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Troy University Department of English

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The Rubicon

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THE RUBICON





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WATERWORKS

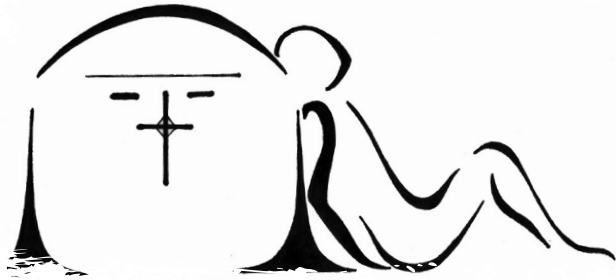
KATHRYN CURRY

I've caressed your cheek
More than any man's hand
The Rain is my sister
The Ocean, my mother

You know me well

I've counted the freckles that lace your face
Studied the curves of your pouted lips
Your skin is soft
And you hate that

Your tongue tells you I'm bitter but
Your heart lets you know I'm sweet
Every once in a while—
I'm not all bad



BLUE

ABIGAIL MICHELINI

The slant of evening through shades
has cast you blue,
starving out the last slice of orange sun
surviving in the alcove of your eyes.

You doze,
your lids tiny tides,
alternately excavating and inundating
the world with greenish beauty,
even you, unable to tame the haughty moon.

I gaze, their strands sentinels
of a glass castle,
the blue light reading
the reflection of your mind.

THE NEW EXHIBIT

ZACHARY DALTON ASHBURN

Someone was killed today
at that pioneer place.
Misplaced blood stains the tin and painted signs.
The dirt paths littered with existence.
Yellow tape, blaring lights, stone-cold glares
bar us from seeing the one-man show.
The museum has never been
more alive and exciting.

EMILY'S LAMENT

HANNAH LINDLEY

I never saw a moor but I heard talk
The angels lurked above and watched me weep
Demons circle 'round me as I question
How God's people could forever suffer
"Read the Book, see the Light,"
people keep saying but
I cannot go on accepting this misery
So will I calm my fears and relinquish my soul
Or will I hear the buzz of the fly when I die?

Hannah Stone

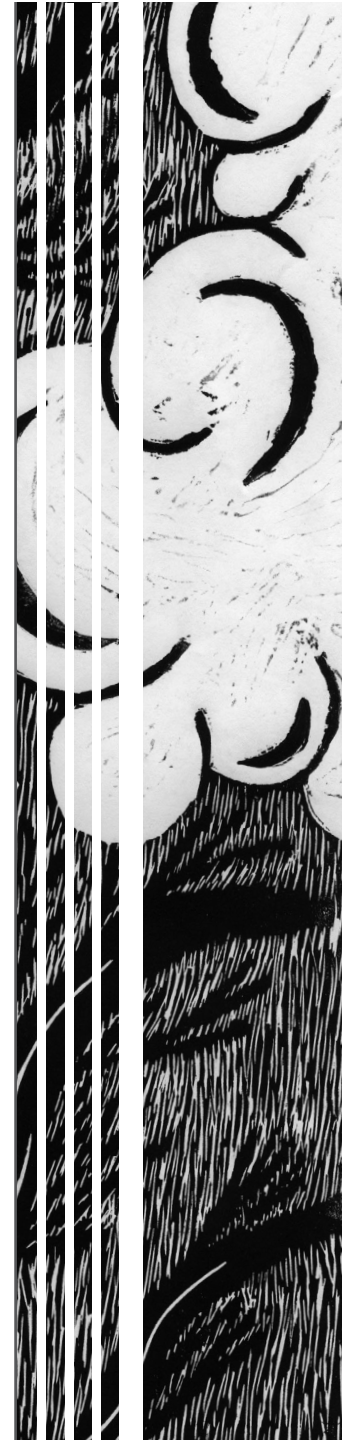
SMOKE

COURTNEY GILLEY

What if all we are is the swirling smoke in a genius's pipe?
A whole galaxy in a breath, riding on the breeze,
Nothing more than a swirling vortex of misty haze.
Millennia pass in a second's time, whirling above his head
in some candlelit pub outside a minuscule town.
He smothers another universe in the glass ashtray
to start fresh again.
We live in the ashes, burning—screaming
to let us live.
But the genius takes no notice, his paper smeared
with ideals of the world he destroyed moments ago.
A different age has begun—new
as the crescent moon.
In the thickest fog, we find ourselves.
Voicelessly lingering, twirling absently
in the barmaid's hair,
we are brushed aside—a nuisance.
Our laughter, our tears mark the sky
dangerously close to his lips.
We come together with accidental anger,
again forgetting that this is not the first time
or the last.
His lungs burn as we warn him that
we are here.
We fight for power of the air, hanging gently
until his breath pushes us forward.
We glow with every pull and he stops—wondering.
The blue-grey ghosts of our ancestors linger, quietly
waiting for their ascent into his mind,
while we fight to hang on to the whispers of the wind.

The genius does not know who he is.
The genius does not know who we are.
The genius does not know what he is creating
or what he is destroying.

As the ink dries on his last line, a smile creases,
and we are snubbed out until his next trial.
We are the smoke.



Hollie Reeves



LEX

LAUREN WIGGINS

My mind's photograph
of you has yellowed.

And the box in
which I stored it
Is nowhere to be found.

It is buried
beneath tax forms,
And textbooks,
And last winter's coat.

You too are buried.

You lie beneath dirt,
and wood, And stone,
and faded flowers.

You were covered
by time, acceptance,
And the ability to
laugh without guilt.

You have been
built upon.

You are yellow
and buried,
yet you remain.



A NEW ME

ROBERT MCGOUGH

She walked out of the room, and out of our life
carrying with her a heavy load of all the things
that made us, us, or at least that's how it seemed
to me as I slumped sadly to the floor in a puddle

My sense of self was left torn into tiny shreds
like confetti-ed paper, and scattered round the room.
The room once filled with our friends and laughter...
and furniture.

