

The Messenger

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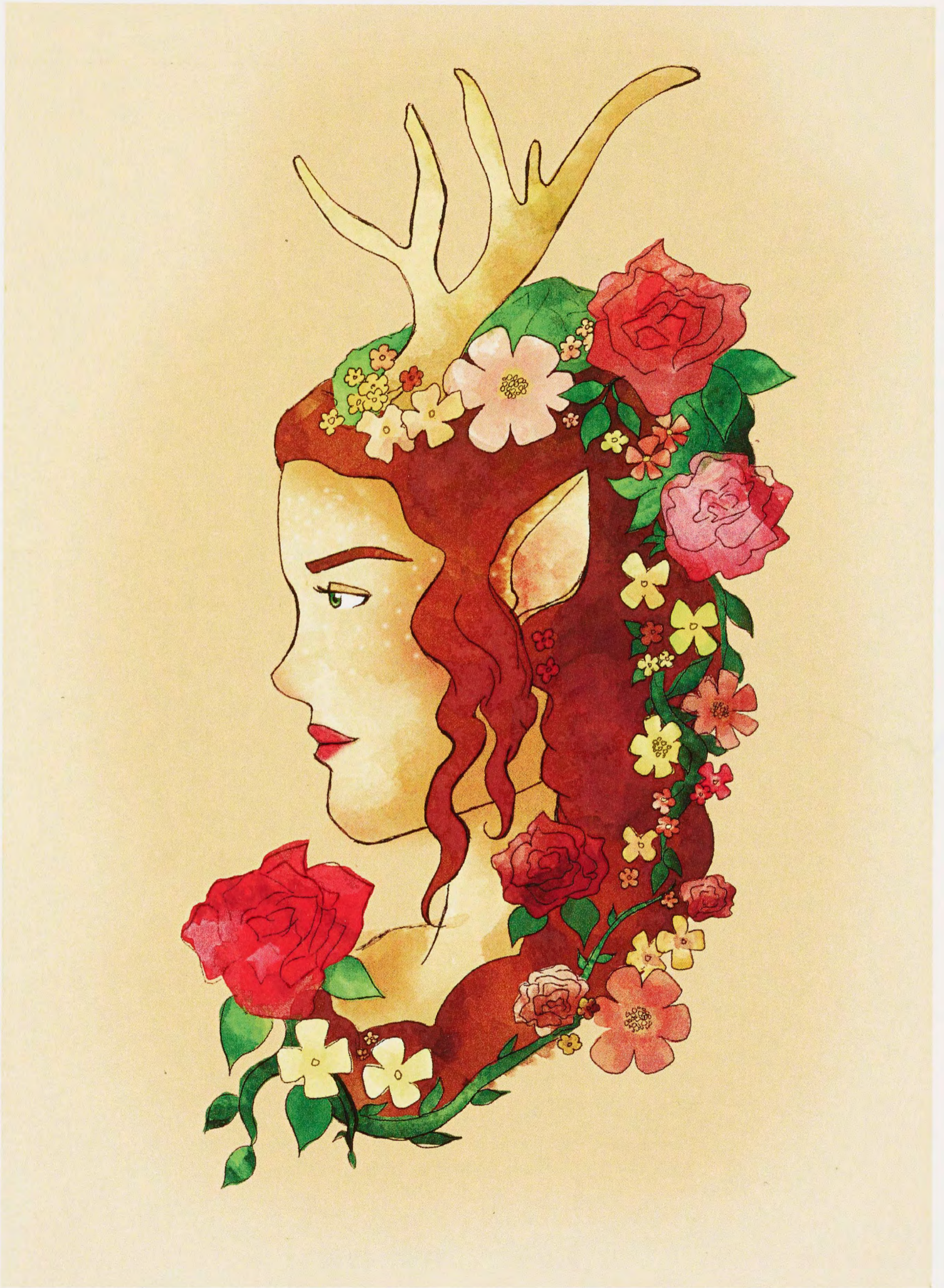
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The Messenger

Spring 2015



The Messenger

Spring 2015

University of Richmond
Literary Arts Magazine

Letter From the Editors

Dear Reader,

“Busy” is the response you’ll receive when you ask the average UR student how he/she is doing. With tests, projects, essays, friends, more projects, and extracurriculars, it’s amazing that students have time to sleep (arguably some don’t) let alone indulge in creative works. With that in mind, that the Messenger always receives not only a high quantity of submissions, but submissions of high quality is a testament to the creativity and passion of UR students. The Messenger celebrates the students who find time to express themselves creatively despite their busy schedules and hopes that its contents will inspire others to do the same.

We would like to thank our advisor Dr. David Stevens, as well as Professor Brian Henry of the English and creative writing departments for their continual support of our publication, as well as for selecting the winners of our two annual awards. Thank you as well to our staff members for their dedication and tireless work in the making of this magazine. Most of all, we would like to thank you readers, because without your continued interest, our publication would not be possible.

Happy reading,

Katie Skipper

Meghan Roberts

Editors-in-Chief

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by Katie Skipper

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Growing Up Minnesota // Richard Jennis

Quaint little towns,
Nestled in the proud white ridges,
The powdered dawn sticking to my eyebrows
And the absolute nature of wind.

Customers clumsily tripping
Over thank you's
In the supermarket aisles.
Sacrificing Starbucks
To the Caribou Coffee powers that be.

Screaming over the Washington Avenue Bridge
Like rollercoaster enthusiasts.
Losing all sense of control
When the car skids,
Feather-light and clutching for safety
Like upended bugs.

Snow-smothered plants
Suffocating beautifully
In the heartless midnight,
Beside the highway that leads
From my house to the moon.

Scandinavian descendants
Practicing the minutia of propriety.
The slanted view from my bed,
As I peek through half-frozen windows
At half past two.

That sight as the plane descends
Toward an alabaster daydream,
Minneapolis flickering like Hanukkah candles
Fighting a Northeastern gale.

And the life I compiled
Like scraps of wood,
Reminiscing over bonfire glow nights
We chose to make the most of,
Arms and backs peppered with mosquito welts
And bragging how only we knew
How to keep our hearts warm.

When I returned, I screamed,
“Don’t ever let me leave again!”
Arms flailing, lips quaking, heart palpitating.

But I swear
On those 10,000 lakes
I meant to say
I loved it far too much to stay.

Blue Eyes // Casey Schmidt

Stark against a fallow field, a crow picked at the husk of a mouse. Fall had leached the color out of the land and the sky and the hollow cheeks of the farmer's daughter who held her son's hands as he kicked up dust with his wrinkled feet. She liked this time best, suspending his weight so only his toes danced on the ground, staring at the back of his head, his hair the washed out color of her own. She could love him fully then, so long as she could not see his face.

It was the spring of the year before when he (we do not speak his name) rolled in from some little coastal town out east. He was the type that carried an aura of influence around him and when she held his hand she thought he could fly her away to the places he spoke of in his casual whispers in the dark. She was the type to think that seventeen was mature enough to know that love is infinite and two mottled halves become an indistinguishable one. It was such, that when he left, as he was bound to do, she couldn't sort out his thoughts from her own. Same old story, such a shame. She could have been somebody, she had potential. Wasted, wasted. So foolish, thought perfect strangers, hiding behind their sunglasses and fashionable scarves. The girl saw the discomfort in the eyes of her friends' parents as they tried to look her full in the face and not her swollen belly. She felt herself steered out of their manicured hedges with a warning notice posted on her back. She spent her time pinching grapes between her fingers and not complaining. She'd called him countless times and memorized the six rings it took to get to his voicemail, a generic woman's voice that read out each digit and then a prolonged note that hummed in her head even after she hung up. The birth was unremarkable. Average weight, crying, no complications. In March, after the hanging note, she said, "It's a boy. This is the last time I'll call you." And it was. April and May were a string of sundowns and rocking chairs, and shhh, please, just sleep, please. In July she bounced the baby on her knee and watched gnats spin like binary stars around

the porch light. Her parents hung in the shadows, watching. In August, under the star dusted sky, she ran out into the fields while the baby slept. The weeds whipped at her ankles. Her bare foot caught a crater and she was pitched forward, skinning her knees. The lights of the house glowed with halos through the tears as she looked back. She retreated. Blood and dirt stained her frayed pajamas a ruddy brown. The baby cried. It bothered her that she could not look the child in the face without seeing the blue eyes of the person she now only associated with six rings and disappointment. She'd once found the boy tearing the wings off a moth as he sat on the floor and she yelled at him until her voice was raw and the baby was crying. As she pulled him into her chest, she wondered what it meant for even your mother not to love you the way a mother should. She wrestled with the idea in the September nights, seizing up, every string in her body pulled too taught for too long.

By October, the starlings had left, but the crows remained. She wondered if the baby noticed that she couldn't look him in the eyes. Would he be okay if she kept herself from looking at him? Maybe that's what made serial killers and pedophiles, mothers that don't look into their sons' eyes. She resolved to every day to chance a look past the chin she knew so well and the puckered lips and jowled cheeks, but in those days, she hadn't the audacity. The leaves fell in crowds and she had memorized his left index finger.

The sea of corn had been hacked down, leaving the ground a bony coral reef. The little boy worked his arms like wings and his mother lifted him high over her head, until it felt as though his bulldog body was only just balanced on the tips of her fingers. Squeals rolled over the undulating hills and a winter wind whistled back. She dropped him back into her arms and nuzzled the rosy nose and cheeks, eyes closed. The crow, finished with its meal, launched itself into the air. The wind took it for a moment and the bird clipped its wing on the girl's shoulder. With a yelp, her eyes snapped open

and found themselves staring into the boy's wide baby blues.

My Darling Daughter // Katie Skipper

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
you stood there,
nervous and sad
and told us you made a mistake,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
when protesters screamed
that you were a whore
but wouldn't allow you
to fix your mistakes,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
when we found out
that the abortion centers
were all closing
because of a law
passed by men
that thought a Man
in the clouds told them to,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
when they said that
a minor inconvenience to you
was worth it to save a life
but when I asked if they'd
pay for the medical bills
they said no,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
that we asked who would
care for the child you didn't want
and were told that someone
would want it,
but when we checked, no one did,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
When our minister asked us
Not to come back to church
Because he heard what happened
And said we lived in sin,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
That they told us to be proud
That the parasite in you
Might one day cure cancer
And I thought of your dropping grades
And wondered if you might have
One day, if you had had the chance,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
When I found you
Red eyed in your room,
Asking if "thou shalt not kill"
Then why could I kill the spiders
In your room when you were young

But you couldn't kill a clump of cells,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
When I called 911
Because I found you
Trying to fix it yourself,
Covered in blood in the bathroom
Coat hanger on the floor,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
That I saw the boy
Who had equally wronged
Walking a free man
While you were forced
To spend a year of your life
In a prison of hospital rooms,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
When you looked at autonomy laws
And found that no one can force
You to donate blood
To save a life,
Not even after you're dead
And when you discovered that you had
Fewer rights to your body than a corpse
You wished you were one,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
 That I watched you
 In agony, deliver a baby
 That you and no one else
 Wanted, and what should
 Have been a happy moment
 Made you cry,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
 I brought you home from the hospital
 Empty and sick,
 Your body mutilated
 By that new life that they thought
 Mattered more than yours,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day
 When it was finally over
 But you looked me in the eyes
 And said that it will never be over
 Because somewhere out there is a child
 That no one wants,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
I thought I died the day,
 I found you in your room
 The pill bottle on your nightstand,
 And when the EMTs told me
 What I already knew,
But I was wrong.

My Darling Daughter,
They thought I was fine the day
 When it was truly over,
 As I watched the clumps of dirt
 Hit your coffin as you got your
 Greatest wish;
 To have the rights of a corpse,
But they were wrong.

Euphoria // Renan Ferreira de Almeida

SWEET CHEESEBURGERS, YOU'RE BACK!
YOU'RE BACK YOU'RE BACK YOU'RE BACK
I WAS WAITING FOR YOU RIGHT HERE
SO WHAT DID YOU DO TODAY?

