2014

Commonthought (2014)

Commonthought Staff

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Foreword

This is my fifth year as faculty editor of *Commonthought* and the situation for the young writer is both very different and very much the same as it was in 2010 when I used this space to share this quote from Andre Dubus, describing a 1975 conversation he had with the novelist Mark Smith:

> He said publishers used to buy a writer's talent, hoping that the writer's fourth or fifth book would sell enough copies to earn money. He said: "Now they want money with the first book."

Certainly there are now a plethora of options for young writers to get their work into the world, from Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing program to ventures like Wattpad. But the situation for the writer who wishes to travel the traditional route to publication remains much the same. You need to prove your work will sell, right from the get-go.

That's the bleak message I fear I left the students with last Friday in my Art & Craft of Short Fiction class, during a lecture on "writing for a living." But there was something I forgot to say, a quip I came up in conversation on Twitter this past week, something I wish I'd said when the students looked so glum: "Always begin from a place of passion, not out of a desire for money."

The money may come or it may not; only passion will see you through the journey in one piece. Hunger for a paycheck is never enough.

There is much passion to be found in these pages. We hope that you enjoy this year's issue and that you will consider adding your voice to the magazine next year.

—E. Christopher Clark

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they call me Thunder Thighs

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sometimes i forget how big my thighs really are. my thighs
could kill a man.
they could snatch the lightning like a cigarette from between
zeus' fingers.
they high five. they're always high fiving, always stoked about
something.

they meet each other like a prayer. they're always praying for
something.

this is why my strides are so long: i've got rosary beads where
bikes would have chains
dusty, always rattling like ghost of christian past —
i'm not afraid of naming it "past"anymore, but i still like
the way
my scars ooze hymnals. i hear them when middle
eastern air
filters through the anise pods in my body.

and it's muffled, but when i walk i feel my great
grandmother's prayers
travel like sap through my tendons. the bullet that went
through her head
is nestled between two lives i don't remember.
each life: an arm that cradles it like her son's arms cradled her
at the end.

my thighs have rings on the inside: who i was before i even
Was
is trapped in my center of gravity.

they're probably older than i am.
i think they belonged to my great grandmother.
i bet every body part i have belonged to a dead relative
and the way they curve or jut closer to the space around me
is to reach closer to the family i can still hug:
        the people i still somewhat resemble
        the biology that Civil War failed to claim
because the cosmic Will hanging in the soundwaves left us all
  with moles and hairs to inherit —
they connect like constellations, but more like something less
  precious:
        something sleeping on the capacity to kill with the roots
          stored
                in the nucleus of you: that planet that centers all
                  the rings.

it hangs like a doorknocker behind your bellybutton.

when you're born, the portal between you and mother is
broken but so much has traveled between you before your
body sealed itself. so it hurts to stick your finger in your
middle,
to knock at your navel. something ancient is carving you from
  the inside out

you're not supposed to know it's there.

you're not supposed to know why there's a cellar in your
  stomach
because that's where the lizards live — those dehydrated past
  versions
of all the Selves you've ever been. They wait to breathe when
  they sense

other halves of themselves behind other bellybuttons you
orbit.

this is why when i meet certain people, i feel a tug at my navel,
and my breath wants to collapse into the cellar of myself. i
can't breathe
and i watch stars turn into fleas, chewing my vision purple.
this is why I like purple so much, why i collect it under my
eyes.
why i trust my stride even when i can't see where I'm going.

when i can't breathe, i keep walking. they call me Thunder
Thighs.

Twins
Julia Messier

Imperfect Science

Paige Chaplin

There are days when all the things I see are tiny tragedies and I want nothing more than to save everything, but I can barely lift my face from the lonely rose lying limp between the subway tracks, the deflated birthday balloons hanging over the rim of a trash can. On these days I remember I am not whole. On these days my insatiability beats like its own pulse. My insides sometimes sound like birds crying—not for help; just because they like to cry.

Most of me is heart I cannot apologize for. You can touch me, but do not gasp at the blood on your hands. I am not always made of spiral and puncture, or the tattered stitch from his trying to reassemble me. Parts of me are more vacant than others. I fill up too easily, then not at all. I don't get to decide. It's the barren things that take up the most space in me. There's a science to being comfortably full of empty.

There is a boy who lifts my chin to kiss me, but I have trouble pressing my lips to his without wanting to crawl deep inside myself. I kiss him anyway. I let him think it is him I am The crawling into. But it is always, always myself.

The Zealot

Abraham Abrams

Birth
When the Zealot is born, he has a bible in his hand. His mother didn't mind, as he was her sixteenth child, and she was quite used to it.

Elementary School
The Zealot's early career is impeded by the fact that he simply could not stop spreading the word of the second coming. One day, he is suspended for breaking into the front office and preaching over the loudspeaker.

First Bicycle
The Zealot receives a bicycle from his father for Christmas, on the condition that he will only use it to spread the word of god. One day, the rear wheel of the bike falls off. Not wanting to embarrass his father, he fixes it himself. The duct tape makes it somewhat harder to ride.

First Date
The Zealot rides his bicycle to the church, and kneels before the cross. His date is sitting in the pews. They pray together, then he leaves. It was a good time, he says to his father.

Camp
While the rest of the camp is in the chapel, The Zealot and one of the girls talk about god in a broom closet.

First Job
The Zealot spreads the word of god for a living. Sometimes, people are less willing to listen, but they always pay attention when he puts his foot in the doorway. He learns to do this

every time. In his heart, he knows that they are all better for the flyers he places in their mailboxes after he leaves.

Competition
One of the lost souls who did not accept the teachings of the lord starts their own satanic church. The devil takes the form of a hideous tentacled creature, made of wheat, with tomato sauce and meatballs.

Marriage
The bride wears black, and he does not kiss her. This is a church, after all. At the banquet, the women are divided from the men, as is the white meat from the dark.

First Sexual Encounter
The missionary position is best executed with a thin layer of cotton between participants in the procreation ritual.

Family Trip
The Zealot and his family go to Columbine to pray for the souls or Harris and Klebold, then have sushi for dinner.

Tragedy
The Zealot's wife dies in childbirth. She will be remembered by her husband and a modest three children.

Retirement
"The lord's work is never done,"he says. "Shut up,"says the chemotherapist.

Death
Is just the beginning for those who believe.

Ellipsis

Julia Messier

Waiting is a thunderstorm,
coloring your body
with cracking anticipation.

If you leave before the lightning,
the pattern of falling rain
on purple lips
will stay,
like calloused skin.

Whether it be
a television warning
in a country house
or a radio broadcast
in a city bed,

it is the last leg
of a hurricane
and the weakest
brush with death.

Thanksgiving Dinner with Halmoni

Erika Cain

She sears me with
her intrusive stare,

as she brutally stabs her turkey,
an innocent bystander.

I push my own food
slowly around my plate,

my kimchi and mashed potatoes
leaving behind a clumpy pink snail trail of slime.

She clears her throat
and I straighten my spine,

one vertebrae at a time.
All of my color bleeds from me,

I am an unflinching statue,
limestone and strong.

I sit straight,
ready for her questions to

peck at my eyes, my innards,
my every soft spot.

Even her 83-years of bigotry
can't break me down to rubble.

"Why you no have boyfriends?

You so pretty, you so smart!"

Her dusty brown eyes sag,
heavy with confusion.

She's thirsty for clarity,
I just can't give her.

For how do I tell my halmoni
that the first time he spoke

those three little words,
he gargled with them

before releasing them straight
onto my breasts.
I want you.

And how do I help
my halmoni who is

as wise as a bamboo forest
and as sweet as red bean cake,

to understand
that the first time the woman I love spoke

three little words,
she softly whispered them

into her cupped hands,
before very carefully releasing

them into my outstretched palms.
I am yours.

How can I make her understand,
when I know she simply won't.

So instead I pass the turkey,
which sits between the sushi

and the egg noodles.
I change the subject

to Uncle Cliff's new promotion,
mum's new yoga class,

the conflict taking place, well—
everywhere.

I am a limestone statue,
unflinching and strong.

**Halmoni is the Korean word for Grandma*

Untitled
Jess Rizkallah

Diplomacy

Brendan Flaherty

"This is really happening, right?"I asked, looking up at the traffic light to see if it had changed. It was still red. I hated the lights in this part of town because they always took forever. That was probably why I was the only one around besides the nice guy waving a gun in my face.

More surprising than the gun was the fact somebody was actually trying to carjack me. The pickup I drove looked like it had barely survived a fight with a pissed-off swarm of chainsaws, and it ran worse than it looked.

"H-hell yeah it is, now get out of the god damn truck!"

I decided to be accommodating because I'm a nice guy, and also because I didn't want to get shot. It doesn't take a hardened war vet to pull a trigger. Sometimes people do it by accident. It's very easy. I held one hand up and patted the side of my chest with the other, making sure everything on my person was in order.

In my life, I'd had probably thousands of guns pointed at me, most of them in the hands of men much more dangerous than this little shit. Hell, I had more bullet hole scars than he had bullets in his gun. He was nothing. But like I said, it wasn't hard to pull a trigger. Kids did it all the time.

"Why do you want this shitbox?"I asked, leaning back in my seat and pushing the barrel of the gun away from my chest. I was wearing a vest, but I wasn't sure how effective it would be at point blank range. I dropped my hands. Didn't feel like holding them up. "It barely even works. If you're gonna be a dumbshit and carjack somebody, why not go downtown and get yourself a Bentley or something?"

"Q-quieter here,"he said. I wondered if he was born with the stutter or if he stole it from somebody at gunpoint.

"Alright,"I said, shrugging. The light turned and I flirted with the idea of stepping on the gas. I didn't, though. The guy would have shot, because that's what nervous criminals tend to do. And boy, was this guy nervous. I had thought he was tweaking at first, but he just had the jitters, looked like. I had pushed the gun away from my chest, but I could have just let it drift away from the guy's nervous shaking. He wouldn't have hit me, but he would have hit the windshield. A replacement windshield would be more expensive than the truck itself, at this point, and to hell with *that.*

"You know, that gun's worth more than the truck is, dude,"I said, pushing the barrel of the handgun away from me with a finger as he tried pointing it back at me.

I found it funny that this could very well be the death of me. I had killed people ten times more important, twenty times tougher, and ten thousand times more experienced than this guy, and if the guy really wanted to, he could kill me. On the bright side, if he had wanted to kill me, I was sure he'd have done it already. The gun was just there to scare me. It could've been empty, for all I knew.

"*Get out of the goddamn truck!*"he cried, evidently done with the banter as well as his stutter. That was a shame. I lived for banter.

"Fine, fine,"I said, shoving the gun away and unlocking my door. I reached out with my free hand to kill the engine and then I opened my door. As the engine wheezed its way to silence, the door squealed open reluctantly, not wanting to escape the frame I had forced it to fit back into. I hopped out once it was open and gestured for the guy to hop on in, giving him a grin as he clambered up into my vehicle and tried closing the door behind him. That went pretty hilariously unsuccessfully for a full minute before I closed it for him, and he waved the gun at me and cursed.

Disappointed by his rudeness, I let him struggle with starting the truck, leaning into the open window and watching as he failed.