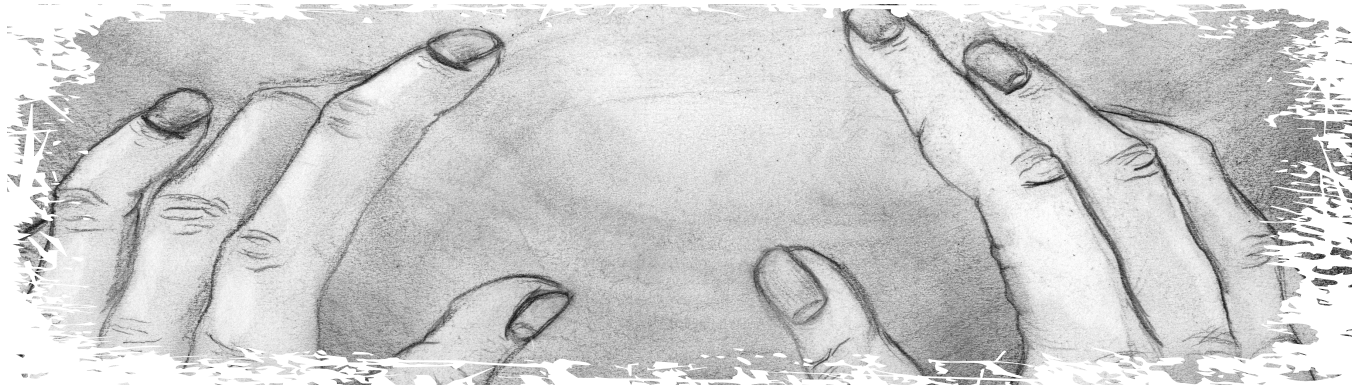
I gathered up the scraps and glued them back together,
but my ends were dogeared, and bits were missing,
and I found myself an ill fit for who I was wanting to be.
So I sat on a broken chair, my tears making the glue run.

I tore a seam in the me that was, red ink spilling out
pouring out the poison that had come to fill me up,
and colouring the me between, changing me into what
I prayed would be the me to be, perhaps a me I could stand

I rose up, shuffling past the cats as they batted at
the little slivers of me I couldn't be troubled to gather
and paused in the hall to look at the only picture left,
one left behind so not to remind her of what she'd been.

I looked silently at this stranger I once knew so well,
and felt the still fragile tears pull and stretch painfully
while the edges of me curled like paper too close to heat,
revealing the charred bones that spiderwebbed within me

Turning towards the door, tongues of flame licked out
scouring holes through me, the fiery once full heart
turned to dull greying coals, its warmth scourging outwards
seeking greener pastures, or at least less dismal moors.



Alisha Merritt

Ashy flakes of me rained down on the wooden floors,
leaving long sooty streaks in my wake, like passing ships
as the heat from the ever increasing flames left behind
charred footprints, marking my path through empty rooms

A bloodied, blistered hand reached out to open the door
its brass knob melting under my fragile wrenching grasp
as I opened the door to the raging storm that surrounded
and blanketed my solemn home in dank gloaming greys.

As a ship I slipped into the storm, unnoticed in its maelstrom,
A Ulysses seeking my home, knowing Ithaca lay behind me
empty, and already in ruins, the suitors having come and gone.
With my once wife and never children having left me as well

The storm around me echoed what my life had become,
had been. Thunder roared like angry shouts and hot tears.
Lightning, like the slamming of doors, or hateful remarks.
The wind buffeting, taking me where it would, out of my control

Steam rose thickly as the fires within me were extinguished,
and the last shards of the me that was sloughed off leprously
leaving me naked and bare before the might of the storm,
the rain lashing my new flesh, hardening it against the world.

Falling to my knees, into the patchwork puddle of the old me,
the heat within cooled, and you could not tell were rain ended
and warm tears began, blanketing my face in a soothing embrace
welcoming forth the me to be, as a child leaving the womb

These are the moments where you think faith is lost, or found
And even in that moment, I was sure that this was the case,
my faith burnt to cinders and scattered upon the storm's wind.
But faith is never the matter of a single moment, nor is love.



Victor Sanakai-Papi



WE IS ME

KATHRYN CURRY

Bitter, burning water tastes sweet
down our throats and
we know it may be wrong but
what is right anymore?

We are wicked fiends dreaming
wicked dreams fueled by the
fire we desire at the bottom of
red plastic cups

Our voices are no longer there but
we don't care and share
our hearts with people
who don't deserve it

We drown ourselves in drunk sincerity
lacking the clarity to make sense of
ALL THIS
But who needs articulation when
your heart is blue and
misconceptions true?

Living?
Forgetting?
What's the difference?



Victor Sanakai-Papi

WEEDS

LAUREN WIGGINS

Come wander in my garden of weeds
Here adoration is given to all.
Sprigs of ivy spiral and sprawl around the gate.
Doesn't the English Daisy appear delightful?
Lush clover blankets the lawn.
Some search it for the four leaves of luck.
How picturesque the lily pads make the pond.
You may recognize the morning glory's bloom as a representation
Of the light bursting from the stem of each life.

Desire to make a wish? Pluck a stray dandelion.
Inhale, blow, and enjoy your wish in its infancy.
Wish I for a world that celebrates the wonder of weeds.
The obstinate ones that naturally thrive
And persevere in places where they were not planted.

RUNNING

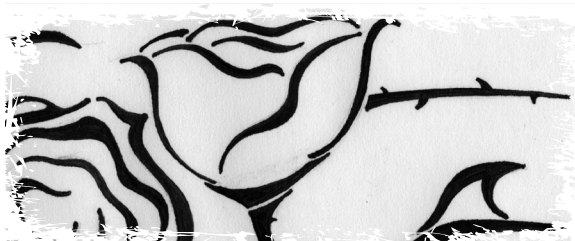
ABIGAIL MICHELINI

How many runs left from 15th Avenue?
Followed by breakfast and the promise
of brownies, pizza, wine.

How many secrets unlaced
in the easy cadence
of a Saturday morning long run?

Predawn, post dark,
our feet have drawn maps of this city,
slow circles and streaks of fast lines,
the white gaps between footprints
like a toothless grin dotted in with time;
the trails left bleeding with the heavy red marker
of an out and back and back again.

Those longest runs,
our voices flickering like fireflies above the road,
lit the hours for an instant,
their best burn
always with you.



Hannah Stone

WHOLE

ABIGAIL MICHELINI

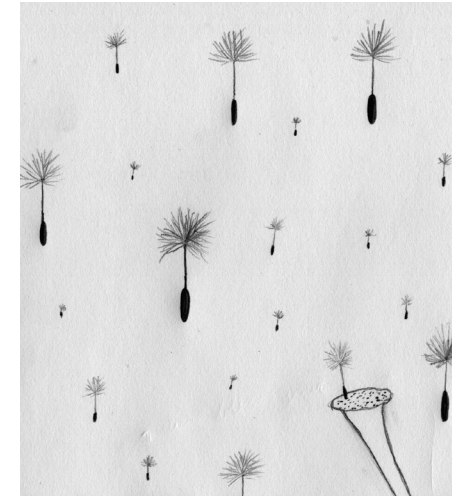
Hannah is driving and Erin's next to her
and I'm in the back.
We are winding our way to her old house
with white pizza and wine coolers
and if I died right now I'd be whole.
When we were little, Hannah poked
our arms with chunky toy needles
until we cried out with pain.
"It's supposed to hurt," she'd say.
Now we are older and no one says anything
when her husband tells her he's leaving
as in her arms their infant struggles
to breastfeed for the first time.
Erin and I drive from hours away
and shove our fists into our own mouths.