YOU SMELL FUNNY
YOU SMELL LIKE YOU GOT A PROMOTION
SO CONGRATULATIONS ON THAT
PERHAPS NOW YOU COULD BUY ME EVEN MORE FOOD

OH, AND YOU ALSO SMELL LIKE YOU TOOK A WALK IN THE PARK
WHILE EATING TWO DONUTS AND LISTENING TO MUSIC
SO IT LOOKS LIKE YOU HAD AN AWESOME DAY, YAY
MY DAY WAS PRETTY AWESOME, TOO

I PROTECTED OUR HOUSE WHILE YOU WERE AWAY
A BUTTERFLY GOT IN AND WANTED TO SIT ON OUR TV
SO I JUMPED AT IT AND CRUSHED IT
THE TV, NOT THE BUTTERFLY, SADLY

OH, AND BY THE WAY
I TOTALLY APPROVE YOUR NEW PAIR OF SHOES, THEY TASTE
GREAT!
I GAVE THEM AN EXTRA SHINE BY CHEWING ON THEM
YOU ARE WELCOME AND FREE TO USE THEM NOW

HOLY LEFTOVER BONES, IS THAT A HOT DOG?
HOW ABOUT YOU SHARE THAT HOT DOG
WITH THIS HOT DOG, HUH?
OKAY, NOW THAT SOUNDED TOTALLY CANNIBALISTIC, SORRY

ALLOW ME TO LICK YOUR FACE
WITH THE SAME TONGUE I USED ON A DEAD RAT EARLIER TODAY
I'M SURE YOU DON'T MIND
BECAUSE WE'RE BEST BUDDIES

WHAT? YOU'RE LEAVING ALREADY?
I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO WATCH ANIMAL PLANET TONIGHT
UMM, OKAY. HAVE FUN!
I'LL BE WAITING HERE FOR YOU TO COME BACK

Whenever you decide to...

This Isn't a Title // Tracy Akers

I know what it's like, to belong.

All my life I've belonged to something, to someones.

If you're looking for somewhere to belong and find yourself losing hope, don't.

I have a lot of hope. I hope that I never have to belong.

You can take my slot, that space, my belonging little belong. I don't want it.

I looked up today at a clear, blue sky.

My first thought was That. Something. Else. Belonged. There—and, *damn* it.

Even the clouds have to belong somewhere. Watery, fluffy, invisibly visible vapor—still belongs up there.

Some things can belong in three places. Birds can be in the sky, in the trees, skimming the oceans. We can belong in all of these places and still not know where to belong—only making us belonged to a group of unknowing unbelongers.

No matter what, we still belong.

That's why I only have hope of not belonging, so I can have cloudless skies and rainy days at the same time.

When I'm in his arms, cozy, secure & warm in his arms...

I try not to think that here, that *there*, is somewhere I belong.

Didn't I think I belonged in arms before these?

Didn't I think that I belonged with my parents and they belonged with each other—and me and all my sisters belonged with my parents that both belonged? Until dad decided that he didn't want to belong.

When does belonging become a choice?

Why can't we, then, know where we belong ?

Like. The. Clouds.

They belong in the sky.

We look up and see belonging.

Upon Seeing Myself in Giovanni's Room

// Caroline Merritt

Waking up before the sun on a Wednesday morning,
Sneaking away before the foreign hotel could spoil my reputation;
Starved and inspired.

Wearing my little black dress from the evening before (as well as
every other evening of significance),
Humming the tune of Carmen's provocative habanera: "L'amour est
un oiseau rebelle,"

Love is a rebellious bird.

Continuing proudly though the star-studded aura of Kensington
High Street;
still drunk on Dom Perignon.

Walking until the bakeries finally opened their doors to release the
aroma of decadence.

Walking into every bakery on my path to savor their creations
through the tease of sight and smell.

Walking until the monster who growled deep within my stomach
grew too tired to perform.

Walking until the museums finally opened their doors to those
seeking enlightenment.

Walking through every decade of the V&A's exhibit on first 18th
Century Fashion, then 19th, then 20th...

Walking until I was six years old and my mother held my hand
through the same navigation.

Sipping instant coffee in my closet-sized bedroom of New Cross
Gate while

*Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable
condition.*

Beginning Richard III for the 17th time:

*"And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, To entertain
these fair well-spoken days, I am determined to prove a villain."*

Stopping once again, for the 17th time...

Wondering if I too should strive to be the villain; yet, at least he was
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature.

Wishing I too had such a valid excuse, then

Pouring a brandless vodka into my mug:

Silence the questioning mind.

Walking until the weight of that drink no longer felt so stagnant.
Walking to hush the growls of my awakening monster.
Walking until the thoughts of my incompetence evolve into feelings
of achievement because at least I'm
Walking for hours.
Walking until the guards of Greenwich Park finally opened their
gates to those seeking enlightenment.
Walking through space until my pace paralleled with the flow of the
Thames.
Walking until I was six years old and my father quoted Wordsworth
through the same navigation.
Walking to forget that nothing is more unbearable, once one has it,
than the freedom of
Walking for hours.

Duende // Brittany Capps

I will transpose you into a sentence. I will diagram your movements into rocketships and pedestals. I will spell your tiptoes in lowercase. I will write your footsteps into spaces and punctuate your breath with periods. I will study your syntax and learn your grammar. I will never stop writing you until I figure out what you're hiding in your ellipsis.

Life Cycle // Micah Farmer

I was conceived in the bathroom of a dive bar in Valparaiso, Indiana. No doubt compelled by the sweet smelling joint that was wrapped in twisted tissue paper and pinched between her thumb and first finger, my mother held nothing back. I was five. My mother no longer felt pressured to hide her addictions from me after she absconded with my older half-sister and me on a power trip from our rental home in Lynchburg to a suburban town just an hour's drive outside of Los Angeles. She held the joint out for me to suckle, laughing when my young lungs choked at the bitter burn of smoke, and told me a story. My mother, in her early twenties, had been casually dating my father's younger brother. My father had been in the midst of a rocky marriage to an older woman. One too many shots of tequila on her part, a moment of weakness on his. It wasn't supposed to happen, she sighed as she exhaled a cloud of smoke in my direction. And yet, there I was. An accident. The unwanted outcome, as she explained it, of a one night stand.

* * *

As part of our second-grade curriculum, Mrs. Edmunds was required to teach the life cycle of the butterfly. Yet there was something about the way she described the colorful creature that deeply resonated within the core of my being. From where I was on the rug with neon letters and numbers drunkenly mixed, at a time when it wasn't politically incorrect to sit Indian style, I listened with rapt attention.

Overcoming danger at every turn, blending in with their surroundings to survive, a single caterpillar's chances of reaching metamorphosis were extremely narrow. But for the ones who made it, she gestured to the diagram on the chalkboard, they emerged even more beautiful because of the struggle.

My mother had been arrested the summer before

second-grade. I was seven years old. Mrs. Edmunds' body was soft and plush like the oversized Winnie-the-Pooh teddy with the red belly shirt that my father had given me when he picked me up from Duilles Airport. I had wrapped my too-skinny arms around the bear and pressed my face into its velvet fur, feeling the fibers rub back and forth against my cheek while my father had awkwardly shaken the social worker's hand.

* * *

By the time I was eight, the intermittent pay phone calls and cheap scribbled birthday cards from my mother stopped altogether. I just learned to shut down that part of me, the part that ached for a mother to braid my hair, scold me for wearing clothes that clashed, do that thing where they lick their finger and rub a smudge from the side of your cheek while you tried to squirm away.

But my father was the mile long gravel driveway's familiar crunching at 5:30 p.m. every weekday, the old Ford truck roaring in with the broken muffler. He was the sound of footsteps as they ascended the wooden deck stairs into the kitchen, his tan and stained Carhartt coat carrying in the aromas of sweat, sawdust, and a faint musk of Brut aerosol deodorant that had managed to cling to his skin throughout the workday.

He was the crinkled forehead and the exasperated growl when he caught me making a wish on a dandelion. He was the one who taught me how to stretch a piece of yarn between two pikes stabbed into the red clay to keep my tomato plants in a straight line. He was the sounds and aromas of dependability. He was all I had. I would sit on the rusty tailgate with him as he popped open a beer and tell him about my day. His was the deep tenor that howled off-key to "Man of Constant Sorrow" as it crackled from the truck's speakers. He was the goatee that tickled a kiss on my cheek, the small squeeze, and the "I

love you more” each night before bed.

He was the underpaid carpenter who trod down the hall to the kitchen at precisely 4:30 every morning for his first cup of coffee; two splashes of cream, no sugar. His t-shirt was clean, his Levi’s were faded but patched, his steel-toed boots dusted off. “Be proud of what you have,” he would tell me, “Even if it’s not much.”

* * *

“In the light of the moon, a little egg lay on a leaf,” Mrs. Edmunds read, turning the pages of the painted book. “One Sunday morning, the warm sun came up and POP! Out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar.”

She was beautiful, I thought. Her hands, soft with age but assured with the confidence that comes with devoting over thirty years of her life to educating children, danced gracefully as they turned the page of the book. As I listened to her read, I imagined her on a stage, the curtain black with a single beam of light illuminating her gray curls as they danced along to her words.

Lost in my own thoughts, I had forgotten to leave the classroom when they called for my bus, and was forced to wait for my father to leave work to collect me. When all of the other students had drifted onto school buses and carpools and Mrs. Edmunds and I were alone, I hesitantly shuffled across the brightly decorated classroom to the blackboard where she stood, swiping the white dust with a felt eraser. I watched her move, her body swaying gently into the labor of the movement, as though she had turned such a menial task of housekeeping into an elegant dance. The overwhelming urge became too much for such a tiny person as me to bear. I wrapped my still-too-thin arms as far around her waist as they could reach, digging my fingers desperately into the squishy flesh of her back and enveloping myself within her. I rubbed my face back

and forth, feeling the microfibers of her shirt caress my cheek like a mother's kiss. I felt the warmth of her bosom against my forehead, heard the lub-dub of her heart like a steady drum, and for a moment, I was whole. She quietly set the eraser in the tray and squeezed me back. She had probably heard that I was the kid whose mother had been arrested over the summer for narcotics and child abuse, probably heard that my father worked twelve days a week to afford hand-me-down clothes and store brand macaroni and cheese. She was silent as she gently swayed back and forth, gently combing my thin tangled hair away from my face until it lay smooth. Then she turned back to the board and continued to swipe away the dust.

By the time my father hooked up with my mother that night at the bar in a moment of drunken weakness, she was already beyond help. Not long after high school, her first foray into adulthood found her caught in a group of the wrong people, doing every drug that she could get her hands on and giving away everything she had to offer to get her fix. Her pregnancy announcement highlighted the betrayal: the betrayal of my father's already rocky marriage, and of his brother. With no other alternative, my father found a small house outside of town and settled into an uncomfortable cohabitation. My mother spent most days laid out on the couch, the ashtray filled with cigarette butts, dropped ashes scattered all over the carpet (to keep the moths away), watching daytime soap operas. "Her stories," she used to tell me. "I have to catch up on my stories."

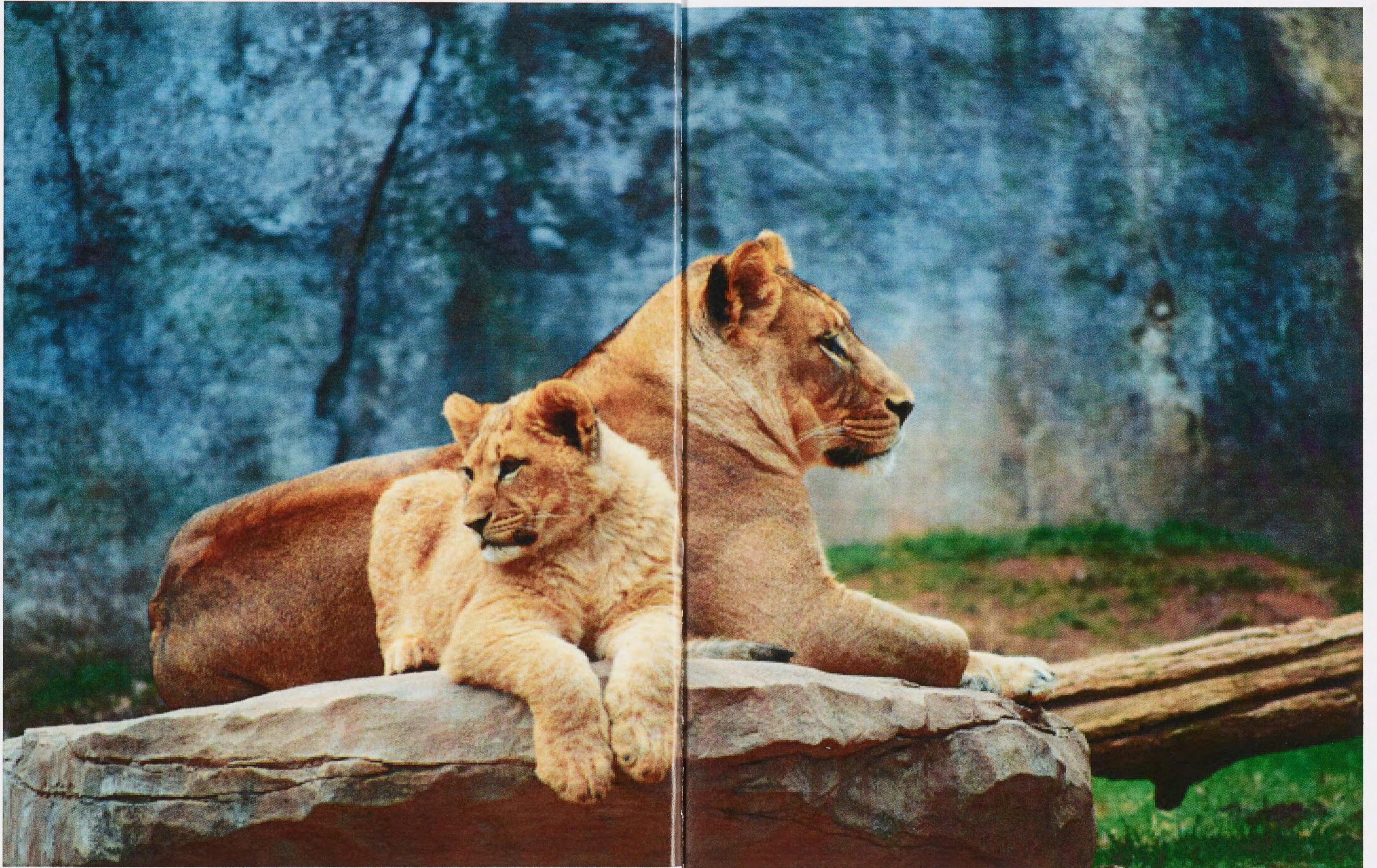
My father learned early in their strained relationship to handle her from a distance. Throughout her pregnancy, he followed her from bar to bar, bribing bartenders to serve her nonalcoholic drinks, flushing her drug stash down the toilet

after he came home early to find her passed out on the couch, the television blaring, and my two-year-old half-sister crying in hunger. He didn't know what to do, he said, when he'd discovered a strange man sweating over her swollen body, when he'd found out the bartenders had been handing her the money he'd paid them to keep me safe. At night, my father told me later, he would drop to his knees and beg God to keep me safe, and if He did, he promised that he would never leave my side.