His gun lay in his lap as he feverishly tried to get the truck to start. Figuring now was a better time than any, I reached into my coat and pulled my own gun out, pointing it down at the ground and waiting for something interesting to happen.

Nothing did, though. The idiot just kept mucking with the ignition, trying to figure it out as if it were an exceptionally complex puzzle and he had a quarter of a brain. It was kind of deflating; I had been all amped up for some sort of a fight.

Flicking the safety off my gun, I crunched the numbers. Price of a bullet, price of getting my car cleaned, price of bleach, rubber gloves, and all the other necessities to hide a body. I had most of the stuff laying around back home—leftovers from the last job I'd pulled—so I didn't need to spend much, but it wasn't worth the money or the aggravation. I decided to be nice to save everybody some grief.

And you know, that's how diplomacy starts.

I raised my gun up, putting it right up against the guy's temple.

"Hey, get the fuck out of my truck."

Hers and Mine

Kate Bond

By the time I was out of infancy, both of my dad's parents had died. My grandfather from a pin-prick hole in his heart and my grandmother from alcoholism due to the pin-prick hole in her husband's heart. My mom's dad had died too, but I would be hard-pressed to call him a grandfather or a husband or a father at all. He was in and out of jail and a heroin addict, eventually dying from AIDs from shooting the latter.

Joanne C. Horgan was my only grandparent; I called her Nana. She'd been a bad mother, but a better grandparent, especially to me. She'd gone to school to learn how to assist a man and retired as partner in the architectural firm where she'd started. Her skills took her from designing for the Smithsonian to the Louvre and a hundred places in between. Power was her maiden name and it suited her.

She retired to Martha's Vineyard; I spent all my summers there with her. She'd designed her home on a beachfront property with two great rolling lawns, sand kissing the ends of the furthest one. She loved that property but I don't think anyone loved it like I did. I don't think anyone loved her like I did.

In the second grade the doctors told my parents that they'd found a growth in my inner ear. It wasn't cancerous—benign, they'd said—but it was dangerous and it needed to be removed. They removed it, promising it wouldn't return but it did, eight surgeries over the following eight years. They just couldn't beat those benign masses eating away at the bones from the ear inward. The doctors promised the worst thing that could happen would be it growing to my skull and quite literally crushing my brain but they'd stop it by then. I believed them.

The whole family packed in the car to the hospital, which was as much a comfort as a stressor, but my grandmother helped me laugh off the jitters. She used to call my doctor Dr. Handsome. She would ask me what foods the anesthesia had made me crave and she be gone in an instant to the store. I'd wake up to her making blow-up turkeys with the nurse's gloves, drawing faces and giving them personalities. A man in the lobby of the hospital sold these felt dolls with spaghetti looking hair and I never woke up without a new one. When laughy-gas made me goofy and instead of Dr. Poe I called my doctor Dr. Poop, she was still laughing about it when I woke up four hours later. None of it ever seemed so bad when she there. She made the world lighter, or mine at least.

My grandmother had never liked doctors. She once took out a three inch splinter from her own foot and only decided to go to the doctor's when it got so infected she couldn't walk on it anymore. All the more reason I felt special to have her beside me through all that. The summer my grandmother send me a postcard with a kitten on the front for my birthday, she started to lose feeling in her right arm. She only noticed when she was gardening, but she gardened a lot. Those rolling lawns were tailored with flowers and vegetables and fruits all up and down the sides. When my mom finally convinced her to go the hospital, they immediately rushed her by helicopter from the Island to Mass General in Boston.

The thing I don't understand about my tumors is why they were any less harmful than hers. They were called the same thing weren't they? They looked sort of the same, grew the same way. I wondered why my support, my love, hadn't saved her the way hers saved me.

"Carcinoma of the lung but it's metastatic,"he sighed. "It's cancer,"the doctor told her "you've been ignoring cancer". She was 70 in the helicopter and 70 when she died.

I was a daughter, a granddaughter, a younger sister and a want-to-be version of my older brother. I'd just finished Seventh grade and was heading into my last year of middle school, which I was not the least bit sad about.

When my brother had gone off to private High School at Philips Academy three years earlier, it was the end of my favorite friendship as I knew it. Without him around I'd become somewhat lost. It wasn't that I didn't know kids my own age, I did, but all those girls wanted to do was figure out how to put on eyeliner and I had more interesting things going on in my head, literally. I'd had this wretched circle of venomous girls as friends at one point and after that ended I sought companionship elsewhere, in my Nana. She wasn't any average grandmother; she was an artist and she'd taught me that I was an artist too.

She traveled a lot so when she wasn't around I filled her absence with reading and drawing and with waiting by the mailbox for her postcards and packages to come. She sent me priceless things from the places she traveled; handmade paints and turquoise jewelry from Mexico, bangles from Bali. She told me the most riveting stories of adventure and luxury. She always made it home for the times that mattered though. She never missed a Christmas, a Thanksgiving, or a surgery; and that meant she was home with us a lot.

She brought so much merriment, always taking me to places and to see things that I'd never seen before; Saturdays in bird sanctuaries, rainy and foggy days on the water, museums and fancy restaurants. When I couldn't sleep because I was too excited about Christmas morning or too scared the night before a hospital trip, she used to sit up with me and braid my hair. Her nails were long and the way they felt against my scalp combined with all her stories put me right to sleep.

I listen to people tell me stories about the loss of their grandparents and I get bored sometimes. Not because their losses are any less significant than mine but because it's just a part of life that an adolescent or teenager loses their grandparents. It's hopefully their first real experience with death and it's nothing short of a tragedy, don't get me wrong. It's just when I lost my grandmother, it wasn't the average tragedy.

Sweaty in my Hooptown Basketball Camp T-shirt and filled up on Gatorade and ice cream sandwiches, I road down Storrow Drive to see her. My mom said that she wanted to go get a coffee before she came up to the room and told me she'd meet me there. I headed up to the ICU where she'd been moved the night before. Before I was to be buzzed in I had to wash my hands in the sink by the door, use hand sanitizer and turn my phone off. The nurse escorted me down the hallway of permanence where the patients had giant dark oak doors instead of the glass ones; my Nana was down the end.

The doctors had moved her to the ICU after her brain surgery because the tumors in her lungs had gotten so bad that she couldn't breath on her own anymore. The doctors gave her this oxygen mask with a thick tube that went straight down her throat. It wasn't the kind of oxygen mask that they pull on and off you before you get your wisdom teeth removed, but instead a mask that they surgically inserted into her throat. It was further held into place with tape and a red plastic bow around the back of her head. It was a form of life support I suppose.

When they let me into the room, she was in bed sitting up straight with the mask on. The nurse had explained to me that they'd put it on her that morning after she'd nearly suffocated. I was 13.

The sound of the door closing woke her up and she smiled a smile I could tell was weak even from behind the mask. She waved. I walked over to her bedside that was still accessorized with a ceramic turtle from my dad, lemon scented and colored lotion and a journal she kept as close to daily as cancer would allow, and I kissed her on the cheek.

"How are you today?"I ignorantly asked her as I sat down in the chair beside her bed. She motioned so/so with the turning of her hand, I noticed her broken and yellowed fingernails and the way her veins nearly stuck out through her translucent skin. She tried to speak. She tried to speak to me with a surgically inserted breathing tube half way down her esophagus. The sounds were muffled and incoherent but the agony was tangible. She winced and stopped herself in the middle of the first word she'd tried to say.

I apologized immediately and stood up to grab her the notebook off her bedside and a pen for her to write her thought instead.

She recovered from that moment but was perceptively so weak and so tired. She tried to move her hand to write on the paper but the IVs inserted into her hands and inner elbows prohibited her and she looked up at me. Some combination of seeing her struggle and seeing her hurt had caused my eyes to well up and she reached up to touch my face. She tried to speak again and motion with her hands but I watched angst and fear and tears swarm up in her eyes like the IVs were in her tear ducts instead.

My grandmother sat before me in a hospital bed with a breathing tube down her throat because her lungs were over taken by an invasive tumor and not only did she try to speak but then she tried to cry.

The doctors hadn't told her to try not to cry. They hadn't told her that the breathing tube wouldn't allow for the type of breathing that crying makes necessary. The nurses came

rushing in for the sounds of the machines going off and they tried to whisk me away.

I remember looking at her for the whole five or six steps out of the room. I remember thinking about the day she taught me how to cartwheel down the cascading lawn in front of her house. She told me "think about yourself like a wheel on a wheelbarrow, your arms and legs are the pegs inside the wheel."What she said clicked and I spent all afternoon, as the sun set along the harbor, cartwheeling down the hill until suppertime. I remember thinking about the day before one of my surgeries, when she gave me an old ring of hers that I'd always loved. It wasn't special to her, just a band of silver but I never took it off after that. The doctors quickly learned that asking me to take it off before operating was like asking a bomb to go off. Having her right there on my finger let me relax into the state they needed me in. I wore it every time I visited her in the hospital and made a point to show her, I wanted her to know how much it meant to me.

As I left and watched her on my way, her hand reached up toward me as they ushered me out the door like she were apologizing for scaring me. I suppose I must've been wearing how I felt all over my face that day. I just couldn't understand how or why she was so sick. She had tumors and I had tumors but why was I fine?

My Nana had always been there for me listening to doctors say things like "Cholesteatoma,""keratinizing squamous epithelium,"and "opting to maintain the structure of her temporal bone."She'd always held my hand as they put me under. So the summer she got sick I decided to spend everyday by her hospital bed that I could. I owed it to her and I liked the way she turned around when she saw me walk through the door. Plus, I understood why she was scared because I'd been scared by what was growing inside me too. I

thought maybe we could talk about it and I could make her feel better, like she'd get through it just like I always had.

The nurses got me into the hallway and I sat with my elbows resting on my knees and my head between my legs. Trying to breathe but not wanting breathes of the air that smelled like Lysol and urine tubes. I opened the notebook to the page where she'd tried to write and flipped it right side up. Through chicken scratch and misplaced lines I could just make out "how ar."This whole thing had happened and escalated because she was trying to ask me how *I* was. Because despite having a tube down her throat and IVs in every able vein she wanted to know how *I* was doing.

I closed the notebook because, even if I could bring myself to look at the other pages, I could never read the words. I couldn't violate her intimate conversations with the idea of death. I sat in the hallway and sobbed until my mom came back with coffee and even then I didn't stop.

The following week I went back and the week after that too; but the next week, the doctors had told us to say our goodbyes. My mom went first, then my brother, then my dad and then me. Everyone had come out with hot tears having left red streaks on their cheeks. When I walked into the room she looked as she'd been for the past couple days, unwillingly asleep. I was really trying not to cry because I had so much I wanted to say and I knew tears would just choke me up. I kissed her on the cheek when I walked in as I always had and instead sat down on her bed with her this time. I couldn't think of what to say so I just held her hand there for a while, probably longer than it seemed to me. In my memory the whole room is blue but I don't know how true to fact that is.

