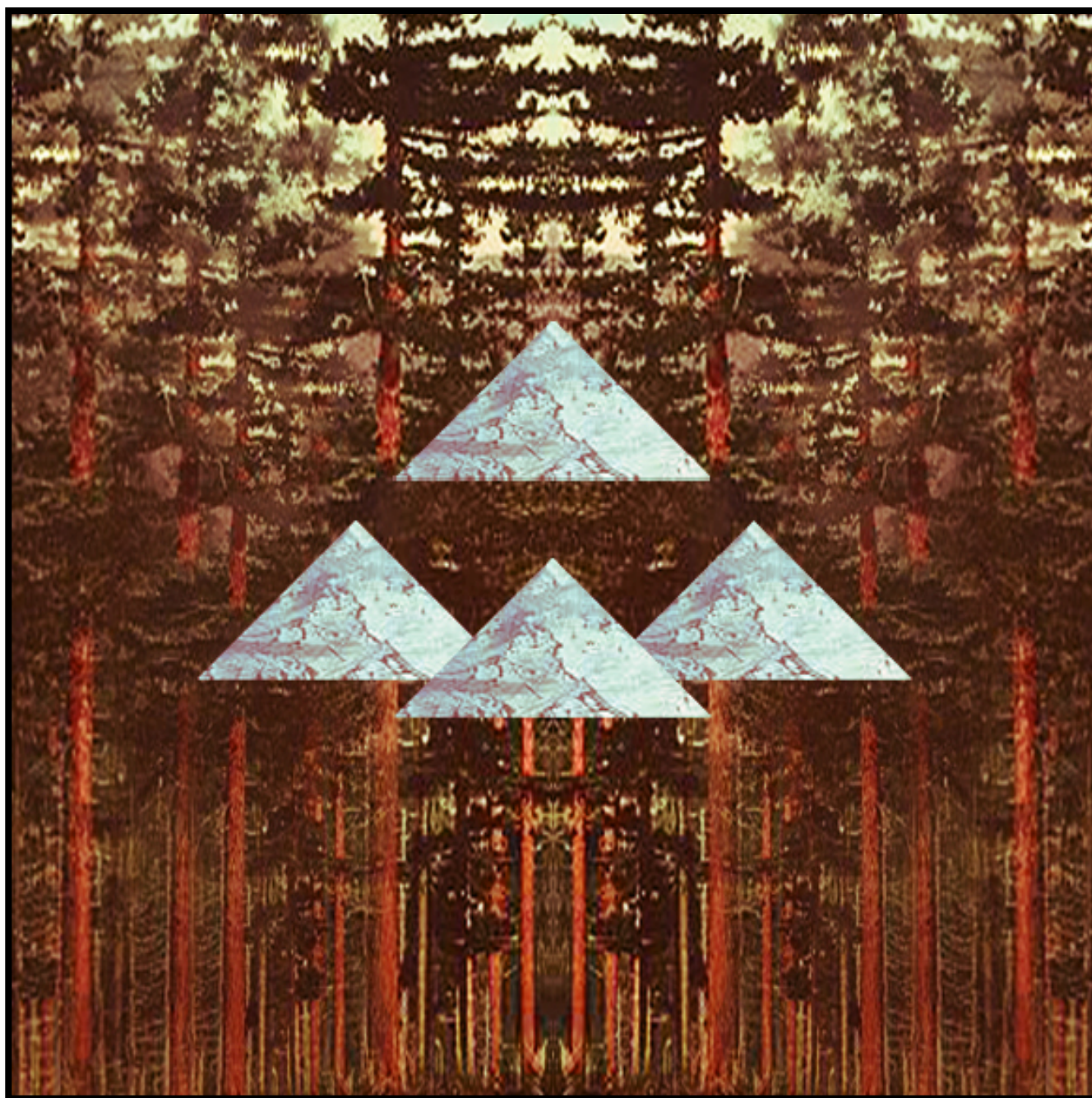
Can hear the gun rattling in Beth’s hands. She hyperventilates. She inhales “oh,” exhales “god,” over and over... Can

feel the shade of her shadow as it crosses over my body... Pistol whipped by some rich bitch. Embarrassing. I guess you really can’t trust a woman you meet on the Internet. Ha ha. Drops of neon-green fluid feed my little puddle, creating ripples. Ripples bounce off edges in the pool’s little basin in the dust. Meet again in the middle. Waves hit waves and bounce away. Heh heh. Ow.