When we were teenagers
and I was starving
Hannah didn't leave me alone,
even though I begged her with silence.
And when I was well again,
she was the only one waiting.
Riding in her car I recount
the details of divorce
and graciously she says I've had it worse,
when I know I haven't.
We crucify men for each other.

Womb to wake, together
we cry and stuff back tears.
And at the center is a trinity –
Hannah is driving
and Erin's next to her
and I'm in the back.



Alisha Merritt



GHOST

BRANDI MITCHELL

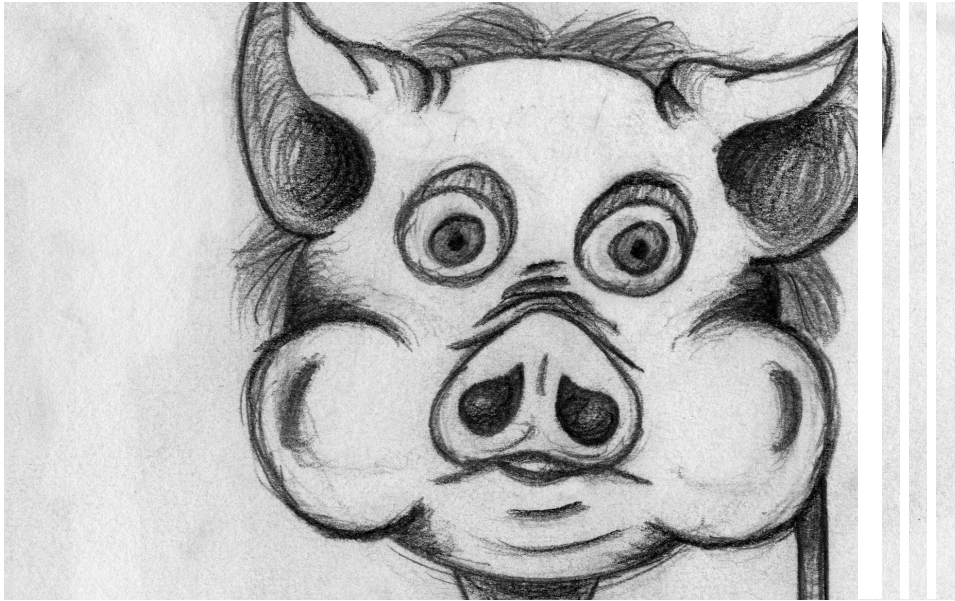
My mother thin in her yellow dress,
the dress each Sunday saw.
The large women sparkled,
laughing in the glow of prosperity,
exchanging empty bless your hearts.
Fat bellies and wallets abundant in
The House of the Lord.

My house was thin.
Thin walls.
Thin meals.
Thin people.

Hard times are a blessing
sang the ghost in yellow.
The windows of her soul saw
cold nights,
pantries bare,
children bare,
calledus feet,
darkness.
But blessings.



Lydia Phelps



ANIMALS

AMBER RICHARDS

“I was tainted, you know, by the world. I was doin’ some bad stuff. I was runnin’ with the Hell’s Angels and gettin’ into shoot outs, getting high, getting bombed. But he plucked me out of all of that, God did.”

He holds his thumb and index finger in front of his face, pinches them together and pulls his hand away when he says “pluck.” Bob is a big, muscley guy, but his belly balloons out. Wire hairs stick out from under his sports watch. Some of the hair on his arms and legs has reclaimed skin that once better showed his tattoos. He continues talking as he gets back to his triceps pushdowns. She watches his pecs and belly undulate in one smooth wave.

“So, you a student here?” he asks.

“Yeah.” Her voice is flat.

“You stay at the dorms?”

“No.”

“Oh, where do you stay at?”

Her brows knit ...she decides to answer... the Wood is big enough that, in case he is unhinged, he can’t find her without knowing her car.

“The Pointe at Redwood?” Suspicion marks her voice.

“Oooh, you better be careful out there. You know about them rapes.”

“Yeahhh.” Her eyes narrow with the corners of her lips.

“Do you carry a firearm?”

She stops knitting and narrowing her face. She relaxes it instead. Placid, controlled. There are mantras in her head. Hushed hands on a hot ore.

“That’s a loaded question.” Her voice indicates that she didn’t mean for this to be funny. Neither acknowledges her pun. He keeps talking.

Hollie Reeves

“You know, if you don’t, you ought to carry a pencil with you. I seen a guy get stabbed in the neck with one—and you gotta pull it out—guy bled to death in five minutes. You be careful. Take care of yourself. That guy’s an animal.”

He steps away from the triceps side of the arm station, over to the low row bench—where she had completely stopped her workout a good ten minutes ago after he asked her about her tattoo and told her about her beautiful red hair and about how if he was twenty-five years younger and about moving to the South and about his wife and a blur of other overshare static. She has been debating whether to abandon the rows or create a reason, other than not giving a shit, for needing to get back to her workout. She’s getting hungry. Dinner needs to be started, but now he’s less than a foot from her, goatee and micro stash winging away.

“My wife has a good friend who works at the ER. You wouldn’t believe the things that animal did to her. He—”

Bob looks so disgusted that he could really bust some guy’s head, but her face is still smooth and as cool as river stone. Only the intensity in her eyes changes. Lightning strikes in an open field. He cocks his head to the side, squinting. Before he can say anything she cuts him off.

“—Yeah. Awful. People are awful. It was nice meeting you.”

And she gets up from the station, heading for the other side of the gym. She doesn’t even wipe down the equipment. She always wipes off the equipment. Bob shrugs and continues his reps.

The other side of the gym has work-out machines in two rows, one on either side. Three girls in oversized t-shirts that advertise campus events and sporting pony tails and bright finger nails are doing post work out stretches in an open area behind the first row. Full make-up at the gym. Sweat, oil, and waxy pigment mingling in pores, stretching them. She opts to switch out arm and leg day and gets onto the leg press.