“The butterfly is very tired when she emerges from the chrysalis. And so she rests.” Twenty-two round noses pressed against the aquarium glass of the butterfly farm. We'd squealed with excitement and felt the caterpillar's legs move across our hands like sticky tape. We'd *ooh'd* and *ahh'd* in wonder when the brown chrysalises were discovered hanging from the placed branches. But by far, the emergence of the first butterfly was the most incredible thing our young minds had ever witnessed.

Unrecognizable, she crawled her way out, sticky and damp. After awhile, her wings slowly began to open and flap. She moved to the edge of the branch, flapping her wings, and lifted off before falling in a spiral to the bottom. I cried out.

“She's not very good at flying just yet. Having wings is new to her,” Mrs. Edmunds reassured us. “But she's not ready to give up just yet. She'll learn. Just watch.” She turned her crinkled brown eyes in my direction, staring with the intensity of a messiah who imparts deep truths, the secrets to life itself. In the butterfly's fall, she saw the drive to succeed, accomplishment through failure, and the beauty of grace through it all.



Little Lion // Katie Skipper

Mount Olympus Times-Dispatch// Austin

Price

(15 February 2010) A double-homicide was committed last night. The victims, one male and one female, lay on their right and left lateral decubitus, respectively, with an arrow going through the male's body and coming out of the female's. The male is considerably taller than the female, which explains how the assailant was able to pierce both of them (evidently from an elevated distance) through their hearts. There are no leads. However, a bystander saw a naked baby flying away from the scene around midnight.

(23 April 2010) A scantily clad older man had to be escorted by security out of British Petroleum's headquarters. This unidentified man, whilst shaking a trident, screamed in the executive office, "I'm the king of the sea," later adding that "all BP degenerates (sic) will suffer a watery death for their oily transgressions." While struggling to break free from security guards, the intruder exclaimed that he possessed the wrathful power of all five oceans, which apparently, is not as effective on land.

(2 February 2012) People are forming crowds to see if a kidnapped girl returns to earth from the dark, treacherous abyss of the underworld. According to sources, if the young lady returns, then people will be blessed with the warm and sun-kissed days of springtime. On the condition that she doesn't come back, the earth will be swallowed into a harsh, yearlong winter, in which humanity would likely perish. Regardless of the outcome, this is another case in the unfortunate series of young girls getting kidnapped by much older men in our town. No one knows the exact science behind the act, or if it's just a scam. In other news, a groundhog saw its shadow.

(24 March 2014) A local boy will not come out of his bathroom until he takes the perfect bathroom selfie. What seems like a simple task of clicking the camera icon on his

phone, the teenager is unable to do so because he cannot stop looking at himself in the mirror. He has been standing in the same position, marveling at himself, for two days now. Forgetting that he left the faucet on, it is possible that the boy could eventually drown. The youth also struggles with the fact that the term “followers” on social media bears no religious connotation.

(9 November 2014) A homeless man (possibly senile) was seen frantically running around the streets at dawn. Reports say that he was once a high-ranking executive for one of the world’s most historic and influential religions. But due to the recession, this religion had to merge with the more powerful Roman conglomerate, and he did not retain his position. “It must be tough for his ego,” says one person who frequently passes by the bearded vagabond. “He used to be the supreme ruler of the universe. Now he can’t even afford a Burrito Supreme.” Possessing some rare genetic disorder which allows him to control electricity, he briefly held a job at a factory powering the machinery. However, he got fired after unsuccessfully trying to have sex with his boss’ wife.

I Know How It Ends // Richard Jennis

In an organic diner in Portland we sit drinking sanitized coffee in a room full of salsa dancers. You say that coffee tastes better if we imagine we're the human vestigial of a robotic future, and I say that the entire technological race can be expunged by a virus some hacker created. Hackers are clever that way, like artists and dictators all they want is for their dream to spread.

I crashed your car one summer morning when the birds were fluctuating like marionettes, crookedly northbound in the sweltering heat. The thermometer read 114 degrees Fahrenheit, but only a week before it was -33. The whole weather forecast is fucked, and Matt Marshall, weather man channel 4, recently quit and named his Rottweiler his successor. I think the Rottweiler's doing a damn good job. Your car isn't, it's probably still on fire, blazing bright under an apocalyptic sun.

What can I tell you about my life? I am doing well, I suppose, only I am suppressing that familiar longing to fly. I forget my wings were severed during Armageddon, when Lucifer finally got to fight Michael. While I was distracted watching Gabriel summon his seraphs with his horn, the demons dewinged me with gargantuan scissors. Snip, snip. You're human now. Welcome to earth. Don't fret, the humans have a ritual just like this, it hurts much more. But humans don't have wings. No. No they don't.

I'm so lost without your road map smile. We used to go on adventures and then we weren't in Portland anymore. Now you're off scouring east Poland for traces of god; you hold witness to a sunset that bleaches the fields with all the wrong colors. I'm dreaming of a city where the woods part to make room for you like conquered seas. I want to be charged egregious sums for organic food, only to have it go bad overnight. I want to see feminist literature lining all the shelves of all the bookstores. I want to stare up at a bedazzled sky alongside

you and forget we're mortal.

The moment you departed, the moon feasted on the sun. You left the day of the eclipse.



Sunset in Rural Queensland, Australia //
Monika Payerhin

Ra Ra Nah // Brennen Lutz

A moment here before you go,
The sun rises early now, the cursed thing,
And I realize that you want to be there,
Before the night falls again.
But it's too bright out for you to leave.
Rectangles of white in the widows are obfuscated
By thin sheer fabric, and yet it hurts my eyes.
Quiet now, close the heavy curtains.
This is no godly hour.

Suicide Watch // Micah Farmer

He always liked to light the matches.
To feel the flare as the flame took over.
The fear when it crept too close
to fragile fingers and the last minute twist
for extinguished safety. Fact:
there's only so much friction
a lively hand can handle
before the hand is scorched. Even nursery
pastel walls lose their vibrancy
when the babies toddle out. The sound
that crayons make when they scar
the pages always warped his wrist
and he'd rub it to soothe the ache.

We come from bunk beds.
We come from sweaty summer fans
oscillating the putrid air in swirls
of primary reds and yellows.
We fail to see the gradual shift
from summer greens to autumn decay.
We fail to see the chromatic chickadee
contemplating God, but we whistle along
in the startling quiet like a prayer.
Where did these notes come from
and when did they scribble verdicts?
Because the Lord knows, we don't know
the words for this world and the world
pretends to give a speech, pretends martyrdom
when it points a finger upward in contempt.
He can't stay static so we stuff
his face with pills, hoping he'll *just pay attention*
and regurgitate the lecture we just critiqued.
Everybody's afraid of the book, afraid to turn
the pages, because they're afraid
they might get an answer.

The Dragon and the Librarian // Katie Skipper

I was rudely awakened the night before my eighteenth birthday by someone shaking me by the shoulders. A knight stood over me. His armor was shiny and new, and the giant feather plume on his helmet was long enough to be a tripping hazard.

“Are you Princess Caramel?” he asked melodramatically. “I’ve come to rescue you from the dragon.”

Perhaps an explanation is in order. As was tradition, on my 14th birthday my parents had packed me up and dropped me off in a meadow near the mountains to be stolen away by a dragon. At the time I was gangly, all knobby knees and two left feet, not standard princess material at all. I was also impatient and quickly grew bored of waiting in the meadow looking helpless, which is what I had been instructed to do. So I pulled a book out of my bag and sat down to read.

I was so absorbed in my book that I almost didn’t notice when a giant red dragon with spectacles landed nearby. The gust of wind created by his wings knocked me from where I had perched on my luggage and sent me spilling to the ground. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to knock you over,” said the dragon in a deep voice. I scrambled up. “I am Robin the Dragon of the Lamentable Mountains. Dreadful name, but I assure you the mountains are really quite charming. And you are?”

“Princess Caramel,” I squeaked, trying to curtsy and dropping my book in the process. It was fashionable at the time to name your children after a food you craved while you were pregnant. I had fared much better than my sisters Potato and Brussels Sprout.

“A pleasure to meet you Princess Caramel,” said Robin. He held out a talon for me to shake. “Are you waiting for a dragon?”

“Are you looking for a princess?” I asked, pushing my glasses up my nose with one finger.

Robin smiled. “No, but I have a large library and am looking for a librarian.” This wasn’t mentioned in the tradition or in the lectures my parents had given me, but to my fourteen year

old mind seemed close enough. So I put my book away and climbed on Robin's back, whereupon he picked up my luggage and we flew to his castle.

The knight shook me again, rudely, as if uncertain whether I was awake. "Stop," I said, batting his hands away. "What do you want?"

"Princess Caramel, I am Sir Cabbage, and I've come to rescue you," he said. For a moment I feared for Robin, but then I remembered that the knight couldn't have killed Robin because dragons had been put on the endangered species list and so were safe from the predations of knights errant.

"Thank you, but I don't want to be rescued," I told him politely. Other knights had tried to rescue me, of course, but all had failed. For which I was grateful, because there were quite a number of books in Robin's library that he and I had yet to read and discuss.

The knight crossed his arms. "Of course you do, you just think you don't because of Stockholm Syndrome."

"No, I really don't think I want to go with you," I said. "I like Robin, we're good friends."

"I studied this in knight school," said Sir Cabbage, snapping his fingers so hard that the visor on his helmet fell down with a clank. He pushed it back up with a pained expression. "Sometimes a princess will feign disinterest in order to encourage a knight's interest."

"That's dumb," I said. "Why would someone do that?"

Sir Cabbage did not answer. Instead he swung me up over his shoulder, a position both undignified and uncomfortable, and scaled down the side of my tower. Once on the ground, he plunked me on his horse, and got on behind me.

It was traditional for a princess to weep for joy and thank her knight, perhaps bestowing on him a handkerchief as a token of her gratitude for her rescue. Instead I started to scream for Robin to rescue me. Sir Cabbage stuffed my handkerchief in my mouth while spurring his horse into a full gallop. So I sulked all the way back to my parent's castle and did my best to kick at Sir

Cabbage's shins, although without much success.

As was tradition, we were to wed the next morning. My parents, and Potato and Brussels Sprout were delighted to see me again. I continued to sulk.

The next morning came too soon. I was fitted in a white wedding dress with a corset that left me gasping for breath and a skirt so voluminous that I had to kick it with every step forward I took to avoid tripping on it.

"You look beautiful," said Potato, who I was happy to see looked much more like her namesake than last time I had seen her. She was lying of course; I looked very uncomfortable and vaguely constipated. I pushed my glasses up my nose with one finger.

"You shouldn't wear your glasses," my mother said, fluffing my veil. "It's not traditional for a princess to wear glasses."