Beth screams things. Did she call me Robert? Beth says that she’s living life for her. That she won’t take this. Maybe she should have learned how to park. Or maybe things would be different if she had read a different horoscope. Or fortune cookie. Or whatever it was. Or if you hadn’t called me. Or if you hadn’t ripped me off and spent my life savings on a brick of heroin you would never be able to pawn off. Or if our dad wasn’t such a crazy bastard. Or if Beth’s father wasn’t such a hardass. Or if we all could escape becoming our fathers. Or maybe I should have packed socks, shit I don’t know.

But here I am, hemorrhaging onto the pavement giggling at a puddle. And there’s Beth standing over me with dad’s gun ready to sink a nine millimeter bullet into my stupid. Fuck-up. Head.

Nick is a senior majoring in English.



BRAEDEN COX
FOREST

digital amalgamation

18 x 18"

OSCAR WILDE IN PARIS

— COLIN KEATING

He would sit in the same café
looking at his books warily.
He would stumble through alleyways
trying to find the house of Lust
to heave his worries
onto Lady Harlot's breasts.

What once was Ernest now seems dull,
weak and pitiless. His shell shuffles
from table to table of the same café.
“He always sits there” the waiters whisper
as they bring the same latte to grace
that famous Irishman's face.

He would weep into the night
expecting it to dry his tears
on a tapestry of stars.
He would always write in the same garret
above *le jardin bourgeois*
and with a certain smirk
nib his past off in a halting cadence
unlike anything he ever wrote.

He always wondered whether,
if he had told his secrets in one breath,
the judges that exiled him here
would sense that rush of shame
billowing out of his mouth
and reduce his sentences.

He would sit at the same café
looking at his books warily.
He would sit there until he left Paris,
setting off into the gleaming metropolis
the starry night had promised him.

HOW DID YOU BECOME THE VICTIM?

ABIGAIL PFEIFFER

Get off the bus on your first day at Woodrow Wilson Middle School Annex. Rhode Island fog obscures some of the building, but you can see most of the windows are stained glass. On the wall above the door, a mark that looks like a cross used to be there is visible. When your mom drove you by the school last week so you could see it, she told you the Sixth Grade Annex is in a converted church because the old building was torn down two years ago and they haven't finished the new one yet. The seventh and eighth graders are in an old office park by the library. The new building is supposed to open next August, but until then you and three hundred other sixth graders are in the Annex.

You have on the new pink skirt, white polo, and white Keds your mom helped you pick out at the mall for your first day at public school. At Holy Child, your old Catholic school in Brandenburg, Ohio, you wore a blue and green plaid jumper with a blue shirt. Now that you're in middle school, you would have gotten to wear a skirt in the same plaid with a white button-up. At Woodrow Wilson, the only dress code says girl's hemlines have to be to their fingertips and no spaghetti straps or obscene images. Feel your skirt swish against your knee. If you twirl in a circle, it will spin out like a dancer's.

On your way to the school's front doors, walk past a girl wearing pajama

pants and a sweatshirt. Hear her ask: "Did you mommy dress you this morning?" Freeze. Look around the parking lot. Everyone else is wearing jeans and flip-flops. Press your lips together tight and pull on your new backpack's straps. At least you're not wearing pajamas to school.

Waiting inside the front office, a tall, skinny boy with his pants sagged down looks you up and down, a mean look on his face. As you walk past him, hear him say: "Oink, oink." Look down and see pink skirt, pink legs, and stomach pressing out round against your white polo. Keep walking, still looking down. Feel the tears begin to burn your eyes. Wish you could go home and change, or that your mom had let you buy the jeans you wanted at the mall. Keep staring at your feet. *Did your mommy dress you?* Pull your backpack straps even tighter.

