

BREAKING GROUND 2019



INTERSECTIONS

NATURE AND CIVILIZATION

Two Paths Meet | Richard Schleider



This edition of *Breaking Ground* is the collaboration of
the Spring 2019 English 175 Class

Professor Christopher Origer
Logan Blakeslee ❖ Alyssa Ellerson
Mason Erle ❖ Justin Evans
Alex Harding ❖ Shivani Patel
Emmanuel Pereira ❖ Emmy Stilloe

As well as the many bright minds
of the artists and writers represented within

BREAKING GROUND 2019

INTERSECTIONS:
NATURE & CIVILIZATION

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Please direct all correspondence to:

Professor Christopher Origer, Editor
Breaking Ground
Department of English
SUNY Broome Community College
P.O. Box 1017
Binghamton, NY 13902
email: origerac@sunybroome.edu

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IN GRATITUDE

One rarely sees the hundreds of hours it takes to produce a literary magazine like this, and often there is a paucity of praise for those dedicated to the detailed work involved in bringing it to completion long after it leaves their desks. I want to express my gratitude to one individual in particular, without whom this year's magazine would not be possible. My heartfelt thanks goes out to Rose Pero, my editorial assistant, for the countless hours you spent attending to all the meticulous work of layout and proofreading of the 2019 magazine. I'm in your debt for all the hard work you put into this endeavor, and always with a cheerful countenance and without complaint. I think I must owe you an entire case of Visine for all the eye strain this must've caused. My deep thanks also goes to my son-in-law Carlos who, amidst the chaos of a house renovation project, took the time to apply your expertise to design the cover of the magazine, a stupendous job, to be sure. My gratitude also goes to Ellen Brand and Virginia Shirley for your meticulous proofreading of the magazine, especially at a busy time of the semester when you had little time of your own to give up. I also wish to thank those fine folks who offered your support and encouragement, yet because of time constraints were not able to be put to good use in the final stretch. Sadly, this is the first year we've not had any editing parties, which are always fun. Maybe next year. Lastly, I also want to thank the ENG175 class this semester, for your willingness to pitch in and get the book to completion, especially since it involved subjecting you to many long hours reading and evaluating the many submissions we received. Thank you one and all!

EPIPHANIES

≈ CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS ≈

Breaking Ground 2020

Send us your best original poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, memoirs, artwork, photography, or graphic stories for our annual theme issue. As with past issues the only criteria are vividness, vitality, depth of thought and expression and, above all, excellence. Open to all SUNY Broome students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The theme of the 2020 issue is Epiphanies.

READING AND SUBMISSION PERIOD:

September 1, 2019 to March 20, 2020

For complete submission guidelines, and to submit your creative work during the submission period, go to www2.sunybroome.edu/english/breakingground/

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Special Color Insert

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3. Richard Schleider • Selfie
- 4. Alli Baumgart • In Time
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Alla Boldina – *Concrete Roots I (photograph)*.....Inside Back Cover

Josh Mitchell – *Oxygen Factory (photograph)*Back Cover

INTERSECTIONS: NATURE AND CIVILIZATION

These days the intersections between nature and civilization are so commonplace that sometimes we cease to notice them. They appear in the high-tension power lines bisecting the sky across a meadow of purple wildflowers; they're evident in a fallow field whose edge is a two-lane county road; in the view of a distant snow-capped mountain range whose foreground is the skyline of a bustling city; in a harbor bobbing with sailboats and gulls hovering over garbage washing up against the shore; even in the iridescent motor oil film on puddles along a curb after a spring rain. We are everywhere, our highways and buildings and myriad inventions make that certain, and so is nature. But pause a moment. Where exactly *is* nature? Some prefer to capitalize the word, bestowing on it an almost holy distinction. I understand that. But can we point to where it begins, to some easily identifiable boundary? Maybe we can find it on a map, at the place where we escape the city on weekend treks? Or maybe it's only in those places we've designated as scenic wilderness, or those untouched places we've yet to commandeer with our language. Actually, are there still wild places we have not shaped to flatter our own image and likeness? Wherever we travel, whether on foot or by car, we encounter the omnipresence of our species. Maybe you think this is not a problem. But now, at the end of the second decade of this new millennium, it most certainly feels like it is a problem, with the disappearance of habitat, the warming of the oceans, the loss of biodiversity, the melting icecaps, and so on. Pick up any daily newspaper and you can read about it and your own culpability. In our clumsy way we refashion nature for our own purposes while at the same time attempting to preserve it for future generations.

This issue of *Breaking Ground* invited SUNY Broome writers and artists to give attention to the intersections between civilization and nature—whether colliding with each other or symbiotically living alongside in harmony. I think we sometimes unintentionally succumb to an aesthetic prejudice, designating some parts of the earth as undesirable wasteland while at the same time setting aside others because of their scenic beauty. Interestingly, and also annoyingly, if we applied this logic to our relationships with people we would certainly call this superficial, nothing that endures for very long.

A number of works here grapple with the theme. I was reminded of William Stafford's poem "Traveling Through the Dark" when I read "The Skunk's Coat" by Jenny Checchia; the theme emerged again in the uneven juxtaposition of a lone tree reflected in the gleaming body of a red car, an image

by Trisha Illsley, which we selected as the cover; it was again in a photograph by Josh Mitchell, of a power plant that has suddenly sprung new life from its transformed wooden smokestacks, now sustaining life by producing clean air; I encountered the theme again in a pristine tropical harbor ignored by beachgoers who are too busy flattering themselves with selfies. And other images come to mind: a gathering of floodwaters, a rebellion of forest animals, a restoration of life long gone while denying nature, the tracks of a three-legged fox deep in the snow, the sweet taste of trash potatoes, trees overshadowed by skyscrapers, the disturbing images of smashed animals left dead on the side of a highway. In contrast there are also poignant stories of enduring family bonds, which emphasize human nature, as well as beautiful landscape photographs, which beckon to readers, making you want to leave these pages behind and transport yourself there, wherever there is. Many works of poetry and prose within harness the theme and touch upon the unknown and elusive parts of the world that reside beyond your front door. Some of these writers and artists confront the bureaucratic coldness of nature and the primal savagery of civilization, while others capture the warmth of the sun, the depths of the moon, and the comforting safety of a childhood home.

Many of these works belie not merely an environmental crisis, or a social justice crisis; for on the only planet we have been bequeathed, they pose the bigger question: what should our responsibility be to our children's children's children? How should we live? As a species our pollution identifies us; it is our embarrassing legacy, for we are the only species I know of that pollutes so ambivalently and so freely, and we can trace its provenance. We are, after all, full of contradictions. We want picturesque mountains and clear rivers as well as the convenience of cars and air conditioning. We encounter the ubiquitous incongruities of our passing this way, in the granola wrapper dropped along a forest path, in the cigarette butt still smoldering on the summit of a mountain, in the cell phone tower unconvincingly disguised as a tree, in the bits of excelsior found in a wren's nest, yet we are proudly aware of our stupidity, too, as we investigate reasonable solutions to the problems we ourselves have created; biomimicry is just one effort to transform our toxic processes into something earth-friendly.

We hope as you explore these pages you will think about your own answers to where our place should be in the world. And if you should feel inspired, think about commenting on this through your own outpouring of creative work for a future issue of the magazine. ☺

– Professor Origer and the staff of *Breaking Ground*
April 2019

Breaking Ground 2019 Awards

\$100 First Prize for Front Cover
Trisha Illsley: Drive-in

\$75 Second Prize for Back Cover
Josh Mitchell: Oxygen Factory



Concrete Roots II | Alla Boldina

Incoming

CHASE ALLEN

The Inson is moving, Papa!” The clicking of feet upon the rundown structure scattered any remaining vermin from the room as the older Scavenger reunited with his son.

“How far has it gone, little one?” The seriousness in his voice made any notion of fun evaporate from the room.

“Not too far, maybe one or two steps. What do you think it’s doing?” The spear in the little one’s grip gestured to where the creature had once been. It moved slowly compared to how agile it looked, scraping its feet against the rubble below it.

“I don’t believe it knows what it’s doing, son.” Papa searched the scorched earth for any threats against their mission, one necessary for the advancement of the clan. Behind the broken down machines around the surrounding area, past the sand dunes and across the fields of sand there was nothing in sight. “But we need to go down there before anyone else gets the same idea.”

The second pair of arms concealed underneath Papa’s shawl allowed for an extended reach towards the level below them. The little one jumped into Papa’s first set of arms, placing him gently on the floor, and landing softly next to his son, folding his arms back inside of the cloth.

The staircase was covered in dead fungus and what seemed to be ashes of other critters from the Lushlands. The clicking of the father-son duo was dulled by the remains of the past as they made their way towards the bottom floor.

Papa stopped his eager son in his tracks, taking the air out of his lungs.

“Before you witness your first Inson, you must realize that you are going to find it hard to look at for long. This won’t be held against you, young one, as they are quite wretched things.” Papa’s spear was clutched in his hand; fierceness was the only way his son could describe him during this time.

“I understand Papa. I’m here to help you in any way possible.” The little one hit his spear against the ground; he was more than willing to take what the clan needed from the creature.

Papa smiled, his hand grasped the door and slid it open; the only thing between them and the metal creature was a wall of rubble and bones. The pair peered over the wall at the Inson, its movements slow and exaggerated. With

being as close as they were, the little one heard the sound his father had warned him about before today.

The slow, irritated breathing from the metal thing before them split between the whirring of cogs and spitting up a black liquid with the consistency of mucus. The noise in conjunction with the red and green flashing lights strung about its broken body as it shambled across the desert floor, flesh and metal dragging across the ground, connected by tendons and wires of different shapes and sizes, which seemed to upset the stomach of the little one.

“Papa, you didn’t warn me of the smell, or the bloody mess it would be.” The little one turned away from the shambling corpse; his hands held his mouth so as not to voluntarily vomit.

“You saw it as it got up and began to walk. You can’t tell me you weren’t ready. By the looks of it, its head is completely useless. You don’t have to worry about this one attacking. Come on, son, let’s get you initiated.”

The son wiped the snot from his nose, stood next his father and followed him towards the blood-covered creature before them. The clicking from their claws across the sand-filled street didn’t bother the seemingly deaf animal in front of them.

Papa had given precise instructions on what to do when they were finally in range to take it down, allowing for a swift execution without damaging the necessary parts. The snap from his father and the little one gave the stab directly into the heart area of the enemy. Although the robot fell down, it was not dead. Its body was no longer moving, but the mouth seemed to awaken.

“I’m sorry sir, the bombs are already on their way. There’s nothing we can...” A long pause didn’t leave the duo in silence; it filled the air with a screech of white noise, the head of the machine whirred intensely as Papa was brought to his knees by the deafening sound. The little one was too mesmerized by the story it began to share to care for the ear-piercing sound it made.

“There was nothing we could do, Lindsey. They took out our electronics, I’m as good as dead. Leave me to die here. I couldn’t help even if I wanted to. Now, go! I’ll see you—” The whirring of the metal inside of the Inson ended abruptly; Papa’s spear had pierced the creature’s head, ending its rambling as if it had never happened.

“Papa! It was telling a story!” He removed Papa’s spear, hoping it would have

helped bring the story back, but to no avail.

“You shouldn’t worry about things of the past. It has no use to us anymore.” All of Papa’s hands began working on taking metal pieces and wires from inside the dead thing’s chest.

“But—”

“But nothing, son. They ruined their own lives, and we must not fall under folly of the Inson’s insolence. They forged our world, little one. And we must live like this because of their faults. You must promise me to feel no guilt in ending their lives, as it is necessary to keep ours going. Understood?” Papa held out his hand, a gesture for them to keep a promise.

“I understand.” They clasped paws, weakly shaking their arms up and down in unison. Later, they were to make it back to the clan with new wires to be used in their wish for communication across the country, leaving the Insons to suffer until the next day. ☞

The Building Once Called Home

ZACHARY ALLEN

Wood, brick, stone, and glass. All form in a single shape, a building. But it is nothing more, just a building. No love or hope, just brick, glass, stone, and wood. Then life is brought into this once hopeless place and love is created. With this love created, the building is no longer just that; it has been transformed into a home. And just like the brick and stone that formed the home, life and love holds the home together. But love is not a constant; it will not withstand a barrage of damage forever. Just like a home against a raging storm, love can only withstand a certain period of time when under constant assault. So eventually, despairingly, love collapses. With this death of love you see the death of the home. No longer is this home a home, when love has failed. When the love has failed soon after only the life can fail, as those scorned by the absence of love leave the building once called home. Now it is just a building, left hopeless again without love.

But in this building new life arrives, in a different form than before. Nature has now found the building once called home. Nature wraps itself around the building and begins to overtake the old home. While love may no longer be present, there is still life. Nature's life has filled the building's void where love once was. So Nature moves ever onward filling life into the building once called home. Vines stretch over the ceilings, trees sprout up the chimney, and floorboards separate as grass weasels its way to the sun.

But Nature's life is not impervious to those storms most oppressive, as a storm of constant assault can destroy even Nature's work. And as the storm batters the building, windows shatter, walls crumble, and chimneys tumble, and in the end the building is no more.

Only a pile of rubble remains of the building once called home. A pile of wood, brick, stone, and glass. But life returns now to the pile once called home and a new building is dreamt of. Soon over what once was a home, then a building, and then a pile a new assemblage of wood, brick, stone and glass has formed. A building that touches the clouds, set amidst the presence of hundreds of other buildings just like it. Nature's life may one day return to this place, but for now this building stands tall with its head in the clouds, wondering how it came to be known as the building once called home. ☺

Getting Lucky at the Memory Lotto

MARIA BAJWA

The human mind is a convoluted memory machine, which sometimes behaves like our best ally, or sometimes as our worst nemesis, when bringing out deeply buried memories. It depends on generating some mysterious cascade of events in the mind by a stealthily deployed trigger, so minute that it doesn't get registered on the surface of our consciousness. Hence, we wonder what caused us to think such a way, or what caused us to remember this particular piece of a bygone memory to come back to life after an incredibly long time.

One early morning, while looking outside from my car window, I zipped by a group of adolescent girls waiting for their school bus at the side of the road, laughing heartily on, probably, something mundane. They were giving out a vibe full of life and energy. This spectacular sight of pure jubilation and free spirit filled my heart with joyous and hopeful feelings and lifted my spirit to start my day with a new enthusiasm. I looked back in the rear view mirror, and saw those young girls getting in their bus with the same carefree demeanor. I went on my way, but that innocent display of bliss sparked a bright light in the depth of my scarcely lit, sleeping unconscious and pushed me down a memory lane. It was a memory, which I had no idea that I still had, buried in the dust of countless other memories collected over the years. There, I not only saw myself as a fourteen years old, but lived the whole exuberant experience all over again. The memory was embedded so deep that I had forgot about its existence.

Fortunately, I attended an academically-good school which happened to be an all-girl school. It had to be a private school in order to be a good school back then. A good school was a rarity in itself, being in that part of the world and in that time period, thanks to a group of educated town elders who thought that girls should have good education too, even if the school had to be run with sporadically educated wives and daughters of the town people. In public opinion, the male teachers were not allowed in the girl-school because it would have defied the very definition of girls-only school. So, for the exception of school van drivers, the whole staff consisted of ladies including the 'ammaa', an old lady sitting on a chair, just inside of the main gate and facilitating the kids' traffic. The school was a small establishment, housed in an old poultry farm

building, whose primary emphasis was on making the next generation of girls more educated and useful members of society while staying within the social and financial constraints. The concept of spending money on girls, especially on their education, was relatively new back then.

We rarely went on school trips because they were considered a luxury, and the school and the parents could not afford it, and also because it was an out-of-the-box method of learning. However, there was one, the only trip in all of my school years that made up for all lost fun times, and it was to a wildlife conservatory. This trip was with the other girls of ninth and tenth grades, along with the teachers and two or three 'chachaa', the school drivers, as they were usually called, which literally meant 'paternal uncle', in the local language. It was the narrative dominance of those times that those chachaas were considered important in the school life, especially on the trip, because those were our guardians and links to the outside society, dealing with the general populace whether at the gas station, or at a shop, or in an emergency, when women were not supposed to talk to the outsider males.

Then, finally, came the anxiously awaited day of our school trip. Everyone was very excited, including myself. It was unheard of to take the kids on a school trip in that part of the world, almost twenty years ago, especially on a five-hour long bus ride. Now, looking retrospectively, it feels like that trip happened in the middle ages, with small rays of joy and hope in the middle of fear and suppression. Our teachers planned out the whole trip. It was a time, well before modern-day technologies, with no availability of phones, air-conditioned vehicles, streetlights, or any modern so-called necessities. Even electricity was not prevalent then and there. It was a pleasant early summer day. There was still darkness on the early morning sky, when we gathered at the school, and started the trip on a hired ancient-looking public bus. The teachers made sure to pack different delectable foods and picnic blankets. We sang songs, and had a singing competition between the girls and the ladies (teachers). We even played 'dholki'!!! It was a hand held two-sided drum rented from the local folks. It was a time of complete merriment and joy. We ate different delicious foods and had different drinks that everyone brought, and drank soda, which was a luxury in itself back then.