Vvvvvvhhuu chu

The large inked anchor on her left thigh twitches left to right over her vastus lateralis. It’s surrounded by orange rose blossoms that saturate her moonstone skin.

Vvvvvvhhuu chu

Vvvvvvhhuu chu

She can see the girls in the reflection of the mirror across the aisle from them. One girl is still stretching. A blonde in a Patagonia cap reaches her toned arm down the length of her toned Australian Gold Adobe calf. The other two are talking to each other, but their eyes are on their smart phones. One finally looks up at the other, startled joy in her voice.

“Oh my god. So, you know how I want one of those micro pigs? Well, this story showed up on my feed. It isn’t one of those pigs; it’s like, a pig-pig, but it saved its owner’s life. She had a heart attack in the kitchen, and the pig busted out of the house and went to a neighbor’s and freaked out until they followed it back home and found her. I had no idea pigs could feel that way about people.”

INTO THE NOTHING

COURTNEY GILLEY

He woke up at the same time as usual, in the same place as usual. It really didn't matter how he got back there, because every day had a reset. He'd walk the Earth three times before coming to the conclusion that it was all the same.

The sun shone bright through the cracks in the window, dissecting his body into delightful shapes. He reached up to dim it, but today it was too far away. The dust and grime reflected the rays with a pearlescent sheen that amused him. He waited a long time before listening to the echoes of his footsteps down the hall onto the pavement.

Today he would stay in the United States. From Oregon to North Carolina, he walked. It only took about two hours, much less than the trip to China, which took six because he had to swim the Pacific River. Oregon he liked. It was wet and the wilderness made him feel like nothing was out of place.

He didn't think much about before. When he did, it was usually the same day. He would remember what she said and then laugh. The noise would come out of him before he could stop it. It was disheartening to hear. The buildings around him would swallow it whole and not return the favor of an echo.

It was amusing, traveling like this, because before it was never possible. The state was lonely and made him feel. Big, beautiful plantation houses loomed down at him with broken eyes while being choked from the wild vines that seemed to have their hands in everything. The stacks of factories still had haunts of white-blue smoke, even though decades had passed.

He sat and watched the sun kiss the horizon from the top of the giant wheel at the theme park. He closed his eyes and could almost hear the music, or what he thought was music. None of that made sense to him anymore. Then he saw her. She was looking up at him with the tiniest hint of a smile. Instantly he climbed down to her, pulling her into him. He could feel her manicured nails dig into his skin.

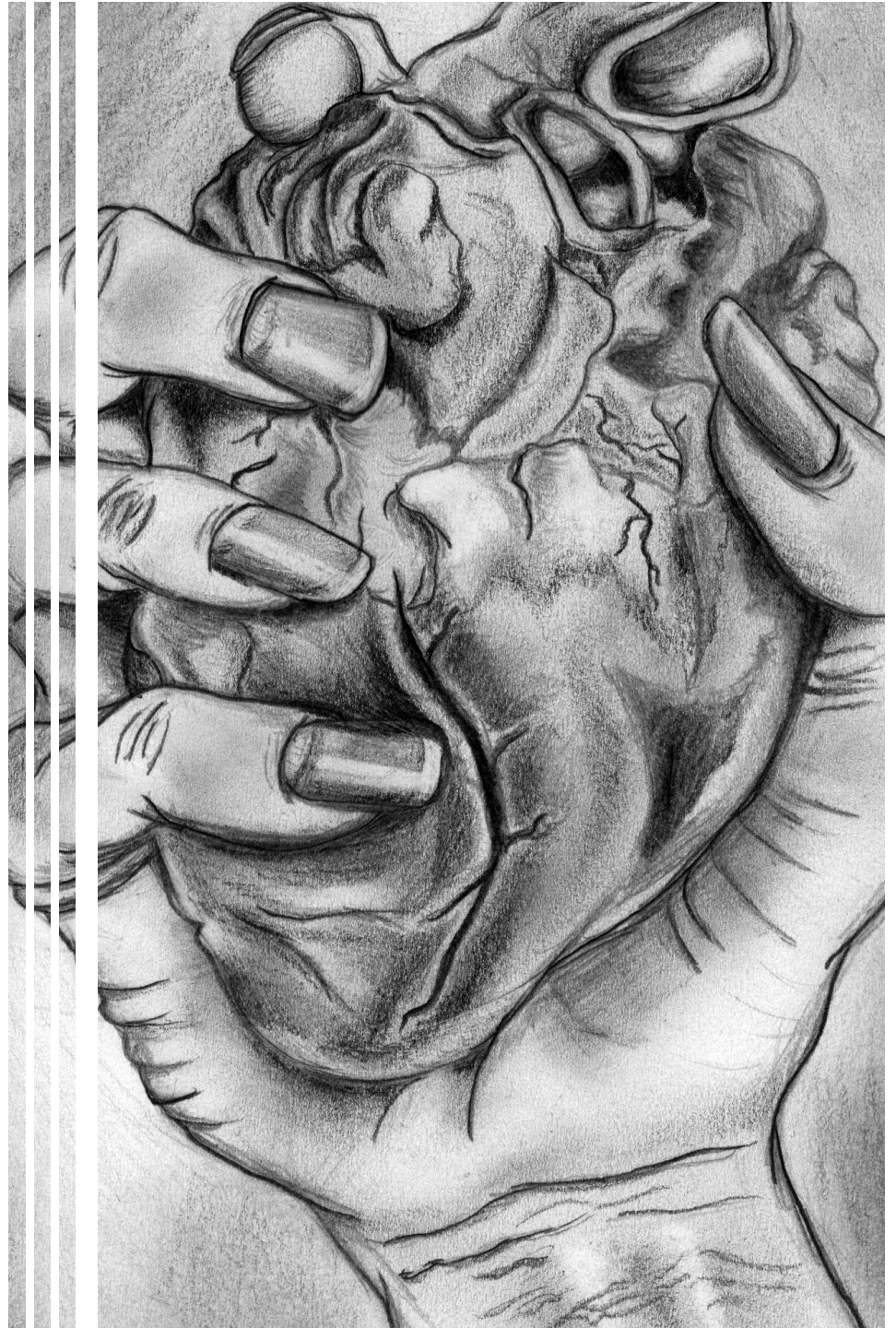
He drew her breath into him and moved to stroke the cascading black locks. "Not if you were the last man on Earth," her red lips whispered in his ear.