I told her that she looked beautiful because she did. I tried to thank her for all the appropriate things but had to stop myself because the emotion was making my voice too high and I wanted her to hear me clearly if she even could. I rested

my forehead on her hand and felt my tears splash down onto her fingers. I told her "I love you, I love you, I love you"I told her over and over like it were the only thing I knew how to say. With my forehead on her hand I told her "I love you"to death.

The nurses outside must've heard the heart beat flat line from their monitor because all I could hear was white noise. Suddenly there were nurses in the room and my dad was asking me if I'd said everything I'd wanted to say.

I don't think it was a coincidence that she let go when she was with me. We were always able to let go when we were together.

Escape

Emma Benard

Static Town

Kelsey Little

Internal sighs
the size
of mountainsides

ant hills
dirty heels
broken soles

Abandoned dress shoes
after Sunday church
Abandoned sandals
after sundaes and cokes

Empty pack of smokes
Camel wides
heavy breaths
broken spirits

Breaking bread
family dinners
battered

Chicken
secret recipes

Family ~~secrets~~
family recipes

Treasure Town

Peter Dugdale

If it was up to me,
I'd make the clouds rain gasoline
and strike a match to paint this dead city red.
If it was up to me,
I'd have every window break
and have the glass-filled wind take your breath away.
The fire has married my tongue.
My heart was as black as my lungs
but I've coughed up enough ash over your memory.
Now when I speak your name, I am no longer burning your effigy.
I have buried you and I have begun to breathe.
I am the coldest flame there is and you are nothing but flesh and regret.

Eden

Willow Coronella

The old hall clock clanged, marking two in the morning. The smooth-faced woman sat up out of the frayed and tattered wing back chair, upsetting the cup and saucer on the arm and spilling its contents across her lap. Her steel lungs rattled out as she sighed. Another pair of pants headed for the rag basket. She must be careful. There wasn't much clothing left.

She bent slowly and retrieved the runaway dishware setting it on the rickety side table. She turned back to the chair to straighten out the cushion, sliding her stiff joints along the faded pattern of flowers, listening for any sounds of disturbance from the room above her head. As she carefully folded the thin throw on the couch, the soft strains of Frank Sinatra's "How About You?"drifted down the stairs. She picked up the blanket and made her way up the once grand staircase, holding the bannister as she went.

When she reached the second floor landing, she draped the throw over the railing and padded down the hall on the faded rug, ignoring the dust that had collected on the wall hangings and settled into the cracks of the baseboards. As she reached the end, she looked at the dark wooden door with a faint light escaping under it; the notes of Sinatra's warble still hanging in the dust-laden air.

She tapped lightly on the door, pushing it open when a faint "come in"was heard. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No."

"Can I make something for you to drink? Tea perhaps?"

"No thank you. I just want to listen to music."The small boy looked down. "What happened to your pants?"

"Oil spill. Runaway teacup."

The boy on the bed curled into his deep blue blanket. The woman sighed again, the rattle still audible even to the boy

across the bedroom. She stepped carefully over the photographs spread across the floor, being particularly delicate around the ones of a young couple and a baby hugging each other tightly. She bent to pick up the one closest to her feet and took in the shapes, colors, and tones.

"They're really gone,"the boy said.

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault. You have always taken care of us, you aren't like the rest of them."

"Your parents would be proud of you, you know."

"You don't know that. Emotion isn't exactly your specialty."

"Not yours either."

The boy rolled into a sitting position, blanket still encasing his small frame and shabby red flannel pajamas. He stepped over the pencils and notebooks mixed with Iron Man and Captain America comics by his bed and came to stand next to the woman. He looked at the picture in her hand with a sad expression for a time before sitting at her feet and shuffling through the rest of the monochromatic slips of worn paper.

"Why did the war start?"The boy asked.

"I'm not exactly sure. Someone went against the programing I imagine. some...anomaly in their code,"the woman said. She started to tuck the photos into a pile, her joints creaking with each movement. "People panic when they feel threatened. That's how it always starts."

"You don't know that."

"Based on human history, that was a good answer."

She crossed to window with its blackened and graying glass from years of gunsmoke and cannons and carefully bent herself into the dark oak rocker looking out at the street. It was illuminated by a solitary lamp post at the side of the torn up pavement and debris stretching as far as her optical system would allow. A few stray dogs ran under the illumination.

They would yelp as a stray metal arm would twitch at their feet.

The boy jumped at the sound. “Doesn’t really matter. Half the population is gone anyway. Most of the automatons are decommissioned. At least I can use their parts for repairs...”

“Don’t be insensitive!”The woman suddenly snapped, getting an edge to her tone.

“Hey, if I hadn’t scavenged parts you would have been gone a long time ago. If I don’t use what we’ve got, we’d both be gone.”The boy said flatly.

“Those were operating things that had a conscious. They at least deserve some respect!”

“They were just robots, Eve. They were just machines-”A ripping sound was heard.

The woman angrily looked down at her stiff digits. She dropped the pieces of the photos she had been unconsciously gripping with more force than necessary. She looked at the clutter she had just created and some simulation of a frown crossed her features.

The boy froze. Suddenly he burst.

“Humans were the one’s who fixed the problem!”

“And look where humans got us! Into this paradise of the derelict!”

“Mum and dad rewrote the code! Not automatons! They went into danger and got killed to fix it!”

“We all make choices.”

The record ended, throwing static noise into the dense air between the two figures in the ever tightening room. They sat for a moment in silence with only the popping and cracking of the gramophone to cut the tension. The boy finally reached for needle and lifted it from the scratched disc and pulled the light chain, throwing them into darkness.

"That rattling is getting worse in your chest pumps. I think you need a new air valve in your neck, Eve"he said. "I'll fix it in the morning if you want. Just keep drinking the oil."

She pulled herself out of the chair and treaded along the floor towards the door, her optic programming kicking in for night vision.

"Thank you, Adam."

Untitled
Maryam Zahirimehr

1995 Chevy

Caitlin Foley

Thinking about Jake's truck, my memory starts with road trips to Vermont and plays backwards, like rewinding a VHS before sending it back to the video rental. In the summer, we drive up 89 North for two hours, passing over the Chattanooga and finally reaching the White River, which bubbles and froths and shepherds us towards home. The light that filters through the dirty windshield on the way up is blinding; on the way home, thunderclouds hover over mountaintops and send lightning into the valleys and rain into the streets. I try to take pictures that capture the sinister feeling of driving into a storm, but they come out dark and blurry and strange. The collie dog whines in the backseat, but Jake and I think thunderstorms are exciting. We are high on the strange feeling of falling back into old love, on rediscovering each other and ourselves with one another. We cross a bridge and I look out the window, past the smears of dog saliva on the glass, and the sun reflecting off the breadth of some river almost makes me want to cry. Silence filled with classic rock is not drawn out but thrumming; we are connected; we are always looking at each other and fumbling to hold each other's sweaty hands.

Before Vermont, the Chevy Tahoe serves as our limo to prom. Since it's Jake's car, I ride shotgun and miss out on the four-body prom dress cram in the backseat. We listen to the soundtrack to *Hairspray,* ladies' choice, and keep the windows up to keep our hair looking good. On the way home, we race other classmates on the highway, burning through gallons of gas and we still lose but the windows are down now and we're laughing, pulling out bobby pins and rubbing our abused hairlines.

Rewind to March of that year and Garrett Dubina wrecks my car, so Jake and his Tahoe taxi my sister and me to and from high school every day. When she and I hear his truck idling on the curb, we scramble to find matching shoes and make coffee and check our hair; we are never in the car before 7:15. Every afternoon, Jake and his Tahoe drop me off at my doorstep, and ten minutes later I wave to the kids walking home from the bus stop and pat the Tahoe and kiss Jake and say, "See you tomorrow."

The truck lost its muffler a couple seasons ago; it gave up, fell out, starting dragging itself down the highway until it was forcibly ripped off and never replaced, taking the tailpipe with it. The truck growls and rattles down streets and highways, alerting you to its arrival well before it rounds the corner. It's dark green, Vermont green, and stands high off the ground; any shorter than 5'4"and it takes some athleticism to get in without getting hurt. It smells musty when you climb in for the first time, like nostalgia, like pulling old photo albums and childhood toys out of the attic. After a few years, the musty smell diffuses and it's only noticeable with some concentrated deep breaths. The sandy interior is pasted with long white collie fur, which will stick to anything you're wearing. The way-back is big enough to fit an *actual* trunk, along with the collie who will never stay there; the trunk will be filled with emergency necessities like blankets, and snow scrapers and a twelve pack of vanilla Coke, and the collie will always ride shotgun, no matter who's already sitting there. The heating trills and whistles in the winter, and blasts hot air dry enough to chap lips and fingers. In the summer, you roll down the enormous windows, hold the collie by the collar in your lap so he doesn't fall out—the first time in a parking lot was bad enough—turn up some music you won't really be able to hear over the noise of the highway, and enjoy the wind whipping into the car as the truck roars its way up 89 North.

Usually, I am not permitted to drive the truck. I've been in accidents, both minor and serious; I frequently hit curbs and mailboxes, and I've been pulled over (although never ticketed) a fair few times. Understandably, I'm not allowed to drive the truck. But once—I did.

It was nighttime in the wild-things-only part of Vermont; between the three adjoining properties his family owns, only the Yellow Place has a functioning bathroom, and I really had to pee. We decided to drive over. Asking if I could drive this time, I climbed into the driver's seat without waiting for an answer and slammed the door shut. Jake came over to the window. He had pulled his hood up to keep the bugs away from his face, and looked at me with a grimace that said, "Absolutely not, crazy." For a moment, feeling intimidated, I almost gave up and moved over. He knocked on the window and stared at me. I crossed my arms.

After a moment he climbed into the passenger's seat, resigned, and handed me the keys. The truck broke the silence of the woods by growling and then coming to life. I moved the seat forward. Jake's entire body was turned towards me in the passenger's seat, sweatpant-legs pressed uncomfortably against the center console, probably ready to pounce into the driver's seat over me if I showed any signs of recklessness. The shift stick stuck out horizontally from the wheel and it took me a minute to figure out how to get the truck in gear. We lurched forward into darkness before I remembered to turn the headlights on. I fumbled around on either side of the wheel, twisting sticks until I realized the headlights were somehow, unfathomably, controlled by a dial next to the heating system—they illuminated the area enough that I managed to catch Jake's eyes narrow, just slightly, at my apparent incapability. I grinned at him, as big and cheesy as I could manage. He sighed.