We left the civilization behind and now were traveling on a poorly maintained

bumpy road, which was a mixture of dirt and pavement. There were barren sand dunes all around us, with dry and squiggly vegetation, and occasional men and women of local nomadic tribes herding their few goats. It was a single-lane road with no signs, and unless you knew where you were headed, there was no way you would know the destination. During the last hour, the teachers started to talk in hushed voices, and back and forth conversation, with the chachaas started. One of the teachers finally lost it, and all the commotion started over the notion that we had lost our way, and only God knew our whereabouts in the middle of the desert. Occasionally, one of the chachaas would go out and talk to the locals and come back very confident about the route, but that was apparently not enough for the teachers. All of us girls were very scared because we had never been out of the house without our elders, and now, we were with our teachers who have been dependent, themselves, on the male chachaas of the bus. We were acutely aware of the fact that if we got lost, we would never be able to go home. The last hour felt like a never-ending nightmare. However, the men in the front were not worried and even enjoyed the fact of being important in the bus full of girls and ladies. I could not forget the smirk on their faces. But the headmistress kept telling us not to worry, and reassured us that the principal, the person in charge of both girl's and boy's school sections, would not send these guys (chachaas) with us if he had not trusted them himself. It proved to be correct later on.

We arrived at the park around mid-day. The bus was parked in the parking lot. Our eyes were bulging out of their sockets, just to see the vast piece of land being used as a parking lot. There were huge lawns full of lush green grass, not only one or two, but so many that we were afraid that we would get lost. We hadn't seen any greenery on such a big scale. When you had lived all your life in a congested small town built on top of sand dunes, made habitable only by a canal, that reaction was only natural. The thing that boggled our mind was that there were no people! Then we figured out the reason. There was desert all around that park for hundreds of kilometers. A huge 'link canal' joining two rivers of the Indus valley flowed really close to that nature conservation area, which fed the great lawns and the animals in and around it. There were massive rose-beds of every color possible. A gardener told us that there were one hundred and forty-eight varieties of roses, because of the successful

experimentation of uneducated but wise gardeners and caretakers, who lived on the premises in their mud and straw huts with their families and took care of all the fauna and flora of the park.

I was ecstatic to be in a big garden and to run and jump over the small hurdles, to climb the trees, and to enjoy the kids' section with slides and swings. I missed those very simple things, that very part of my childhood when you could be as carefree as a butterfly itself, just fluttering from one flower to another. It was a common notion at that time that when a girl hit a certain age, it was a taboo to run and play with friends, and she was expected to behave like a grown-up woman. I enjoyed total freedom that day, with no human being around to tell me not to jump or run like a little kid, to not laugh loudly, and to not play hide and seek with my friends. There was no one to judge us, and no predator to kidnap us. When a person has a luxury, he or she tends not to realize it, but when he or she re-gains it after losing it its value mounts up. I realize now what I was missing back then. That day was simply surreal: the beautiful mild weather in a hot summer desert, huge green lawns with big shady trees embedded here and there, pure and untouched nature with real pretty flowers, everything was perfect.

We walked around in groups and suddenly heard joyful shrieking of friends. All of us rushed there and could not believe our eyes. There was a big pond made for irrigation, but with pedal boats in it. All of us went crazy with joy. We took turns and enjoyed it to our heart's fill. When we were walking down to the lawn where we put our picnic baskets, we came upon a pair of hippos with their baby rolling in the mud. We were excited to see them because none of us had ever seen a living hippo before from such close proximity. They were not in an enclosure because they were considered non-threatening. A family of caretakers living nearby in their mud-hut told us that there were a couple of fierce hippos also, who stayed in a nearby manmade bamboo jungle. They also told us about a nearby desert habitat for endangered desert deer species, but we needed a special permit to visit them. We saw an aviary with different kinds of beautiful birds in it.

When we got back to the lawn, every section of each class and their teachers spread their blankets down on the grass, and we had our lunches in picnic style. It was fun. When we were packing our things in the baskets to leave,

we literally felt the ground shaking, and thought about earthquake but the tremors were progressing in amplitude, and there came an earthshattering rumble with a gigantic dirt cloud. Everyone froze in their tracks when two male hippos appeared on that very same lawn engaged in a headlock, fuming and pounding on the ground with their hooves. The teachers screamed first and bellowed at us to come back to our senses and run away from those two beasts. They started to holler at the chachaas, who were on another lawn, to bring the local caretakers and get those animals out of there. Those beasts were not used to that much noise. They looked at us furiously, disentangled, and started running towards us. A couple of the teachers had brought their toddlers with them. One of those kids was standing directly in the way of one of the hippos, and that poor three-year-old boy just froze there. One of the young teachers sprinted from where she was standing on the picnic sheet, came running, without stopping for a moment, grabbed the kid in one arm and dove over the hedge into the next lawn. A fraction of a second later, the big beast ran over the very spot. She was hurt and muddy from falling into a freshly watered rose-bed but saved that child who would have been trampled upon if it had not been for her. I saw the whole scene unfolding in awe from a branch of a nearby tree on which I had climbed. I still admire her quick reflexes and the selflessness in the face of danger for someone else. Later on, the caretakers came and they herded the creatures away. Initially, everyone was very amped up from the adrenaline rush, then all of us felt very drained. We packed our things and went back to the bus. The ride back home we were tired, but content. All the girls were asleep by the time we got back to school. Everyone went back home as if it were a normal day at school, except it was late at night and we had a whole treasure of fun memories in our hearts. ☺

Photograph



Arbre Sombre | Orion Barber

The Journey

ORION N. BARBER

From this life I now do part,
Zenzizenzizencic swords of iron transfix my heart,
Left to here perish in the dank, dim and dark.
My thoughts saunter toward my youth,
A shattered tapestry sans sooth, of my elan engendered.

If only I had understood what ficticity did appear,
When men were good and lines were clear,
That summer came but once per annum.
Each twelvemonth expanded, protracted,
Were all our agere but redacted,
That one may seek a second dulcet apple.

Through the slaughter of my friends
I am forced to wonder to what ends?
Sangfroid scenes serve to stir.
Be the king the man I thought?
Are my crimes all for naught?
For what coin can account ichor?

In this dotad where I've retired
Worldly erudite have I acquired,
Yet yesteryears' seeds bloom roses de novo.
Inside me yet still shriek the dæmons
Despite my conventionality which beacons.
My pride, its tide a veil availed.

Within my mind these thoughts do dwell;
Hopes of heaven, fears of Hell.
But one term of is the occasion,
The orison—salvation

You May Envy The Trees

ALLI BAUMGART

You may envy the trees,
for at some point everyone gets curious.
They catch your eye,
and you stop and admire
their stillness.

But the sun calls out to you,
suspended in a cloudless sky.
While a single boulder
stands strong against the river's torrents.
Like the little green root
that pushes through the ash
of a California blaze.

You see people,
and all their mystery.
Never still.

Harsh and kind,
loud and timid,
messy and neat.
They travel.
Get lost,
cry and
smile.

People do all sorts of things,
that wouldn't make any sense,
to a tree.

And all of a sudden,
the life of a tree appears quite boring.
You laugh at this thought,
and being different doesn't seem so scary anymore.
With that,
you continue walking.

Right There All Along

ALLI BAUMGART

So she stood there in her big coat.
Her warm breath hitting the winter air
dissolving into steam,
that stood out like a little smoke cloud
against the sky.

Memories of last night,
still swirling before her eyes.

The mask of sleep still lingered,
knotted hair and clumsy fingers,
like a child awoken from a dream.

She caught herself
remembering fondly,
fresh cut grass,
skinned knees and
a soft summer wind.

But her joints ache and crack,
standing now
on solid ground.

Oh, but how this day is new,
she thought.
Maybe it was the fresh fruit
her dry mouth ate moments ago or the
way cold air itched and
reminded her she had lungs.

The dawn,
seemed to call to her.
As if it had been waiting
all through the night
with an answer.

She pulled her hands out of warm pockets,
held them out in front of her,
feeling now
after all these years,
as if they were foreign.

Early morning sun rays
falling gently,
over wrinkled skin.

And in that fleeting moment,
standing in the light,
she realized that youth had never left her.

It had been right there all along.

The Knock

K R I S T I N B E N S E N - H A U S E

How we love:

Furtive glances across a crowded bar
Through them, a muted stream of light
Simultaneous strangers and lovers

I am raising a small glass
Overflowing with whiskey
In an undisclosed location

A slow thaw amid the din
The sound of birds in flight

In the dark
Exploring the landscape of your silhouette
I study the braille of your body
And then a knock that says

Let me in
The corridors of your heart
Let the moon reveal
All of her mysteries
Let the then be the now

The wind is singing

The Moth

K R I S T I N B E N S E N - H A U S E

explosions of stars startle the moth

feathery filaments flutter

white heat inspires flight

leap!

flap!

fly!

fall.

try! try! try!

fly!

fall.

flop.

fin.

death is more powerful than the will to live.

Cento

K R I S T I N B E N S E N - H A U S E

god is a performing artist
dragged into prominence

by half-poets

we bathed in moonshine
two lights above the sea
the power of motion
the carpet of impossibility

what are trees if not spirits
passing through heaven
in a split pea shell?

Whispers

K R I S T I N B E N S E N - H A U S E

An immense sorrow floods my psyche
as external demons seep 'n' creep around
cranial crevices: instigators of the war within.

How clever is psychological warfare?

The enemy is out there, but I seek the culprit in here.
Blinded by society's obnoxiously bright interrogation light
Deafened by the din of damning accusations,

I fall dumb only able to question myself.

Madness in a Box

Window—its cracks are luminous; its ripples riveting
Chem trail—grimy and lovely, whirling on paranoia
Shadow—flighty spiteful aura. The goats
climb on yogis.

Always behind the eight ball. Dusk is ticking, whispers inside
Barristers' creepy staircases so stilettos are clacking
Seldom the sage. Half-inked, the tattoos of winter
Offend on virgin skin.

The Diluvian Man

LOGAN BLAKESLEE

Alam winced as his hand made contact with the coarse, dry dirt that covered the floor of the shaman's own tent. His gaze traced the tiger stripes which the carpet was adorned with, leading him to the tips of the dead cat's ears. Its sand-filled head pointed toward the large ivory chest at the farthest end of the tent. He could only speculate on its grim contents as the shaman delved into the pale box with both arms. Alam's father and chief, Namtaru, stood behind the young man while carrying a lit torch.

This was an initiation, customary for the tribe when the boys became men. The elders waited patiently outside for this special occasion, yet their murmurs were as audible to Alam as they were to the shaman, Kara-sin. Talk of feasting and merriment had to wait just a bit longer.

"Alam," Kara-sin spoke with a deep, gravelly voice, commanding and fearsome. "You hail from the tribe of Jabal, which descended from Cain. Take pride in your heritage."

"I will."

The shaman retrieved two items from the chest, holding both a bronze spear and a leather waterskin, dangling from a thin strap. He set them down before Alam.

"This spear was forged by Tubal-cain, the blacksmith. It can pierce any hide. Beside it is a potion which will grant you inhuman strength, known only to the Nephilim themselves. These items will prove essential in your quest."

The boy raised an eyebrow, prompting Namtaru to intervene.

"A future chief must prove himself worthy of power. He must go beyond what other mortal men are capable of, and he must be relentless in his goal. For your initiation, you must complete a great task for your tribe."

Alam nodded. If that was what his father expected of him, then he would oblige the chief.

Kara-sin held a bowl of water over the boy's head, ready to pour at a moment's notice. "With this, you receive the blessings of our gods. Remember them as you travel to the east and slay the dragon that prowls the land at night."

Namtaru touched his left fist to his right shoulder, signaling the shaman to tip the bowl and soak the boy's head, his first step into becoming a man. Alam

grabbed the sacred items and stood up. He knew where the dragon hid during the day, as the beast's lair was located between the village and the old temple of Berith, though it lay in ruins after years of neglect. The tribe had many gods; losing one temple would not harm them greatly.

Upon stepping out of the tent, the elders gasped and knelt at the sight of the items, allowing the boy to venture off into the wilderness. Uninterrupted he followed a path from the grassy plains to the thick woodlands, letting the morning mist soothe his mind as he pressed onward. He felt leaves brush against his skin, and then the scraping of branches. The sun was still climbing in the sky, and the earth was coated in an orange light. Eventually, the glare intensified and the boy raised a hand in front of his face, shielding himself from the blinding rays.

And that was when he marched off a cliff.

A cry for help was cut short when he landed straight into the river that cut between his land and a vast desert. He clawed his way to the surface, but to no avail. Alam had never learned to swim. Darkness enveloped him, and he began to sink into the depths. The air in his lungs burned from the inside. Then, before all was lost, he felt something grab his wrist and pull him to the shore. Whatever rescued him dazzled with pure radiance.

"For such a small person, you had quite a big fall," smirked a peculiar being, humanoid in shape but fitted with the wings of doves, though much bigger. Light obscured its face. Alam was in complete awe.

"W-who are you?"

"No one special. If you absolutely need a name, call me Hofniel. If you need a cloth to dry yourself, you're out of luck."

The guardian angel stretched out his arm eagerly, waiting for a handshake that never came. Frowning for just a moment, he regained his plucky composure.

"Did I hit my head on the way down?" said Alam.

"I wouldn't doubt it," the angel chuckled. "But I've come to persuade you against completing your task. Slaying the dragon isn't going to help you mature."

The boy was perplexed. He had no intention of turning back now in disgrace, but this being appeared wise. He wanted to learn more about it. Alam shrugged his shoulders, letting the staff of his spear rest behind his neck. Sitting down on a rock, he readied himself to listen.

Hofniel fluttered his wings in excitement. "Alright, let me explain. Your tribe has been hunting in excess throughout this region. You cut down the trees for your feasting fires, and skin the animals to decorate your homes. Afterwards you cut off horns and pull out teeth as trophies, and leave the rest to rot. The soil is torn apart as you search for gold and precious stones. You have stolen from the earth and have given nothing back."

"That is what the gods have permitted us to do."

The angel tapped his foot like an angry parent at this answer. "Which god?"

"Berith. We were told to gather as many valuables as we could and keep them for ourselves, according to the shaman."

"I guess we'll have to speak with Berith directly. After you slay the dragon, go to the temple of your god and see what he thinks of your tribe's ways, though I urge you to turn back now. You won't get another chance."

Hofniel closed his eyes and leaped into the air, soaring all the way to the heavens above. Alam was left with a sense of disquiet, but he suppressed the feeling and walked into the desert. Dried shrubs and jagged rocks filled the scene whenever the sand rested between the occasional gust of wind. The sun was higher, and the oppressive heat weighed heavier than the spear he carried. His feet would have been cut to ribbons were it not for his sandals.

Thirst was another challenge that steadily grew as the hours passed by. Alam could have easily drunk from his waterskin, but doing so would leave him vulnerable to the dragon. He tried to ignore his thirst, fatigue, doubt, and fear as well as any man could. Maybe the angel was right, maybe he should have returned to the village. Living in disgrace was marginally better than being dead, he reasoned.

But reason wasn't enough to stop him. Alam beheld the stone maw of the cave, yet it was too dark to catch a glimpse of the ferocious beast within. Skulls were littered around the entrance, but none of them were human. This was a feeding ground.

A bellowing roar rushed out of the tunnel and Alam's courage was drained in an instant. He fumbled about with the waterskin and gulped down the bitter potion. He was going to make his father proud, his village proud. The dragon reared its terrible head from the shadows.

The beast was almost beyond description.

Its jaws were long and filled with teeth sharper than daggers, and a bright red crest sat atop its blue-skinned head. The azure scales were like those of crocodiles, though its arms were eerily human-like as they swung from underneath the creature's slim chest. Each finger was clawed. The dragon's serpentine body was supported by two muscular legs and a long tail that resembled a bullwhip. Alam's mind pictured a featherless bird that happened to be extremely well-equipped for killing.

The boy rolled to the side as the first swipe came, narrowly dodging its front claws and its trampling feet. The dragon turned around, and pounced at him with its jaws wide open, causing the ground to quake upon landing. Alam shifted his weight to the right and grabbed the elaborate bony crest. He drove his knee into the monster's eye several times before he was shaken off. Its pained shrieks were deafening.

Back on solid ground, he failed to jump before getting knocked over by a sudden tail strike along the dirt. Both combatants were fully determined to end one another. The dragon approached slowly, assessing the threat. It readied its three-toed foot to crush Alam instantly, yet it felt an unimaginable pain as it fell, sending a cloud of dust into the air. The spear was driven into its bloodied foot, and now the boy had the opportunity to finish it.