He opened his eyes and watched her dissipate. How typical of her. Again he laughed, but it was hollow and hurt his lungs. He was glad the moon had rolled in. The moonlight never played such cruel tricks as the sun. But could he really believe what had been in front of him?

The half-moon shapes on his forearm made him believe. She had been there, touching him. In the rushing darkness he could taste her scent. He should have seen her before now, though. The world was so small and he wasn't alone. A small ember glowed from the depths of what used to be his soul. He almost said it aloud. He wasn't alone. Days came and went with an emptiness that engulfed his entire being. The sun had played another game, and he foolishly played along.

He walked until he couldn't walk anymore. Everything passed by him slowly, but nothing took his eyes away from his feet morphing with the Earth. His toes gripped the edge of the universe. He looked up into the vast, black velvet and inhaled stars, exhaling galaxies.

The last man on Earth raised his hands in mercy. He felt a manicured hand push into his back, and he fell into the nothing.



THE RUNAWAYS

LIZ NOWLING

They were running through the alley ways. Rain above them pouring and soaking through their clothes. Their tennis shoes sloshed and spat as they batted them down hard onto the pavement. They ran around corner after corner, through the maze of brick walls and trash bins, trying to find an exit. If they didn't they were counted as good as dead. The boy knew that as he pulled the girl along with him, hand in hand. The girl was much shorter than he was, yet fairly tall to others, but still she slowed him to a steady running pace. Much slower than he knew he could run. She tried, though, she really did. And the boy thought that he should be grateful for that in the very least.

But they had to move faster.

The boy could only imagine what the people with the guns and wicked minds would do to them. He shuddered even at the thought of them hurting the girl. He wouldn't let that happen, he told himself. Even if it was the last thing he did. They hurt the girl too much already. In many ways that the boy didn't understand how or why.

They would have to settle for him, he thought.

The boy felt the girl fall—but not completely, because he had a firm grip on her—and mutter a curse. He would have smiled if it were normal times. But now wasn't normal times. They were being chased out of their home, forced to run with their tails tucked behind their legs, and pride left behind. The boy wondered how he had ever gotten into this mess. He wasn't the reason the rotten people were chasing after them. The girl was. But yet as he pondered in his head for the reason why; he already knew the answer.

For the girl, he had run. For the girl, he had taken the mocking and ridicule for falling in love; half of it his own conscience. For the girl, he had done all of that. Only for the reward of her love and affection.

"Hush," he murmured gently. She looked up at him with her glassy deep brown eyes. She tried to hold back the tears that threatened to be exposed, and his heart throbbed out for her. She was showing tears now, showing weakness. He wanted to encase her in his arms right then, shield her from the monsters that chased them. But, he would have to settle for carrying her instead.

"Sorry," he muttered and jerked her upward in a fast, yet delicate movement, into his arms. He knew she wouldn't like it. It was bad enough she already was crying, now he had taken the only other independent thing left she could do to help.

The people were speeding up. He could already hear them and their searching party.

The boy ran.

He ran as fast as his body would let him. He ran through alley after alley, jumping over trash and debris that came in their way. Their only chance was to be out in the open with normal people, where they couldn't hurt them. If only for a little while.

The wind shifted and the boy stumbled over his feet, caught off guard.

No! It can't be!

But it was.

They had tricked him. He could hear them know. Another group of them was up ahead,

hidden from the rest. They were just two alleys down. They were trapped now.

No escape.

Or so he thought.

Just up ahead was a fire escape, the ladder was pulled down for God-knows-what reason. But he didn't care, it was there. And it was their only chance for survival.

He shifted the girl onto his back to free his hands. She made a little gasp at the movement, but soon understood and held on. He took a few steps back and readied himself.

One, two, three!

And he was off. He ran and jumped on one of the dumpsters to give him a boost as he reached for the ladder. His fingers connected with cool metal and held strong. He scampered up the ladder and up onto a platform, then up another. On the second platform, he could hear the people one alley away now. He started to panic.

Any minute now they could be here and—and—

And he didn't want to think about that. He needed to get the girl up to that roof and out of range from the guns.

He pushed his feet faster and pulled harder. The goal set in his mind. Now all he had to do was achieve it.

He was on the third platform now.

Half way up the ladder.

Three steps till the top.

Bang!

A gun fired in the distance. The people were at the bottom and shot wildly at them. But they had hit. They had hit him badly in the ribs. He gasped in pain and clutched his side. The bullet didn't hit anything vital; but, that didn't mean he couldn't die.

He swung the girl over and onto the roof with the last of his strength and staggered down a step. She landed in a low crouch and reached out a hand to him, screaming his name as she cried.

"Richard! Please! Oh, God, Richard! Grab my hand!"

But he couldn't. He was already falling. His hands slipped from their firm hold of the ladder; his vision blurred at the edges. He felt the wind whip around him as he fell, whirling through his ears.

Her face popped into his mind, and he smiled, glad that her face was the last thing he was going to see.



Alyssa Narksavee



SANDGLASS

Ngoc Vo

People like you always seek meaning in meaningless things, in their desperate search for proof that things matter, that they matter because it's all life is about, isn't it? You look at the threshold of time—the point where the two bulbs of a sandglass meet—and see on the other side, a whole different world. It may not be a great world, you try to pass as rational, but at least it's a better world.

...

You are at that pinhole again. You're standing at the passage where everything stalls, packed up in that tiny little space, dropping and waiting for its turn to drop, to be drawn by gravity. Glorious, glorious gravity.

You are at that pinhole again and you are about to jump. You've been waiting for this; you are ready, except, maybe you're not. You don't know about that; it doesn't matter. What matters is getting to the other side. Close your eyes, take the leap.

You can't feel with your numb nerve-endings; you can't breathe in that dense air: free falling is everything and nothing like you have imagined. Silence, pitch-dark: deaf, blind. Open your eyes. You find yourself at that pinhole again and you can't remember what's happened, too many faces, too many colors. Come closer a rolling line of strangers sing to you. You've never heard that song before but you can sing along the lyric. It's like a lullaby: you're safe, it's not dangerous, everything is gonna be okay. You feel magnetized.

You are at that pinhole again, waiting for your turn to jump.

You are at that pinhole again.

...

O how easily
how easily you forget.
You forget every time
that the clock turns about.

WE SERVE AT SEVEN

ROBERT MCGOUGH

The cars had been arriving all day to the Hocht-ta-chaabee Barbeque Club, lining up in tidy rows around the southern edge of the large clearing where supper would be served. It was nearing six when the last few cars finally trickled in. Last of all was a large Ford pickup truck, painted blue wherever it wasn't the dark brown of rust.