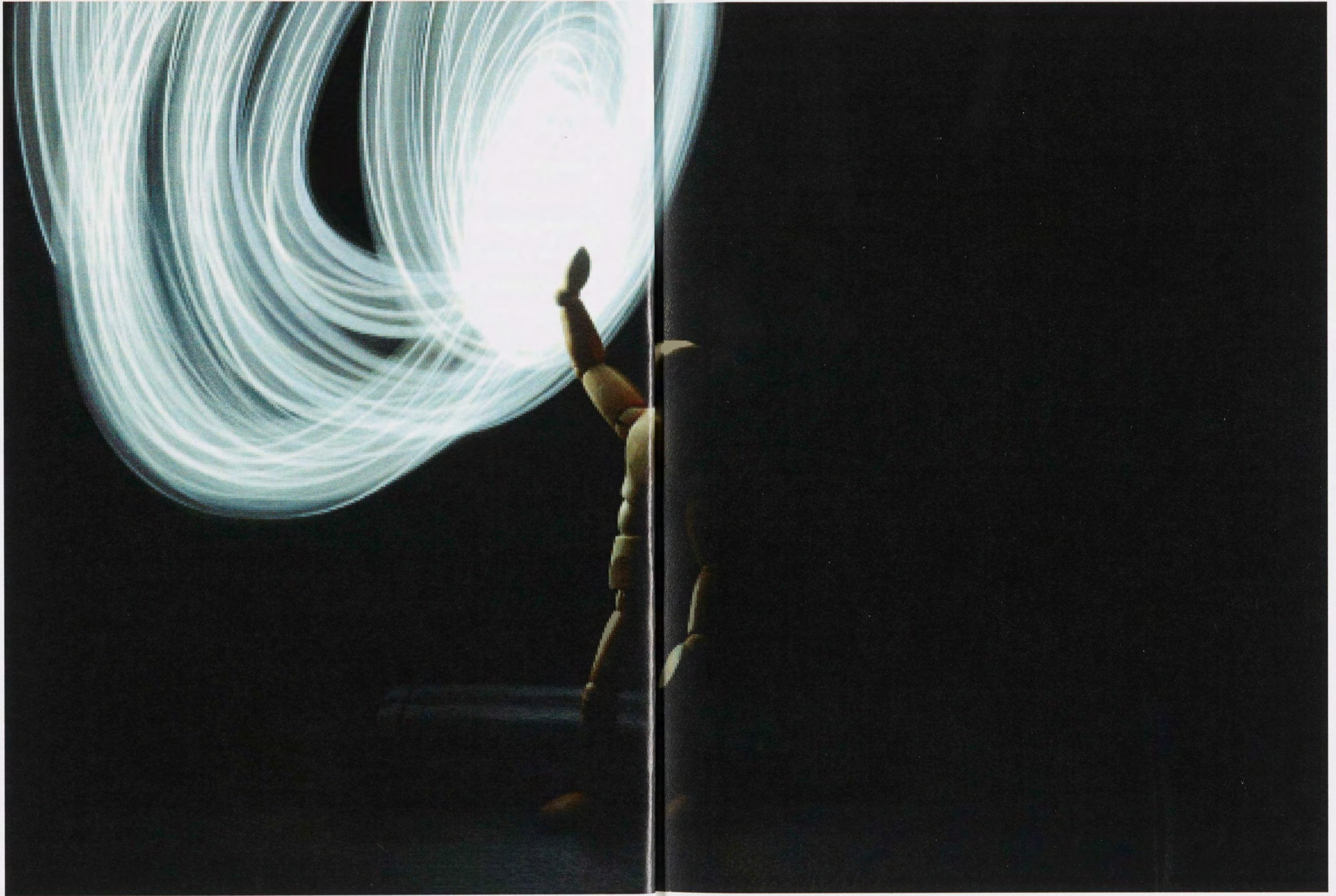
"I don't want to be a princess," I told her stubbornly. "I want to be a librarian." This sort of complaining was acceptable because it was traditional for some princesses to be rebels, although usually that involved wishing to dress in men's clothing and secretly become a knight. This sort of complaining was also ignorable, which is precisely what my mother and sisters did, cooing at me instead and leading me out to the chapel.

I stumbled down the aisle on my father's arm to meet Sir Cabbage at the other end. Sir Cabbage was puffing out his chest. This took so much effort that his face was beginning to turn an unflattering shade of puce. As was traditional, at the end of the wedding service, the priest asked, "If any among us has any reason why these two should not be lawful wed, speak now or forever hold your peace."

There was a booming knock on the doors to the cathedral, before they burst open. Robin stood there, glaring at the congregation, who as one dove under the pews trembling in fear. "I am Robin, the Dragon of the Lamentable Mountains," he said with a growl. "And I've come to retrieve my librarian." I pushed my glasses up my nose with one finger and smiled.

My Fourteenth October // Casey Schmidt

The back pain started in August and September called it cancer. By October, my grandfather had chicken legs and his beer gut hung low off his sunken chest. The cancer was everywhere, in his lungs, in his brain, pushing behind his eye until it popped out farther than the other. I tried to pretend he was looking at me sideways, but the cancer-eye followed me more closely. I decided to shut mine when he talked to me. It ate holes in his head until the last day, when he went crazy and tried to jump out the window. He swung fists and screamed himself hoarse, throwing every curse he knew at my dad and uncles as they pushed him back into the bed he would die in later that night. By then, my mom was already driving us away from the hospital. My sister slept. I watched the leaves whisk by in the wake of the car and felt my world a little less full without him.



Strength // Miranda Martinez

Pyro // Brittany Capps

Sometimes I feel like I should have been born inanimate. I can feel myself wanting to be more but my body won't let me. God I swear there's more life in a burning flame than I'll ever have in one hundred years. From the moment I blow out the candle it has about 23 seconds to scream a thousand stories until the air inhales its last breath of blue smoke. What happens to flames that are so tired they burn themselves out? I wonder if there's a heaven for dead fire.

Homecoming // Kevin Hargrave

he glides through
the frame of the door
passing the clock,
the cabinet,
the wicker chair,
his children's faces
in frames,
the dog dozing
where his boots
used to rest
in disuse.

they are gone now,
along with the other
leftovers,
struck from the walls,
emptied from closets,
ousted from corners,
taken down from the attic.

he finds himself
in the bedroom,
where his wife
sleeps peacefully
on her side.
he sits upon the bed,
gently, and in silence
listens to her breathing.
each soft breath
is music to him.

Martha Stewart // Austin Price

1 cup of flour
2 tablespoons of sugar
And 3 Hail Marthas

Don't touch the remote,
We'll be right back.

Dietary Deity, Caesar of Caesar Salads:
These are merely a few of my titles.

And yet, even the divine can be sentenced.
When I could've crosscut the boar,
I bore the cross to prison.

Prison: no lemon bars; just bars.
And dim lighting unfit for a queen
So used to brightness.
This darkness is not normal.

Normal: even though I'm the closest thing
you have to the word,
I couldn't be farther away from it.

I am not a human being.
I am your suburban fantasy.
I am the American Dream.
And I am your God,
The ultimate Cookie Cutter.

And even when the slightest shadow
Creeps into your house,
Mother Martha will be there.

I am with you.
In the rustic scent of a holiday pinecone,

In the suffocating warmth of a blanket,
I am everywhere.

Sweet, naïve audience,
Your brains numbed
By the glucose rush of Christmas cookies.
Your eyes blinded by studio lights.
You do not need darkness.

Don't touch the remote.
Don't look away.
Don't *ever* look away.

Dinner is served.

A Few Steps Back // Joseph Zelek

“As I walked by one of the rooms, an old man had just flat-lined so I called over to one of the nurses. They eventually wheeled the guy out and me, being the curious person i am, went inside. The only thing on his bedside table was a book with a dollar bill in between the covers. It was in between pages one-ninety-four and one-ninety-five of a two-hundred page book. No one sent this guy flowers or a bookmark or even came to visit and he didn’t even get to finish his book before he kicked the bucket. I’ll tell ya, it’s a messed up world we’re living in.” Trenton Walters sat in a local diner with his only friend, telling stories like this one. Trenton’s stories, no matter when he told them or who he told them to, all had one common theme: that Life was a sadist. “It’s not because I’m a pessimist,” he would say, “It’s because I’ve accepted the truth.”

Trenton worked at the local hospital as a custodian. Each day he saw a combination of three things: people check into the hospital, people check out of the hospital, and people die. And for the ones who did check out, Trenton often saw them return a few months later.

“It’s screwed up, don’t you think? It’s like we’re all just loose puzzle pieces that can be tossed aside at any moment. Sure, people try to make the pieces fit together but they never do.”

Trenton’s friend Marshall took a sip from his coffee and then said, “What a man thinks about the world often says something about the man himself.”

“What are you saying here, Marshall?”

“I’m just saying that it depends on how you look at things. Sure the world has its problems, but if we all looked at it the way you do then no one would ever be happy. Let me ask you: do you truly believe that you’re just another loose piece? That you serve no greater purpose? That you fit in nowhere?”

Trenton paused. “Yeah, I do believe that. All my life I’ve

been told that I'll find my place. And now I spend my days watching people wither away, and when they're finally gone all I can do is clean up their trash." The conversation went on like that for a while. At the end of it though, Marshall made a proposal. He asked Trenton to spend next Sunday morning with him, and if his belief did not change, he would pay for lunch. If it did change, Trenton would pay. The men shook hands.

*

That Sunday at nine A.M., Trenton met Marshall at the train station. While Marshall marched over to the ticket window, Trenton stood wistfully against the station's brick wall, his eyes fixated upon the ground. Marshall bought two tickets to Fellerton and handed one to Trenton.

"Fellerton? The only place I know near that stop is the mental ward. What, are you going to try to have me committed?"

"Beautiful day isn't, Trenton? It hasn't hit the sixties in weeks." Marshall enjoyed playing upon Trenton's curiosities. The train arrived at its destination at nine-thirty. Marshall then hailed a cab and off they went—indeed to the mental ward.

The psychiatric ward's corridors were a pristine white. The nurses wore voluntary smiles and spoke with sincerity, which irked Trenton. An eternal doubt had infected his mind long ago and now any implication of perfection caused him unease; perfection insinuated decay. Marshall and Trenton signed in at the front desk and then one of the nurses led them down a hall to the main area where the patients played board games, talked, and even laughed.

"I've got a friend here that I'd like you to meet Trenton; he's a voluntary patient and has got a perspective I think might cause you to raise an eyebrow."

"Mr. Vance is over there," the nurse said, pointing

towards a table where a group of men were engaged in a game of Blackjack. Marshall and Trenton approached the table while the nurse stood still, a perpetual smile upon her face.

“A regular Nurse Ratched if you ask me,” Trenton remarked. “I know a facade when I see one. I’d like to see this place when there *aren’t* visitors.”

Marshall made eye contact with his friend and then waved. “Hey, if it ain’t Marshall. What are you doing here?” Wes Vance’s voice was welcoming, which just aggravated Trenton’s unease. Wes wore sweat pants and a Chicago Bears t-shirt. His brown hair was combed straight and his glasses made him look distinguished. He looked—normal.

“I actually came because I want you to meet a friend of mine: Trenton Walters. You think you have a minute?”

“Of course.” To the rest of the men at the table: “Gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse me.” Trenton, Marshall, and Wes found an empty table and sat down. The table had a Rubik’s Cube and a few board games scattered across it. Wes picked up the cube and started solving it while he and Marshall caught up with one another. Then, they all talked about sports and after that politics. When talk of politics frustrated the men too much to continue, they moved on.

“So Trent,” Wes began, “Why is it that Marshall finds it necessary that you talk to me?”

Marshall interjected to explain Trenton’s outlook on life in brevity. Then Marshall put forth a question to Wes: “Why did you check yourself into the ward?”

Wes paused and peered down at the Rubik’s Cube. “Well, it’s simple really. Trenton, you say were all just loose puzzle pieces, that we’re—expendable. Well, I say we’re more like squares on one of these cubes. We’ve all got our place, but it takes time for everything to line up.” Wes twisted the multi-colored block around, looking intently at each side. “And the only people who find their place are the ones who

realize that sometimes you've got to take a few steps back to get where you want to go. I'm here because I was stuck. I forgot where I wanted to go. I forgot how to be happy. This, I guess you could say, is my few steps back." Wes handed the now finished Rubik's Cube to Trenton as he stood up from his chair.

On the train ride home, Marshall sat pleased. Trenton, silent and in deep contemplation, leaned forward on his seat with his hands clasped together. Marshall broke the silence, an unbreakable grin perched upon his face. "Quite an earth shaker, don't you think?" He nudged Trenton but he remained silent. "Hey Trent, don't worry. I'm not all that hungry anyways."

A few moments passed before Trenton spoke. "I was thinking, and you know what's messed up?" Marshall frowned. "Your friend Wes. He can't ever be president." Marshall became confused, almost frustrated. "The second he checked himself into a mental ward, he was labeled. By trying to get help, ya know those few steps back he was talkin' about, he closed some doors, limited his opportunities. Imagine Wes was a politician and ran for president in the next election. And imagine he was more than qualified. Well, I'll tell ya what, he's not winning that election. No one's gonna elect a man who once thought he was crazy..."