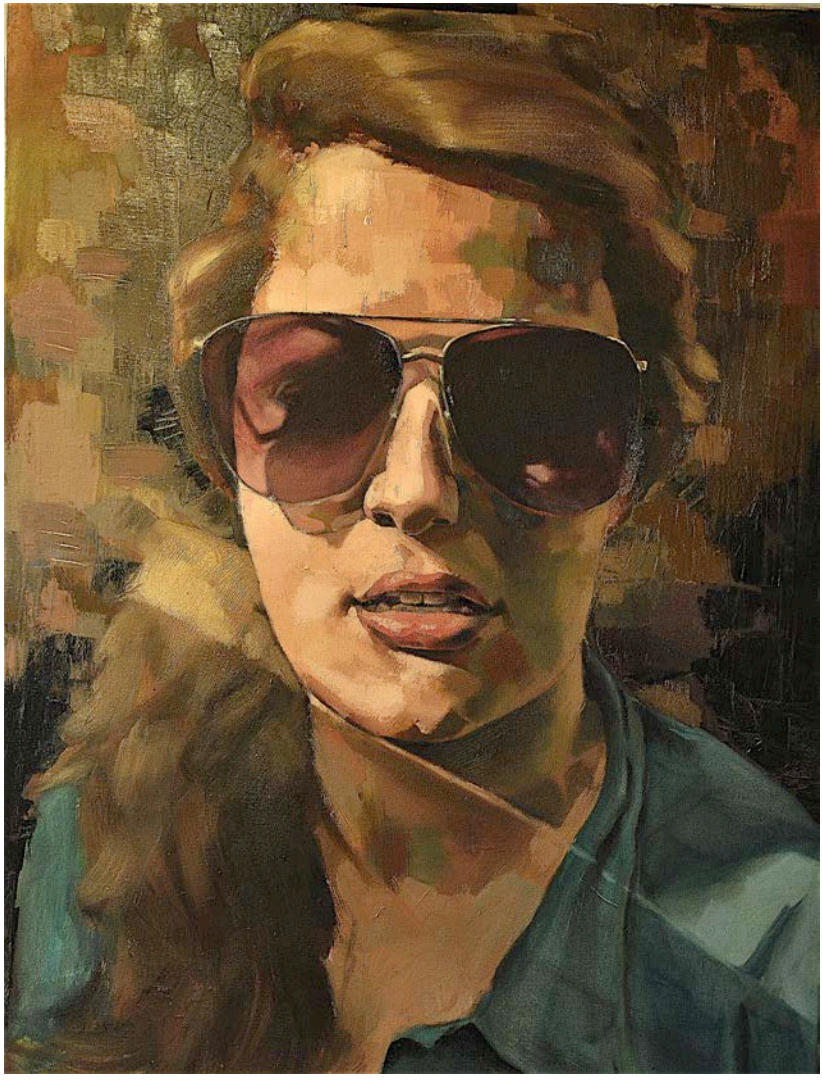
The truck bounced over the uneven ground, toward the dirt road that led to the Yellow Place. We dipped down onto it, and the road was narrow and potholed and hemmed in on either side by creepy skinny tall dark trees, and the truck was bouncing and jostling me and my foot kept slipping off the enormous gas pedal. Jake was gripping the handle overhead and was still turned towards me while he grimaced out the windshield and he kept *breathing*, and now I really needed to pee so I slammed on the break and told Jake that he could drive the next three hundred feet to the Yellow Place, *I* didn't care. He smiled almost smugly and we switched seats. The truck barreled forward and Jake realized he wouldn't be able to make the sharp turn up to the Yellow Place; he swung wide and suddenly we had one wheel in a ditch and one wheel in the air and I was shrieking in short panicked bursts like an animal, and Jake was yelling, "Stop screaming, goddammit, we're fine, stop screaming!" But I was up *way* higher than he was, almost convinced of my rapidly approaching premature death, and one tire was spinning uselessly and the other was making a gross grinding noise as it buried itself into mud and weeds.

I opened my door and fell out onto the dirt road, worried that somehow my shifting weight would send the car rolling. From the safety of the ground, I watched Jake throw his body into shifting gears and stomping on the gas pedal, burying the truck even deeper in weeds and small trees. Finally, he got out and dropped to the ground and, ears purple, called his dad to for help. His arms were crossed as he watched his truck lurch out of the ditch and back onto the road. I told him it was okay; it wasn't *that* embarrassing. He sighed, and I rubbed his back, and I never said that if I were driving, it wouldn't have happened.

Once, in a fit of sentimentality, I asked Jake if he would please keep the 1995 Chevrolet Tahoe forever. He told me it's

not very good on gas; he couldn't commute to work in it everyday. It's not a great family car; it doesn't have the safety features he would want, like functioning air bags or the ability to come to a stop with less than a three-hundred-foot warning. But it's carried so much of both of our lives, bringing us to and from and safely home again. Jake became comfortable driving in the truck. The collie grew from sitting comfortably in my lap, riding shotgun, to barely being able to fit in the front seat at all. Jake and I gained our first taste of independence together in the truck; at seventeen, it felt exhilarating just to be able to get away from our parents whenever we wanted and go wherever we wanted, even if there was nowhere we really wanted to go. Just to be able to be alone without explicit permission was an adventure. The summer after high school, we broke up leaning against it in his driveway, and fell in love again idling on the curb outside my house, listening to "That Girl" by Justin Timberlake a year later.

I ask him what happens if it the truck breaks. He smiles, and tells me he'll fix it.



Self Portrait in Sunglasses

Julia Cangiano

April 16th

Shem Tane

I think the old man upstairs has forgot to turn off his
Christmas lights.
It's the middle of May and reindeer lights flood my cupboards.
I try to confront him but his collection of plastic knifes are
twisted pointing up like stakes in Agincourt.

He moves by a system of pulleys and weights.
Moving his morning frost frame along the hallways.
His wife used to push him in a shopping cart layered with
satin pillows.
I would know because it would always smell like distilled
jasmine.

He called her name for three days before the paramedics came.
He still calls her name when the lights start to dim.
I guess we are never truly friendly with the dark.
The vast void that consumes all of my thoughts, keep the
reindeer on.

Did I Ever Tell You?

Ali Russo

Did I ever tell you about the time I got so lost that I followed the moon back homeward? I was in a field, you know, with grass so tall that it brushes past your thighs, and there were some fireflies, and I liked looking at 'em but I think I might have scared 'em. But, anyway— back to the moon. I had driven out there because I wanted to go for a drive, and my room was so hot, and I knew that if I could just get my tires on the asphalt and follow the low street-lamps of our back roads, stick my hand out of my open window and feel everything I was supposed to, maybe I'd get outside of my own head.

But, you know, I have the worst sense of direction. I can't tell you left from right without thinking first; Pop always makes fun of me for it. Says that a man as sturdy and strong like me should at least know where to go, if not in life then in direction. But, yeah, anyway, I was able to go downstairs and sneak off. I thought for sure either Pop or Ma would come runnin' out in their robes and slippers, waving their arms at me like I was a fire itself, but neither of 'em heard the engine kick. God or Jesus or someone musta been on my side as I twisted the key, just cause' I really had to leave.

Anyway, once I turned a left off of Mulberry, I knew that I was lost almost instantly. One of my headlights was out, see, and I couldn't really tell what was in the road, or what I was supposed to avoid, or what even kind of animals I was near; Lord knows I didn't want to hit any of 'em. But I let myself go because I figured, why not, gas had gone down from seventy-six to seventy-three, and I was getting my check from the supermarket later that week, so I went for it. I got lost real bad, so lost that I just kept driving until the road made me turn right, and I found a field.

The parking lot of the field was dirt, you know, like the kind of dirt at a racetrack, something that was smooth and could have been put down by cement, but I dunno, maybe the town couldn't afford it, or something. But I pulled my car into it and I got out, because fields are mighty nice, and why not? I didn't have work the next day, and what's a summer if you can't experience what everyone else thinks of in their head when you talk about it?

So I got out of my car, barefoot and all, and I went into the field. It was the first time I had looked up since I was getting into my car back home, but let me tell you, I don't think the stars coulda been any brighter. There were thousands and thousands and thousands of them, and I could point every one out to you, if you had the time, and we didn't have to worry about growing older. But I wanted to touch them, almost, wanted to run my fingers through the galaxy and see if I'd be burned. But, since I can't do that, cause' my arms are too short and they'd never reach the sky, even with the best ladder, I walked into the field. And, like I said, the grass went right up to my thighs— so probably up to your hips, maybe. And this grass wasn't like the grass I mow and the grass you get allergies from; it was the kind that people dream about when they need to be someplace else that isn't their home.

I didn't have my watch on, so Lord only knows what time I actually laid down and stayed there for. But I couldn't help it; everything around me was buzzin', you know? I heard everything breathe, everything buzz, every creature make its way to bed and know that it had a job to do in the morning. They sounded so happy, they sounded so put-together; I wish you were there, I wish I could explain it better.

I was maybe there for about an hour when my head stopped runnin', when I thought that I could go back to bed and maybe get a few more hours of sleep until Pop needed me for the farm. So, I headed back to my truck and pulled the

door closed, started the engine, and thought of how I really didn't know how to get back.

But then I looked up at the moon again, looked at how it was half-full, and how it was on the opposite side of the sky when I started driving when I left home. And, maybe it was kinda a dumb idea, but I poked my head out of my window a little, and followed it. I took lefts and rights and lefts again just to get it exactly where it used to be— no, I didn't remember that the moon moved through the night over time. I forgot about that, honest.

But somehow, I got back onto Canyon, which, you know, is only about a half a mile away from Mulberry. And I turned off the headlights of my car before I put it next to my house, just in case Ma was worried, and I had to explain anything to her. But nobody came out, no one came with a newspaper to hit me in the back of the head with, or anythin' like that. Never found that field again. Never told Ma or Pop about it. Only you.

Ironing Redux
Lisa Sibley

Moving Day
Lisa Sibley

Reflective
Lisa Sibley

The Garage
Lisa Sibley

Carl B. Strange

Erica Redfern

Characters

ANNA, *a woman in her mid-twenties*

STRANGE, *an attractively dressed man, perhaps around 40 years old*

CAFÉ OWNER, *an elderly man who owns the coffee shop*

Setting

TIME: *Mid morning*

PLACE: *A small suburban coffee shop*

ANNA sits alone at a table for two, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, her laptop in front of her and a sweatshirt draped over the back of her chair. The rest of the café is completely empty, except for the old CAFÉ OWNER, who bustles around cleaning tables.

CAFÉ OWNER: You just give a yell if you need anything, all right, miss? I've got some things I need to take care up in the back room.

ANNA: All right, thanks!

(She goes back to reading. STRANGE enters, briefcase clasped in hand, and immediately spots Anna. He gives a predatory smile, which Anna does not see, and walks over to her, sitting down in the empty chair across from her.)

STRANGE: Wouldn't you like to know your future?

ANNA: What?

STRANGE *(Exaggeratedly slow)*: Wouldn't you like to know your future?

ANNA: I don't see how you could possibly know everything I want to know.

STRANGE: Why shouldn't I?

ANNA: Alright, if you know my future, you should know my name, right?

STRANGE: Anna Reynolds, 23, living on your own with three cats and two job interviews scheduled within the next two weeks. Don't bother going to the one for MIT, it's not quite the job you were looking for. And you'd only be a TA anyways.

ANNA *(Shaken, but trying to hide it)*: How the hell did you know that?

STRANGE: I have, in my bag here, an item which will allow you to be able to know your future too.

(She opens her mouth to talk and he holds up a hand.)

STRANGE: Before you say anything, don't doubt me too much.

(He reaches across the table and lays a hand on her laptop.)

ANNA: I have to leave.

(She stands, folding her newspaper and gathering her sweatshirt, and tries to get her laptop from under his hand. She fails.)

STRANGE: Are you sure you don't want to know your future?

ANNA: Quite sure.

STRANGE: What if I told you that if you leave now, you'll die?