Forced to park on the far edge of the clearing, away from the much preferred parking spots close by the picnic tables, it pulled up in a cloud of dust that followed it from the dirt road. Rolling to a stop it rocked from side to side as Greg Howard unhooked his seatbelt. Flinging open the door he squeezed his four hundred pound bulk out onto the grass and began trundling his way up the low hill to the festivities with the hitching walk of the morbidly obese.

Even this late in the day the June sun still had not set, and would not for two hours yet. Its orange glow filtered through the leafy expanse of pecan limbs, keeping the temperature well into the upper 80's. It was so hot that by the time Greg was halfway up to the tables he was dripping sweat, the moisture soaking through his shirt to his fine blue coveralls.

He had been coming to the club his entire life, well over fifty years now, having been carried there as an infant by his mother. Her family had, generations earlier, been one of the founding members of the club, a fact that brought him no small amount of pride. Never having married, he had no family of his own to bring to these events, but he had never minded, as the club was his family.

Fortunately for him, a couple of other stragglers were lingering in conversation on the outskirts, giving him a chance to stop, talk, and, more importantly, catch his breath. By the time the chatting had worked its way to a natural conclusion he at last felt able to finish the trek and assume his place at his family's table.

One of the oldest on the property, it was also the only painted table, having been colored by his father a dark green twenty-five years ago. The original coat had long since flaked off, but Greg had always made sure to keep the caretakers in paint so that they could keep it as pristine as possible.

Cries of welcome greeted him as he eased himself onto the attached wooden bench, as near to the head of the table as these style seats could manage, as was his due as the oldest living

member of the clan present. A half dozen nieces and nephews, the children of his two brothers and his little sister Laverne, already sat around it, playing a few games of dominos to help pass the time.

The air was so thick with humidity that it draped over the attendees like a moist blanket, as though it were trying to smother the life from the gathering. Anytime it seemed to settle especially heavy on the crowd though, it was partially dispersed by roars of laughter as the good folks of the event caught up on the news and happenings of the past month. Cicadas droned in the background, weaving their notes into the sounds of the party.

Greg took a glass of his sister's sweet tea, sipping it slowly and trying to cool himself as much as possible with a makeshift fan made from a paper plate. His heart was fluttering in a way it never had before, which had him a bit on edge. Unwilling to disrupt the good times of the others he swallowed the bitter pill of his worry, chasing it with an extra large swallow of tea. It was only another thirty minutes until the food was served, and he tried to assure himself that he would be fine until after then.

Not for the first time he cursed the lack of backs on the seats, thinking about how nice it would be to be able to lean and let a full chair ease the strain created by his ponderous gut. Maybe then his heart would stop hurting so badly. Reaching into the bib of his overalls, he pulled out a threadbare red handkerchief and swiped it over the bald spot on his head, then down across his face.

Beside him, his youngest nephew, Kieran a boy of 11, leapt to his feet, slamming down a double five so hard that the other dominos bounced and jostled around. Groans of dismay came from his siblings and cousins as he crowed "40 points, 40 points! Winner, winner, chicken dinner!"

"Boy, sit your ass down. Damn all that ruckus, too hot for such as that." The heat was making Greg irritable, exacerbated by the pain, which seemed to grow with every breath. Abashed, Kieran sat down.

A look came across the boy's face. "Uncle Greg, you don't look so good."

Laverne gave her brother a hard look. "Greg he's right, you don't..."

She never got to finish that sentence as her brother suddenly clutched his chest, his eyes bulging. He tried staggering to his feet but instead just ended up on the ground, flopping obscenely. His collapse knocked the pitcher of tea over, a brown wave slushing most of the dominos off the table. Gasping for breath, he could not hear his family calling for help over the sound of the blood pounding in his head.

From amongst the attendees a doctor, a nurse, and two med students from the University of Alabama came running up, rushing to save his life. Hands began pawing at his chest, attempting to start CPR, easily popping the buttons of his shirt to reach his thickly haired chest. He thought to himself how strange it was that his last thoughts were about how the trees needed a good trimming, and how sad it was that it wasn't something more profound.

Head lolling to one side he looked up towards the tree tops as if looking for heaven, body rocking from the failing, flailing attempts to restart his tired heart. His last breath rattled out and filtered amongst the languid breeze, drifting away, carrying his soul. Everyone was too busy trying to save him to notice, caught up in their own heroics.

When at last the nurse stopped, having taken over from the doctor after the first frantic minute, a great wail went up from Greg's sister, so loud it even quieted the cicadas for the briefest of moments. Everyone stood around in shock as the medical folk rose back to their feet, knocking the grass from their pants, save for one of the students who remained kneeling, clearly dazed. The doctor helped him to his feet and guided him away talking softly, as the nurse tried to get service on her phone to call out the officials.

Sobbing into the arms of one of the matrons who sought to comfort her, the sister cried out. "Get him off the ground at least! Please." Several of the nearby men stepped forward, looking

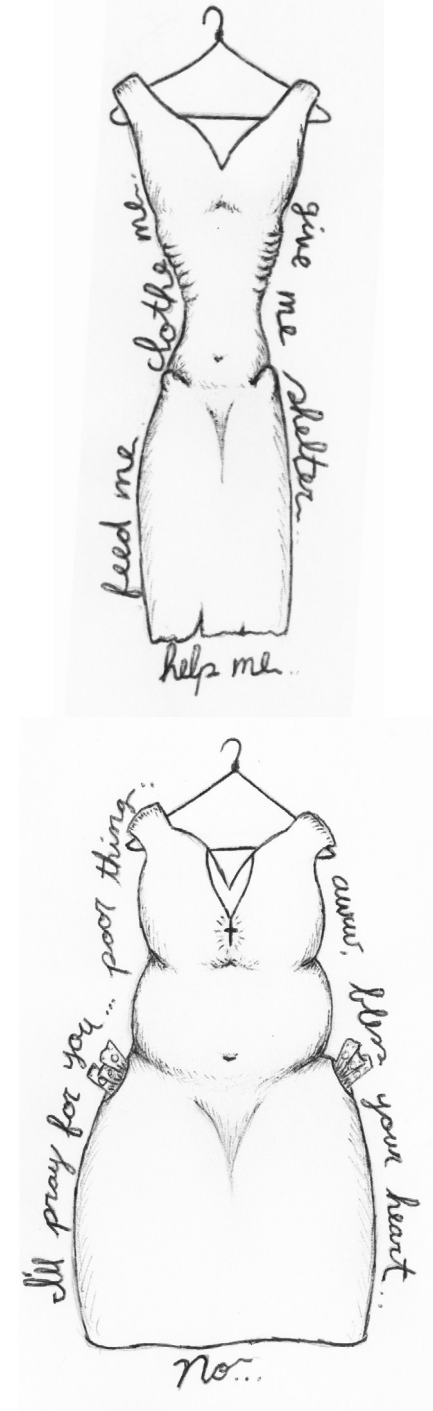
from each other to the massive corpse before them. They waved a few more men over, and together the six managed to lift him onto the picnic table, which groaned under his weight. No one had bothered to clean off the table first, so they found they had set him in a puddle of tea. This final indignity at last sent his sister into complete hysterics. It took ten minutes to get her calm enough to load into a car and take away from the scene.