The next day, get off the bus wearing brand-new jeans and one of your older brother's sweatshirts that goes down to your knees. No one looks at you twice. It's like having a uniform on; you blend in. Still, you can't help but think it every time you get your sweatshirt from your closet and see the pretty pink skirt and polo hung up there. *Oink, oink.*

Since your dad transferred to his new job as Hasbro Children's Hospital's pediatric surgeon in Newport, Rhode

Island, nothing has been the same. For one thing, in Brandenburg, no one cancelled Halloween dances (to which your friends would have at least invited you to go) because security guards the school hired found bullet casings on the floor. For another, no one at Holy Child, where you went to school since you were five, ever got arrested for beating a sixty-five year old teacher with a metal yardstick after she failed him on a math test. Here, you've heard both of these things happened in your first three months at the Annex.

If only your father had gotten his job before the private schools stopped accepting enrollment, your mom tells Grammy on the phone, you'd be in private school, like the Hixon twins next door, who go to school dressed in pleated plaid and wear white sneakers like you used to wear to Holy Child. She says you don't belong at Woodrow Wilson. You're smarter than those hooligans are, she says. She says she's ashamed to be sending her daughter to a public school district that consistently ranks in the bottom twenty, below inner city Chicago, but above the Bronx. You liked New York when you went two summers ago, but think it must be bad if it's anything like Newport.

In Brandenburg, your friends thought it was exciting to watch R-rated movies and were shocked when Christina Herrera told everyone she'd frenched a boy. Since you've been in Newport, you've learned what a BJ is and people talk about doing drugs, which you thought was only on shows like *Cops* that your mom doesn't like your older brother, Anthony, watching. You don't know how to talk to the girls here; they use cuss words and slang and codes. "That fucking slut is always

disrespecting." "Bitch makes me weak. She fucking kills me." "You know where I can score some?" You're afraid to open your mouth.

"Can I skip school today?" Ask your mom at least once a week.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Did you do your homework?"

"Yes."

"Why skip then?"

Nobody ever sits next to me on the bus to school, girls call me baby or fat or freak, nobody ever sits next to me at lunch, boys laugh at me, I'm learning stuff they taught at Holy Child in the third grade, nobody ever sits next to me on the bus home. "No reason."

She always makes you go.

It's after Christmas and you still aren't happy. You might even feel worse, since the rest of your family seems to fit in here so well. Dad is always working, even during the weekends and holidays. Mom is always at this church group or that hospital charity event. You've stopped asking for homework help because she always ends up on the phone. Anthony is seventeen and doesn't want to talk to his little sister. Your mom and dad managed to get him in a private high school. It's less competitive after middle school, your mom tells you, since there are only two private K-12 schools and ten private high schools. Anthony has even less time for you here than he did in Ohio, since he joined the crew team. In Ohio, he used to watch TV with you. Now, when you want to hang out with him, he says: "Why don't you get some friends?"

Wish you had friends. The Hixon twins always have people from their own school over; you see girls that look like your Holy Child friends at their house all the time. They've stopped inviting you to play. Try to make friends with kids at lunch break, but once the warning bell rings, nobody keeps talking to you. You don't even have Cooper, the black lab you had to leave with Grammy because the town-house you live in doesn't allow dogs.

In Ohio, you went to sleepovers. In Rhode Island, the only girl you've invited to the mall, Tina, never showed up like she said she would. In Ohio, your friends passed notes to you in class. In Rhode Island, no one pays any attention to you, except for the occasional mean comment. ("They're just jealous of you," your mom says, but you know she's just trying to make you feel better.) In Ohio, you used to get in trouble for talking too much. In Rhode Island, you're too shy, too scared. In Ohio, you used to have fun.