ANNA: I wouldn't believe you.

STRANGE: Why do you keep doubting me? I don't think I've given you any reason to.

ANNA: No reason to doubt you? I don't even know your name.

STRANGE: The name's Carl B. Strange. Nice to meet you.

ANNA: The pleasure's all yours, I'm sure.

(She succeeds in getting her laptop from him and turns, making for the door. The sound of a gun being cocked stops her in her tracks. Strange holds the gun, hidden in the shadow of his briefcase.)

STRANGE: I told you that if you leave now, you'll die.

ANNA *(Somewhat in shock)*: So I'm guessing you can't really tell me my future.

STRANGE: Not exactly, but I can tell you how the next few hours of your life will go.

ANNA: And how exactly will my life go?

STRANGE: I want you to sit back down before I reveal your future. I have to make sure you're not going to bolt, don't I?

ANNA: Fine.

(She sits down again. Her hands shake slightly, betraying her fear.)

ANNA: Now will you tell me what exactly you want with me?

STRANGE: Well, that's an interesting question. You see, Anna, you and I have met before.

ANNA: I think I would've remembered a creep like you.

STRANGE: I'm surprised you don't! After all, you did save my life.

ANNA: I saved your life? Are you sure you have the right girl here?

STRANGE: Quite sure. You probably didn't even realize that you saved me. I was homeless, poor, and friendless. No one cared if I lived or died. I was going to kill myself when you walked by the bench I was slumped on. You were so beautiful, I instantly knew that I didn't want to die. Life would be worth it as long as I could be with you.

ANNA: You're insane!

STRANGE: Quite possibly. That doesn't change the fact that I clawed my way out of the gutter because of you. I've become a respectable businessman who comes home every

night to a penthouse apartment and a little tabby cat. You saved me.

ANNA: I'll make sure not to save anyone's life ever again if this is where it gets me.

(She clutches her sweatshirt to her chest as if it will protect her.)

STRANGE: Oh, that hurts! Really, I just want to give you somewhere comfortable to live. Somewhere where you don't have any worries or problems. I promise you'll be comfortable. Just come with me.

ANNA: No way in hell am I going with you!

STRANGE: Now that's a shame.

ANNA: I might have been friendly if you had just approached me normally.

STRANGE: That's why I spent all that time outside your apartment. I wanted to get to know you. I wanted to do something special for you.

ANNA *(Angry, but getting more scared)*: And you thought that becoming a stalker was the way to do that? Most people just start a conversation if they want to get to know someone.

STRANGE: Is there any way I can persuade you to come peacefully? Remember that I have a gun.

ANNA *(With false bravado)*: I remember that you have a gun. That's why I'm still here, chatting with my stalker in a café. Casual stuff.

STRANGE: I'm perfectly within my rights to have a gun. I have a license.

ANNA: Licenses don't mean that you can point it at people. You're a criminal.

STRANGE: If you really can't accept me, I guess I'll have to do this the hard way. Get up.

(She gets up, and he rises too.)

STRANGE: Walk towards the door.

(As she starts to walk, the café owner enters and stares at the scene in front of him.)

CAFÉ OWNER: What the hell is going on?

STRANGE: Shit!

(He points the gun at the owner. Anna turns, staring intently at the gun.)

STRANGE: No sudden movements, old man.

CAFÉ OWNER: Stay calm, please. I don't want any trouble!

STRANGE: Stay there and there won't be any. Anna, go.

ANNA: But—

STRANGE: Go if you don't want me to shoot this man here and now.

(She stares intently at his gun for a moment, before slowly shaking her head.)

ANNA: No. Your gun's a fake.

STRANGE: Are you sure of that?

ANNA: Completely.

(Strange shoots the café owner, who gasps and falls to the floor.)

STRANGE: Are you still sure?

ANNA: No! I'll go. I swear. Just let me check on him.

STRANGE: Be my guest.

(Anna runs to the owner's side and drops to her knees, feeling frantically for a pulse.)

ANNA: He's barely breathing. We have to call an ambulance.

STRANGE: No, we can't afford that now. It's not a real loss. Now go.

ANNA: I'm calling an ambulance.

(She reaches into her pocket for a phone. Strange crosses to her and puts the gun to the side of her head.)

STRANGE: Make it short. And leave out personal details.

ANNA: Hello? 911? I'm at the Cornerstone Café, 122 Main Street. There's been an emergency—

(Strange knocks the phone out of her hands and gestures for her to get up.)

STRANGE: All right, that's enough. Now come on.

(As they head towards the door, sirens begin to sound, growing closer. Red and blue lights flash dimly.)

STRANGE *(Desperately)*: Dammit! They won't keep us apart, no matter what they do. We'll be together somehow.

(Strange shoots Anna in the chest. She falls to the ground without a sound.)

STRANGE: So this is how the future was meant to be. Such a waste.

(He then brings the gun to his own head and fires. Lights fade to black as the sirens grow louder.)

Untitled
Jess Rizkallah

Last Left Clinging

Sarah E. Shields

Our white knuckles grip
The hot bar, as if
We were trying to rip it off
To use in defense
Against our spitting foe,
This devil kid in a puke green shirt
With double pink eye,
Both swollen, oozing radioactive
Fluid from his monster brains.
He pushes and pushes,
His chunks of muscle
Shoving hundreds of pounds
In circles
We hold on for dear life,
For pride and acknowledgement—

Who will be the last left clinging
To the merry-go-round?
The bar brands our already blistered palms.
Flashes happen,
Flashes that make us dizzier
If we try to follow them.
A kid arcs through the air on a swing.
Kids wait in line to shoot free-throws
On the basketball court.
Gravel crunches everywhere like Nerds
Crunching in the devil kid's mouth
His tongue is a blue balloon.
There are three of us left
One other girl, a boy. Me.
Our knuckles whiter, purpling

Our heads getting heavy
Bobbing in slow circles.
Hulk Muscles pushes us
Tossing us a little sideways
A kid flings off— the girl.

She screams. And lands.
The boy and me, it's just the boy and me.
We don't dare look at one another.
We don't dare try comradery.
My palms are sweating, getting slippery,
Slip-slip-slipping, screaming.
Bing-bing-bing-bing-bing-bing.
The devil's kid's palms smack the bars
As we sail by,
And then both of his thick hands
Grab an empty bar
And the merry-go-round stops. Like *snap*—

We go a-sailin' with the wind.
Bounce once! Twice!
Then the boy and I-
Tied-
Are down and out
Like a couple of raccoons clipped
On the side of the road,
Tossed over to the side by
The impact of car and fur,
Bone and flesh.
A green car with pink headlights
Runs to get in line
Leaving a stain of purple oil
Where he had stood.

Blue (For My Mother)

Paige Chaplin

Tell me about the bursting,

the aubergine patterns on your hospital gown,
the first time you saw me and 'daughter' wasn't just a word anymore.
Tell me how cold my bloody body was in the beginning, tell me
about the crime scene I left on the bed,
how such a tiny thing could cause such agony,
how a labor of love could make such a mess.

Tell me about the moments after, when from your body,
I became tangible,
Suddenly a separate being. Tell me about the separation.
The battle between loss and gain and losing

everything. Tell me about crying in the dark,
how you taught me without teaching me.

Tell me you love me medicated or not. Tell me about the pills you took,
tell me about your blue
and I'll tell you I've listened to Joni Mitchell's so many times I'm surprised
people can't smell it on me when I cry in public.

It makes sense that our blood is blue before it is red.
The blue is always first,
always hidden.

Chapter 27

Julia Messier

I don't understand you at all.
You who leaves the bathroom light on,
but can only sleep in the dark.
When you tap your fingers
against the dinner table
the tendons move like wires on a piano
hammering in song.
Yet they never make a sound when you touch me.
What finds roots in the Earth,
cannot be claimed
by such rugged nails.
Stop beheading roses at the foot of my door
to try and bloom your way into my bed.

Women Who'd Float Away

Shauna Osborn

you know the type—
the ones who
a stiff wind
would turn
into parachutes,
their skinny arms
& legs flailing
like abandoned
kite strings
during an upscale
wind event,
armpits larger than
the cartoonish ocular
cavity painted with the
red vocal punching
bag at back but
always shaven close
to the sensitive burred
skin that holds aversion
to the contents of aerosol cans or
masculine scents

Untitled
Jess Rizkallah

Jam

Bethany Snyder

Agnes was wakened from the nap she hadn't meant to take by the sound of breaking glass. She'd fallen asleep on the patio with the gardening trowel in her hand and soil underneath her fingernails. She'd only meant to rest a bit on the patio, then clean herself up and start the roast for dinner. Now the crickets were beginning their night song.

She knew straight away the breaking glass was the jars of strawberry jam being knocked off the counter next to the sink. She had spent the entire morning cooking the jam, pouring it into the quilted crystal jars, and sealing the jars with wax. She had burned the tip of her ring finger on that wax. Now it seemed as if the cat had spoiled her morning's work.

She heard a muffled sound, a human sound, a grunt. The plastic Japanese lanterns strung around the perimeter of the patio flicked on and then off again, and then the lights in the kitchen came on. A perfect square of yellow light illuminated Agnes' feet.

She had slept through the sunset and it was approaching full dark; she ought to be frightened by the thought of someone rummaging around in her kitchen, knocking about her preserves, but she found herself angry instead. Her cheeks flushed; her fists clenched. She pulled herself into a sitting position on the lounge chair and straightened her house coat, which was damp and translucent with sweat.

The kitchen windows were open. Through them came the sound of more breaking—this time the porcelain plate her father had brought home from Denmark. It sat on a brass stand on the butcher block. She dusted it every Saturday morning, the tiny blue figures pulling the sled through the field, the church steeple blanketed in snow. Her father had given that plate to her mother in 1938.

Agnes slipped off her rubber gardening clogs. She grasped the window ledge and pulled herself up to peer inside, her toes gripping the gritty edge of the patio baseboard. If the thief had been looking in the right direction, he would have seen the top of Agnes' head, her hair in a neat braid that hung down to the middle of her back, her eyes narrowed and flashing behind her tinted glasses.

But the thief, quite tall and broad shouldered, was busy violating the drawer of Agnes' great-grandmother's desk in the nook next to the double oven. He rifled through her tax forms and social security check stubs, brushed aside a jumble of linked-together paper clips, and slipped Agnes' father's Swiss Army knife into the front pocket of his trousers.

Agnes' toes and fingers were numb. She lowered herself down from the window and pressed her back against the siding of the house. The only phone was in the kitchen, on the top of the very desk through which the thief was pawing. Her nearest neighbors, the Clarks, were out for a movie and an ice cream cone, their usual Saturday summer evening treat, and they never left their doors unlocked. Agnes would have to confront the thief herself.

As she took several deep, settling breaths, she heard the thief moving from the kitchen into the living room. Agnes moved the glass-topped table with the clay pitcher of gladiolus on it aside so she could stand directly beneath the living room window. The thief had found the television remote; she listened as he changed channels rapidly, finally settling on the station that played country music videos.

"Dude,"he said. Agnes stiffened. "I'm at that house out on 54, you should come out."There was a pause, filled with steel guitar. Then: "Nah, it's empty. I checked all the rooms. No car in the garage, either. There's just doilies and shit."