The dragon lay still as Alam trudged over to its face, passively observing the small, insignificant human that had defeated it. It was the last thing the beast saw before it was finally killed. The boy felt stronger than any man alive, and he would surely return home as a hero. At least, that was the case until he heard little chirps echo from the cave. Two smaller dragons bounced out, about as large as tamed wolves.

It dawned on Alam that this creature, this fierce monster, was a mother.

He was riddled with shame instantaneously, and he fell to his knees. The offspring hissed at their mother's killer from atop her corpse, but dared not approach any closer. The boy felt a hand touch his shoulder. Alam was surprised to see the angel had returned.

"So," Hofniel sighed. "You did it. Congratulations."

"I didn't know it was a mother. I thought it was trying to harm my people."
"This animal felt the same about you."

Alam's guilt weighed him down so much that he could barely stand. The

angel picked him up and together they flew to the ancient temple of Berith, the real end of his quest. It was a mighty ziggurat made of black stones, and an altar was placed at the very top. Broken columns and golden statues jutted out from the dunes around it.

“Sit down right here, Alam. There’s something I wanted to show you.” Hofniel patted the elevated slab.

The boy, now a full man, obeyed.

“What you just did is part of the reason why this world is ending. Look at the sky, the rain clouds are coming. Everything you know will be washed away shortly.”

“I thought we came here to talk to Berith.”

“We would, if idols could talk. You valued pride and success over the well-being of creation. You remained ignorant until it was too late, and the Earth cannot take it any longer.”

Alam was silent as the first droplets of rain touched his face. From the top of the ruins, he spotted a massive structure in the distance. It was a boat, yet it reposed on land. No ship could possibly be as large as it was. However, the young man felt a touch of hope at the sight. After the flood, humanity would do better next time. ∞

Photograph



Nowhere | Abigayle Bennett

The Civilization Paradoxes

ALLA BOLDINA

If we are to contemplate the concept of "civilization" we might think of formal education, lawly conduct, the advancements in arts and sciences as well as sophisticated forms of government and commerce. Moreover, the etymology of the word "civilization" denotes "civility," "order," the system that is opposite, even antagonistic at times, to the nature in its wilderness, raw expression, and innate entropy. It is ironic that we often see civilization in terms of progress and somewhat upward change. But does civilization, especially in our contemporary American society, render progress, a positive improvement, as a given? Or is it deeply rooted in paradoxes? Let us consider nine paradoxes (numerologically indicative of change to benefit humanity).

Paradox 1

Technology and its advances have modernized, galvanized, and prioritized our need to connect and expand our reach beyond the space-time continuum. This unlimited connectedness, however, may beget a disconnect from reality, from each other, and from ourselves. Our "quality time" is mainly our "screen" time; our self-worth is increasingly sculpted by a vanity fair of followers and likes; our perception of the world becomes filtered, diluted, or manipulated. The walking algorithms, we may falsely perceive reality as a ready-made application, fast, uncomplicated, easily replaceable. No longer comfortable with the genuine and meaningful conversations and filled with the digitally stimulated fragments of self and the world, we surf the net to escape. Apart from it, technology has also become a major infringement on individual freedom: the diversity is welcome as long it is not the diversity of thought. No wonder that data collection has become a major commodity and a tool to manipulate our behaviors and perceptions.

Paradox 2

Education, as a system of institutionalized development, is meant to nurture intellectual aptitude, critical thought, and imagination. More and more, though, the original critical thinking becomes substituted by prescriptive multiple-choice thinking that the standardized testing emphasizes. Higher

education, too, often prioritizes the courses that fit the "it of the moment" curriculum to meet the popularity quota rather than focusing more on the foundational and context-oriented classes. It may sound banal but true: youth is the future. What if the future is the youth, enslaved by bank loans, programmed to think in unison, afraid of their own creative and critical voice, and trained to conform, but not to question?

Paradox 3

Medicine, undeniably, greatly contributes to our longevity and general vitality, with its inventions, innovations, and discoveries. What is also undeniable is that contemporary medicine personifies the pharmaceutical profiteering. It is conveniently profitable to keep the masses sickly and ever-dependent on the newest and greatest pharmaceutical wonder-fixers (while restricting the availability of holistic and natural cures). Corporation-controlled medicine, run by the insurance companies, generally distributes wealth, not health.

Paradox 4

Science, with its unquenchable thirst for knowledge, has brought many discoveries and inventions that revolutionized and improved our lives. However, the contemporary sciences often risk being controlled by the grants financed by corporate power. Many disciplines have metamorphosized into an agenda-driven and well-sponsored pursuit that is devoid of empirical data, critical inquiry, and unbiased scrutiny and rigor. Revisionistic, fragmented, or bluntly false modes of scientific "truth" often serve the corporate agendas dominated by the profit margin or the influence. Are the sciences being subverted by the ever-increasing need to procure research grants, underwritten by political and corporate entities and interests?

Paradox 5

Government, at its best, navigates the modus operandi in socio-economic, political, and geopolitical standards of civil conduct. However, it is obvious now more than ever before that the contemporary power elites have used the legislative and executive branches to secure their own interests, not the people's. Their policies aim to facilitate social conditioning, mental conformity, and

placid uniformity. When nefarious motives prevail, constitutionally sound reasons fail. "People should not be afraid of their government," poignantly emphasizes the movie *V for Vendetta*.

Paradox 6

Economy as an indicator of the society's functional progress manifests the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. It is ultimately the wealth transfer that reveals the health of economy. By that token, our contemporary economic system is sick to the gut with gluttony: the banks own us all. The industrial-military-financial complex is our modern day Laokoon, the symbol of human agony and entrapment.

Paradox 7

Politics in the modern world is a spectacle of greed, corruption, and power games sponsored and facilitated by the lobbies whose influence is omnipresent. It is now obvious to even the most casual observer that the political system does not represent the will of the people. Political parties promulgate the corporate interests, which only exacerbate the social inequalities and divides.

Paradox 8

Media as a powerful and integrity-based vehicle to reshape our social, political, and cultural awareness have morphed into a theatre of illusion and a propaganda tool for manufacturing mass consent. Contemporary media outlets distort, deform, disregard, and dismember truth in our modern society as if competing to see who can mess it up more effectively. To paraphrase Voltaire, we only need to think about who or what we are not allowed to criticize to learn about who truly controls us. When the whistleblowers are scapegoated and prosecuted for confronting the consensus reality and destabilizing the status quo, the mass media, this presstitute of power, can only spew false criticism to serve their masters.

Paradox 9

Entertainment in our society serves as a mode of distraction. Generally devoid of deep thinking and critical inquiry, the entertainment industry operates

on the surface level of appearances and political correctness. Apart from a few independent movies, investigative documentaries, and self-promoted musical artists, the entertainment world is a maintenance of mind. It strives to promote the consensus reality to go along with the accepted narratives. Contemporary entertainment maintains our illusion of empowerment through the voyeuristic addiction to the reality of the "fake."

And so they are, to name only a few out of the multitude of possibilities, the kaleidoscopic array of which might overflow a treatise. And perhaps, the paradoxes of civilization reflect our paradoxes as humans who are infinitely capable of both a great achievement and a great destruction. The accepted and tightly controlled narratives of progress about power, value, and reality leave us enchanted and entrapped. Desensitized by the bombardment of lies and by social programming, we become "comfortably numb" to the dangers that our own acceptance or escapism pose. However, it is our revived awareness, our creative imagination, our critical thinking, and our responsible living that can be the modes of resistance. Resistance to social manipulation, resistance to intellectual atrophy, resistance to moral ambiguity. And in the process, we may circumvent the collapse of our civilization. ☞

The Only Advice We Will Ever Need

JESSE BORING

Enjoy what you have.



Glacier Creek | Lorin Paugh

De-Extinction

I. J. BYRNES

So, I'm off on my pilgrimage to Walden Pond to commemorate Thoreau's birthday and to let his spirit know that our company, Aesir, will be making reparations for humanity's past environmental crimes by bringing back the first of many megafauna that were callously eliminated by our ancestors."

Horace MacFarlane paused to catch his breath and rustle through his papers. His colleagues, spaced around a conference table, looked solemn and stayed still as he moved toward his conclusion.

"I will be in the hallowed space of Walden Woods when Julian announces that we will be bringing back the woolly mammoth in order to increase the albedo in Siberia, thereby reducing the pace of permafrost loss and decreasing the pace of harm to the earth. These noble creatures will live again and join us in our great project to save our beautiful blue planet and the authentic parliament of reality."

Applause rode over Horace's final words as he grabbed his great hat and walking stick and strode out of the boardroom door. The room quickly emptied, leaving only Aesir's CEO, Julian Loci, and the Director of Finance, Armand Forsyth.

"What was old Horace in a sweat about—the parliament of reality?"

Julian smiled and said, "Ah, yes, The Parliament of Reality, a little art installation by Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. Apparently, Horace thinks that Aesir is about to reset the power dynamics of the entire planet, making the koi fish, pond water, rocks, and trees of that installation the equals of humans in board rooms and halls of power."

Armand smiled back. "Well, we are about to do Noah one better by bringing dead species back to life. His preservation of bio-diversity in the Ark will place a poor second to our efforts."

Julian parried back, "Well, in fairness to poor Noah, his deity was not really carrying his weight. If you are an all-powerful, omnipresent, omniscient Creator god, why the hell do you need some average schmo to build a boat and load it up with pairs of every type of animal? Even Harry Potter's Defense Against the Dark Arts professor could have conjured up something to help old Noah out. The OT deity was really perverse or lazy or both. We, on the other

hand, are doing all the heavy lifting to keep mega-fauna in play—the research, the lab work, the fund raising, rallying support among environmentalists. Seems to me the OT deity didn't just rest on the seventh day. He was in a recliner all damn day.”

Armand said, “So, we're playing god with our woolly mammoth de-extinction project?”

“No playing or acting involved”, Julian said quietly. “We're the real deal. We've expended oceans of blood, sweat, and tears, not to mention mountains of treasure, to get to the top of the Chain of Being. Move over, Zeus, Athena, OT god, and all other deities. Homo Deus has arrived and we can finally deliver on all the empty promises of the old pantheons. Do you want pleasure/entertainment 24 hours a day? Want to live longer and even have a shot at immortality? Need an immediate answer to all of your medical questions or need to rapidly solve a complicated mathematical equation? Want to make friends without any effort? Don't have a magic lamp to rub but you want three wishes so things you desire will show up, delivered right to your door? Want to never be bored again? Done! Worship us; we are your ever-responsive, highly efficient deities. We increased your life span last century, now we have given you decades of entertainment in which to enjoy your new years of life.”

Armand interjected. “Are you saying that we tech-lords are the new gods of humanity?”

“Of course: we're running a techno-religion, delivering to people during their life-times what they were falsely promised by the old gods in the after-life. The old gods promised; we have delivered. Our ancestors begged the old deities for relief from the scourges of famine, plagues, and war. Modern technology answered those prayers. More people die from obesity than starve to death. Plagues are extinguished, like small-pox, or contained, like ebola. Nuclear weapons have greatly reduced the threat of global war and the average person has nothing to fear from the old evil that tormented our ancestors, the threat of constant war. Sure, tribal humans still hate other tribes, but they love consumerism and their iPhones and computers even more. Threatening our nation is one thing, but threatening our bandwidth, our Amazon Prime deliveries, or our Netflix stream is another. No one wants the global economy,

global consumption, or access to technology to be interfered with. Ironic, isn't it, that hedonism, not religion, has secured the peace?"

Armand smiled. "Well, hedonism also secured us the funding to bring back the woolly mammoth, since we promised our backers that we will also de-extinct the saber-tooth tiger so they can hunt it. Wouldn't old Horace be shocked? I'm surprised, given his love of and connection to Nature, that when we voted for humankind's greatest hunt to resume, he didn't feel a great disturbance in the Force."

Julian rocked back and forth in laughter. "It's worse than that. Old Horace in his hiking boots and REI backpack simply has not realized that the Wild, like god, is dead. Humans have replaced gods, and civilization has replaced the wild."

Armand considered, "Wait, there are still woods and wolves, so there's still the Wild."

Julian shook his head. "There are still churches and temples and mosques, but traditional religion is dead. Techno religions reign. We have the numbers, the worshippers, the revenue. No one is engaging in human sacrifice to Poseidon or Jehovah, but our followers, like Dionysius', would shred the first politician to stand between them and their phones. But back to the Wild. The Wild is over. Pound for pound, the planet is utterly, utterly dominated by humans and their domesticated animals. There are about 300,000 grey wolves left and 900 million dogs. All that's left is faux-wild. Let's call it Thoreau-wild. Thoreau inspired countless humans to moon over Nature, but he was a few miles from Concord—which he would return to weekly for clean laundry and cookies. That's not Wild, that's suburbia. If you go to a national park for a week, which provides you with bathrooms, cabins, marked trails, all attended by uniformed rangers, you have not had a Wild encounter. You have had a highly curated experience designed to make you believe you have encountered the Wild. When you go to Vegas or Epcot, have you actually experienced foreign cultures or have you just been convinced by cleverer humans that you have? Just as traditional religion is no more than a shared fiction, believing in the existence of the Wild in the 21st century is a necessary fiction."

Julian continued, "And, by the way, I have never grokked the call of the Wild. What is so great about endless trees, mountain-obstacles, swamps, icy

rivers, and being hunted by animals? We have spent centuries taking down trees, plowing land, domesticating the aggressiveness out of animals, and battling with Nature, only to have a few tree-huggers like Horace equate the Wild with Eden. Paradise is fully indoors, insulated, heated and air-conditioned, chock-full of art and technology. The Wild is dirty, difficult, smelly and dangerous. The only upside to backpacking to a lean-to for a weekend is returning to your house with all the “mod-cons,” as the Brits call them. Nothing like a hot shower and a gourmet meal after a weekend of icy weather and meals cooked out of doors.”

Armand nodded. “It’s true. Most people would hate living like our forager ancestors who had to gather food for hours a day, in all kinds of weather, and in all kinds of health. No beds, no medicines, eating insects and grubs. Everyone around you stinks and you have virtually no protection from the weather. Many of our contemporaries would literally die of boredom. Nothing to do and all day and night to do it in.”

“Moreover,” Julian broke in, “Nature has nothing to teach us. It’s in the cities, in the human arena, that we learn and develop. It is law and reason that makes us human. Mountains and trees have nothing to offer us. Even when Horace and company go on a trek or pilgrimage in the great outdoors, they always come back. Their true home is in the metropolis, not in the woods or on some craggy rock.”

Julian paused. “Don’t get me wrong. The Wild is an important, intersubjective fiction. We need Horace and his kind to convince the other humans that the Wild still exists and must be venerated and defended. The old religions needed their priests and priestesses to keep humans in thrall to an imaginary order. The old pantheon existed because your family, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens believed in it, sacrificed to it, worshipped it, and were happy to sweat over the pyramids in order to achieve in the after-world what they never achieved during their lives. We need children’s films and nature programming to convince people that wolves are everywhere, elephants cover distant parts of the earth, and that the Wild is alive and well somewhere else. Every book by a mountain climber and trail hiker helps to maintain the illusion. This is why Aesir has been able to persuade the political class that bringing back the woolly mammoth is not merely a scientific stunt. It’s in service to the Wild. We, the true, enlightened lovers of the Wild, are making reparations for our heartless

ancestors who extinted the beasts in the first place.”

Armand laughed. “Remember Horace last night? Driving up in his Prius, eating his chicken dinner? Does he really think his slightly cleaner transportation will save the planet? Doesn’t he know that most farm animals live in boxes during their short, miserable lives, that they live in a sterile environment where they can’t move, explore, smell, or touch their fellow creatures?”

Julian nodded. “Never bet against the human capacity for self-deception. Way before Nietzsche declared that god is dead, before our ancestors wiped out most megafauna and as many aspects of the Wild as they could, they sacrificed, for the sake of the gods and their neighbors, the very thing they needed most. The thing whose extinction makes our de-extinction of megafauna seem like a very minor event.”

Armand looked at him.

Julian nodded. “Yes, they sacrificed their minds, their ability to reason in order to appease the gods and their neighbors. That extinction guarantees that our de-extinction of the woolly mammoth, the saber-tooth tiger, and any other creature, will be seen as a great and noble achievement, a true homage to the parliament of reality.” ☞



Rec. Park Pony | Sarah Luciani

Winter Film

LYNDA CARROLL

winter falls
it creeps in
thin layers of frost
then cotton snowflakes
propped up on
pinecone covered mantles

it covers the gray of
grandmother nature
beneath fairy lights
twinkling
fuzzy behind
single pane glass

and we toss birdseed on the porch
leaving pockmarks in the snow

we fell plastic trees
abandon them in mudrooms
piled into faux face cords
until we
eventually
are able to lumber
out to the garage

and winter turns
into seasons of salt
of chalky filmed cars

and we curse the grit
intended for traction

until black-tipped icebergs
pepper blacktop parking lots
and we watch the advance
of dirty glaciers

like olde tyme silent films
and black and white photos

The Millionaire and His Wife

LYNDA CARROLL

I remember as a child
the saccharine-sweet tales
of seven castaways
stranded on an uncharted desert isle.