In Rhode Island, there's nothing to do. So, read. At least when you're reading, it doesn't feel like you're stuck here, listening to the foghorn blast over the harbor all the time. Watch TV, without Anthony. Write letters on expensive paper to your Brandenburg friends and send them in the vellum envelopes Grammy got you for your birthday. In your journal, draw pictures and make lists, maps, diagrams, cataloguing everything in Ohio so you don't forget the layout of your bedroom, how you rank your friends, the cutest boys in your class. Call your friends, but you have less to talk to them about, less in common. Read a lot. Anything with a dragon or a sword or a crown on the cover, set on a foreign planet that is somehow

more familiar than Newport.

By February, dread going to school. Every morning seems a little worse, a little harder. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you had a friend or two, just someone to sit by during lunch. You've tried sitting at different tables. At one table, everyone stopped talking until you left. At another, there were some friendly girls, Jenna, Ashley, Becca, and Katie. You sat with them for a couple weeks, before you heard Ashley say "Not her again!" when you were walking toward them. Hide in the back of the cafeteria, at the end of a table filled with laughing people, reading *Dealing with Dragons*.

Your teacher says: "Put your book away! How many times do I have to tell you?"

A girl at your lunch table, staring at the small pile of Oreos your mom has packed in a little bag says: "I hope I never get fat."

A cute boy, looking at you with no meanness in his voice, like he's stating a fact, says: "Freak."

Look in the mirror; your cheeks are puffy and red from crying. Say: "I hate Newport."

"Are you doing okay?" your mom asks you in March. She's finally looked up from editing the church bulletin. She's in charge of the bulletin and the church choral concert advertising. It means she's been even more busy than usual. "Why don't you go shoot some hoops with your dad?"

"He's taking a nap. He had a long surgery."

"Do you want to come to the

Church Potluck tonight?”

She tries to spend time with you. She asks if you want to go to Church events or bake cupcakes or go to the grocery store with her. She doesn't understand why you just want to stay home, because you don't know what to say to her anymore. You went to the youth group meetings at the beginning of the year. The youth group is all younger kids and high school kids, no one your age. Anthony goes. He doesn't let you hang out with the older kids, and you don't want to color with seven year-olds. It's awkward to stand there alone, so don't go anymore.

“Not tonight.” You're belly-down on the carpet, reading *Howl's Moving Castle*.

“If that's what you want, sweetie.”

She stopped forcing you to go after the first few times. She thinks you're just sad about leaving Brandenburg. You are sad about leaving, but you're also sad that she can't understand how lonely you feel. You don't know how to tell her without sounding like a crybaby.

“Are the kids at school nice to you?” she asks suddenly.

Freeze. Look up at her slowly.

“I've been talking to some of the church mothers, and they say there's a lot of violence at Woodrow Wilson.” She waits, as if she expects you to say something. “They say kids get beat up, that kind of thing.”

“I guess,” you say. People are always getting punched in the hallway. You're not scared anymore. You've been hit by accident, in the back. Someone missed when they started swinging. It hurt a lot less than you thought being punched would.

“You guess? You'd tell me if kids

were getting violent with each other, wouldn't you?”

Look back down at your journal. Say: “I haven't seen anything.” Want to tell her the truth. Want to tell her about the fights in the hallways, the cussing, and the BJs. Want to tell her the mean things people call you. You've never not told her something before you moved here, but it's too hard to say it—you've never been different before.

You're reading Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* again in Mr. Alexander's math class. Sometimes, he tells you to put your book away, but usually he doesn't care. None of the teachers care here, especially since it's almost spring break. They let their classes out fifteen minutes early, cancel projects, and play movies during class twice a week. Fidget in your seat, suddenly aware of the extra glass of juice you had this morning to wash down your toast. Don't go to the bathroom. Try to ignore it. Wiggle side to side. Keep reading.

Last week, some girls came in and caught you while you were in the stalls.

“Pisssssss,” one of them said.

“Sounds like a fucking waterfall,” said another one.

You sat still, red-faced, breathing quietly as possible.

“Who do you think the firehose is?” the first girl asked.