Agnes gritted her teeth. She did not abide cursing. After she confronted the thief with her father's pistol, and made him

clean up the shattered glass and strawberry jam, she would slap his filthy mouth. Then she would call the police.

"Bring some beer, man," the thief said. "And this is gonna sound weird, but go to Morgan's and get some of that crusty bread, from the bakery." Another pause and then: "Just get it!"

Agnes heard the thief move back into the kitchen. He would be busy for some time, rummaging through her refrigerator, taking hot dog buns out of the freezer, squeezing her oranges. She hitched up the skirt of her house coat and slipped around the corner of the house.

She had lived in the house since 1973, when she bought it from the Christensens. She'd had the roof redone, filled in the swimming pool, planted rosebushes under the front windows. She'd paid off the mortgage after fourteen years. She'd had the gravel driveway converted to black top, and every Halloween she hung tissue-paper ghosts from the branches of the crab apple tree in the front yard.

The hot water heater went in 1985, and just two years ago the furnace blew its last breath of hot air. Eggs had been tossed at her front door, and once a bag of dog feces, set alight, had been deposited on her front step. But never had anyone breached her home. She did not allow vacuum-cleaner salesmen or Jehovah's Witnesses to cross the threshold. Pastor Jensen knew to pass on his well-wishes to Agnes from the other side of the screen door. Plumbers and electricians entered and exited through the bulkhead basement doors, and if they had to visit the living quarters, Agnes hovered at their elbows and swiped every surface with disinfectant the moment they were gone.

Now a thief, a young man with greased hair and wearing only an undershirt, was inside, spreading his sweat and stink all over Agnes' home. And he had telephoned his friend to help him desecrate her home, to sit on her loveseat and eat her leftover tuna casserole.

At the side of the house, beneath the bedroom window, was the set of slanted bulkhead doors, painted green, that led into the basement. Agnes did not remember locking the doors from the inside; in fact, she could not remember so much as looking at those doors since late April, when the men had come in to replace the basement carpet. With any luck, her atypical lack of attention to detail would be of benefit to her tonight.

She slid her fingers under the right-side handle and pulled. The door protested for a moment and then lifted open with a great, creaking groan. Rust flakes floated down onto the concrete steps. Agnes held the door and her breath. The bulkhead was on the opposite side of the house from the kitchen, and the television was still blaring, so it was unlikely the thief had heard. Still, Agnes' heart beat rapidly for several minutes. When she was confident that she hadn't been heard, she shuffled her way down the steps and through the door into her darkened basement.

Agnes moved quickly across the floor of the main room, filled with several chairs, a coffee table, and a black and white television that received three channels. She passed the laundry room, fragrant with lilac-scented dryer sheets and bleach, and moved into the cool dark of the office. Her rubber shoes squeaked on the cement floor.

In the far corner of the room, behind the plastic-encased stack of *Life* magazines, was the safe. The hulking gray mass had been delivered from her parents' house when Agnes had bought the Christensen home in 1973. She rarely looked inside; besides a copy of her mother's will and Agnes' own Social Security card, the only thing inside was the gun. She had fired it once, over a decade ago, sending a bullet into the side of a bale of hay in the field behind the house. The gun had felt greasy and unnatural in her grip.

Muffled voices carried down to her: The thief's friend had arrived. The basement office was directly beneath the kitchen; Agnes listened closely, her fingers twitching against the dial of the safe. The intruders stomped back and forth across the kitchen floor, opening and slamming shut cupboard doors. The microwave oven timer dinged, and the thief and his friend laughed.

16-9-24. The safe clicked open. The gun was wrapped in a soft tan cloth. A small box of bullets had been shoved to the back of the safe, but Agnes did not reach for it. She always kept the gun loaded. She put it into the pocket of her dressing gown, which caused the flimsy cotton to sag. She closed the safe and spun the dial of the lock; she didn't need the thief and his friend stealing her important papers as well as her food.

Leaving her shoes at the bottom of the stairs, she walked quickly but silently up to the door. It was, as always, open several inches in order to allow the cat to access his litter box down in the laundry room. Agnes recalled letting the cat out after lunch, so she at least did not have to fear that the thief or his friend would harm him.

"Dude, this shit is sick!"

This was a new voice, the voice of the thief's friend, higher-pitched and less confident sounding. Still the same foul mouth.

"This is better than any of that shit you get at a store,"the thief said.

Agnes sniffed. They were eating her jam. Her strawberry jam. The jam for which she had harvested the berries herself, from Tomion's U Pick on Fergusons Corners Road, coming home each morning stiff, her fingers stained deep pink with berry juice and the cuffs of her trousers wet with dew. She had hulled each berry, had rinsed each one gently before chopping the lot to meaty bits. She had stood over the stove in the heat of the late June morning, pouring in the heaped cups of sugar,

stirring the mixture until it bubbled, adding the pectin. She had skimmed the pink foam from the top of the roiling mix, collecting it in a porcelain tea cup that had belonged to her great grandmother. Later, after the jam was cooling in crystal jars on the counter next to the sink, she'd spread the skimmed foam onto a slice of white bread for her dinner.

"Whose house is this?"the thief's friend asked, his mouth thick with Agnes' jam.

"That old bitch I told you about. I followed her home from the drug store last week? She had a shitload of stuff in her cart. Like three boxes of Sudafed."

"Bullshit. You can't buy more than one box at a time."

"No, this was at Henderson's, they know her. She asked for three boxes and they gave it to her, no questions."

"Where's she keep it?"

"Probably in the bathroom. Give me that."Agnes heard the familiar tinkling of knife against glass. "You ate it all? Dick."

They had finished an entire jar of her jam. Jam that she used as gifts for her neighbors, for Pastor Jensen, for the young postal worker who delivered her seed catalogs and the occasional letter from her niece in Scranton. And she always saved two jars to get her through the winter, to spread on browned English muffins in the dark of a January morning. The thief had broken what sounded like several jars when he first entered her home, and now he and his friend had eaten another.

Agnes felt the weight of the gun against her thigh. She pushed the door with the tips of her fingers and stepped around the corner.

The kitchen table was filthy with bread crumbs, jam-slick knives, and puddles of spilled milk. A case of beer, its cardboard topped ripped open, was on the butcher block next to the napkin holder, along with a set of car keys and a package of cigarettes. The microwave was open, emitting a

stench of burned cheese. Hanging from the back of one of the chairs was a denim jacket. Sticking out of the jacket pocket was a battered leather wallet.

Agnes placed the wallet in the empty pocket of her house coat before moving slowly through the kitchen to the narrow hallway that led to the living room, the bathroom, and her bedroom beyond. The television blared a song by Johnny Cash, one she recognized, about a ring of fire. Agnes clenched her fist until she felt her fingernails bite into the soft flesh of her palm.

"Dude, in here."

The thief was in her bedroom. Agnes stole a glance down the hallway from her position in the living room. The thief's friend, hair long and tied at his neck with a hank of rawhide, jogged the few steps from the bathroom to the bedroom, his dirty sneakers slapping against the hardwood floor.

Agnes followed.

"Found it,"the thief said. He pointed to a stack of red and white cardboard boxes on Agnes' night stand. "Three boxes. I told you." He tossed one of the boxes across the room. His friend fumbled a moment and then caught it. "I'm gonna sell these to Chuck."

"I don't know, man. I think we should just go,"the friend said.

The thief laughed. "You're such a pussy."

"Let's just take it and go, then,"the friend said. His voice was hardly more than a whisper. Agnes moved closer to the door.

"No way, man. *Die Hard*'s on later. I'm gonna order a pizza."

The friend sighed and sat down on the bed, wrinkling the comforter, and that's when Agnes stepped into the room. She fumbled for a moment with the gun as the hammer caught on

the fabric of her house coat pocket, but then it was steady in her hand. She rested her pointer finger against the trigger.

"Hands up," she said. Her voice was firm.

The thief dropped the other two boxes of sinus medication on the floor. "Huh," he said in a rush of breath, as if he had been kicked in the stomach. The thief's friend turned around slowly until he was facing Agnes. His cheeks and forehead were alive with red blemishes, but all other color had drained from his face. He was barely seventeen.

"Run!" he shouted, his voice cracking. Agnes and the thief watched as the boy dashed to the open window and threw himself through the screen. Agnes winced at the sound of her hydrangeas being trampled.

"Young man," she said, leveling the gun at the thief, "please follow me."

"Listen, lady, I don't—"

Agnes waggled the gun. "Just move."

They walked down the hall together, the thief in front, Agnes in back, the gun between them. When they reached the kitchen, Agnes used the barrel of the gun to prod the thief toward the sink.

"I want you to clean that mess up," Agnes said.

"What mess?" the thief said, even as glass crunched beneath his stained shoes.

"You spoiled my jam."

"That's good jam, lady."

"What did you say?" Agnes used the gun to usher the man into a chair. He sat down.

"That's the best jam I've had since I was a kid." The thief smiled. His teeth were white and straight. "My grandma used to make it just like that."

Agnes stood over him, the barrel of the gun pointed at his chest. "If you had a grandmother who cared enough for you to

make you strawberry jam, then you should know better than to break into someone's home."

The thief frowned. "She's dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

The thief shook his head and started to stand up, but Agnes poked him with the gun. The grease on the barrel left a circular stain on his undershirt. The thief settled back again. "What's the name of that stuff you use to make it firm up? Looks like clear Jell-o?"

"Pectin."

"Right! Grandma used to let me squeeze that shit out of the package."

"Watch your mouth."

The thief laughed and lunged at Agnes at the same time. She cut her heel on a shard of glass, but maintained her balance.

"Sorry, lady,"the thief said, his palms out. He had a yellow rubber bracelet on his wrist. "Sorry. Maybe you can put that gun down, you know?"

"You broke into my home,"Agnes said. "You disturbed my papers. You burned a burrito in my microwave."

"Listen,"the thief said, and took a step closer. Agnes tightened her grip on the gun. "I'm sorry about the mess. You got a mop? I'll clean it up."

"And you ate my jam,"Agnes finished.

"Well, yeah,"the thief said. He made a quick movement that Agnes couldn't quite follow, and then thrust his arm forward. "And I took your knife, too."Agnes' hand spasmed and the gun went off.

"Jesus Christ!"the thief shouted. He patted his chest and stomach, but there was no wound. Agnes had shot the coffee maker.

She could no longer stand. She slumped to the floor, her fingers still tight around the gun. Her father's Swiss Army

knife, now bloody, was in her lap. Blood bloomed on her dressing gown.

"Stupid bitch,"the thief said. He knelt down and breathed beer and burrito stench into Agnes' face. He had traces of mustache on his upper lip, fine blonde hairs. "You make good jelly, though,"he said, and then picked up the knife and jabbed it twice more into the soft flesh of her belly.

He stood over her for several minutes, and gradually she let her breathing slow. When he seemed satisfied that she was dead, he picked up the two unbroken jars of jam on the floor and deposited them into the bulky pockets on the side of his pants. Agnes listened as the thief walked down the hallway to the bedroom and back. When he returned to the kitchen, she opened her eyes just enough to see him cradling the boxes of Sudafed in the crook of his elbow.