"But he's not crazy, nor was he. Ever."

"Well we know that, but the American public doesn't, strangers don't. They see the facts and don't bother to consider the circumstances or look much further than the black and white. The labels one accrues over time have got permanent glue on them. Now *that* is messed up."

"I'll take that as you're not yet convinced."

Marshall was still determined to change Trenton's mind and so they went to the park, Marshall again in lead, Trenton again in somber curiosity.

Children filled the playgrounds, parents the benches, and birds the trees. Dogs ran to catch Frisbees while their



Untitled // Thomas Davant

owners stood in content admiration. People walked the paths, hands in their pockets, looking up at the sky, unable to keep from smiling. Anyone could find peace here.

“Look around, Trenton. What do you see?”

“Inevitable decay. Things don’t stay like this; they can’t. And there’s no way to hold onto the good things. I see loose puzzle pieces in temporary disillusionment, convinced that *this* is where they belong. Sunny days are quite deceiving.”

“So are dark days.” Marshall spent thirty minutes trying to help Trenton see the beauty of it all. Though after years of morbid encounters and ensuing self-assurances that the world was inherently cruel, Trenton had shut his eyes too tightly, and by noon Marshall had given up trying to pry them open. “Well, I guess lunch is on me.”

“And boy am I hungry. But I need to stop at the hospital and pick up my work schedule for the week. I’ll meet you at the regular place?” Marshall nodded.

Marshall sat in their usual booth at the diner, sipping coffee and waiting for his friend. He thought about things to say that might at last change Trenton’s mind. Nothing seemed to suffice; Trenton would poke holes in every anecdote and every piece of wisdom. Marshall decided that the only way Trenton would change was if he saw the errors in his philosophy for himself.

Trenton arrived fifteen minutes after Marshall had. He carried a book in hand and wore a revitalized grin. Seeing this, Marshall sighed.

“What’s that? Although I’ll probably regret asking.” Marshall was referring to the book.

“This? Just the old man’s book I told you about. Guess where I found it? I found it in the garbage. How messed up is that? The man’s sole possession ends up in the trash.”

“Just because that was the only thing he had at the hospital—nevermind.” One of the waitresses came by the table to see if Trenton wanted something to eat. He ordered

more than usual. An idea then sparked Marshall's curiosity. "Wouldn't you have been the one to clean that man's room?"

"Yeah, why?"

Marshall motioned to the book. "Would you mind?" Trenton slid the book across the table and then gestured in a way that said "be my guest". Marshall opened the front cover, stopped for a few seconds, and chuckled briefly. "What pages did you say you found the dollar in between?"

"One-ninety-four and one-ninety-five." Marshall flipped near the back of the book and then grinned like Trenton had minutes ago.

"What?"

Marshall flipped back to the front cover and began to read: "Dear Dad, I left this book with your nurse because you were resting. I hope it makes your time here a little better. And sorry about the dollar bill (I forgot a bookmark!). The kids and I will be here tomorrow just like every Tuesday. Love, Cindy." Marshall glared at Trenton.

"That still doesn't change the fact that the guy never got to finish his book."

Marshall flipped back to where he had before. "Page one-ninety-five: Appendix." He then slid the book across the table so Trenton could see for himself. Trenton stared intently at the page in front of him, thinking of a way to discount Marshall's point; he remained silent.

"You set up this false world a long time ago, Trenton, because you weren't satisfied with where you were, where you *are*." Marshall spoke not out of urgency but out of sincerity. "At some point in your life you forgot who you were, or at least who you wanted to become. You needed a reason for your struggle and making one up was a lot easier than changing things. You've held on to this illusion. But I can't make you change how you view the world; today is evidence of that. You have to be the one that lets go of the mirage you created." Silence overtook the conversation, only to be broken by the

waitress's customary questions and the men's solemn replies.

After having finished his meal, Marshall looked at Trenton's half-full plate and stood up to leave. "I'll leave the money on the table. How much should cover it do you think?"

"No. I've got it," Trenton replied. Marshall stopped for a second and then exited, leaving his friend sitting quietly in the diner, his eyes fixed upon the word "Appendix".

*

The next afternoon Marshall and Trenton met for lunch as usual.

"I quit my job," Trenton began.

"Why? It seemed to be the perfect job for a pessimist like you."

"I thought about what you said, and what Wes said, and about the park. And then I remembered that I was the one who threw that man's book away in the first place." Trenton laughed, then paused, and became serious again. "I feel like my subconscious had been trying to protect me, making me see things in a way that would explain why I am where I am. I must've felt that if I could convince myself that no one had a place in life then I wouldn't be mad if I discovered I wound up in the wrong one."

"Well, I'm glad you've come to terms with this. But what are you going to do about work? Do you have a plan?"

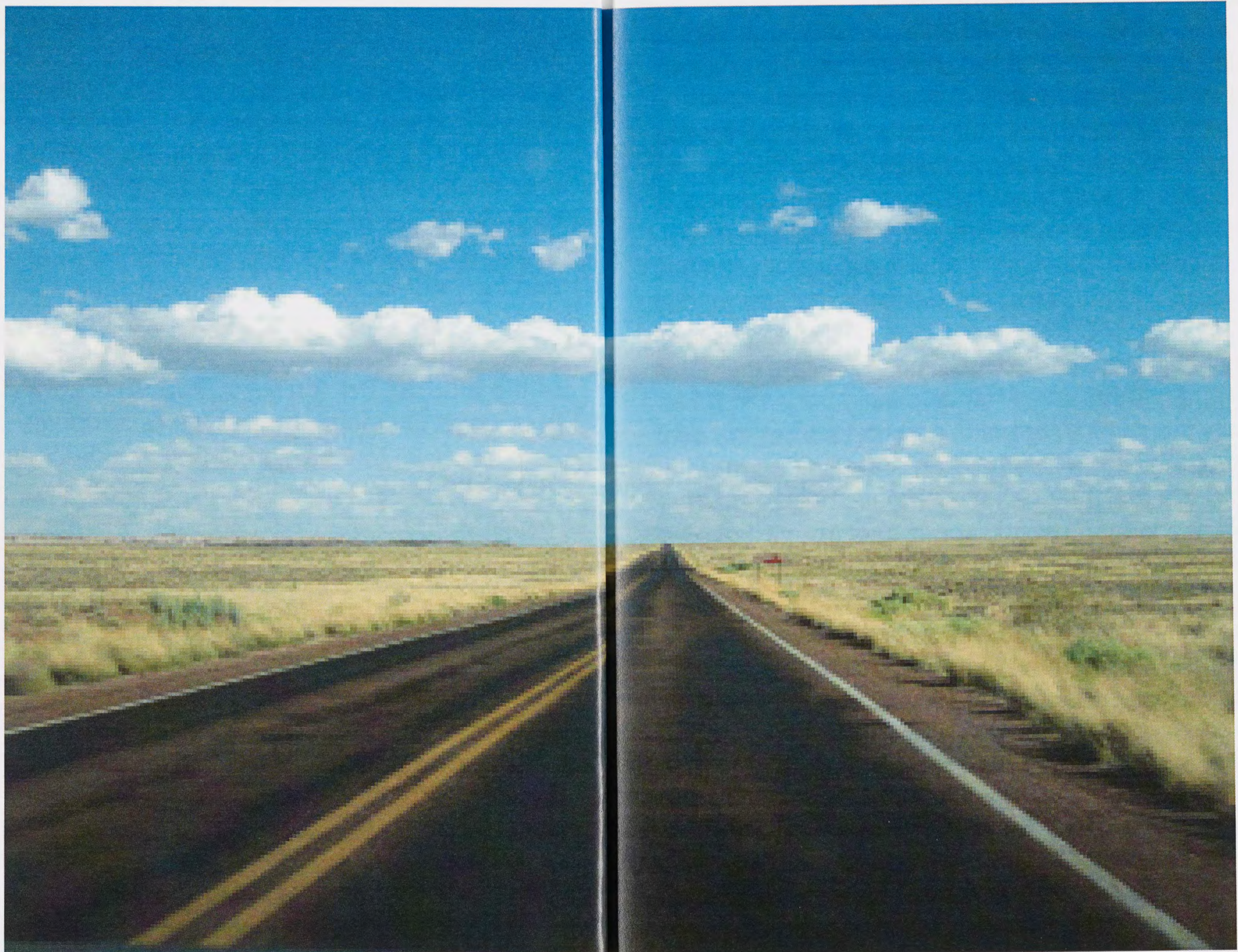
"Not in the least bit. But I needed to do something. You of all people can attest to that. So I quit my job. I don't what the next step is but I'm ready to find my place in the world—and yes, I do believe we all fit in somewhere. Although it might be someone's, my place isn't at the hospital. It made me miserable."

"Quitting your job, I guess you could say..."

"...is my few steps back."

When the men finished their lunch, Marshall left the diner as he always had: content with a fine afternoon. Trenton, however, exited as he never had: hopeful and excited. As

Trenton stepped outside, he breathed the afternoon in and looked to his right. He saw a familiar path: the one he had taken every day for years. Then he turned his head to his left and walked that way, his eyes not fixated upon the ground but upon a new horizon, upon a future that made his fingers tremble in anticipation. Trenton, once slave to self-told lies, now ventured out into the unknown as children do: infatuated by a world yet to experienced, scared, though strengthened by the thought of dreams yet to be fulfilled. This was not the end for Trenton, nor was it the beginning, for to say that would be to disregard his past, which is almost as important as his present. Instead, this was the curtain's ascension—the signal of the start to Trenton's Act Two. And now, granted his brief hour upon the stage, he chased redemption.



Plastic Bag // Emily Bradford

The bag is a boon to each harried, weary, or ecstatic customer whose arms, without the benefit of the plastic handles, would strain in an awkward cradle to keep purchases from crashing down. When called to serve, the bag sticks to its fellows, is extracted, billowed out with a jerk of the hands. Miscellaneous goods slide across a black belt into a wide and welcoming mouth. Holiday bags rustle like faintly jangling bells, whispers of Christmas. The bag stretches, sags, the thin handles cut into flesh as they strain, until the flimsy mule is led indoors, relieved of its load. The bag is disposed of, frequently into another plastic bag. Careless people ball the bag up and shove it, along with bones and softening cantaloupe, into a tall wastebasket lined with an even larger plastic bag. The kind-hearted who pity the earth's digestion scrunch the bag up next to others and put these into another bag and think no more of any of them. Where are they headed? Plastic bag Samsara? When they are no longer useful, some specimens become unsavory tumbleweeds, vagrancy dehumanized, polymer jellyfish that graze the concrete floor of an arid, smoggy sea. The bag was once manmade and sterile but is now filthy, inorganic and undomesticated. Unrestrained bags become lawless. Some will be guzzled by a long-billed bird with soft gray wings. The bag, last supper and death shroud, blows about in tatters around the poor mistaken creature whose eyes are still and neck contorted. The bag's red "Thank You" motif is not yet faded.

Untitled // Brennen Lutz

I think there's a special mode of the mind
A certain self-destructive intention
That is contained within the stress and grind
Of the momentary lifestyle of destruction.
I see them shooting up on love and hate.
Do they know that pain will always follow?
Oh when the bullets drop, how is that great?
You shall see love has always been for sorrow
But still we send our kids to fight for those
Who should by now have known the pain they cause.
Helen was never worth the exchanged blows.
If God is love, to fight should give you pause.
And yet we go to war each day. Let's kill.
The sight of blood has yet to make us ill.

Run Like Water, Burn Like the Sun //

Ashley Wilda

“Why are you so angry?”

I stare back at the eyes peeking over the back of the grey wooden pew. “Stow it, Marie.”

The shock of red hair disappears again, and I continue painting. Back and forth, back and forth. The rhythm of the brush is soothing, a kind of haven.

“Why did you pick such a boring color?”

I sigh. “It’s blue, Marie. Do you have some kind of problem with the color blue?”

“No--it’s just... boring.”

“Hmph. I think it’s a good sensible color.”

“Sensible is often just another word for boring.”

My brush pauses for a second. “Are you painting over there?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well then do more painting and less talking.”

Blessed silence.

Then, “I think blue’s a sad color.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t have to be so snappy, you know. I think you picked blue because you’re sad.”

“Marie...”

“What? It’s true. The whole town knows it.” A brush waves an arc above the bench, paint splattering on my face. That stupid girl can never keep her hands still when she talks.

I don’t answer, and neither of us say anything for a good while. Then, “I think... I think anger, is just--maybe--a way of being sad.” The words come low and quiet, but it feels like an arrow. I suck in a breath.

“Stop babbling, child.”

“I’m not a child. You’re only four years older than I am, and I’m sixteen.”