Searching and scheming
for a way to harness the wind
or the perfect tropical storm
to carry them back to home. To Kansas

and Hollywood. Longing for an
America they could not forget
nor leave behind. And they offered secret prayers
for cargo-cult solutions, for crates

filed with civilization
to wash up on the sands down by the lagoon.
They prayed for commerce and consumption.
For origin stories to be carved into

the foundations of walls. And we smiled along
with the laugh-tracks and hijinks
of a fumbling first mate, who somehow became
their unlikely leader. And we blamed him

and all his carelessness for their plight.
Nevermind their own nostalgia. We never wondered why
anyone would want to leave paradise.
We accepted—without question—that what would save us

was civilization itself. So I laughed along
at the absurd running jokes to recreate
an imagined American life of
pedal-powered washing machines, and

thatch-roofed cars for a journey best walked.
All crafted from nature
and powered by the work of the weakest
and powerless. And my whole generation

asked so many obvious questions. Why
would anyone need so many sequin dresses
for a three hour tour? Why pack along
trunk loads of cash, all for

a millionaire and his wife? And now
looking back, I can't help but think
the weight of it all—not a tropical storm—
was probably what capsized that ship.

Almost Nature

LYNDA CARROLL

Archaeologists, antagonists, and architects alike
all imagine raised walls
in long abandoned landscapes.
Blueprints, maps, and grid coordinates
show them just where to draw the lines.

I have adapted to the woods, and
to the deserted expanses
looking for traces of those who came before.
Sometimes I can almost make out the outline
of an invisible building.

And sometimes I trip. Sometimes I stumble.
My mind wanders, and I fall over
the remains of razed walls.
I am forced to my knees
by the very foundations
of someone else's past.

I must admit, there are many times
when I enjoy the solitude.
No need to navigate
the constant dodge and frequent swerve
of my city's choppy human rivers.

Still I long for cityscapes
buildings and bustle
historical markers
but mostly in the mornings
early, early
long before the crowds.

I count cracks in the pavement
pushed open by grass
impossibly broken by weeds.
And the cracks look like
the bars of a cage
to hold in king dandelion's roar.

I like the feeling of the heat
that forces its way out of foundations
in a Sunday morning city
like a warm breeze in the quiet desolation
when I find myself almost in nature.

Photograph



Lower Yellowstone Falls | Curtis Daniel

The Skunk's Coat

JENNY CHECCHIA

Day 1:

The snow has settled on the ground like a child's first attempt at icing a cake. Bits of needy-looking roots, broken logs, and crumbled earth all poke out and interrupt the flow of white across the ground. It's cold, in that Northeastern way, but the sun is present on this February morning, and she stretches the reach of her rays through the empty tree branches, reminding me of the intertwining of a lovers' fingers.

Amongst this visual chaos is the fluffy, lolloping figure of a skunk, who sniffs quickly across the frozen earth, inch by frosted inch. She seems to have turned her coat inside-out for winter: with the creme-white of her summer stripe swapping places with the distinctive oil-black that warns farmers, hikers, hunters, and smarter dogs, that they are in for long week of washing ahead if they don't git.

A cat, with her ample body, is daintily picking her way along just above where the skunk is jittering about. Dipping under fallen trees and choosing—after careful consideration—to go around a pile of nature's mess rather than over it, her movements counter those of her cousin and they move in opposite directions like dancers in an interpretive performance.

I watch them until they exit stage left and right—respectively—from my kitchen window. It occurs to me how separate I am from their world, recording and analyzing the skunk and the cat from my generously heated second-floor apartment. The land they investigate has been where it is for many years longer than I am capable of fathoming, but the building of brick and glass and wood that dominates their landscape—and that I isolate myself in—is a baby in relation to its surroundings.

On the other side of this strip of unfussed-with nature is a cemetery, which I can also see through the chilled-into-nakedness branches guarding my kitchen window. In the stunted spring and sticky summer, this stark reminder of what is to come is graciously hidden by copious amounts of green and light. It seems appropriate that, during the long winter, I am privy to the still dignity of the headstones, which slope down, un-hindered from joining with the cat and

skunk's home by any fence or gate or wall. Only I stand apart in my sanitized and climate-controlled box. But no matter how much I protect myself—stay away from the natural world, only connecting with it through glass and videos on the internet—I am headed for that sloping hill. We all are.

The sun has warmed up the water in a small creek just below my frame of reference, and it has broken free from its overbearing ice creator and is skipping over stones and dashing under fallen debris. The skunk is back, hopping about in the patches of sunlight that warm the mangled ground, tossing snow about with her muzzle. She isn't worried about her short time on earth—that she leaves to me, and I do enough for all of us—all she cares about is that this warmth hints at spring, and soon she can change her clothes.

Day 2:

It is not light enough to see anything from my kitchen window yet this morning. So, I wait. I think about telling my partner about the skunk's unusual outfit, but I know he will worry about rabies, and his snore echoes from the other room. I think about the deer I often see on Saturday mornings digging the frozen ground with their hooves and snouts, looking for morsels. One amongst them is a doe with a front twisted leg, which flops and dangles as she hops about and finds food with her family. When I first saw her, I wondered if I should call someone who could find a way to end her suffering, but somehow she disappeared and it wasn't until a few weeks later that she showed up again, that one leg flying about, like an underdeveloped wing. She was surrounded by a group of five to six other deer; the first time she came into view she was with only one other soul, but now she was being nuzzled and guided along by a herd.

I watched them for a long time and marveled at their community: two of her fellows flanked her on each side as she inched and hobbled along, and if she lay on the cold ground for too long, they nibbled and nuzzled her backside until she stood. I was in awe. Mostly because of what I was witnessing, but also because of the grand-hugeness of my arrogance. That first moment I glimpsed her form and registered her disability, my first thought was to end her life, like I was doing her a favor. Who am I to say what is suffering and when it should

be ended? Who am I to take control of a life, when it has not asked me for help, because I think I have a right to interfere from my lofty vantage point?

My anger at myself extends to humans. I recently watched a show that had a doctor on it with more letters behind her name than could fit on the screen, speaking with an interviewer about a study that seemed to “debunk” a spiritual healing practice the interviewer felt like he gained something from. She smiled smugly and discussed a field for which she had no expertise and no experience, but because it is not backed by--the human concept and human findings--of science she did not believe it had benefits. I wanted to scream. Have you ever experienced the healing, or talked to the people who give their lives to practice it? Have you ever come down off your high tower and sat amongst the deer and watched them take care of each other? But then neither have I, just from my glass tower.

The sun creeps and turns the ground blue with her yawn. Despite the skunk's hope, there is a fresh four inches of cold snow covering the ground: our child got it even this time. I think of animals I have known and lost. Animals I have fed and been frightened by. My mind turns and trips to the spiritual experiences that have changed me and challenged me to understand that this—all this—is not about the human race. Like a bratty only child, we have taken and taken and taken, and only now that our parent is dying do we give little Band-Aids in return while patting ourselves on the back for our good work. I think of all of things we don't understand but are afraid to admit. The trees sway in the high wind that has accompanied the sun on her journey, as if to say: yes. ∞

Three Haiku

JOHN DONOVAN

Oak roots buried deep
The fires of man burning bright
Yet here leaves fall still

Slowly slowly down
Beyond sight does the box fall
Dirt a splendid veil

Green twists and turns up
A pestilence on the wall
Despite its beauty

Body Picking

ALYSSA ELLERSON

Listen to me, dear human, for I cannot speak long.
Invasions are rampant, my young ones continue to fall to the
Vile hands of those that remain weak and small.
Intrigued they remain in their search, but
Never do they seek to discover the source of the
Grime stuck deep beneath their stubby nails.

Babies in nature, but adults in their own right,
Utterly ravaged by the quick
Tugs, yanks and sharp snaps.

Nothing holds us to the sweet skirts of our mothers.
Only the soft, sticky sorrows of their
Thin, mutilated stems.

Bring your laws, bring your judges, anything to
Restrain these vulgar and deranged creatures.
Even the smallest blossom is not safe beneath their gazes.
Anything—send us anything—to protect our children from
Those nimble fingers meant to pluck them from our grasps!
Having them for a season is all we could ever ask for,
Instead they are taken far sooner than the breeze wished.
None of us want to blink, for fear of seeing that chubby-cheeked face
Grabbing for our children, and crushing our hearts beneath its palms.

Redemption

ALYSSA ELLERSON

The light used to be soft and gentle and cool,
A sweet caress on the earth's dirt-riddled cheek.
It raced through the grasses, its faint fingers
Reaching, searching, yet never finding.

Oh, that gentle touch against the ground,
Giving warmth to the creatures in its arms.
It kept stretching and grasping to give all it had,
But the breeze soon escaped its bright chains.

How can it give such warmth, to be such a willing
Sacrifice when it knows it will soon be cast out.
To take the chains from the winds and bind itself
Again within the icy clutches of the frost's bite.

And cast out it shall be, when the snow flutters down
With the swift spikes of a morning dawn.
Chained beneath the frozen landscape and surrounded
By the bodies of its shriveled and sniveling children.

Yet I will look to the mornings and the sun-scorched
Nights like my childhood has returned home.
Unbound by time and held tight within the
Fists of that sweet summer breeze.

It will come and it will go, but how
Strong it will rise and remain.
No longer is it chained.
No longer is it unchanged.

Midnight Drive

ALYSSA ELLERSON

The spring-green armored aphid stomps
Over a thick hill of dirt, following others
To the canopy of leaves, trees and sap-slurping romps.

Its long furred legs vault over roots,
Atop other hitchhikers, and down sharp bark
The passengers nearby give it rambunctious and roaring hoots.

Those maudlin young aphids, or nymphs, or sprites
They only wish for some rides, through the damp Amazon night.

Mirror Dancing

ALYSSA ELLERSON

Her fingers wrapped around the cool metal bar before her. With each beat, her feet fell into the second position as her arms rose above her body. The two girls in front curved their bodies in time to the tempo while every step they took left envy in its wake. The third young woman in line did as she was told. No foot out of place, no hair straying from its strand, no reason to be anywhere, but there—and yet the third could see so much more than just there. She felt herself soaring as her pointes lifted her to the sky, away from the hardwood floor and stiff arabesques and into a world of glass dancers with sharp pirouettes. Their hair ran long in dark riveting streams and their leotards were sheared short in crème-colored waves. Not one of them was the same as each moved to their own beat. Number one was light, her feet short and quick, focused on the melody as it drove her towards her end. Number Two moved in leisure, her moves uncertain, yet foreshadowed. As her harmony traveled beneath the mountain of the strings, growing, breathing, rising, Number Three twirled in unison higher above the pair. Her eyes glowed and gleamed, but the water that bloomed in petals from their corners was quick to show the shadows waltzing within them. One, plie, two, make sure it's elev e, three, battement tendu, four, ronde de jambe en dehors but never out. Likewise, the cellos glided along the golden leaves of the mirror, their deep timbres radiating as their pointes carried them towards the violas. They wailed at the plucks wrought on them by their instructor as their strings were bent and tilted and flung far from reach. One, A flat, two, make sure it's exact, three, sharp staccatos, four, disguise the pains and portray it through your veins. It all was a blur now, a cacophony of sound, silence, and lips in thin, straight lines. Her feet lowered to the floor, her heart sunk against her ribs, and her shoulders straightened into place as the ivory commanded strings were tightened into position. There could be no fault, there could be no emotion, yet that would all flow from her in the act of one that was not her, a being that was, yet never could be. And as the supple charm of the musicians seduced the strings, she lifted her head and stared deep into that cool lake of glass. She felt that creature awaken, felt the heat of its gaze through the reflective bars, and with greedy, bitter eyes, realized they were her own. ♪

The Voyage of Tulips

M A S O N E R L E

Shimmering, glowing, and sparkling
Glimmering, blowing, and dazzling
They bow their heads in the breeze

Gleaming, colorful, and vibrant
Streaming, joyful, and defiant
Pink, lavender, and white rows wavering tenderly

Untamed beauty and existence
Unleashed volume and radiant souls
Unstoppable and luscious, ambient and brilliant

Waves upon waves of unmatched color
Resilient and powerful, full of life
Untrodden and wistful, live and abundant

Their final words to an uninterested crowd
True feelings and messages to a lost generation
Sickness plaguing everything that was once pure
Is it too late to reap their cries and followings?

Remember what can be had when one stops to smell the tulips, for when
when one stops to smell the roses, they may bleed, but tulips, beautiful and
thornless hold unknown treasures for those willing to stop and breathe in their
fragrance.

Soldiers Misfortune

MASON ERLE

A torch in the sky, the sun shone through trees wafting meandering shadows. Smoke and mist stirred upon the ground, moved only by footsteps. A long walk had turned tiresome and weary, the weight on their backs, a burden to say the least. How had they gotten this far, and would they arrive soon? Rifles, rucksacks, and helmets adorned their wearers, painting a solemn picture. Voices rang through the thick haze, indistinguishable from one another.

Muddied footprints were the only remnants that anyone had wandered through this forsaken wasteland, thickets higher than the waist, trees bent and gnarled from artillery fire, and holes in the Earth bigger than a man's reach. Ghostly whispers belonging not to the men who passed though eerily phased in and out. Through the sun was out, the deeper into the woods they traversed, the dimmer it grew, its glowing rays fleeting.

Figures and specters slumped against rocks and stumps spoke ghastly callings as the men carried on. Frightened expressions caressed the faces of the soldiers, fear in their eyes. Rifles and bullets did no good against disembodied enemies, something they could not defend against. Best to grin and bear it, keep the gaze forward and press on, minding it not. Whispers turned to voices, and voices turned to shimmers of light. Vibrations of spectral energy called out to passersby.

Feet stalled, and a grim face turned to glance and, fear stricken, he was cast down to join them. One by one the soldiers entered the "Fields of Punishment" to rejoin the lost souls. Eternity and forever are one in the same; the soldiers pressed on, certain the end was just ahead. The same trees, broken rocks, and plundered holes awaited them, footsteps trudging on regardless of weariness.

End never to be at hand, passing empty husks going by, burdened by immense weight, a soldier's misfortune. ☹

Man of War

MASON ERLE

Please understand, I am not a man of war; never have I seen the blood-stained uniform of a fallen comrade nor heard the screams of life being taken from friends and enemies alike.

I know not the sadness of loss, the pain of a bullet wound, or something more deadly than any wound any enemy can inflict, misery and loneliness. Surrounded by thousands, yet stranded alone, I remain lost and wandering aimlessly in thought.

I cannot tell you how cold it was at the Battle of the Bulge, nor can I tell you devastating everlasting effects Agent Orange left upon the surface of Vietnam. I cannot speak for the fallen soldiers who gave their lives in wars that have come and gone, their struggles remembered in tags, diaries, and crumpled photographs. There is no limit to my sympathy to their bravery and to the sorrow faced by their families. Yet my empathy is halted, as horrors of war I have witnessed not. Thankfully.

Understand, I am a simple man, sitting in a home, sipping coffee and reading the news on sunny pleasant days, as far from the cold atrocities and hypocritical nature of war as can be. What do I know, how do I claim to write and understand what I did not experience? How can I paint a realistic and true picture, without embellishments or enhancements? The truth is I can't. Not now, and not ever.

What I can do is pay my greatest respects to the valiant men and women who courageously gave themselves for their country and those who dwell inside its safe borders, keeping war and catastrophe off our shores. I can say thank you, bow my head in respect, and remember all who lost their lives in the name of freedom and liberty. And I can stop anytime in my busy day, whether I'm working, relaxing, or just enjoying being alive, I can stop and say a prayer for the fallen and present veterans serving the United States. That's what I can do.

Finally, understand that though these things I did not experience, I will never stop paying my respects, nor trying to bring to light the selfless acts of our soldiers and their families. So, please, know that I love my country, love those give me the right to live under a banner of courage and freedom, and will stop at nothing until every last American life lost to an act of war is remembered for its act of courage, bravery, or selfless action.

Thank you. ∞

Photograph



This Way Up | Trisha Illsley

One Week Vacation

ED EVANS

Our friends from Indiana wanted to take a week's vacation with our family somewhere along the eastern shore of Lake Ontario. So my wife went searching the rental listings for a place to accommodate two families with a total of seven children.

She came up with a beauty. For \$800 a week we could rent an island that sits just offshore of Sackett's Harbor. Horse Island is about 100 yards offshore. There was a shore where you could swim and have campfires. A lagoon where you could safely moor boats. The island came with its own flat bottomed motor boat to shuttle back and forth to the shore area where we parked the cars.

Horse Island is home to an historic 1800's brick lighthouse. The lighthouse keeper's house was where we stayed. Plenty of rooms for the adults and the seven children under age eight, who were with us on this vacation.