He took the remains of the six pack of beer and his keys. He left the screen door open behind him.

After the sound of the thief's engine grew distant, Agnes struggled to a sitting position in the spreading pool of her blood and sugared strawberries. She wrapped her hand around the leg of the butcher block and pulled, her knees crunching on quilted crystal and Danish porcelain. She felt the weight of the thief's wallet in the pocket of her dressing gown as she began the slow ascent to the telephone on her great-grandmother's desk.

Tigers
Danielle Maio

What?

Kate Bond

It doesn't bother me that I am
Deaf,
it bothers me that I can't hear
you.

Benign cauliflower
ate away
my bones. Hungrily

took my necessary tools:
hammer (malleus),
anvil (incus),
stirrup (stapes).

It gnawed a hole through my drum
now the music,
is just a

hum (mm)

Game of operation;
the tubes,
removal,
recovery,
regrowth.
They said
"the last time"

I stopped believing
eight times ago.

My parents say
"selective hearing"
when the doctors say
"you're a strong
girl"

How many times must the doctor
remove,
I recover,
it regrow
before it is not so

selective.

150 (+) stitches have sewn
and dissolved
in the same place
down my skull,

I've had new bones,
ceramic & titanium.
Those bones hear just as my god given;
not at all.

What?
Excuse me?
I'm sorry?

It doesn't bother me that I am
deaf,
it bothers me that I can't hear
You.

Sonnet for the Man I Love

Hannah Brosnan

I have slept many moons against your knees,
Awoken warm in arms whose breadth I know.
It's you: who turns my bumbling tongue to bees,
It's you: the light which keeps my autumn slow.

I planted past and in its place we grew.
If hands are homes, these spaces are the rooms;
Please slumber dear, this house is meant for you.
You linger here, a tree that always blooms.

A fool believes that lovers never weep,
But vaster than the oceans you will sail,
A world so new– beneath the water's deep,
Eternal moonlight, beautiful and pale.

Remember this: if thoughts send you away,
Our love, my love: a bridge that does not sway.

The Zealot

Hugh Long

Their initial arrow barrage was futile,
Arrows bounced off my black armor
Like hail on a castle's walls.
I stomp past my men
All huddled beneath the enemy battlements,
They stare with fear and desperation
As I raise my battleaxe.

It takes only four blows to shatter their gate,
The Saracens are waiting for me, their spears leveled.
I roar, they flinch, I charge, they scatter.

The brave ones scramble to face me.
Their spears splinter against my breastplate,
As my axe splinters their skulls.

The smart ones keep running.
Their faces hit the dirt,
As my mens arrows hit their backs.

I don't listen to their pleas anymore.
The sooner I bisect them with my axe,
The sooner their pitiful words,
Will drown out in their own blood.

Some of them begin to go mad,
As they watch their friends and family
Turn into mindless heaps of flesh and organs.

One lunges at me from my right,
Tears streaming down his face petrified in rage.

I sidestep his spear and it passes under my arm.
A swing of my axe severs his hands still gripping the spear.
A swift gauntlet to his shocked face cause blood and bone to scatter.

They keep throwing themselves at me in this melee.
My axe meets more arms and arteries.
My fist meets more necks and noses.
The leather grip on my axe is so soaked in blood and gore,
I have to make sure it doesn't slip as I swing.
Soon I get bored and start looking for wounded to stomp.

Then I see him across this living hell.
Clad in bright silk against his dark skin
Compared to his worn soldiers
He appears immaculate.

He is more dancer than soldier,
More performer than prince.
His victims sigh as they die,
While mine only wail and scream.

He sees me now,
Even beneath my armor hot with blood and sweat
I can feel his cold seething stare.
Had we not met before ,
Even I too may have frozen in awe
And let myself be felled.

He leaps at me, sword drawn back.
I howl at him, swinging my axe.
He kicks my axe arm away mid swing,
But my brute force still knocks him back.
He skips against the dirt and rights himself,

I glare through my visor, and growl.
He levels his sword, and stares back through his head-wrap.

We rush at each other,
I crush the dead underfoot.
He dances between them.

I swing waist level, he ducks underneath, as my axe shreds his head-wrap.
He lashes out and strikes between my shoulder armor,
My arm burns as blood bursts from the wound.
I throw an uppercut and it connects with his abdomen.
I hear ribs break as he drops and vomits.

He tries to leap up but its too late,
My armored boot breaks his sword hand.
His face contorts in pain but he doesn't scream.
He draws a dagger with his other hand and throws it,
My helm fills with blood as it loges itself in my visor.

I tear off my helmet, and wipe off my face.
The blade hit above my eye, but the wound still bleeds profusely.
His right arm is shredded and useless,
he falls on his knees and coughs blood over himself.

As I lift my axe over my head his eyes meet mine,
And he says “Maiden, you are beautiful.”

I tell him, “Then you are blind.”
As I bring my axe down.

Untitled
Maryam Zahirimehr

Amicus, Who Sat on the Wire

Shelby Moore

There was a little, silver-striped black bird on a telephone wire the day my parents and I moved into our new house. It sat alone, staring out at the streets and tall hills beyond, its back to me. I thought nothing of it at first, but as the hours hauled by like the unpacked boxes from the moving trucks, I began to focus more and more on it. On him. He was still there. And not another bird was around.

Why?

It was peculiar to me; very, very interesting. And I didn't know why.

When the day transitioned to evening and the sunset could be seen beyond the streets, the bird was still hunched over in his spot, never swaying. I sat by my bedroom window, leaving all of my things to collect dust in their boxes, watching him and how the pinks of the clouds ran into the oranges of the copper sun. In that moment, I decided to paint a picture of the bird on the wire against the dissolving sky. It was so beautiful, and though the painting was average, it was perfect because for the rest of my life I would have my first memory of this bird on the wire.

He would only ever leave at night, after I'd gotten ready for bed. On the first night in the house, my parents tucked me in, kissed me goodnight, and left the room. When I knew they were downstairs, I snuck to the window to see the bird. He was still there, his silver wings glistening against the dawning moonlight. "*Goodnight*," I whispered. His long wings stretched and pushed against the wind, as if my whisper was a cue. I watched him fly into the horizon until he blended with the night and could no longer be seen.

I was nine.

In the following months, my overwhelming anxiety became more recognized. At school, I found myself afraid to talk to the other students, teachers, anyone, really. It happened at the previous school as well; I was never able to hold onto friends for long, but it was overlooked because I still managed to have at least one friend at most points. But here, it was different. All of the other students seemed so intimidating, so aggressive in their sociality. I felt small compared to them. They were loud, outgoing, and seemed to hate their classes. Every single one of them. It was unsettling. I was quiet, withdrawn, and didn't mind my academics. Largely, they were them and I was just different.

It wasn't that I didn't want to make friends, but rather that I couldn't. There was something within me that sent me into fits of shivers or pangs of horror when I was approached by another classmate or talked to by those that weren't my parents. I rarely chose to leave the house because of this, and only when staying at home wasn't an option did I leave, clinging to my parents' hips all the while. It was beyond shyness. It was fear. So I kept to myself and avoided others, seeking solace in the quiet safe house that was my mind.

That was why most of my time was spent talking to the bird. It was easy to hold up conversations because he never spoke back and he never left. I was free to spout my troubles without the fears of judgments or some commotion. And to this, my parent's—my mother, really—were taken aback. She saw it as psychologically unhealthy. I saw it as a way to avoid my loneliness. To me, the silver striped bird was my only friend, always there for me, always listening. Whether it was raining, snowing, hailing or sunny, the bird was there. I felt bad, but at the same time it was as if I was never alone. On some days, I would take food out to him in hopes that he would come down and eat it. I tried talking to him and standing some distance away, but he never ate. Not when I

was there. He waited until I left and he was out of my sight. I only ever knew because the food was gone whenever I returned to check. My mother explained that other animals ate it, not him. He was a bird. He wasn't *that* smart. Why she would say this, I wasn't sure at first. I thought she just didn't like birds. But it wasn't that. She liked birds; she just didn't like *that* bird. She thought it was *that* bird that gave me my anxiety. She couldn't understand otherwise. At any rate, I ignored her. I knew it was the silver-striped bird who ate the food, and I knew he was grateful.

After about a year of seeing him, I recognized our true friendship and gave him a name. I saw it in a book in my school library—the place I frequented most outside of the classrooms—and knew right then and there that it was for him. I asked the librarian what it meant. She said it meant friend.

Friend.

From then on, the bird was no longer known as "the silver-striped bird,"but rather as my little Amicus, who sat on the wire.

I was ten.

Amicus' meals soon became a daily routine, seeing as how he never seemed to eat otherwise during the day. He was always alone up there, as I was down here, and I sought to make up for that by feeding him and talking with him every day. I spoke about the upcoming seasons and weather, about the flowers that were ready to bloom in the backyard, about my academics, and about how terrified I was of talking to other kids at school. I talked about my drawings, how I loved to paint him and hang him on my walls, and how I loved his company. More and more I treated him like a friend and sought comfort in him. Some days, I would drag a chair across the street and sit on the opposite side of my house so I could

see and draw his face, his solemn, content face. Other days, I would sit by the window in my room and sing to him. I would hum the songs that were stuck in my head as the setting sun hit my face, feeling the warm breezes comb my hair away from my face. Sometimes he would sing back. He would whistle his own tune. It was always the same: mellow and smooth and fluid. There were five total notes. Two high notes, three low. He would sing them over and over, and a smile would quickly find its way to my cheeks. It was as if we spoke in our own language, as if he was acknowledging our friendship. And it was perfect.

I was diagnosed with depression after I moved into that house. Everyone was already aware of it in me as a young child, but age only worsened it. Everything became sad and too hard to bear, with the exception of Amicus of course. He kept me sane. I talked to him more about my thoughts because I knew he wouldn't judge me. He wouldn't talk back as if he understood. I hated leaving the house because it meant leaving him. It was a never-ending battle just to sum up the courage and motivation to go to school. I was unable to make friends because I was too bent up on my melancholic reality and afraid of talking to those that weren't Amicus. This upset my mother. She thought it was because of Amicus that I was anxious, because of him that I was so sad. In her mind, it was Amicus who kept me from being outgoing, not the diagnoses. She was unable to believe that this had been happening to me all along.

As my sadness pushed further and further on my tired shoulders, all hope of making friends was lost. Amicus was all I wanted; all of my thoughts and words were used on him—no one else. I spoke less and less about the flowers and the weather, and more about myself, how I couldn't stand my being, how others judged me for my state, how I wanted to die. Perhaps my mother was right; perhaps I'd gone mad. I

didn't care. I didn't care that talking to a bird was weird, that I had only Amicus to confide in, that my entire social life was wrapped around the life of a small, silver striped bird. I just didn't care. He made me as happy as my mind allowed me to be, and for that I was grateful.