“Maybe we should wait and find out.” They laughed.

You probably only know forty of the three hundred students in the Annex, and you don't think even that many know you. However, you couldn't let two girls know what you look like, the waterfall, the

firehose. You sat still on the toilet and held your feet off the ground so they couldn't identify you later by your shoes. You sat in gut-turning silence, until you heard the door open and close again. The bathroom was quiet, but you couldn't have gone out yet, in case they were waiting to see who you were.

You're nervous about getting caught again, but it's an ache, a pressure that needs to be relieved. It's no use. You've got to pee. Slip out of your seat in the back and grab the bathroom pass. Wish you didn't have to go. Think if you go to the one in the basement during class, there probably won't be anybody around.

Pull open the basement bathroom door and go inside. It's quiet. The second faucet in the counter is dripping, leaving a reddish stain on the bowl of the sink. It smells like Lysol and a garbage can when you open it on a hot afternoon. Check for feet under the stalls. There's no one, so go into the middle stall and pull it closed. It has one of those beige metal doors, and it sticks to the frame even though the lock won't close all the way.

There's a bloody piece of paper stuck to the floor, but at least you're alone.

Hear the bathroom door swing open. Stop midstream, pull up your feet. Slow your breathing to tiny little gasps. Feel the warmth and blood start to pool in your face. Cautiously, pull some toilet paper free, keeping your other hand on the roll to stop it making noise.

"I hate that old dick, always giving me shit about homework," one of the girls says. You recognize her loud voice. It's Marcia, the meanest girl in your science class. The second week of school another kid accidentally hit her in the face with a

zipper while twirling his jacket around. For that, she'd bashed his head against the side of the bus, putting him in a coma for three days. She only got suspended for as long as he was in the coma.

"Spit in his coffee," says a quieter voice. It's Kimberly, Marcia's sidekick. Picture the crusty bits of gel stuck in her bangs.

You're still breathing as slow as possible. Ease your feet back on the floor. Pull your underwear back up.

"You got the stuff?" Marcia asks.

"It's in my backpack, hold on."

You hear her pulling open the zipper, and the crinkle of a Ziploc baggy, and then the baggy being opened.

"How much you want for this?"

"Twenty bucks."

"I don't have that kind of money."

Wonder how you're going to get out of this stall. Try to sneak out of the bathroom? Should you flush the toilet so they know you're here? You've heard about the cigarettes that some people smoke in the bathrooms. Wonder if Marcia and Kimberly are about to start smoking. You don't want to be caught by either them or the teachers.

"Who's there?" Marcia says. You must have made some kind of noise. Your heart speeds up, but don't say anything, hope she'll ignore you. Just hide in here until they leave, and tell Mr. Alexander that you felt sick.

Bam! The door flies toward you. Kimberly is in front of you. Numbly, think she must have kicked it in.

"Who's this Twinkie?" Marcia asks. She is standing by the counter, looking at you as if you are a cockroach. She's big, bigger and taller than you are. She stomps

down the hallways as if she's saying *Get out of my way, get out of my way*. She's the last person in this school you want to notice you.

"The fuck you doing here?" Kimberly asks.

"Nice panties. You steal those from your Grandma?"

Try to yank up your jeans. Look down at the pink French cut underwear your mom buys you. Feel your stomach clench.

Everything seems to be slower than usual. The backpack is on the counter. The Ziploc bag is in the sink with the rusty stain. On the counter next to it is a smaller sandwich-sized baggy full of green and grey stuff. This must be marijuana, you think. You've never seen it before, or smelled it, but Anthony has a Bob Marley poster in his room with a picture of a big leaf on it that he's told you about. That leaf doesn't look like the grey-green stuff in the bag, but you're pretty sure. It makes you scared. Kimberly is wearing a black sweatshirt that says Juicy across the chest. Marcia has on bracelet-sized gold hoops. The fluorescent lights above the stalls are flickering. There is a crack along the side of the mirror.

"What are you doing here, you little bitch? You spying on us, trying to get us in trouble?"