People began looking nervously from their watches to the cook house. It was growing perilously close to seven o'clock, the traditional serving time. There was no precedent for such an occasion. Either the club met, or it didn't. Never in its hundred and seventy years had the club met, but not served. Everything was ready, it was just waiting on the Reverend to say grace. Those nervous glances occasionally strayed to the table bearing the dead man, but most tried to ignore it as best they could.

A huddled meeting of the board of directors of the club took place over by the entry-way to the cook house. It was presided over by Martha George Hall, the club's matriarch and de facto president, a wrinkled old crone of over eighty. In hushed but heated tones, the five people assembled debated whether or not to serve, with Martha and the doctor saying yes, the Reverend and Tobias Wheeler just as adamantly saying no. At last, the old woman looked over to Quentin Summers, the club's attorney, jabbing a finger curved with arthritis towards him, demanding his input.

Looking over to the corpse he stood there, hand on his chin, deep in thought for another moment more. At last he spoke. "I mean, he's already dead, can't do anything for him now. And as much as he loved our pork in life, it would be a shame to let it go to waste. After all, we serve at seven."

If the line went a little quicker that night, and the people left a little earlier than normal, no one commented on it. They were even nice enough to fix plates for the paramedics who came to pick up the body.



WAVES

NAOMI PEREZ

It is so loud. I can barely think. The ocean waves are crashing against the shore, attacking the sand as if they were lifelong enemies.

“You need to wear sunscreen. I told you that already. If you don’t take care of yourself, no one will.” I look up and see a face I vaguely recognize. The man standing over me is dressed in shorts with dripping hair, blocking out the sun with his long and sinewy body. “We should go to my house and get some before you burn.” He turns to walk and I follow silently, already knowing the way.

His house is not a house. It is a shack that should not be standing. The wood is discolored and decayed, still damp from high tide and crusted with salt and sand all along the sides. The shack is only a few feet away from the ocean, and there is no one to be seen for miles. The beach is usually filled with families, every inch of sand occupied by towels, umbrellas, picnic baskets, and fold-out chairs. I do not remember when I stopped seeing children playing with shovels and pails in the sand, mothers watching patiently as they desperately try to get tan. Maybe I had never seen them.

“Are you coming?” he asks, leaning in the doorway.

“I can’t, you know that. I have to go back to work.” He slowly walks toward me, grabs my hand, and places it on his chest.

“Then why are you here?” I think about it. Why am I here? My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a plane whirring by in the sky with a sign trailing behind, advertising for a diner called Lucy’s Eats. It seems as if the plane’s engine interrupts silence. I had forgotten the crashing waves.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” I whisper honestly. “But I do know I have to go.” I put my hands over my face and shake my head back and forth. My mind flashes between images of my hands on his chest and the plane in the sky. He takes my hands away from my face and forces me to lock eyes with him. I couldn’t have pulled away from him if I wanted to.

“You don’t have to leave. You see, no one has to go anywhere. You either want to stay with me or you don’t. No one is forcing you either way. At any rate, I already know what you are going to do.”

“Which is?” Tears roll down my cheek. He doesn’t let me wipe them away.

“You’re going to stay with me.” He releases his hold on me; the minute distance between us leaves me breathless and aching. He walks into the shack, leaving the makeshift door open, and I follow trying to control the thrill I feel for the moments to come.

The sign above the diner reads Lucy’s Diner. It’s one of those local beach eateries where everybody knows everybody, no one has to wear shoes, and everyone has a sun burn. The sand that people trail in is never completely swept away, and as a result, the feeling you get upon entering Lucy’s is that the beach has followed you inside. I see the familiar faces working diligently to keep the tourists and locals alike happy as they eat. Lucy, who as the owner of the restaurant usually acts as the hostess, is waiting tables. Mallorie and Daphne are right behind her in their sections, filling coffee cups, taking orders, and delivering little

neon cocktails with umbrellas in them. People always want drinks with umbrellas in them when they go to the beach. Mallorie’s strawberry blonde hair is pulled up in the ponytail holder I lent her last week. I catch her tug on her ponytail while taking an order. She always does that when she thinks the customer is attractive. Daphne is smacking her gum, which is a sure sign she’s feeling overworked. I can see all this through the large glass windows that make up the wall that faces the road that separates me from them. The beach is far behind me, and I can’t seem to look anywhere but forward.

Lucy never put blinds up. Anyone who walks by can see right into the restaurant. She wanted people to feel like they could jump right in and join the party. All I can think about as I see Mallorie and Daphne gossiping about the customers is that I belong in that diner. It is where I should be, and I feel guilty that I’m not. A car whizzes by me, and I remember where I’m going.



I have been walking for a while. My legs are beginning to ache from trekking through so much sand. I can see the shack in the distance and am surprised to see how far I have come. When I finally reach the shack, I glance inside and to my bitter disappointment realize he’s not there. I can smell the sunscreen and sweat that has soaked into the wooden walls. All that inhabits the dwelling is a striped mattress with sun-bleached, sand-encrusted towels draped over it as makeshift sheets.

There is a small radio, a green duffle bag with a couple pairs of swim trunks, a pair of faded red flip flops, and two surf boards leaning against the wall. Upon looking at the surfboards, I realize the yellow one is missing. I quickly jog outside and begin searching the waves for any sight of him. I look and look, knowing I will find him, as I always do when I search for him.

A glimmer of yellow suddenly appears in the wave, and I can clearly make out a surfer riding on the edges of a massive wave. It is him, and I wave to make sure he can see me. He gives me a quick wave but then concentrates on what he is doing. He glides along the waves as if he were a part of the ocean itself. I sit on the beach and watch him for awhile. I always do when he surfs.