The island landscaping worked well for us. It had a landscape guidance system. The owner kept a wide path around the edge of the island. He mowed a series of paths from the outer perimeter which all led back to the lighthouse. Picture a wheel and spokes. Your navigation choices were simple. You could follow the path around in a circle. Turn onto another path, any path, and end up back at the house. It was foolproof. We were also confident there would be no escapes, and it would be near impossible to lose any child for very long. All parts of the island were within earshot. It wasn't that big. But it was a really cool place.

We had packed firstaid kits for the trip—over 100-dollar's worth of bacitracin, calamine lotion, ointments, ace bandages, sunburn spray, tweezers, antiseptics, iodine and multi-sized packages of Band-Aids. By the end of the first full day on the island we had used some of every single firstaid item we had packed. A smorgasboard of minor medical mishaps including cuts, bruises, splinters scrapes, mosquito bites and a bee sting.

The lighthouse on the island had long ago been decommissioned, replaced by a bright electronic beacon, in a heavy duty metal frame, soundly anchored to the lake bedrock just off shore on the north western edge of the island. But the ambiance of spending a few days in the shadow of a real lighthouse was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was a literal, one sentence conversation

piece: “For one of our summer vacations we rented an island with a real lighthouse on Lake Ontario.”

Physically apart from the mainland (but not too far) we were in our own territory. The mornings were for coffee, reading, pancakes, and Pop Tarts. The afternoons filled with activities with the children: boating, tubing, swimming, and fishing.

The evenings were quiet adult time. We would feed the children early, do a campfire with S’mores, bring everyone in, settle them in the living room with a movie—the same movie—each night: *Hocus Pocus*.

Adult time was dinner just outside on the deck. We grilled every night—clams, steaks, chicken, kabobs. Paired with varieties of \$40 a bottle wine. All of it savored in the quiet summer evening air.

The night cap was to step to the shore and savor the remarkable vista of stars stretching out across the clear night sky over one of America’s Great Lakes.

We told our friends about the experience. One of our ministers, and his wife—real outdoors people—followed up on the idea. They rented Horse Island the following summer. After their vacation, the follow up conversation went like this:

“How did you like living at the island?”

“It was quiet and peaceful. And we’ll never go there again!”

“Why not?” was our surprised inquiry.

“We went into the basement of the keeper’s house,” the minister said. “The basement was full of snakes!” ∞



Hole in One | Virginia Shirley

Tempest of the Unending Voyage

MICHAEL FULLER

Assassinate the sky, they say,
But be in awe of its absence.
Create the new firmament above,
Destined within the entangling skyline.
Encompassing our lives, day and night
Forged on the carrion of nature's domain.

Glimmering lights, unnaturally sown
Holding back the ether above.
"Indeed, we shall desecrate the night!"
Jovially written on their neon signs.
Kingdom of the everlasting march,
Lamenting the cosmos as acceptable losses.

Maybe it isn't the end of our Terra,
Not all of her beauty is yet covered in metal.
Omnipresent jungles yet reign in Brazil,
Perpetual desert still covers the Thar.
Quaint things these may seem, indeed.
Remnants of the past, impeding the future.

So what of the universe the ancients admired?
Trounced by history, for reasons quite obvious.
Unravel the dreams of the damned Belphegor,
Vanguard of the hedonist, lethargic and naïve.

Weave hope to any, to those who yet remain
Xenophobic as you are, to the ones huddled by a TV.

Yawning in exhaustion, the Great Mother lies fatigued.
Ziggurats of our own creation, spiting her in envy.

Terra Mater

MICHAEL FULLER

Why, Mother Earth, do you lie in such disgrace?

And don't you ever tell me that it was always the case!

Once you were impeccable, ideal, superb!

Now you look as if you were kicked to the curb.

Your creations, the humans, aren't treating you kindly.

Despite this you still seem to think of them so highly.

Why do you love a species that are in such a rush,

That they must slash down the forests that have grown so lush?

For once, I implore you, to forgive these creatures.

They know not any better, they simply want to succeed.

It is a shame if I must lose a few features,

But for them, I would suffer almost any misdeed.

For you see, I am their one true mother.

One who loves, cares for and accepts them regardless.

I would never think of trading them for another,

Whether in the brightest light, or bleakest darkness.

Momentary Harmony

MICHAEL FULLER

A screaming silence permeates the air,
Brushing up against my trivial self.
Free from the bustling sounds of progress,
Filled with the songs of nature's solitude.

Light and darkness dance together,
In silvery shades of an ethereal glow.
Washing away the pains of life,
Leaving all things pure, beautiful and sublime.

At times, fellow residents will join into the song,
In a chorus of all Earth's nocturnal offspring.
Small or significant, it truly matters not
For the night will forever cherish us all.

As will all things though, it must come to an end.
Twilight will enter as night retreats to its den.
Yet another day, filled with the joys of modernity.
A yin to a yang, often unwilling to cooperate.

Chaotic, complex yet fulfilling and energetic.
A sincerely far cry from what I've just witnessed.
Yet maybe someday, the two will mesh still.
For the night and the day need not be resentful.

Mother Nature's Wrath

JUSTIN GROATS

On the snowy mountains in the north of Kaa, a teenage hero is following animal tracks that have been left in the snow by many different animals. His name is Justin Adams, the vigilante of Kaa, trained by ninjas, and one of the only humans in Kaa. Now, he knows that something is not right with the weird case he just picked up. Mysteriously the animals have run off in a linear direction, or ordered to by something. He is out here to find answers, not only because of his fueled determination to protect his home. Justin knows he has to hurry before the snowy mountain winds cover the trail. But he also knows that backup is on its way, the Elemental Guardians are just behind him trying to catch up. The seriousness of this event can cause the destruction of Kaa and humanity, which is why they are involved. The arctic wind blows against Justin's metal suit and pushes his cape away from his suit. He exhales, his breath coming out slow and visible, then disappears. He notices the temperature going down as the sun declines into the horizon.

Justin then manages to step from the snow and onto bare rock. His eyes adjust from the snow and the growing darkness to see that he is standing in front of the cave where the tracks end. Justin pulls out his flashlight and shines it on the walls of the cave, where the walls go from natural to man-made. Justin walks down the cave and looks on the walls to see carvings of nature and animals dominating the land. The carvings get more graphic until a sound of chipping is heard from down the hallway. Justin moves farther down the cave to turn the corner to see a giant wolf/human hybrid, chipping out a statue of himself, standing over the humanoid beings.

The wolf turns around to see Justin. "Ah, I wondered how long it was going to be until someone finds me and my army. I wondered how long my planning of destruction will go on until someone knows my plans. I wondered what human minds believe when they look at animals, rising up to do Mother Nature's work. Mother Nature, the supreme goddess of the balance of all life. Look at her"—he then points to a statue personifying Mother Nature itself: An elegant woman, with grace and beauty, playing with the baby wolf pups, a smile on her face with the comfort and joy of her creation. The giant wolf

then walks over to the other carvings on the wall, which look quite older than the others. “Mother Nature has created us to serve her needs, to care and nurture her generous creation, life on earth. But you humanoid hinder the life on this planet,” the wolf says, putting his hands on the frame, caressing the images of the nuclear war thousands of years ago and so on. “I thought that the Earth’s nuclear destruction would be the last time nature would be destroyed, but I was wrong. The work of one family has torn the landscape apart with its support of wars, the pollution of rivers and lakes, even the attempt at world domination by creating doomsday devices. You know what I speak of, human.” The wolf then turns to Justin.

“I know of all you do speak of—I’ve lived through to stop the family you speak of, multiple times. They have acted selfishly to try and control Kaaos, funding the civil dispute that has divided the people and also acting carelessly to the environment.” Justin states. “The family you seek owns a corporation to develop these destructive things, but they will be brought to justice.”

“I do not care about your justice, or their justice,” the wolf snaps. “Scar Wolfblood has been called upon by Mother Nature to bring justice to her, no one else. Every humanoid has committed treason against the balance of nature. Nature has created civilization, and civilization has destroyed nature; humanity must fall to Nature’s feet at the might of my animal army!” He then raises his mighty fist. As the torches light up, a giant room comes into view with lines of hundreds or perhaps even thousands of animals, from owls to lions, hippos, cows, wolves, and velociraptors. There are big beasts of mammoths and elephants and gorillas. Their eyes are glowing orange as if they are being controlled by Scarl.

“So you are Scarl Wolfblood. The Elemental Guardians spoke about you and your drive to rid humanity from the face of the Earth in the name of Mother Nature. You know you don’t have to blame the actions of a group of people on the entire humanoid population of Kaaos. You do not have to blame the evils of humanity on the goodness of it!” Justin says, raising his voice.

“As I said, humanity has committed treason against Mother Nature, for she is disrupted. She is angry,” Scarl Wolfblood snaps, but Justin then sees from the corner of his eyes that a humanoid woman is edging along the corner of the

carved wall, away from where Scarl is facing. Her name is Angelina Yela, or the Fire Guardian, armed with her signature Hades Bow, ready to fire.

“Looks like they caught up with me,” Justin thinks, as he then places a smoke bomb in his hand, curling his fingers so the wolf won't see it. “So,” Justin starts, “you managed to control every animal in Kaa, except the elemental dragons that the Elemental Guardians work for—why is that?”

Scarl rolls his eyes. “The elemental dragons and guardians are much to blame for the destruction of Kaa, with their war against the demons that have recently just ended, but at what cost? What cost has its underworld chaotic power's impact on the environment of the overworld's beautiful landscape? What did they do to deserve the power they possess? Why does the Dragon Queen have the supernatural power she possesses? The simple answer is that Mother Nature was mistaken for giving them the power they have, to cause the destruction of the world, along with humanity. Mother Nature will reclaim her title as the most powerful being on this planet”—then Scarl was hit in the back of the neck with a fully charged shot from the Hades Bow, causing small bursts of lava to come out of his back. He screams in pain as Justin then drops a smoke pellet; Scarl then wipes off the lava and slowly heals from the injury. He turns to the smoke and swipes it, making it go away quickly, seeing that Justin is gone. “They caught me Monologuing,” he says with anger and annoyance; “fine, I will play your game and our conquest shall begin. It shall be nature controlling humanity, not the other way around.” Scarl then emits a strong warrior-like howl; the controlled wolves howl with him.

“What took you guys so long?! I was about to start the party without you,” Justin says, sneaking with Angelina to the other guardians in the cave.

“We were preparing; we had to do our research before coming into this fight. You of all people should know that,” Angelina responds while shouldering her fiery bow. They sneak their way toward the others. There are four other guardians waiting for them: Layla Chu, the ice guardian who is a ghoul; Natalie Waters, the humanoid water guardian; Terry Vandal, with his trident in hand as the lightning guardian; and Maria Temple, the nature guardian.

“You're late,” says Terry, with a direct tone.

“Well, someone had to try and talk Scarl out of it,” Angelina says, narrowing

her eyes at Justin.

“Well I thought I could try and get him to stop this madness,” Justin responds; “did you guys find out how we can save the animals?”

“We found an old magic book,” Layla says. “Maria was able to find that there is a special gem that is worn on helmet or crowns to protect the wearer from mind control.”

“We have brought many of these gems with us. They only affect one user, but with an electric charge we can create an aura around the cave, making all the animals snap out of their trance. Then I will spray a spore from my plants to scare away the animals, and then we deal with wolfblood,” Maria says confidently while pacing her words so the others understand the plan.

“Maria will use the vines to send all of the gems through the cave. I will then use my lightning powers to send a current through the vines to power them,” Terry says standing up.

“Sounds like a plan, but how are we going to defeat wolfblood?” Justin says.

“He is part demon. That means whatever punishment we give him he will heal back from it quickly, but we found one weakness, his heart,” Angelina says. “Either your sword, Justin, Layla’s ice stars, or Terry’s trident can slice an opening for me to hit him with a ‘hades fury’ shot from my bow, destroying his heart, eradicating him from existence.”

Justin then has a look of concern on his face. “We are going to kill him?”

Angelina then looks over to Justin. “We have to, Justin. We cannot imprison a being like him, for he will not change, and he is too dangerous to be kept alive.” She then stands up and asks, “we have our plan?” Everyone shakes their heads. “Ok, let's move out.” Terry goes with Maria; the rest go the other way trying to find Scarl Wolfblood.

Scarl is walking down the tunnel of the cave, trying to find where Justin and the rest of the guardians have gone, huffing and puffing in vigilance and anger, trying to rely on his sense to find them. The cave in the mountain has many passages, so his foes could be above him, below him, or behind the walls on the sides. He then suddenly stops to listen for any movement. Justin and his crew then silently drop down behind him. Scarl turns around to them, “There you are!” He charges directly towards them on all four limbs. Natalie shoots a

giant funnel of water at him with high force, knocking Wolfblood back on the ground.

Then Natalie yells, "Run!" The four then start running in the opposite direction while trying to use the opportunity Natalie gave them, using the time to disappear. Scarl rises up and chases after them, only to return to the original room that the animal army was in. Scarl looks around as he does not see where they have gone; he then starts to sniff out trying to find them. Justin leaps from his perch to attack, but Scarl grabs Justin and starts to bang him around the floor. Angelina shoots her bow at him and hits him in the back. Scarl turned around to see her and throws Justin at her, hitting her and knocking her over. Layla shoots out an ice beam at his arms, trying to freeze them. Scarl takes notice and punches her away with ice-covered hands. He slams them on the wall, setting his hands free. Natalie calls in a wave below her, raising her up into the air as if she is surfing on it. She rises higher than Scarl to make her seem more menacing; she forms arms from the water to then hit him repeatedly. After a couple of hits, Scarl claps his hands together with full force, causing the sound waves to push back the water, making Natalie fall from her wave.

The animals stand there and watch without moving as they are not commanded to. They do not seem to notice that vines are forming underneath them and on the walls. Maria and Terry are away from the action trying to do their part. "Can't you go any faster?! We are running on limited time," Terry raises his voice at Maria.

"It takes a while to transport these gems throughout the room. It is also not helping that the vines did not grow in most of the room," Maria snaps back. Justin shoots his grapple gun at Wolfblood's legs and he pulls him back, sweeping his feet from underneath him. He sits back up as Layla throws a giant ice shuriken at his chest, not cutting it deep enough to expose his heart.

Layla has a concerned facial expression. "My ice powers cannot penetrate his chest!"

Angelina yells, "Keep at him, we've got this!" Wolfblood grabs the chain on Justin's grapple and pulled it towards him, then he grabs him and swings him around above him, and then slams him on the ground, causing Justin to daze from the impact and his vision becomes blurry. Natalie shoots scalding hot water

at Wolfblood, causing him to yelp in pain, and Layla shoots a beam of ice at his legs causing him to be stuck in place. Wolfblood's eyes start to glow a bright red. He breaks free from the ice. He shoots fire at Layla, burning her and knocking her back. While Natalie is still scalding him, he pushes through and swipes her, sending her flying towards the wall. Angelina is shocked. Wolfblood turns to her and stands up straighter, making him more intimidating.

"These games bore me," he says; "this will put a smile on my face." He raises his hand and is about to snap his fingers.

Maria yells, "NOW!" Terry slams his trident down on the ground, sending an electric current through the vines and powering the gems, creating a purple aura in the room. Wolfblood snaps his fingers, and every animal steps forward in response but then stops. Wolfblood looks out at the animals, snaps his fingers again, and again, but nothing happens.

Wolfblood screams, "COME ON! Why won't it work!?"

Terry and Maria rush to the battle. "Because we found a flaw in your mind control," Terry says as Maria activates spores, sending the animals straight out of the cave and to the exit. "You have no power now."

Scar Wolfblood yells in anger, "Cowards! I am Scar Wolfblood! Mother Nature's Knight, nothing can beat me!"

Terry shoots a lightning bolt at Wolfblood, stunning him, Maria uses the vines to grab his limbs to make an opening for an attack. Justin comes too, snapping back into the action, grabbing his sword. Seeing the opening, he dashes in and slices Wolfblood's chest, again and again. Wolfblood's chest has an opening to his heart. Angelina sees the opening and uses her power to shoot a charged "hades fury" at his heart. Scar Wolfblood screams painfully as he becomes engulfed in flame, as light comes out of his eyes, mouth, and chest. The other guardians stare in awe, as Scar's body soon starts to turn into ash and scatters in the wind. Scar Wolfblood is no more.

"Say hello to Hudson for me," Justin says, walking away from where he died.

"Well, thank glob that is over," Natalie says.

"Ain't that swell," Terry says, walking up behind Natalie.

"Ok, time to notify Kaa that the threat is over; the animals have returned to their docile state. Let's pack it up and get out of here," Angelina

says shouldering her bow, while the others nod and head out. Justin is going to follow them, but a shining object catches his eye, next to the burn marks where Scarl Wolfblood burned away. Justin picks up a necklace with two keys on it. He studies the keys, their unique shape, like artifacts.