"No," you say. "No."

"You think a pale whale like you could get me into trouble?" Marcia asks. In her hand, you see a switchblade. She flicks it open and points it toward you. Light glints off the edge.

Shake your head. You're having trouble thinking. Your heart is beating so fast, seeing the blade, the tiniest move-

ment of Marcia's hand.

"I'll tell you something, bitch. You ain't worth getting sent to court, so I'll let you go." She draws the knife across the air slowly, as if she's slitting your throat. "Get the fuck outta here."

Run out of the bathroom, hands shaking too hard to button your jeans closed.

Go home after school to your small bedroom, and flop on the bed. Watch the fog roll by your window. Lay still, thinking about the glinting blade. Marcia was standing so far away, not coming toward you at all. Maybe it was an empty threat, gone once you got out of the bathroom. Still, you're scared about science class. Wonder if Marcia knows you're in her science class. Imagine the knife pushed into your ribs. Don't feel anything. Think about reporting the knife, but realize you'll be in even more trouble. Even if they take her knife, she might bash your head against the bus until you're in a coma. Track the sunbeam from your window as it moves slowly across your room. Wish you didn't have to go to school tomorrow, but mostly feel numb.

"Dinner!" your mom calls.

Walk downstairs, sit at your place at the table. Dig your bare feet into the carpet. Anthony is already pouring his second Pepsi. Your mom and dad are carrying in platters of baked beans and broccoli. Dinner tonight is ribs. Very fatty. The thought of eating it makes you queasy.

"I'm not hungry," you say.

"What's wrong?" your mom asks.

"Saving room for dessert?" Dad says. "It's chocolate cake."

Shake your head, looking at the cake

knife balanced and glinting on the plate. "I'm going back upstairs."

Fifteen minutes later, your mom knocks on your door. "Are you doing alright?" she asks. "You need to eat something."

"I had a big lunch," you lie.

"I didn't pack you that much," she insists.

"I've eaten enough."

"You need to eat your dinner or you'll start disappearing before our eyes."

Good, you think. You'll be less of a target.

She puts the plate on your bedroom table, about to go back to the dinner. She pauses though, and walks back to your bed. She sits down on the edge.

"Are you okay, sweetie?"

Take a deep breath. Take another. She's not leaving this time. One more breath. Tears are pouring down your face, like a baby throwing a tantrum. "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

Gasp for breath. Your whole body is shaking with huge sobs. "Everything!"

"Tell me what's wrong. It'll be ok." She's patting you on the back, like she used to when you cried. "It'll be ok."

She can say it again and again, but you know it won't help anything. Shake your head hard. Bury your face in the pillow, feeling the linen against your face.

Your mom starts to rub your back. "Honey, this move was difficult for everyone. You just need to get out more,

make some friends. There's nothing to be scared of."

"No one wants to be friends with me." You can barely get the words out, you're crying so hard.

Your mom shakes her head. She keeps telling you everything will be all right. Next year you can go to private school. Just make friends, just be happy, don't be scared, just make friends, just be happy, no reason to be scared. Pull away from her.

"A girl at school pointed a knife at me today."

Your mom's hand stills on your back. Your face still buried in the pillow, you tell her the whole story. She rushes out of the room to go find Dad and "fix it." You've seen her in moods like this, when she won't take no for an answer. She'll be yelling at the principal on the phone before you can try to explain that the knife isn't the real problem, the real problem is you.

Lay back on the bed, looking up at the bumpy plaster on the ceiling of your bedroom. Tears are still leaking out of your eyes, rolling down your cheeks. Imagine what it will be like at St. Margaret's Girls School next year. Probably something like Holy Child. Wish you had your old friends, teachers, Grammy, and pet lab Cooper back. Wish you didn't know what a BJ was, or marijuana, or fear. Wish everything would be *fixed*, like your mom says. Know it won't ever be *fixed*: you will never be the same.



CHAD HUNIU
**EVERY TIME,
WE GO**

photography

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