Sometimes I think he surfs for me more than himself. He wants to seem impressive, in control of nature itself, in control of me. After an hour or so, he swims back to shore. When

he rises out of the water, I think the vision before me is a trick of sunlight dancing on the water’s surface. No man could ever be as beautiful or enchanting. The water slides down his body, as if to complement every muscle and contour. Watching him walk towards me is both exciting and painful. I do not even know how to swim.

He sits down next to me and takes me in his arms, my clothes now damp from being pressed against his skin.

“I couldn’t concentrate on the waves,” he whispers. “I was thinking of you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“What?”

“Think of me.” He grabs my face in his hands and kisses me softly.

“I will always think of you. I am always thinking of you. You are in every one of my dreams.” I look into his eyes and realize instantly that this is true for both of us.

“Honey? Sweetheart, are you okay?” I look up at Lucy as she dabs a rag against my soaked uniform. “I can’t believe that man threw a drink in your face just because his chicken was dry. The next time he comes in, I’ll throw a bucket of water on his head!” I hear her voice reassuring me but can’t seem to focus. Everything is too much.

Lucy sticks her rag into her apron and starts looking around until her green eyes spot who she is looking for. “Daphne! I need you to take her tables. She’s soaked through.” She turns and looks at me with a worried gaze that helps to bring me out of my haze. “Where’d you go this time, baby?” I look at her, not fully understanding her question. I’ve been here, haven’t I?

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, when that man started screaming at you, your eyes kind of glazed over. Don’t think I didn’t notice when it happened the other day.” She grabbed my face tenderly. “Where do you go?”

I looked through the panes of glass towards the crashing waves.

“Nowhere in particular.”



Duong Tran

FLANNEL PATCHES

SAMANTHA LOFF

She brushed against the red and brown flannel on my elbow, and I offered a polite “excuse me.” We walked farther down the sloping dock in syncopated steps. The cyan sky hung low, draping our frames in an iridescent, flamboyant glow. The sundried wood creaked under our feet, and the water rose to the floating scaffold in sloshing yellow bites. We stopped at the precipice of the platform, staring across the shifting crests to the collage of gold and brown trees. She parted her lips as if to speak, but exhaled a white cloud in a short breath instead.

“It’s about that time, I guess.”

I bowed my head in her direction.

“Already?”

She looked away.

I lowered my eyes in embarrassment.

I caught a sideways glance of two men approaching the floating port in a small white john-boat. Both men had the wrinkled faces of life-long fishermen, sunken skin under chalky brown hair. They slid the boat sideways and cut the engine off, drifting toward the onlookers. One of the men, caped in a baggy beige coat, began spinning a rope around his wrists and leaning towards the stationary posts. His first toss missed, but he ripped the rope from his wrist and caught his anchor. The two men staggered from the vessel and nodded, then walked towards the parking lot.

We peeked over our shoulders at the pair walking away and stepped toward the boat.

We were coasting now, silent and hovering after having choked the engine. Small splashes of water-breathing life interrupted the stillness.

“Where are we taking it?” I asked.

She stared past me, coughing in aversion.

I shifted my flannelled elbow against the crook of the plywood seat, leaning and holding my jacket together at the hip. My finger traced the bottom of the zipper, drawing circles. I found a hole and grimaced; this was my favorite coat.

I glanced away, imagining the horizon was empty, imagining the finite bark and brush had disappeared, imagining our circumstance differently. The boat was drifting towards a small mouth in the land, and she hit the motor to guide the boat into the cove. Overhanging Cypress trees dipped long arms into the water, and the more within the inlet we traveled, the trees embraced in compact hugs. I looked up, a hand shielding my face from Spanish moss, and saw a flutter of birds escaping into the sunlit tree gaps. Black masses shuddered as they flew upwards and away from the enclosing wood.

“He loved it here.”

I saw her, her brown eyes lifted upwards, her soft hair waving at me across the length of the boat. She let the boat drop in the water. The inlet led to a makeshift dock about five feet wide, and she let the boat beach itself on the slush ground. I followed her lead, stepping over the rim and tugging the boat onto the dryer portion of land. When she turned away from her grip, she walked through a small area of broken trees and flattened brush. I pursued her.

In a pool of sunlight, she stopped. I came up beside her, searching the small patch of

treeless grass with scouring awareness. Surrounding us was nothing. Perfect silence suffocated the breadth of the clearing. The clasping trees from the inlet continued their wall of arms deep into the woods, and I saw the crowns of the trees nearly touching over our heads. The branches stretched out, reaching to breach the chasm, forming a dome overhead. Showers of patchwork light meshed with the ground, and, in spots, leaves were two glowing shades of gold.

She marched to the center of the small field and knelt, rocking back on her calves. I did the same. I felt the shift of her breath on my folded hands, and I knew she was crying. She was staring at the grass, her face a contorted purse. I wanted to touch her, to soften her sob. Instead, though, I stared at the ground too, a perfect mirror.

She stood up warily and untangled the strap of her bag from her arms and neck. She unbuttoned the lapel and the body of her thin canvas coat, and I turned my head to watch. When she shed the jacket, I realized she had a second coat beneath the first. She pulled the hood over her head and ran her hands along the fabric at the waist, lingering around a hole near the bottom of the seam. Slowly removing the jacket, she creased the length of the arms and folded it twice. She buried her face in it, whispering into the fabric. She kissed it and set my brown and red flannel coat on the ground.

I perched on the precarious planks of the decrepit, overgrown stairs built into the land. My hands dragged along the gritty transitional sand where water met grass, and I pinched grains of earth between my fingers.

She sat in the beached white boat, her knees to her chest, staring outward to the opening of the hidden hollow. She rested her nose on the cranny of her knees.

“I’m so mad at you.”

I didn’t move.

She looked upwards, yelling this time, and repeated her words. Gray glossy pools of mascara began trudging down her cheeks.

I jumped and surrounded her. I linked my arms at the wrists and put my chin on her shoulder.

She only felt the wind blow.

Her dark hair moved with the subtle wind of swaying trees and fluttering birds. The golden trees whispered flickers of leaves into the puddle beneath the boat, and she ran her hand along the cracking white paint of the rim. A piece of the boat splintered into her jacket and formed a hole. She traced it with her fingers.

Rising and wiping her face with the back of her hand, she nudged with her leg and then launched the boat. She hopped over the side and sat, facing the mouth of the inlet.

I stood on the shore, watching her hair wave goodbye.

She didn’t look back.