“What does it matter. All this fuss about a color. You’re stuck with the same color that I am, so there.”

Silence from the other side of the bench.

“There.” I rock back on my heels, surveying my work. “I’m

done. You?”

“Just almost...” A brush flicks up into the air, as if ending a sweeping arc. But that brush... it’s small. Too delicate for the broad painting of an ordinary church pew.

“Marie...”

“I’m done, I’m done! Chill out, already.” There is a soft snap, like the closing of a clasp. The willowy girl rises to her feet, brushing a runaway red-gold strand of hair behind her ear. Her green eyes seem fresh, as if they had just been born, supercharged with living honey. “I guess I’ll see you at church, huh Elise?” She walks backwards, a lopsided smirk on her face. “Hey, and remember to smile!” She turns around and strides out the wide stone arch, a small black case swinging loosely from her fingers.

“Hmph.” The room feels empty without her, but I don’t want to admit it, even to myself. I scrub my hands down my face. Ew, I forgot about the paint. My fingers come away smudged with orange. Orange?

A speck of color catches my eye. A fleck of green paint lies streaked against the dark stone floor.

Marie.

I shove myself up from my knees and hurry around to the other side of the bench. The blast of color snatches my breath from me.

A bright flame of color fairly bursts from the formerly dull, cracking wood. The entire spectrum of color is somehow incorporated into the painting, featuring a burning sun fading into pale blues, indigos, and forest greens, a depiction of the downfall of night so alive it is almost breathing. How I know it is a sunrise, I have no idea. But I just know.

Even more unexplainable are the tears I cannot stop. They trickle down my cheeks and splash against the stone. And I kneel for a second time, not to grudgingly paint a pew, but to let my poorly disguised sadness run from me like water and burn like the sun in the painting. The sadness is much more beautiful in death, the banishing of the night--into joy.



I am (yours) to command // Kevin Hargrave

Know that it is happening. Catch the tiny part of you that escaped with wide-eyed frantic movements – though I am small I am dangerous and cause discomfort, now. Achieve equilibrium – mistake it for normalcy. Drum on your breastbone. Play in moonbeams – glow. Forgive me for noticing you glowing.

Look into your own eyes – now you are communicating. Misunderstand. Forgive me for intruding. Do not break. Suffer through it – you will feel better in time, allow me that promise. Protest. Protest because you think and feel you know you must. Be wrong.

Keep this time – a moment. Never throw away but misplace often, because what is lost can never be forgotten and forgetting is the real loss. Leave me here. Grow. Return.

Breathe with insides. Apologize. Announce yourself to the dark. Creak and crack. Wobble a little. Stop that. Become a microcosm of yourself. Cease existing for a minute. Don't mind me – minding. Fuse matter with footfalls. Draw power from the earth. Sap it in leap and tendon-snap. Halt. Mind your surroundings.

Grow statically charged and release. Impose your will upon the self-censor of your mind. Weep and do not satisfy the urge to conceal or dispel – feel the flush that spreads from crest to base which is a beautiful loathing. Notice me – have courage. Lay bare – I am watching but I will frighten only by your allowance, now. Know that you need not subdue me to escape from me.

Hold me close, now. You hold me close – fingers curled, light and trusting.

Isaiah 25:8 // Micah Farmer

He will swallow up death forever...

Now,
when the vibrant callow weighty stone
was pushed from the gaping mouth
eating darkness like a carp swallowing whole the worm,
He stood fast with holey palms splayed like Sunday,
ribs exposed, spleen sputtering bile & face lifted
in the heliotropic promise found in
apple pies & homemade spirits,
displayed before God & sundry, iniquitous
grin & triumphant shouts that echoed
in the cloister of craggy tombs
& dust washed the dimpled feet
where steps left no tracks.
Here they come to anoint the corpse
& finding the stone already pushed
they pause and ponder—pure silence
in the gloom—shock of lightning,
the inquisition charges,
Why read the name
of the living on a tombstone?
Already they had failed
to have faith, forgotten prophecies when
false prophets painted hunks of graphite & named it glass,
prepared to rub spices into rigor'd flesh
like it was a done deal, dotted the eyes
& crossed the crucifix
because even Thomas,
who was prepared to tithe his life,
impaled the palm upon his thumb
before he could believe the teacher.

Fairest of Them All // Tracy Akers

There aren't any mirrors in my bedroom.

So I can have bouncy hair and live inside an oak tree. I can cast spells and mix potions. The only time my nose is crooked is when it gets in the way of reading. My lips might be purple or black, my eyes just the same—never having to worry if my teeth are stained. I only have skin when my fingers brush my cheeks, sometimes they're smooth and other times I feel more grooves. I can dance and sling magic everywhere, and I can paint the rounded walls any color I want to. I can sing to broken glass and see a thousand eyeballs, never knowing which two are mine. I can tap my pointed feet as I walk across the hardwood floors, only realizing how giant they are when I trip over them. I can laugh at myself, point at my feet, and keep waving my wand.

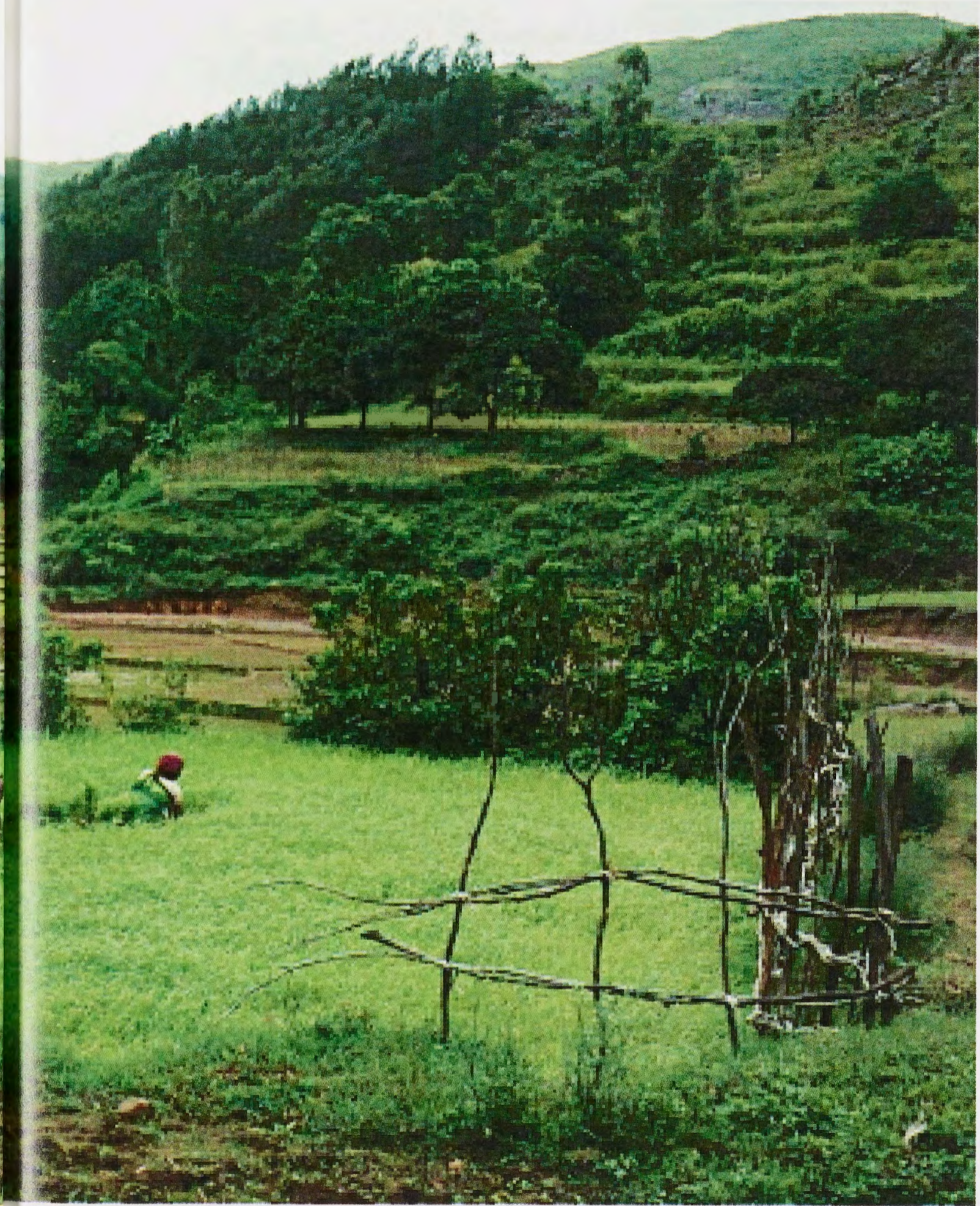
I hear the door creak; my mom's visiting my tree. I stumble toward the sound, clapping my palms, the shiny bangles clanging together on my wrists—they aren't real gold but they're just as shiny. She enters with a flat silver pool in her hands. I race over to her and stand up on my toes. I poke it with my fingers, hoping that I can enter new worlds through it—more oak trees, maybe a small sea. She gently brushes my hands aside and takes the mirror and places it on my radiant wall.

For the first time, I see my witchy self. I pull at my dark frizzy curls, pucker my dull pink lips. I look at my mom and laugh. I look back at the thick glass. Inside of it, the walls of my tree turn back to cream, bed posts standing alone amongst the square, tall whiteness. My wand disappears from my desk. My bubbling pot becomes a boom box. The dangling glass shards I once sang to turn into the feathers of a homemade dream catcher.

First the magic fades, then the witch. I watch a girl grow up inside the silver pool. The shiny glass took away all the magic, a dark curse that makes every princess sleep. Instead of painting my world, I paint my lips, my eyes, my cheeks. I watch a girl inside of a reflection—a forgotten queen. I can hardly remember now, when I was the fairest of them all.

Black Hole // Brittany Clemens

My mother and I keep a black hole in our kitchen. I don't remember it always being there, so maybe one day, she took it in as a stray and it made a nest in our littlest drawer. I think it likes us, or maybe it just stays because it knows it will always get fed. We'll offer it pencils, tempt it with car keys, and dangle dollar bills over its gaping void. When the drawer is shut, we can still hear it, gobbling up earrings and lipstick, notepaper and nail clippers, the last remnants of matter disappearing with a metallic clang and a flash of light. When my mother gets angry, she over-feeds it, throwing empty Purell bottles and torn-up ticket stubs down its throat with extra helpings of dirty pennies and broken calculators. When I get angry, I starve it, and hoard its midnight snacks for myself. In those moments of both feast and famine, I wonder why it never complains about our yelling in the night or the constant opening and slamming of its drawer. But then at the height of our blowup, she and I will pause just long enough to hear a little hiccup, or the smallest of coughs, and our black hole will draw up from its endless stomach a handmade card, a painted-on pinch pot, a lost Christmas present, a family photo...



Untitled // Jacob Salamy

Survival // Bailey Little

what I really hate the most is all this talk of “survival.”
my life is not a jungle filled with striped tigers and striking snakes.
my life is not a building going up in flames.
my life is not an airplane racing risky toward the ground.
my life is not a sinking ship filling up with frigid wet.
my life is not a building going up in flames.

so why then am I so frequently reminded to just “survive?”
I don’t need a lifeboat or a flare gun or a spray down by a fire hose.
I need a hug.
I need a friend.
I need laughter and hope and promises kept.
I need to move and to run and to be far from here by morning.

and I need more than just survival to be preached.

do not tell me that happiness is a luxury.
don’t tell me that I just need to “make it through” this day.
because I can do that. easily. food. water. sleep, and I’ve made it.
and you seemed pleased enough with me, and so suddenly all it’s
ever about is making it through another day and another day and
another day. food. water. sleep. food. water. sleep. and I am praised
because I am surviving.

I do not want survival.
I want life. I want to move and to run and to be far from here by
morning.

my life is giggling like a silly girl at texts from silly boys.
my life is loneliness curled under blankets.
my life is binging on chocolate chip cookies to take away the
sadness.
my life is acing tests and studying too late into the night.
my life is loneliness curled under blankets.
and that is more than survival.

I am broken and my pieces have been scattered to the farthest
ends of this earth and survival looks like acceptance and

resignation at this point, like I should just keep my head down and keep my mouth shut and take step after wretched step. and I'll admit that some days this is all that I can manage but this is not the definition of my life. I will not be silenced by the mantra of "survival."

I do not want survival.

I want a battle. I want to move and to run and to be far from here by morning.

I want to fight until I cannot fight. I want to bleed until I cannot bleed.

I want to win, because I cannot lose.

failure is not an option. survival is not an option. I will not be taken prisoner of war in order that I may survive. I will not lay down my sword so as to preserve my chances at existence. I will move and I will run and I will be far from here by morning.

to survive is to be, for all intents and purposes, dead, but pleasing the world with the falsified image that you are not so. if you appear to be alive and well, that is enough for them.

but that is not enough for me.