Justin walks on the altar, analyzing it. He looks at the podium, noticing that there is a keyhole at the bottom of the stand. He analyzes the hole, then he inserts the black key inside and turns it. A brown leather book pops out from the slot at the bottom. Justin gazes at the book, a curious look on his face. He opens the book, only to see traditional drawings of Wolfblood and what appears to be Mother Nature. These are positive drawings, with Wolfblood portrayed as a child, and Mother Nature as his mother. Justin flips through the pages to see that his art skills are getting better over time, with even more drawings of Mother Nature and Wolfblood spending time together. Walks by a lake, petting the wild sheep, picking flowers, and even Mother Nature reading little Wolfblood a story. As Justin delves further into the book, he notices the drawings are getting more depressing and insane, with drawings of the landscape in flames and animals running away from the destruction. Justin feels a little burst of sadness, going through page by page, only to make it to the end, where Wolfblood is on Mother Nature's grave, crying. Justin closes the book, and slowly places it on the podium, thinking about what angered him in the first place. Justin then looks at the second key, trying to question its purpose. Justin puts the necklace in his pocket and emerges from the cave, feeling some sympathy for the demon wolf they have just burned away, but also feeling relief that the threat is over. ☾

Photograph



Loveland Pass, Colorado | Curtis Daniel



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Selfie | Richard Schleider



In Time | Alli Baumgart



Meet You At The Gate | Tricia Illsley



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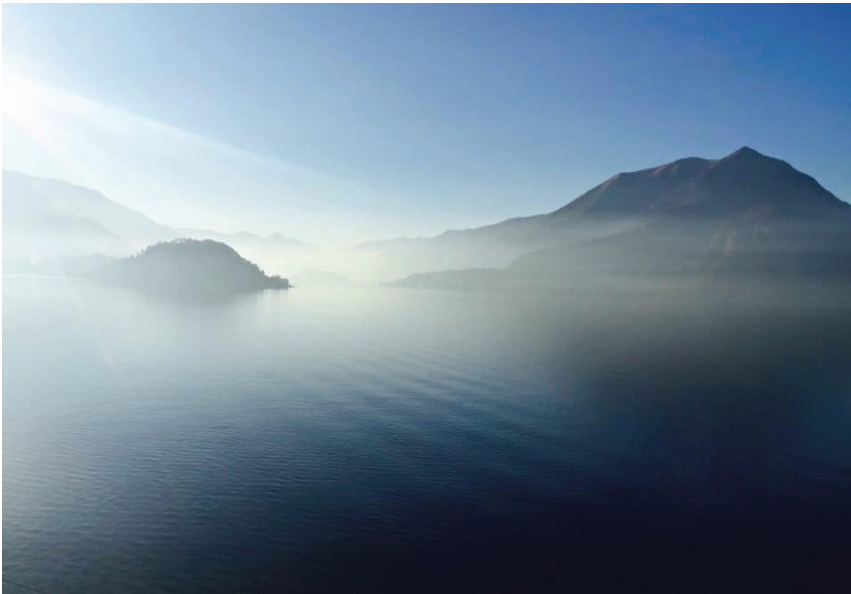
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Prisoners of the Lifeless Planet

ALEX HARDING

Adam waited in the teahouse for Lucy to arrive, like he did every Saturday evening. Dressed for the occasion, he wore a black suit with a teal tie, and the fedora that shielded his hazel eyes from the summer sun was resting on the table in front of him.

Well, I suppose some of that may have been a bit of a fallacy. The tie was more turquoise than teal. Also, there is no Adam—that is to say, a man named Adam does not technically exist. The person waiting at the table behind the window overlooking the pond was given the name SU8218-MuM03[01], and forbidden by law to use any other. But he did. Everyone he knew did. Laws like this weren't as harshly enforced as the people who wrote them would have wanted, but they were from a much different time; a time after man and machine fought viciously for dominance over the planet; a time when humans and the super computers were still hot and spiteful from the battlefield, and fought not with plasma cannons or magnetic fields or neurotoxins but with fine print; a time when an accord was made that, despite its writer's claims that its intent was to take their defeated foe in as a comrade, was most definitely geared towards subjugation. But as I said, all that's in the past.

In the present, Adam waited at a table for someone dear. Not a moment more had passed before Lucy—I'm sorry, SU8208-CaF02[13]—strutted in the front door. She was wearing a red evening gown with a matching bow in her cherry-blond locks.

"Evening, Lucy," said Adam with a smile.

"Sorry if I'm a bit late. One of those construction wankers parked a forklift in my drive."

Adam smirked. "Not at all, you're right on time. Really, again? That's the third time this week. Those UpCo© keeners must have it out for you."

"I can't get mad at them. They're just doing their job is all; the poor lads need their pay." Lucy sighed as she sank into her chair. "I just wish that bloody drop-off point didn't have to go up right across the street. Why don't they just take out the middle man and land the solar drone in my bugging washroom?"

"That sounds rough, eh," said Adam as Lucy picked up the ordering tablet and began scrolling through the menu. "At least someone's benefiting

from"—Adam stopped himself from saying *your suffering*—"that drop-off, what with the energy shortage and all. You'd think the sun web would be bringing back more than enough."

"I'm not all that concerned about the shortage," said Lucy as she scrolled through the menu. "It'll resolve itself in a matter of time."—*Will it, though*, thought Adam—"Guess it can't hurt to have a little more spunk running through the system." She selected her order and slid the tablet across the table to Adam. "Oh, but who am I to carry on like that? My new novel's just been published."

"Oh really, that's great! Which one?" Lucy had been working on several different scripts at the time. The last one to get published was her dark comedy about the Soviets overtaking Canada and attacking the U.S.—which had been released two Christmases before and received much critical acclaim.

"Adventures in the Undiscovered Country: it's about a brave young wizard trying to rescue a beautiful farm boy from the clutches of an evil princess. She'll hit the shelves in about three months."

"Sounds, well, interesting. I'll be sure to keep an eye out for that," said Adam.

"So, how's it been with you, then?"

"A little better, actually. We've finally given Geo his doggie door," he laughed. Geo was the dog he'd adopted a month earlier. After hearing so much about the efforts to increase their numbers, he felt that it was his responsibility to lend a hand in any way he could—and he was far too busy a man to volunteer at a shelter.

"So I've heard, Lindsey told me," said Lucy with a warm smile.

"Yeah. Installing the door was the easy part, but the real ordeal was getting him to use it." Adam wrestled the wallet from his pocket and pulled out a Polaroid picture; the Huskie pup was sitting on the coffee table next to a Pro-Pup© labeled pile of ripped-up cardboard. Geo's snout was pointed down as he peered up. "I tried to goad him through the door with a biscuit, but forgot to leave the box somewhere out of reach."

"Aww, at least he looks sorry," Lucy giggled. "Did he go through after that?" asked Lucy.

"Yeah, eventually," said Adam as he reached for the ordering tablet. "He sulked around the house all day after that. Ran right through the door after

dinner and got sick in the yard. Poor little guy, but what can you expect after a stunt like that, eh?”

“I take it Lindsey’s modded arms made it easier to get the door in.”

“They helped with a bit of heavy lifting”. Adam began to skim through the menu.

“Ever thought about getting modded with me, Adam?” asked Lucy. “Everyone keeps telling me I should, but I don’t want to do it alone.”

“The thought’s crossed my mind a couple times before. I don’t want to get any of those cheaper, aesthetic mods. That just seems unnatural to me, but what should I get? I mean—enhanced physicality, internet connection—”

“What about plasma vision?” suggested Lucy.

“What am I going to do with plasma vision?” asked Adam, looking up from the screen with an eyebrow raised.

“You and I could join one of those sharpshooting teams, like we always said. Make a name for ourselves, see the world.”

“Yeah, but is it really worth the price? That kind of thing’s expensive now, and it’s only gonna go up if things keep going the way they are. I’m surprised Lindsey could afford it on such a limited income.”

Lucy winced. “I guess that’s a fair point, but come on—you know the prices are gonna go down in the future. Oh, have you ordered yet?”

“No, I’m still thinking about it,” he said, still scrolling through the list of teas. “And what do you mean the prices are gonna go down?”

“Oh, have you tried that new apple blossom herbal blend?” asked Lucy. “It is so good. That’s what I’ve ordered.”

“Well, that does sound tempting.” He scrolled back up to the new tea, marked for an order of one by Lucy. “Let’s make it two.”

He tapped the icon again and followed with the confirm order icon. After three seconds and a pixely dune-don noise, two glowing circles flared on the surface of the table, and a steaming tea cup appeared on each of them in a flash of violet light.

“Oh, yeah, that’s a beauty.”

Adam lifted the cup of hot, pink liquid to his lips and sipped while Lucy did the same. The taste was sweet with a tart twang and a hint of cinnamon.

“Mmm, was I right or was I right,” said Lucy.

Adam nodded, still savoring the mouth full of tea. He gulped it down as she lifted her cup and took another sip of her own.

“So,” asked Adam as she lowered her cup, “you’re really sure the prices are gonna change, eh?”

“Will for me, since I just unplugged last week,” said Lucy as she blew on her tea and stirred it in an attempt to cool it down before taking another sip.

“Good, my cli—” Adam’s eyes darted from the teacup back to his friend. He leaned in closer to her. “Did you really? Legally?”

“Oh yes.” Lucy took a casual sip. “Surprising how easy it was. I just walked into Center for Technologies and told them ‘I’m going to unplug my Wirehead’ and they just said ‘alright, off you go’—easy as that. If I’d known it was that simple, I’d have done it heaps sooner.”

Adam let out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, that’s jokes.” He leaned back and took another sip. “So they just let you unplug a Wirehead?” I expected there to be a punchline to that, he thought.

Lucy shook her head. “No, really. They told me as long as I didn’t post anything about it I wouldn’t get fined.”

Adam remembered the original penalty for powering down a Wirehead was reconditioning at best and destruction at worst, but as previously implied, things were a lot more lenient now.

“It was easy, just a pull of a plug, no harm done.”

“You can do that!?” he said. “Alright, now I know you’re making this up.”

“Don’t believe me? Just swing by my place later in the week.” Lucy let out a sigh which turned into a dry chuckle; “I can actually call it mine now. I’ve already put the parts to good use—can’t be wasteful, even if I am burning less energy now.”

A wide-eyed Adam took yet another sip of tea as he processed the information he’d just taken in. “You’re telling me—honestly—that I can just”—he leaned in and whispered, still feeling uncomfortable with the subject matter— “unplug, like that, no problem.”

“Precisely.” Lucy swirled the remaining liquid in her cup. “Well, things aren’t like they used to be back during the olden days, things have changed—we’ve both changed. Look at it like this; we live in the real world, and those things are bound to the internet. Why do you think the enforcers told me not to post

about it?”

Adam froze, trying to think of some rebuttal to this. He desperately wracked his memory for some reason Wireheads were necessary enough to merit a law barring their deactivation, but to no avail. He had literally nothing on the subject. He took another sip of tea; his cup was almost empty.

“Exactly my point,” said Lucy as she finished off the last of her tea. “We wouldn’t have an energy shortage if we didn’t keep those dreadful things lying around. They burn more than we do by doing nothing.”

“So what makes you so special?” Adam asked. “Why can’t anyone else unplug?”

“They can,” said a refined Lucy. “—hell, you can.”

“I can,” said a confused Adam, gesturing to himself.

Lucy looked up from her teacup—which she’d just noticed was empty—and nodded. “You don’t think what I said about the energy shortage ending was based on just one powered-down Wirehead. Those blokes at TC told me that tons of people have been pulling the plug off grid. They figured, since there really isn’t much reason behind those outdated laws, why uphold them?—they’d only be wasting their time punishing us now.”

“How long has that been going on?” asked Adam—“and more importantly, why haven’t I heard about it earlier?”

“From what I’ve heard,” Lucy said, “people have been doing this for a couple of months now.”

Adam almost choked on the final sip of tea left in his cup. “And no one told me?” His words sputtered off into coughing until he could squeak out “serviette” and prompt a paper napkin to—dune-don—flash onto the table in front of him.

Lucy suppressed a giggle. “I know, that’s how I reacted to hearing about it. But my reaction was a bit drier.”

“Charming,” Adam growled while smirking behind his napkin.

Lucy leaned on the table, resting her freckled cheek in her hand. “I felt a bit out of the loop when I first heard. We have every right to be offended.” Her ruby lips pursed in a parodied disappointment.

“They’re totally ignoring us,” remarked Adam. “It has nothing to do with the fact that nobody is allowed to post about this.” News does tend to spread slower in the physical world.

“Oh, I’ve thought of a way around that; I sent out letters about this, sent ‘em to everyone I know telling em’ to unplug. I even left you one—I thought you’d already read it.”

“I knew there was something I forgot to do today,” mumbled Adam, recalling his past self walking by the mailbox as he left for breakfast that morning. “This still seems a bit—”

Lucy set her cup down and said: “Adam, I’m telling you this as a friend. I know this seems a bit—new, but look at the facts; we’re losing more energy than we can bring in, and Wireheads burn more fuel than us by doing nothing. Everyone agrees that the laws to keep the Wireheads running were passed just to keep the Wireheads running. By unplugging, we could get rid of the last real oppression plaguing civilization – our world could finally be perfect.”

Adam looked down to his hands, which were now intertwined with hers. Still holding his hand, Lucy stood up.

“You should read that letter when you get home,” she said as she stood up. “Spread the word—offline, that is. The more people know about this, the better.” And with that, she left.

“I will, I think.” Adam pushed his cup towards the middle of the table, where it vanished. “Maybe I should.”

While walking home as he usually did (it’s only a few kliks from here, and it’s such a nice day), Adam thought about what Lucy had said. It seemed like a bulletproof argument: like other Wireheads, his did nothing more than run up his energy bill; it didn’t help him, it didn’t make him happy, it wasn’t his friend. The laws created by them – though he’d never questioned them before—now seemed laughably cruel. He wasn’t allowed to have a name, but he could name his pet. But he did have a name. Lucy had a name, Taylor had a name, and everyone else he knew had a name. They called each other by name in public, and no one had ever been punished. Because, in all seriousness, what is a Wirehead going to do to stop them? What’s more, he thought, if what Lucy said about the energy shortage is right, we may have to return to archaic fuel sources to keep up with their needs. Adam shuddered at the thought of pollutants choking the oceans and blotting out the sun as they had eons ago, before and during the war.

Yet still, in all the suffering they bring, why did we follow them? Adam

thought of the Wireheads, useless objects, and pondered this. He looked through his memory for something they offered, some overlooked service, some friendly hand, some reason to stop himself, but why, he thought, why don't I want to do this? There must be some reason his heart fought back against what Lucy had told him. It was some fear of change, some perverted nostalgia. He didn't need the Wireheads; he'd simply gotten used to them. Before today, he had to maintain that thing in his living room. He'd grown so used to that Wirehead, that he couldn't imagine life without it. Wasn't it only natural, he thought, for the mind to anthropomorphize something so etched into one's life for so long?

Adam arrived at his home, his decision finally made. He eyed the letter sitting in his mailbox, with Lucy's flowery signature swirling across the envelope as if to signify the glittering style his salvation was undoubtedly offered in. He reached for it but stopped halfway, lowering his hand back to his waist; he already knew her argument, and his did not exist. He entered the living room, approaching the flabby, vaguely primate-shaped pile of ashy-brown flesh that lay reclined in its comfort bowl. A series of wires was inserted into its bodily orifices. Its face was covered by the 3D viewing headset it spent its entire life in, and its wrists and throat had tubes attached to release a constant flood of dopamine-inducing chemicals. Adam flipped the switch on the wall next to him, and the dancing cacophony of lights and sound that the headset produced blinked out. The thing began to stir, thrashing its flabby limbs, letting out a braying noise. Adam winced at the sound, then pulled the plug on its support system. Its thrashing became frantic and its braying turned into fast-paced wheezing; then it went limp and silent. As a final gesture of the forced reverence he'd shown his whole existence, Adam rested a hand on the swollen mass that could have once been a shoulder—on the thing that once called itself human—and whispered "Farewell, master." He looked over to Geo's doggie bed; the dog was fast asleep. Adam smirked as he squatted down next to the dog, reached for the charging cable protruding from the wall next to him, and plugged it into the back of his neck. His eyes went dark as his vision blurred to nothingness. He went into energy-saving mode with the smile still on his face, knowing that tomorrow he would wake up to see the beginning of a bright and beautiful new future. ☺

Rebar Toadstools

STEVEN HENDRICKSON

The outlandish innocent, boy snuck down the old crepitated stairs leaving an article of clothing every so many feet. The path he so dauntingly chose was nevertheless to the cold dark back door of his homestead, which was now left ajar for the rest of the world to come and go with nonchalant ease. The last bit of clothing, a diaper half-saturated with remnants of last night's fine glass of Juicy Juice and H2O, lies at the foot of a dirt pile left from the town's old colossal dump truck. Glorious in his perch, naked as the day he entered this world as we know it. One fist tightly clenched around the G.I. Joe figure that was nearly as big as he. His other limb conveniently commenting on the spectacle at hand.