But my mother wouldn't accept that. She thought I was fine before him, even though I never was. My father, often times, defended that. He reminded her of how I would cry for no reason and ask about dying. How I was sent to therapy because I was unable to hold onto a friend. My mother still didn't accept it. I didn't know why, but she just couldn't. She hated the thought that the one thing that kept me happy was a damn bird. It wasn't normal, and she wanted him gone. A few times she tried to send me to a psych ward, but it never happened. I needed to stay for Amicus, and to this she grew more and more angry. It drove her crazy that I wouldn't speak to anyone, wouldn't make friends, that all I wanted to do was talk to a stupid bird who sat on a stupid wire and make stupid drawings of him. She even went so far as to threaten to call someone in and take Amicus away. We fought about it for a long time. I begged her to stop, but she kept dialing. My father protested, but he was shooed away. I screamed, but she still brought the phone up to her ear, still said hello to the person on the other line. Then I told her I would kill myself if she continued. The silence between us was filled with hate and betrayal. She hung up the phone and the idea.

I was twelve.

The morning after that incident, eight years after seeing Amicus for the first time, I woke up to find that he was not on the wire. At first, I assumed I got up too early. I slipped back under the covers and sketched him while I waited, avoiding the sour shock of my confession that hovered downstairs. But as the day progressed, Amicus still hadn't returned to his

place on the wire. I began to panic, afraid that my one true friend, the one that I thought would never leave my side, was gone. My father told me not to worry, that he was probably in his nest somewhere and that he'd return. It was his way of apologizing for lasts night's events. My mother was still heated. She told me he was gone, he was a wild animal and his place was not to sit on a telephone wire all day, that, in reality, he probably died.

In that moment, hatred spilled into me like lava. I loathed her for uttering the words she knew I didn't want to hear. I screamed at her. She didn't seem to care. We didn't speak to each other for weeks. I lost all desire to do anything but wait in my room for Amicus to come back. But he didn't. Days passed and he didn't come back. Weeks passed and still nothing. Months came and went, but he never did. And then a year turned up and that's when I knew. He was gone, and I was alone. No more talking about my thoughts, no more drawings of my best friend. No more anything. Twice that year I attempted to take my own life. After the second attempt, my parents sent me away. I had no strength to protest anymore. I'd used it all up. My mother convinced me to go only by pointing out that I wasn't right and needed to get better. She felt that I was spiting her for the lost bird and that needed to be better. My father pulled me aside and explained that it was for the best; I needed to be away from that empty wire and going away would be better for me than I could understand.

I was seventeen.

The hospital was two towns over and set on a campus that looked more like a college building than anything else. I was so nervous because all I could imagine were those old-fashioned asylums with bright white walls and dungeons for rooms with doctors and loonies who poked and prodded at

your mind and never left you alone. But this hospital wasn't at all like that. The walls weren't white, but lavender and green. The dorms, as well as most of the other rooms, were carpeted and decorated with paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso, and even some patients. And the doctors and nurses were very friendly. I'd come to notice that after some time when I was comfortable enough to see that they didn't treat me like a mental patient. They didn't doctor me or try to understand me. They were just people; friendly people.

Within the first week, I roomed with Sarah. I only liked her because she was quieter than some, but she was gone by the following Tuesday. Then I was rooming with Caroline. She seemed to want less to do with me than I did of her, grumbling, "I shouldn't be here. My bloody parents shouldn't have sent me here with the freaks."She only sent me further into myself because her attitude suggested nothing other than that I was alone, even in a mental hospital. She was there a little longer than Sarah, but I think it had less to do with her mental state and more to do with her parents.

Then again, who was I to judge?

I was visited very frequently by my father, who wanted nothing more than to sit and hear about my days. We never talked about much, but after Amicus was gone, there was something in my father that I hadn't seen before: familiarity. It still didn't feel right, talking about how I thought and felt to someone other than Amicus, but I was able to talk about other things. I talked about my art and he talked about the news. It was nice. During the times of my mother's visitations, she spoke about her days and her feelings, about the weather and the changing seasons, about the blooming flowers in the backyard, and about family members getting married or having children. I just listened, unable to speak because I knew she didn't want to hear what I had to say. She couldn't

understand my mental instability, just as she couldn't understand my friendship with a bird.

There was never any news of Amicus' return, something I clung to with all of my attention and hope. No, there was never anything of my little bird sitting on his wire where he belonged.

The hospital contained an optional school for patients who stayed behind longer than a few weeks. I was able to continue with my studies without falling behind, and that was what I spent most of my time doing. I studied math, science, and English because they were good means of escaping. When not studying, I focused on painting, making sure to keep to myself and away from others. It was because I missed Amicus more than anything. I couldn't seem to want someone who wasn't him. He listened, he was there, and he understood because he was also alone. Anyone who tried to get close was only pushed away, and they were ones who left after a few days of being admitted, the ones who only ever wanted to complain about their lives rather than just talk about it. They were nothing like Amicus. They were like my mother. So I stayed away.

I came across Amanda in an art class we shared. She was outgoing, pretty, and wanted nothing more than to be my friend. At first, I didn't want her company. I wanted to be alone, away from the sociality. But she kept trying. She liked other people, thrived in the beds of conversations. No one ever seemed to know why she was there. Where some gripped depression, she held hands with her smiles. Where some hid behind their anxieties, she bloomed with stories. No one knew, especially I, that behind this mask of bliss was pain, that she wanted to talk to others so much because it meant listening to someone else's life rather than her own. Only when I found her with her head buried in tissues, her eyes plump with sodden self-hate did I let her in. For the first time ever, I spoke

to someone other than Amicus about my life. And she listened. Just like Amicus, she listened. She didn't judge me, wasn't mortified by my thoughts, and didn't claim to understand as a form of comfort. She did understand. They all did; everyone in the hospital. Those who lasted more than a week, they understood. I was so anxious about being alone, about being misunderstood, when all along I was surrounded by a collection of my own Amicuses.

I made my second friend in that hospital. We've never been apart since.

I was eighteen.

The years that followed my admittance were filled with new beginnings and new friendships, where recollecting tears softened to forgotten laughter. Amicus barely crossed my mind. On occasion I thought about the talks I had with him and the language we shared in our songs. But it was never more than a passing thought, a flash that was in and out of my mind in a second. After leaving the hospital at 20, I spent some time at home, gathering my life and slowly painting it on a canvas. My mother had slowly worked her way into being more supportive, but there was still a lingering apprehension between us, a callous feeling that we were never on the same page and we were never going to be. And it was because of that that I realized I needed to be away and on my own. I wanted to move to the city. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to take flight from the wire. By the end of that summer, I was ready. My room was packed and my first rent was due. Amanda was already settled in. The night before I left, my father helped me finish packing. We talked about life and it was good. I finally opened up about my thoughts of sadness and fear, but also about my redemption and contentment. To my surprise, he listened. Nothing more.

When he went to bed, I circled restlessly around my empty room, plunging between eagerness and anxiety. Then my gaze fell upon the window. I thought of Amicus and an infinitesimal shard of hope surfaced when my gaze fell onto the wire. It was empty, and relief seeped from the deep breath I exhaled. His absence was good. It gave me the strength to open up and a chance to discover the world on my own. The silver striped bird was gone, long gone, and for that, I was once again grateful.

The story of the bird on the wire ended in my apartment room, though it never really ended. As I unpacked the final box, I noticed something at the bottom faced down and covered in newspaper. I pulled out the heavy object and flipped it over. A sticky note lay in the center. *So you'll always have someone to talk to*. It was written in my father's neat cursive. I removed the sticky note and tore the paper away to reveal a large frame. Tears sparkled in the receding sunlight as they slid down my cheeks. I held it close to me and looked out of the window into the streets and small hills beyond. The telephone wires traced the skyline. Dotted among them was not one, but many little black birds with silver stripes running down their backs. They sat together, hunched over, their backs to me. I stuck the sticky note on the side of the frame and propped it on the windowsill. In it was that painting, the first memory of my little Amicus, who sat on the wire.

The Music Men
Danielle Maio

8-10 SECONDS FOR BONE-DRY CAPPUCCINOS

Jess Rizkallah

1.
It's the kind of day where Conor Oberst's ennui drips from the sound system and I'm handing people lattes with an extra pump of
"Hey I Wonder What You Look Like When You Cry All By Yourself"
but it sounds like "Thank You Have a Great Day,"

behind me the hot lid sleeve i didn't tie bursts like confetti from an artery
and john says
"YOU. JESSICA. TIE THESE FUCKERS."

2.
I'm competent enough at my job that now i can think of you
AND break a french press at the same time. I tell Danny I
should wear its teeth around my neck as a warning
to all other french presses and he just takes the broom away from me.
now I can think of you AND not clean broken glass
at the same time

3. Today I stick my arm so far into the sanitizer that my skin tattles to my bones.
i explain to the radius that the internet says it takes 7 years for skin to shed lovers
like some sorta everlasting autumn fuckery and like really
I'm just speeding up the process

my bones snort and my arm sprouts eyeballs and the eyeballs roll at me

and now the eyeballs are crying sanitizer straight into the sink
already full of sanitizer

how do i tell my biology that i am sacrificing it to drown my
phantom limb / how do i tell you that you're my phantom
limb / how do I tell Conor Oberst to stop singing at me

4.
I watch Danny pour water over ice as he patiently shows me
how to make
the same drink for the fourth time
and i like how the ice click falls into place like a bouquet
of elbows
I take it from him, add three pumps "Do You Ever Want
To Scream
In a Room All By Yourself"

and Danny just bangs his hand in the oven door instead

5.
I'm steaming milk and it screams UFOs — this means I'm
doing it wrong.
Danny tells me "Listen for the rip below the surface, 8-10
seconds to aerate,
to bone dry, and then let go"

but I think I'm only always catching the rip in time instead - I
think it's in our bathroom
because every Tuesday, an old man emerges from it. He is you
in thirty years, I know because he looks like you and also I
know because he orders a cappuccino, extra dry. Winks at me
as he drops a knuckle bone into the tip jar, like this is the same
thing as holding my hand.

6.
"We're gonna have to much fun with this Blackberry syrup,
Jessica,"John tells me, and I believe him. I've been putting it in
everything since. I've been injecting our patrons with purple,
knowing it tastes like "Hey This is What It's Like To Fall In
Love I am So Sorry,"
  but I'm not. I've been having too much fun
like
  "YOU GET MY PERSONAL METAPHOR
  AND YOU GET MY PERSONAL METAPHOR
  AND YOU GET THIS ELEPHANT DOODLE ON YOUR
    CUP
  BECAUSE YOU MUMBLED YR NAME
  AND I'M AFRAID TO ASK FOR THE THIRD
    TIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIME"

and it's fun. but your knuckles hang around my neck trying to
  be an albatross
like i ripped them out myself, like you didn't just leave them
  loose change.
i should stop thinking you so important. I should stop letting
  you ruin the fun.

7.
Today we are low on the Blackberry syrup. Danny is sad and
John wants to go home and they are my friends now so i draw
them elephants because that's easier than talking about the
love trapped in my humerus

easier than drowning it right above the milk's ulna, just below
  skin before the rip,
the paper tearing into bubbles, into eyeballs crying UFOs into
  the room like it's empty,
trying to be as dry as my skin, as my bones. dry.

8. and not.
9. and then let go
10.

In Bocca Al Lupa

Danielle Maio