I do not fight this hard every day for food and water and survival. I fight to pass time memorizing the face of my lover, and laying in fields of flowers, and writing poetry no one cares to read.

I fight for all these things because I deserve to.
please stop treating my life like a natural disaster.
please stop telling me to just survive.

please stop acting like that's all that I am capable of.

because isn't that really what someone means when they tell you to survive? that you're weak and useless and practically hopeless and that all you are capable of is remaining?
the thing is, this place I'm in is desolate and maddening, and I

REFFUSE to remain here. so what I really need is someone to tell me to fight like hell. to fight like hell every day until I get the hell out of here. to fight like they know I can. to fight because I deserve more than this wasteland. anyone who knows this place does not want me to survive here. the future here is bleak and I will no longer wait around on my haunches breathing in and breathing out and surviving.

I will live.

I will move and I will run and I will be far from here by morning.

and no one will ever mistake me for a survivor. I may have the cuts and scrapes of those ravaged by life, but I will not remain stranded on this island, surviving, waiting for rescue. I will not be cracking open coconuts and anticipating your arrival.

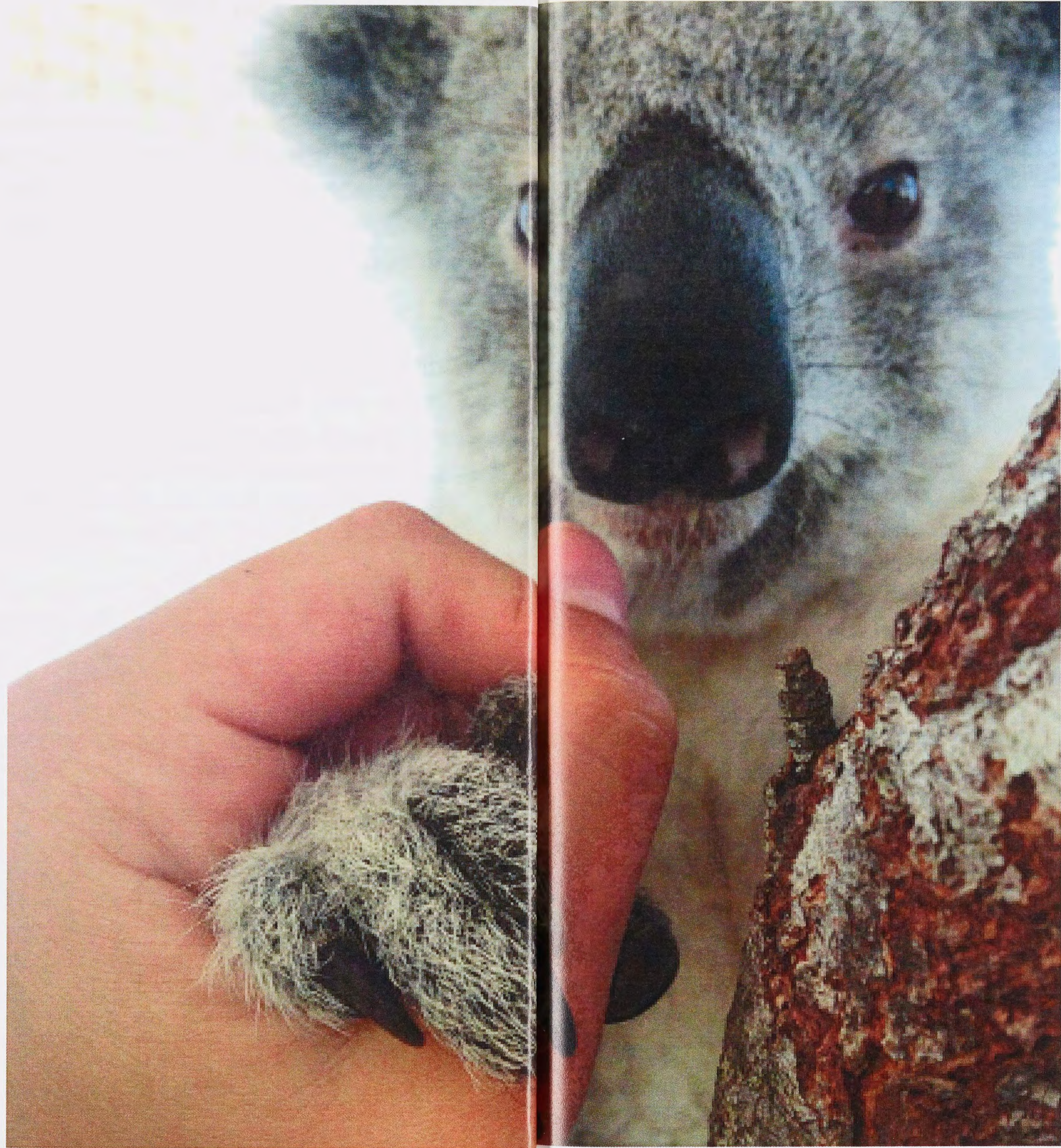
I will live.

I will move and I will run and I will be far from here by morning.

so far from here by morning.

Phantom // Tracy Akers

I move in ebbs and flows. Not the watery kind. The kind that gives glimpses of memories. Wisps of air. I move forward by parting the scenes, one by one, drapery. The kind of phantom that moves through life like life isn't real. Like the memories are water, not mine, not theirs. Searching for a savior in someone, but someone isn't there. Part of the inside dies each time a curtain is parted to see only another, burgundy, flowing, gauzy gaze. A full time job not to lose my fate, face. I'll build a boat to sail the open seas. Let the memories that are mine and aren't mind stay inside the material flowing behind me. I'll move in ebbs and flows. The real watery kind, pantomimes.



Baby Koala Holding My Hand in
Queensland, Australia // Monika Payerhin

The Last Year // Brittany Clemens

That was the year of the 10-pack of Kleenex and cowboy themed playing cards. Mom stopped coming to the dinners so I was forced to perch on the edge of the church pew, squeezed between the too-strong cologne of my grandfather and my aunt who needed her own bench, trying to stop my aching stomach from crying out in hunger while the priest told us we were all Jesus's elves.

Or it might've been year of the glitter tipped nail file and expired dollar store gift card. I was officially assigned permanent dish duty and was desperately trying to prevent myself from hacking asthmatic spittle onto plates of half chewed pork fat, tripping over two homicidal cats and an ADHD rescue mutt in my rush to destroy as many photo-realistic reindeer paper goods as I could while the dessert was starting without me in the room next door.

It could've been the year of the Barbie princess card, the souvenir Las Vegas shot glass, and the portable tire pump. My cousin was too absorbed in her Walkman to say hello, but that was okay, because she plays the cello now and started taking German and was on this fascinating new diet, so I hid the newspaper cutout of my first place in the high school geography tournament behind my untouched block of meat from the turkey my grandfather had shot two days before.

It was the year of the fifty-dollar bill. My grandfather was in the ICU, my cousin discharged from the army, and my uncle diagnosed with colon cancer. My aunt made plans to sell the house over store-bought hoagies and Dad's girlfriend helped with the dishes. So I sat on the plastic-covered floral couch underneath the fake mistletoe garland that never left the ceiling and memorized the patterns with my fingers, perfectly still and silent to catch every last fragment of worried voice and anxious cough and engrain them in my head because I knew that was the last year.

Tell me to fuck off

I See You // Grace Dawson

Joke, and be angry if you want to
but I see you.

Deny it if you choose, but I know
I know you better than all the flippant bullshit you throw at
me
I know how much you can be.

I see the teacher in you
The someday playful dad
The open, uncalculating friend
I've seen the reluctant lover, afraid to feel uncovered

You are only in a fog.
A fuck-the-world,
irresponsible
haze of not knowing.
Hesitation and
muddled inspiration
all that you put in your own way

I see you waking up
In the look you give me when you let your guard down
That provocative glint that you still let slip when I catch your
eye
The self-conscious shyness you betray when you look away
too soon

Laugh at me, go ahead
giggle and poke me,
press your fingers against my skin, then
kiss me into the wall, until
I forget where we are, and
there is only you
and this kiss

Wait

No, that wasn't new
It was only a dream
You were always too real to be true

Yet I wake inhaling your rough sweetness that seeped into
my sleeves,
and the bruises are still fading, after sinking in.
Your fingers mar my delicate skin,
and the marks you made don't lie.
Even though you aren't mine,
don't tell me it's not true.
I see through you.

I see you

Benny // Casey Schmidt

The medicine makes my hands shake. It makes my hands shake and my mouth dry and I feel like I can't say a goddam word without sand pouring out of my mouth. Okay, that's an exaggeration. It's not like the Gobi in there or anything, but I tell you, I don't have enough spit to lick my lips.

I need water and I need it now.

The handwriting on my paper looks like my grandmother's, or a reading from Richter scale. They said the pills were supposed to help my concentration, but I can't focus on a goddam thing other than that stupid "I" that's doing some dance on the page, and the fact that even gum can't coax my glands to salivate.

Alright, hand up, bathroom pass, nice, cool. Take your time, Mr. Johnson. You always put the mister in front of my name, like it makes me older than a junior in high school, Mrs. Eldred, and I hate it, if we're being perfectly honest. And I don't appreciate that sympathetic look you give me every time I have to leave class. I'd say this all out loud if my mouth wasn't so damn dry and my tongue worked at all.

The fluorescent lights bear down on me and I never really noticed the shadows it gives your face until after Benny died. It was maybe three days after I came back to school and no one would look at me and I didn't want to see them not looking at me, so I looked kind of sideways at the walls and passed some windows on the classroom doors. I thought the Grim Reaper had come for me too. No, just me with shadows crawling out of my eyes and down my cheeks. The hollow places told me I needed to eat.

I still need to eat. No, drink. I see the water fountain down the hall, but I don't want to chance anymore encounters with the shadows, and the bathroom is closer. The door opens and closes with a long whine and I am alone in this room that echoes and the focus in the pills get me all tuned into the sound my breathing makes. I'm grateful to that one kid that smeared who knows what on the mirror that used to

be in here, because then the administration decided that we should lose our mirror privileges.

I spin both the knobs on the sink to full power, the echoes a dull roar, and suck the water out of the spigot until I can feel it sloshing around in my stomach. Knobs off. Take breaths, in, out. Seven count in, seven count out. Repeat. Benny can't do seven in, seven out. Maybe he should have. I should stop being so morbid.

That's probably why my parents made me go see Dr. Torrence, back when there weren't the ringing echoes of the empty bathroom, just a dull hum and a haze. Mom and Dad had said, son, we're worried about you. Rumble, hum, rumble, hum. It was like being underwater and someone starts splashing on the surface, but you're settled on the bottom. You've hit that place where you can get your whole body to touch the bottom of the pool, nearly impossible, but there you are and your elbows and head and calves have grown barnacles and you can't move. It's bad, you know it's bad, but something in you won't panic and you forget to know what it's like to be up on the surface. You see the light slip away and the weight of the water crushes down on you, but you can't move and you stop trying to.

The pills take off the weight of the water, but the light and the air elude me. Stuck at the bottom. Alone.

Benny would've said we should poke a hole in the bottom of the pool and then, for good measure, blow the whole thing to hell and ride the waves out until we reach the world's end. That's the kind of person Benny was. Benny ate a bug when we were eight, not because he was dared to, but because I was and he wanted to know what it would taste like. Beans, he said. Baked fucking beans, he added because he had also just learned that new curse word a couple days before and he wanted to try it out.

His mom washed his mouth out with soap. He said it tasted like cottage fucking cheese.

We all knew Benny was a liar and he was crazy. He was crazy, we said and laughed and wondered why we couldn't be more crazy like Benny, who all the girls liked. He liked to climb the highest trees at the park by the river and jump out to see if he could still land on his feet. Maybe he wanted to be a stunt man now, we'd say, like how he'd wanted to be a professional motorcyclist because to hell with school and grades and meaningless shit. Everything was meaningless to Benny. He started skipping school.

Seven count in, seven count out. Repeat. Let's make Dr. Torrence proud, prove to him that we can make it through the day. Goddam hands, stop shaking.

Leaves in the wind. It had been autumn. The frost choked out the last of the fall flowers and the kids blew swirling dragon breath into the wind. Benny started smoking cigarettes and burning little patches of grass with the butts. He seemed particularly spiteful in those moments. At that point he'd stopped cutting his hair and always looked out past you. Past me. But when he burned the grass, he had seemed almost there, like the grass was closer to what he wanted to see past our shoulders and through our heads.