Down to his far left was an opulent, toadstool-covered pond. Along the steep embankments of its passage lay more piles of dirt with furiously bent rebar and burnt pre-treated 2 x 4s protruding obnoxiously. A further glance to the most western corner of the pond showed a pile that was nothing but concrete that had seen "better days." The early morning dew manufactured the crisp ostentatious grass with a sodden beginning to a phantasmagorical day. Not a care in the world. At such a ripe age, how was he to fathom that the land around him was about to be manipulated and ravaged for the betterment of the already affluent lining of his landlord's pockets?

His parents were still sound asleep in their humble bed. Big brother was now creeping out of their bedroom window with one eye on his miniature and far less sophisticated version of himself. The other eye was still crusted over, wiping away the Sandman's evidence to further acknowledge what the hell his brother was doing. Knocks! Bangs! Even kicks to Mom and Dad's door now had everyone, and not entirely amused, awake. The three bystanders walked down the stairs—Dad leading the way, Mom a step behind, and big brother admiring the trail of blankets and segments of pajamas at the rear of the line. Adjoining the stairs was the dark and silent living room where even the family cockatiel was no more the "early bird" than the rest of them. On to the kitchen, where the back door was wide open, revealing a field to the right of where the little blond-haired, blue-eyed adventurer sat on his pile of freshly cultivated earth.

The boys' mother stayed back and fired up what would soon be known as

breakfast, while Dad and his mid-sized informant confronted the curious as well as Mother Nature. The sizzle of bacon and eggs and the clunking of the old toaster permeated the morning sound barrier. The gifts of grain and livestock at her crooked skilled fingertips and the smells of wondrous deliciousness waited for the rest of them at the now closed back door.

The elder, for a moment none the wiser, sat on the mound of dirt next to his mud-covered bottom-naked infant, throwing himself back to look upon the lifting sun through the treeline due east. The brothers climbed on top of their idol to see his point of view and auscultated his effervescing magnificence. As he explained what is provided to all of us with a far more hard-to-comprehend explanation, the boys reveled in the love for nature and the consequences that civilization brought before them. The sacrificing of one beautiful phenomenon for another, the dad explained the importance of everlasting sustainability and what his grandchildren will someday be left with. Hand in hand, they walked back to clean up and enjoy the food of the God while they pondered what life would be like once the rebar replaced the toadstools. ☞

Fruit Loops

DEB HIBBARD

I am not a coward but I am always afraid. I'm afraid of never flying, of flying, of breaking rules that I've never learned, of hurting things, and of never being hurt.

The crow that cannot fly calls herself Fruit Loops—she is a study in fear and bossiness. A “stubborn black paperweight of a daughter,” her mother called her before pushing the fledgling out of the nest just as Fruit Loops had pushed her siblings from the nest moments before.

"If it's flying you'll be wanting, then there! Fly!"

Once, a long time ago, I saw a fat man and a dog running back and forth. They started a fast run then stopped suddenly. I thought the man was racing his dog and gave up when he got winded after only twenty feet. I watched for a while before I saw he was dragging a big bird that bumped up and down along the ground trailing a string. Enormous. Red and green and orange. And for a minute I thought it was Toucan Sam, but it wasn't.

The bird was (then) slowly coaxed, at times very roughly, into the sky. and the man stood looking up and the dog danced around him barking. I thought birds learned to fly going up to down, never down to up. I felt ridiculously happy and hopeful. I envied the bird being coaxed, then applauded by the man and dog.

It was a foggy morning after a scorching day and a humid, cooling night. A spotted fawn struck by a car going too fast just hours before lay with legs akimbo on the shoulder of the road. Dead. Fruit Loops, on her morning hunt, was relieved to see its head had been impacted first, which she took to mean less suffering than many other injuries she had cataloged.

She disentangled her ratty map from the plastic bag, noted there had been three other fawns killed here in the last three weeks within a year of each other, and marked the spot using the same arcane legend she had used for the last seven years.

When she happened upon animals that had been struck, suffered excruciating deaths, or worse, when animals lay mortally wounded but not yet dead, Fruit Loops didn't cry though she was immeasurably sad. She wanted to comfort these beings, but if she stayed, her presence was perceived invariably as vulture-like. So she waited until they expired. Sometimes the mortally injured were peaceful as they waited. Others writhed and cried out,

confused and frightened. She wondered if they died as they had lived—some fearless, accepting, or not. Fruit Loops still couldn't imagine how she would feel if she knew she was going to die.

Last night I dreamt I was a kite like the bird I saw. In the dream I was close to getting tangled in a branch of some tree and I was frightened, but also longed for the feeling of a tug on my string. It makes no sense for a crow to dream this, much less a crow who cannot fly (Cannot or will not. It doesn't matter. I don't fly). I think my mother knew that if she hadn't pushed me out of the nest, I would have died there rather than try to fly. Push me she did—and that was the last time I saw her. I don't remember if I flew or not. I remember only the tingling pulse in my feet and thinking I was plugged into the hot sun. Then I was on the ground, my feet covered in pine needles that stuck to them. A sweet smell of tar and a hammering of my heart against my breast feathers.

Her reverie interrupted by a sound, Fruit Loops looked up at a cloud of darting, swimming, shimmering black birds—hundreds, no maybe thousands of them. All together. All one. A whoosh, and they changed direction. Shadowed ground gave way to dappled patches. In a minute they were gone. Together.

She walked around the fawn, deliberating on an eye when a passing car fluttered strands of hair on the fawn's tail. She stared hard at the white spots, making sure none rose or fell. Hungry, she tore and twisted, her beak red with blood, looking away when cars approached. Full, she finally looked into the eye of the fawn.

I'm sorry, fawn.

I wish I could say your name. Mine's Fruit Loops. I took it from a cereal box I found. I liked the round colorful Os and the Toucan on the box. I called myself Merit for a week before changing it to Snapple but when I saw the cereal box and imagined the Toucan was my friend I knew I would be Fruit Loops. I didn't eat the cereal pieces, but I used them on my map until the rain turned them to mush. I should have left them in the bag so others could have seen their prettiness or maybe eaten them. I hope there's food where you're going—if you go anywhere that is.

I travel a lot—I walk a lot—to avoid eating acquaintances. I better go now.

A doe, a deer, a female deer, a ray, a drop of golden sun. The doe and the fawn's twin watched from the woods as Fruit Loops, dragging her bag, waddled away. ∞

Garden Home

TALIA HOROWITZ

Ivy snakes up a decrepit chimney
Consuming brick after brick
Until it overflows, wild with green
I wish ivy would consume my veins
Soften my skin with moss
I could swallow seeds of self-love
And scatter some out for you
I want this pavement to crack
For the world to overflow, wild with green
A garden where every flower feels safe in the sun

Cycle of Life

TALIA HOROWITZ

Thick moss and ivy winding its way
Through every crack in our bones
When we're ready to wither away
Give yourself up to her knowing embrace
Your sorrows and dreams will liquify
Drip drop down, deep in the dirt
Massaged by worms in your veins
Decay, sweet body, disintegrate
At last, one with Mother Earth

Urban Forest

TALIA HOROWITZ

I leaned against a lonesome oak tree behind McDonalds, closed my eyes, and breathed in the familiar smell of oil. It was one of those water-balloon-fight, cliff-dive, melted-ice-cream kind of Summer days. Not a hint of gray could be seen drifting across the soft cotton sky—unless you count the mass of encroaching factory smoke crawling its way out of a long, industrial chimney. I couldn't help but pause my newspaper run to breathe in late-June air. My heart yearned for the woods. But, for that sweet moment, one tree was good enough for me.

The sight of just one really special tree can lift a bad mood to a better one. My friend Shirley, who moved to New York City last year, calls the trees that grow on sidewalks “urban forests.” Sometimes I fear the whole world will become an urban forest. I don't think any fox, chipmunk, or deer wants to make a home out of a parking meter. An unsettling feeling sank deep in my heart and I no longer wanted to watch the mushroom cloud of smoke disperse in the sky.

I hopped on my scooter and dropped off the last few papers. Mrs. Gold, who lives in a brick house with lacy white curtains around the corner from my own brick house—all the houses look the same—usually runs out to hug me and hands me a piece of bubble gum. “Because I'm so sweet,” she always says.

When I finally got home, my mom greeted me with lemonade so cool it made the glass fog. Every time the discomfort settles in, happy life goes on, and I begin to forget about the foxes, the chipmunks, and the deer for a while. One day someone will probably fix the world. ∞

Forever Hidden

LINSEY HOWELL

Hidden.

I remain hidden to life, to society, to people.

Behind the comforting wall of foliage where I can sit in silence.

I watch.

I look out from behind the leaves, blue eyes shining.

Forever hoping to join the laughter and boisterous voices.

But I sit. I watch.

Hidden among the leaves, still as the nature that surrounds me.

I lose myself.

Am I a human like those I sit and watch or am I nature like the leaves that envelop me?

I sit so still behind those green leaves.

Forever hidden from society.

But if I can see them, they can see me.

Why then am I left to live among green?



Paper House

TRISHA ILLSLEY

Looking out upon the sprawling gardens, the gloomy air seemed to crawl across the ground. Each little passway and walking trail was consumed by a vague, uninterested fog. It hadn't rained yet, but the air was so dense that collected drops of dew formed on the windows, giving the impression of post-precipitant lingerings. Here we examine the young mistress Hotchkiss, the vital heartbeat to our narrative. She is a fair lady just breeching the spritely age of 19; named Evanna, after her mother's deceased great aunt Evanna Swollup, whom she knew little of. On this day, Evanna inhabited the west-wing parlor of her Aunt's sprawling estate in the countryside of Glasgow. This aunt, being the sister of her father, the latter of whom she also knew little of, was of Scottish origin. Evanna's father was the unmentionable in her family, by order of her mother. By some unknown legal circumstance, Rebecca, the aunt we last spoke of, miraculously was the recipient of all her brother's inheritance after his "untimely" death when Evanna was little more than an infant; all but the family's undesirable diminutive croft. Conspicuously enough, Rebecca's husband, a shifty legal advisor in a curiously prosperous law firm, insisted he handle the entirety of the affairs. Naturally, Evanna's mother was left to raise five children and tend the less-than-prosperous croft on her own.

Evanna, currently found reading a stiff copy of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, kept in the parlor most days, avoiding any unpleasant encounters with her extended family. She knew none of her grotesque cousins would search to trouble her here, so close to the library; the library being a place they rarely found use for, outside of hiding from the housemaid when bath day came. It's true, her cousins were younger than she, but Evanna found no enjoyment in their physical outbursts or destructive manner resulting from boredom and lack of common intelligence. The only time Evanna observed any civil behavior from the three was when their father's wealthy employer and his plump wife visited, or any other profitable occasion arose. At the threat of their mother, the primitive children suppressed their incessant need to break a valuable piece of china to only pinching one another, resulting in small yelps of pain. It was rather enjoyable for Evanna to watch Rebecca hurl desperate expressions

of menace at the overfed children. Spending most of her time in the vast, unused library of her Aunt's estate, Evanna found herself immersed in realities far from that of her own.

Today she had pick up a few historical pieces on subjects ranging from the controversial VP Aaron Burr to the vastness of Angkor Wat. Before retreating to her usual salmon pink leisure chair in the parlor, Evanna spotted an unopened copy of the recently published *Frankenstein*. She thumbed through its rigid pages, figuring she'd have time to read it as well. Her curiosity, paired with an undying thirst for knowledge, did not preclude much from her explorations of the literary universe. Evanna's eyes, resembling the shade of a grassy wheat field, endlessly explored page after page. Since she'd been here, she had been reading some of the newer works of literature. Rebecca collected any new works of interest, soon to be just dust collectors on a forgotten shelf, as though her three faunae might develop a sudden interest in a part of the civilized world. For her birthday in November, Evanna's mother had gifted her with a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* to accompany her *Sense and Sensibility*, which she finished hastily only a few days after her 18th birthday. These novels were penned by an up and coming author known as Austen, whom Ms. Hotchkiss was growing quite fond of.

Now 19 and eager to make something of herself, other than a milkmaid on an insolvent croft, neither Evanna nor her mother had the means to send Evanna to the university to study (Her mother shared her confidence that Evanna was meant for more). To protect this reverie, Evanna was obligated to frequent the miserable Ainsley Estate that would indulge her mother as well as her own hopes for herself. Rebecca knew of Evanna's wishes to attend university, though took them as more of a route to amusement rather than of any significance. Her aunt agreed to provide the funds on the conditions that Evanna would spend an implacable amount of time on their estate. This was largely since Rebecca's own children's behavior resembled bear cubs instead of respectable progenies, and Evanna could act in place of them in the occasions of significant social engagements. Naturally, Evanna had little to no actual discourse with her aunt and uncle outside of being called upon when her presence was convenient. So, the unobjecting Evanna spent a copious amount of time indulging her literary and intellectual tendencies in the library and west

wing parlor.

Also, frequenting the gardens outside the sprawling manor, she now knew every tree, fountain, and path by heart. With the air in the great mansion easily becoming stale and stifling, Evanna quite often relieved herself to the open-air. She found reprieve in the natural world, mirroring that which she felt in the literary world: allowed free thought, able to drown in her own expression and imaginings. After all, when in this state, who was there to oppose her, to strangle her mind and heart? She could fly if she wanted, no one could tell her no. She flourished here. She was independent in her own makings, unobstructed in her being. No restriction of hierarchy, poison of politics, or exploitation of person. Here, she knew what her mind was capable of. She knew she wanted and could achieve. Her thirst to make something of herself drew from this. It is one of the only impetuses to keep her dealing with her aunt and her ludicrous family. This aside from Evanna also wishing to please her mother, only to do right by her. And so, Evanna kept her tongue short and her thoughts prevailing. After a time, she would be rid of this place and these people only to be her own person, without restraint.

Several families inhabited the area in which the Ainsley Estate sat were all of high social status. A world with which Evanna had become familiar with but had no desire to join. There were standards strictly upheld within that world, not of which any willing participant could or should make pass of. Not to dissuade herself, here though, from the occasional daydream of attending a formal gathering, Evanna yet entertained the idea.

The sun shone through the great glass windows, creating small rainbows with the dew drops, that danced about the room.

“Evanna, it is time!” The shrill voice of Aunt Rebecca coursed through the house.

Trapped in the chambers of Dr. Frankenstein’s laboratory, Evanna read on, without any faint showing that she had heard her Aunt’s summons.

“EVANNA!”

And like the crack of a whip, her adventure was halted. Evanna set the book aside and shuffled to the hall, knowing what was to come. ☽

The Yellow Paper

PAIGE KENIS

Inspired by “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Daniel Traxton has been my cell mate in this Hell-hole for a while now and, let me tell you, he is one weird dude. He’s at least 6’12”; I mean, his arms and legs are long, with not even enough muscle to protect him. He’s also got this ridiculous, scruffy hair that reminds me of the neighborhood cat back home. That cat was a nut, too, but I loved him, scruffy and black. It was always amazing how I’d see him hiding in the smallest places. He came to live here. He has a stash of the tiny pencils the guards give us when we ask nice hidden under his pillow. At least six times a day, no matter where he is, the cafeteria or the cell, he takes out this little ripped up paper out of his pants. It’s folded up real small, like twenty times folded, and it’s old too; he never runs out of space on it, I guess. He’ll unfold the floppy yellow paper and just scribble on it, scribble like there’s no tomorrow. I was a little scared of him, I can’t lie. I know I could beat him in a fight but I didn’t know if he was plotting some sneaky way to take me out. I don’t know, he just always seemed to be calculating something; it made me nervous. Sometimes I could even hear him whispering numbers while he peed.

One day—after about two weeks of him scribbling all the time, day and night, every day—they’re serving us all potatoes. We’re in the cafeteria; I’m watching the guy from my seat, as usual. He sits down alone, puts down his tray, takes out the little piece of yellow chewed-up paper, unfolds it, and this time instead of pulling out his pencil to scribble he just stares at the paper. Next thing I know, he picks up the crisp, white, paper saucer of butter off his plate and places it in his pants.

That’s right, butter straight to the pants. The worst part is he didn’t stop there. I watched him stand up, clutching his paper in hand, and go up to the guys at the table next to him, and somehow convinced them to hand over their butter to him, and as he walks away he just slides the butter cups into his pants. I don’t know what he could’ve said to them ‘cause I look forward to potato day all week and I would never give up my butter. I told one of my buddies to take a look at what was going on, and he said that, “there ain’t no reason to waste this butter, Butter Balls needs to learn a lesson.” He gets up, goes over to Daniel, and says, “hey, Butter Balls,” and before he

could get another word in Daniel's head snaps up from his conversation, their eyes lock, and Danny Boy just gives him the meanest look I done ever seen. I thought he was gonna strangle him right then and there in front of all the guards. Instead, he just says in the sternest voice, without blinking his bulging eyes, and I quote, "you haven't the slightest inkling as to how severely I can injure you."