There was a little path, he said one time, watching the ends of grass curl and smoke as he crushed his yellow butt into another clump. A little path he once traveled down when he was seven and crazy. Born crazy, man, born crazy. It led him to the river and he thought it'd be a good idea to live there instead of home where there were rules and mom and dad yelled at the dog like it was the dog's fault for being a dog. There he would make a fort and live off the berries on the brambles and could tie a rope to that one tree and swing out into the river, all limbs and unbridled shouts. He started digging a hole with a rock by the shore and thought about building a moat for his fort since all good forts have moats. The river crept closer, pouring into the holes, but Benny kept digging until he hit something hard and pulled it out of the mud

and washed it in his river. A diamond.

That's not a diamond, I told him. He rolled the stone around in his fingers and pinched the cigarette until it died.

Shit, man, I know that, he said, looking irritable all the same. It looked like it was taking him a lot of effort to be patient with me and my stupidity. I pressed my lips together. Go on, I said, what happened next?

Nothing, man, nothing, he said, shaking his head. I just thought it was a diamond and that I'd be rich. He smirked and let his head drop with an exhale before deciding it was time for another hit and pulled out his pack of cigarettes. I thought I'd buy a helicopter and fly down to Monty Park and surprise all of you guys. Be like a sultan or something. Move to Constantinople.

Constantinople's not a thing, I told him. It's Istanbul now.

Do you have to interrupt every five seconds? He took a long drag and blew it out, and pressed his index finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose. I wanted to go to Constantinople and buy a mansion and maybe let you guys visit me or buy you houses. I dreamed big things, like buying the moon and living there instead. But in the end, I decided to keep it. It was important, ya know? A Get Out of Jail Free card. But I was seven and thought, very prudently, I might add, that I should wait to cash it in. I'd wait for a day when my mom would make me eat vegetables and I could whip it out and say, goodbye mother, I'm buying the moon, where there are no brussel sprouts.

He laughed and then again, laughing at his own laugh. It was shallow, huskier now that he had started smoking and he ended up coughing and dropping the cigarette on his jeans with a shitshitshit.

I waited for him to get rid of the butt. He threw it at a trashcan and missed, shrugged and resumed his story. I held onto it for a long time, man, he said, turning the stone gently

like a kaleidoscope in front of his eye. A long damn time. I didn't tell anybody. I kept it in my pocket every day and when Mrs. Jenkins would give me detention or I had to walk home because my mom forgot to pick me up, I'd think about cashing it in. But I kept it. I figured a worse day would come. It gave me something, like hope that even if things got worse, I could fly away.

And then I turned twelve and we learned in geology about quartz and it took me a few weeks to accept that my diamond was just a plain old rock. He pressed his lips together.

Are you okay? I asked. He was crying. Not in a sobbing way or anything. He was staring at the ground, but tears dripped from his jaw.

God, I need water. My head is killing me. Knobs turn, water flows and runs down my chin. There's a crack in the porcelain sink.

Yeah, man, of course I'm okay. It's a fucking rock, ya know, but I kept it in my pocket everyday still. I don't know. Just because it was a rock, didn't mean that it meant any less to me. He shook his hair out of his eyes. I guess I stopped believing at some point that it would do anything, anyways. But it's like how a kid doesn't want to believe that Santa Claus isn't real. It's not just that they think he's real, but they desperately want him to be real and even as adults, they can't let go of the lie and have to pass it on to their kids. I needed that rock.

I could see the defeat weigh on his shoulders. Benny, man, are you sure you're okay? You haven't been to school in almost a week and me and the guys-

Listen, man. Stop. I'm telling you a story and you're interrupting and I'm tired and want to go home soon. Besides, the sun is setting. I know your mom doesn't like you to be out when the streetlights come on.

Alright. Alright, Benny, whatever you want. Go ahead. What I'm trying to say, is I want you to take it.

The tiles on the bathroom floor are cold and I crawl into a stall so no one can see me pull a chunk of quartz out of my pocket. I shouldn't have come back to school. Not yet.

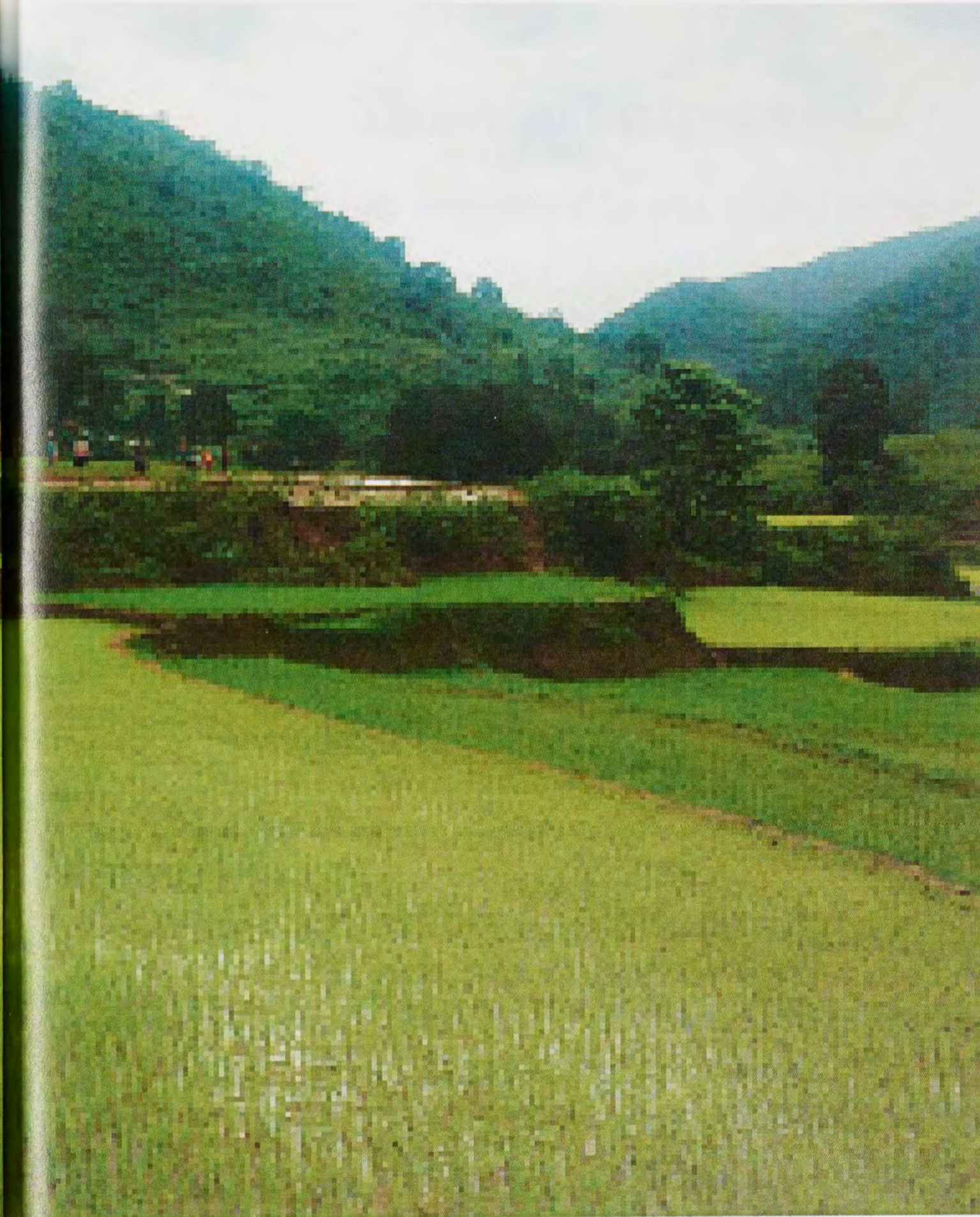
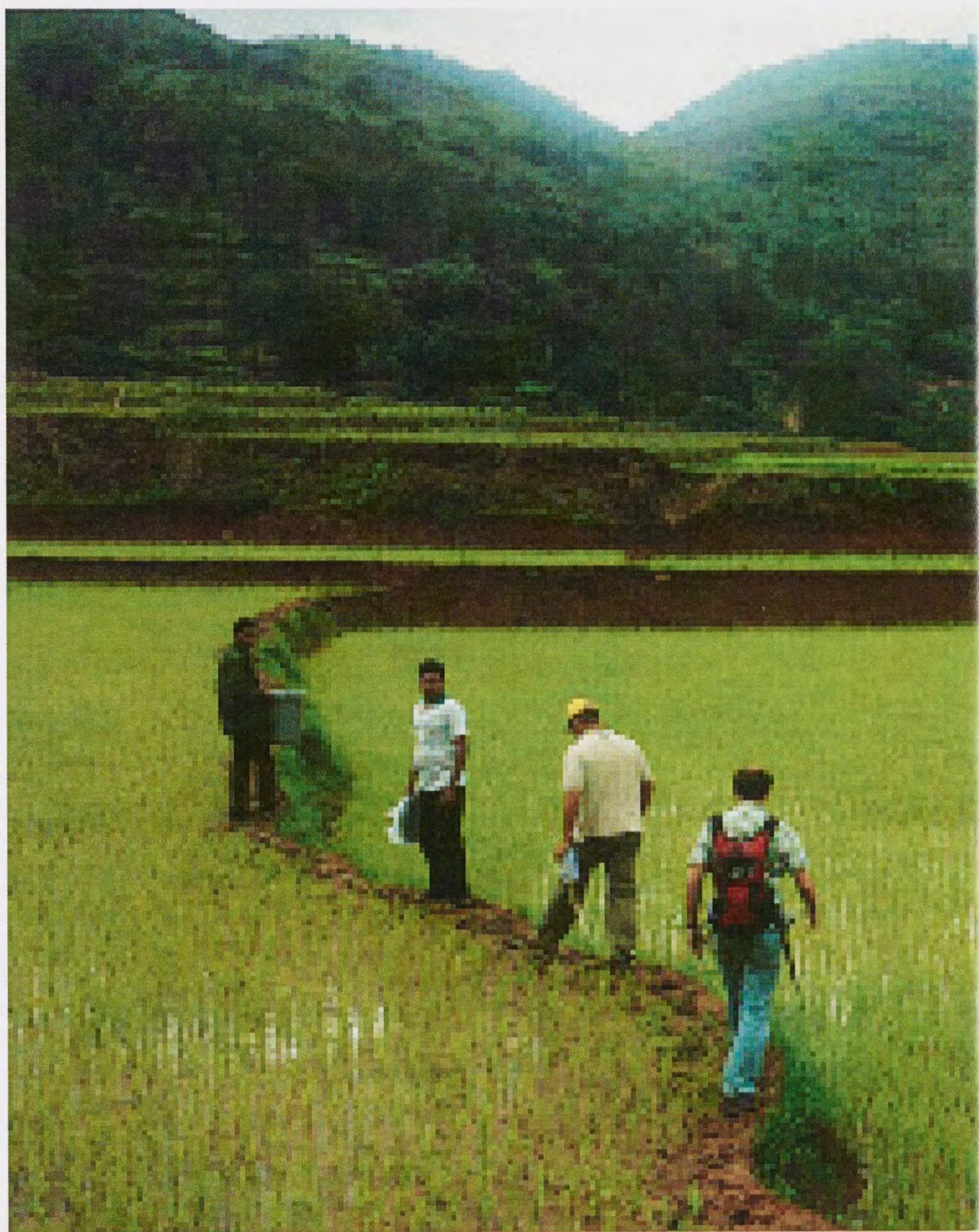
You want me to have it? He shoved the rock into my hand and closed my fingers around it, looking me in the eyes for the first time in I don't know how long. Grey eyes peeked out from behind the mop of hair and for a second there was a gleam of the old Benny, crazy Benny.

My hands wobble and the quartz skitters across the ground before I dive for it and hold it like how I held Benny's sister's hand at his funeral as they lowered the coffin into the ground and I stared past them, past their shoulders and through their heads.

But why?

Because I don't need it anymore, he said, taking his hand off mine and shoving them into his pockets. The wind was picking up. The streetlights blinked on, illuminating the tear tracks down Benny's face before he turned away from it. See ya around, man. He started walking. He turned right, away from home, towards the Tam Street Bridge that crossed over the river. A flicker of something stirred in my chest and I called, but wait! What am I supposed to do with it?

He was just a silhouette now. His voice echoed down the path, the leaves rustling under the words. Go buy the fucking moon, man.



Untitled // Jacob Salamy

Award Winners

The Margaret Haley Carpenter Award for Poetry "Phantom" by Tracy Akers

This award is presented to a student who has had an outstanding poem submitted for publication in the University of Richmond's literary magazine, The Messenger. The winner is chosen by a panel of three English faculty members and will receive \$1250 this year.

The Margaret Owen Finck Award for Creative Writing "Benny" by Casey Schmidt

This award is presented to a student who has had outstanding creative work submitted for publication in the University of Richmond's literary magazine, The Messenger. The winner is chosen by a panel of three English faculty members and will receive \$880 this year.

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