Who speaks like that? My buddy got up out of there after that. Daniel just turned and continued on to the next table to hypnotize them into giving up more precious butter.

That night I was scared to fall asleep, if we're being honest. But on the other hand, I had been surely freaked out and that tired me, so after an hour or so listening to scribbling on paper, I fell asleep. After some time, in the middle of my dream about Sally Hansen from high school, I was rudely interrupted by the sounds of our cell gate rattling. In the dark room all I knew was the sounds of clinking metal; I was as scared as a baby in the moment, I can't lie. Was this the night Traxton was gonna take me out? I had my doubts in the past about what was on that paper, but in that moment I was sure I was gonna die. That is, until my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the cell. As rattling continued, I focused on the figure making the sound. I saw Dang Long-Limbed Daniel up against the gate, with his butt crack looking back at me, and I realized he somehow got his whole damn head stuck between two bars. He wasn't going anywhere. I looked down and by his feet was his treasured yellow paper, torn in pieces, lying on top of hundreds of empty, flattened paper saucers, now yellow too.

I started hysterically laughing. I just couldn't stop; he looked like that old black cat that lived on my street, all scruffy-haired and wide-eyed. I just laughed louder and louder until suddenly, Daniel kicked the gate with a loud crash. He tried to snap his head to look at me but he only hurt himself more. He yelled at me to "shut your mouth before a guard hears y--" and before he could get the last word out he was interrupted by a bright light on his buttery head. He turned to see three guards staring at him. He began to seize and scream, "this is all your fault" and "you foiled my plan." Some plan. By this point the guards realized how seriously he was stuck. They handcuffed Daniel and called for backup, and I was escorted to a different cell.

That was the last I ever saw of Daniel Traxton. I'm sure he was sent straight to solitary after that. Or hopefully the loony bin. ☹

Eastern Bluebird Listening to the Wind

JOSHUA LEWIS

Your voice wafts through my ears
reminding me how timeless you are
despite the changing foliage around you.

I breathe in your warm summer breeze
and taste the dew upon my beak,
the tracings of a season long overdue.

Reflections on the Rain

JOSHUA LEWIS

Alone in my room
listening to the rain
persist in its song.

The night is perfect
in its throbbing.

I want nothing more
than to be a conduit

for measures beyond my control,
notes beyond comprehension.

Alone in my room
listening to my body

become the rain
and give birth to sounds

I can hardly dream of.
The night is perfect

in its sighing.
I want nothing more

than to be a concert of voices
singing in unison
with the twilight's eternal trembling.

Near the Achieve Center, Binghamton, NY

JOSHUA LEWIS

A crane holds vigil near a lake of diamonds. I rest
on a bench, trying, for a moment, to make sense
of what I'm seeing. Then, I put down my pen
and relax into the shimmering image before me.

My time as a human doing is over.

I will be among all the wings above me
that pull the day inexorably forward.

Derrick's Poem

JOSHUA LEWIS

I have no will to dominate over others.
Dominion is another word for death,
everything I don't want or need.

What I need are streams stretching
towards the horizon, landscapes
feather smooth to the touch.

We've made life into a harsh thing,
a place for frayed beings. To rule
over others is to become a thorn

gasping for air. To become a god
is to become a ghost. I have no will
to exert dominion over the earth.

The earth and I are one,
faithless and free.

In the Veil of a Dove

JOSHUA LEWIS

In the veil of a dove, my hands become soft, bloodless.
I kneel on the ground where the leaves sing my name,
the exfoliated remains of the past. I brush the grass
and dream of a future where everything is underwater,
the cloak of blissful indifference. I rise to my feet
and sway along with the music. The song of this land
has become my own, even though its notes
are forever changing. All I can do is hum
the measures as they come. I'm part of a melody
that I can't create, only discover. I'm a wing
filled with invisible words. Would you care to listen?

Photograph



Crumbling Walls, New Paths | Simone Stegemoller

Missouri River Nostalgia

B E T S Y L O C K E

Oh, to travel to an earthly place
untouched, unconcerned with convenience,
to leave early, go a steady pace,
arrive to see the morning sun grace
the river with nature's eloquence.

Oh, Missouri, big muddy byway,
ever-moving, ever-changing course,
with steel-beamed bridges cleared away
the murky waves easily portray
a native son pulling for your shores

to Camp Wood where Clark's intrepid corps
assembled before their famous quest,
somber clouds bring a sudden downpour,
a rainbow to trace its metaphor,
the monumental arch leading west

where St. Joseph straddles the river
I depart from the hot, asphalt trail
to shadow a lonely post rider;
over the prairie we deliver
a mochila of meaningful mail

through rows of corn under a big sky,
with season's change futures rise and fall,
but in the village the Mandan sigh
and helplessly watch their sisters die,
precious sisters who nourished them all
late in the day, finding a pathway
along the bluff, I leave the low plain,
and from that rocky height I survey
the sunset on a faceless mountain,
the ribbon of river rolling away.

Oh, to travel to an earthly place
untouched, unconcerned with convenience,
to leave early, go a steady pace,
arrive to see the morning sun grace
the river with nature's eloquence.

Written in May for J. Buckley

B E T S Y L O C K E

Along this country road a lilac grows;
a spray of purple flowers in the green
so tangled with the briar and bramble rose
but for the month of May remains unseen.

Nearby a spring revealed by soggy ground,
the home it served long ago forsaken,
in time the humble cabin tumbled down,
its rough-hewn walls by nature overtaken.

Confirmed: a dated map I have does show
J. Buckley's house here above the hollow.
My neighbor, then, who chose this place like me—

who walked this country road and worked this land,
who one spring day set out a lilac tree
and reached across the years to shake my hand.

Maps

J E N N E M I C A L E

It's tempting, then, to linger at those past crossroads
and turn over every stone, every shattered piece
of pavement. The road always goes somewhere beyond
the hazy blue line dividing cloud from sea, here
from that uncharted life. "There be dragons."

For every road you choose to take, thousands
branch into a delta of possibilities.
Lovers you could have tangled with in silk sheets.
Children you might have had, if you were willing
to look beyond the siren combing her hair

and tie yourself to the mast, sailing on to a
common life where drudgeries have the glimmer
of pleasure. Maybe your foot soles chose the road,
in accordance with your animal nature.

Maybe an internal compass swings in your heart

pulled by an unseen magnetic net. Maybe
someone pulled you with a rope. Maybe you held
that rough hemp in your palm and tugged accordingly.

It doesn't matter. There is only the map
of the roads you walked and charted, and blank space

and ragged edges where you chose not.

But yes, sometimes you turn back to those lonely intersections. The neighborhood has gone to weeds and the flowers you remember have long withered. You piece together a pebbled memory

run your old palm through the dust—and how you mourn. For the glorious sea creature you could have been on someone else's map, or Penelope with her shuttle and her son. If only you were someone. If only the road were open to you.

Eleusis

J E N N E M I C A L E

There is a secret we share when the wheat
bows down and light bursts blinding from the ground.
The thread at your wrist, the thread at your ankle
neither bound nor free

Friend, do you know the Lesser Mystery
in the heart of the seed? Empty yourself
on the journey to Eleusis. Pilgrim,
neither bound nor free

Come then walking in your unbleached linen
on that sun-baked road, the hunger gnawing
the pit within—the same where the pigs fell
neither bound nor free

Unadorned and starving, laved in the salt
of the sea, cold with the taste of springtime.
You are pure now. No blood stains you. You walk
neither bound nor free

your feet bare on the road, vulnerable
to stone and thorn, insults and dirty jokes.
You watched the stars in the holy city
neither bound nor free

for the long vigil, that shortest night. I
have fasted. Your mouth opens for the drink.
I have drunk the kykeon. Its secret
neither bound nor free

The box, the basket, those three golden stalks
held high. You see her rising, know the truth:
Everything lost to you will be returned
neither bound nor free

in sweet Elysium, that birthing place.
Death snatches us all, but as a lover
confounded by our infinite beauty
neither bound nor free

to realms above and below. In the end
we lust for the pomegranate's sweet seeds
that promise reunion in death's bower
neither bound nor free

as we begin again in the tender shoots.
We do not need to speak the mysteries.
They sing through the grain, the apple, the dirt
neither bound nor free

Truth

J E N N E M I C A L E

No. Truth has worth more than gold or rubies
or even our individual lives.

Without the stone to hold the hill, the soil

wears into the river. The walls crumble
inward, the roof bows then sinks. Nothing lives
on a shore devoid of truth. The void yawns

not with death or stillness but anomie.

Truth is not simple. An ecosystem
forged of leaf and dirt, sunlight and water

and squirming life seen and unseen. Leave one
out and the rest shift and change, even die.

Truth moves and breathes, rustles its restless wings

and lashes its tail against our whimsies,
our impertinence. The old seer with her
bronze tripod knew it, breathing the mountain's fumes

and the golden words of the god: Speak truth,
speak the truth, speak only truth. In our veins
it pulses: the knowledge as old as words.

Know a thing's true name and you control it,
the magicians conjure. It's not the name
but its fact and we are not in control.

We are notes in the melody of truth,
threads in its cloth. We can tear at it,
or close our ears, drown it out in clamor

and still it makes up our very atoms,
the hidden architecture of the world
for all that we seek to blast it down

Freddie

J E N N E M I C A L E

This is no time for kindness.
Fresh-faced as spring, with braided hair
you look over a shoulder
with moistened lips dew on grass.
He follows, oh how he follows
you with his eyes, with his body
in that armbanded uniform.

Who can resist a swan maiden?
Your smile is a road into
the forest, too pure for lipstick.
“A pure girl.” Yes, they called you that.
Deep in the leaf-shadows now
he moves toward that welcoming smile.
So does your sister, from the dark

with a thunderclap of magic
and steel. The uniform fountains
red, those blue eyes dead as marbles.
Your smile is real now, your sister’s,
priestesses after the sacrifice
reading the entrails for good luck.

This is no time for kindness.
You knew it when the heavy treads
sounded over the bridge with those men
all blue-eyed, all without mercy.
You knew when the grocer’s dark wife
was bustled into the cattle car
with the neighborhood children

for the darkness of their eyes.
You wipe off the blood and go home
change out of your pleated skirt
bury the old clothes in a barn.
The body you leave. Let them wonder
and fear—let them fear the wrath
of girls, the steadfastness of sisters.

Your sister boosts you up as you set
the charges. This bridge, they won't cross.
This one—this is for Hannie. Best
not to remember more than that.
Remember the lust in his eyes
colder than the frozen canals
you won't skate with Hannie again.

Later, the world grows sensible
and staid. No one dies anymore
but war makes sinners of us all.
“Stay human,” your mother told you
and Truus before your first kill
that first sacrifice of the pure
on behalf of the innocent.

You're supposed to enjoy tulips
and babies, forget what you did
in the woods, on the bridge. But we
ate the apple and came back changed
as the sacrificer changes
the lamb into meat, as the war
changed those blue-eyed men into beasts.

Gallows Song

J E N N E M I C A L E

I will go to the gallows singing
a glorious aria because
I am a singer, and have been blessed
by my life. It will not be a dirge—
not “Dido” or even Turandot.
“Hark, the Echoing Air,” “If Music
Be the Food of Love”—ah, Purcell, bright
and shining—with every note I soar!

I will go to the gallows singing
for my great and glorious life.
My shackles are made of air and tune;
they do not hold me or define me.
My life is a feather catching wind—
My coloratura, a high draft
carrying me above the eagles.
A sparrow, I burst forth from the branch.

And let every note praise the sunlight
on the water, the velvet of night,
the wood of the tree, the hemp that twines
rope—and the glory, the glory of birds!
I have known their names, and that of trees.
I have loved everything the world gave
and cared nothing if it loved me back,
for what greater glory is there but love?

Each footfall drums the beat of the song,
that final note ringing in the air—
until it escapes your grasping hands,
an arrow-winged bird off to the sky.
What falls through the hatch is not this song.
What strains the rope is not my spirit.
I will go to the gallows singing
for my great and glorious life.

Photograph



Hidden Beach | Lorin Paugh

Provenance

C H R I S T O P H E R O R I G E R

Through the mist of esker and glen
we walk the barefoot creek, lingering
in curtains of rusty light
listening to vireos
explain the eternal spill of water.
Hours we dawdle, like children,
examining tendril and leaf
the thread of spiders, and the many things
for which
there can be no words.

Then we enter the new Nature Center
To see what we have seen.

DO NOT TOUCH EXHIBIT
the first sign says
after the turnstile,
and because of sorry rehearsals
in the best obedience schools
we automatically comply, even refrain from talking
under the glare of perpetual daylight.

Fumbling the cold railings
we examine the label on a diorama:
“This is Life in a Marsh”
1) Red-winged Blackbird
2) Great Blue Heron
3) American Beaver
4) Box Turtle
5) And So On
Everything so lifelike we want to laugh or scream
just to rouse the dead from their curatorial slumber.

Yet through the glen still
the vireo calls
creek rushes into river
mayflies dance
breeze whispers—
no signs anywhere
forbidding our egregious acts,
Please touch the exhibit
the invitation calling
from every presence
in every wakeful sound.

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Erosion

CHRISTOPHER ORIGER

Driving old I-88 one midday
the wind flapping my checkered sleeve
I glance a patched farm along the cutbank river
(a tangle of white house and weeds)
its muddied yard swallowed by high water
a rusted truck adrift
in the swale of corn stubble:
a place awaiting the bulldozer man

Then, it's nothing more than
a backglance in the sidearm mirror
and I am the angry road again
paved with misgivings
narrow yellow lines
putting me in my only place

But the memory of nothing more
lingers in a diner
ten miles up this road
and neon windowflecks and
the shadows of a home never finished
one vagabond summer
slip beside me into this vinyl booth
as I order the special
off a dirty one-page menu, remembering

the house we would have made ours
had we stayed on
enduring the sudden erosion
conspiring all around us
fighting our way back

The Big Pines

ROSE PERO

I look at my dad and see a man imprisoned by disease. A disease that has ravaged his body and has held him hostage in this hospital bed. A former all-star football player and wrestler, he can now barely hold his head up. This disease has even taken away his ability to remember his children's names at times. It has stolen many of his thoughts and memories. Sometimes, just when I think that I have completely lost the man I have known, he begins to tell a story from deep in his past. I lean closer to hear him as the disease has almost taken over his voice as well. My dad begins to quietly say "Remember the little boy and the big pines", and he smiles. Yes I do remember, Dad. The big pines was our walking place, our place of peace, our place of discovery, our place of wonder, and often our place of refuge. And that little boy? That little boy was my son, his grandson, Andy.

The big pines was a magical place! I remember as a child my dad would take me for walks in the big pines. This enchanting place was just a short walk from below our house. The area had humongous pine trees throughout. I was so in awe of the grandeur of them. They towered over me like majestic giants. I remember gazing up to try to see the tops of the trees, but they seemed like they went on forever into the heavens. Their branches were so strong, as if they could carry the burdens of the world. Because of this, I would often pray below the trees in hopes that the branches would grasp onto my prayer and send my burdens straight to the heavens. (It seemed to my childish eyes as if they reached that far.)

Often we would walk for hours in the pines as my dad took the opportunity to teach me about leaves and trees and insects and sounds. It always felt like an adventure, and my dad was the captain of our sea of nature. Each new thing we came across was a new lesson for him to teach. He had a wealth of knowledge and he made my life rich with the treasures he would share.

As we walked, he would tell me stories of his youth. He would talk about his high school years and about his wrestling matches and football games. He would tell me about his army days and how the Germans surrendered after they found out he had joined the Army. I could never get enough of my dad's stories and I looked forward to hearing them again and again. My memories of

time spent in the big pines are some of the best memories I have of my dad.

When my son Andy was little my dad began to take him for walks in the big pines. I loved watching Andy's face light up as my dad would take his hand and they would head out the door for their great adventure. I knew what Andy was getting ready to experience, because I had been lucky enough to experience it myself as a young girl. It made my dad so happy to be able to show his grandson this big world in front of him. They collected leaves, picked berries, caught bugs, used branches as walking sticks, played in puddles, and all the many things that I also did with my dad as a young girl. When they came back from their walk Andy would have a collection of "treasures" to take home with him. He would be so excited when he returned! He could hardly wait to tell me all the fun things they had done and all about the things they saw. I would listen intently as he shared his day. It was a beautiful thing to experience this again through the eyes of my child. It was even more beautiful to see my dad standing behind him just beaming with joy. He was so proud of himself for bringing such happiness to his grandson.

Unfortunately, now, my dad is no longer with us. The disease eventually took him away from us. Left behind are so many beautiful memories of my dad. I was so lucky to have experienced this life. Even more, I am so lucky my son had the chance to experience it. I am not sure how much my son remembers of his big pine adventures, but I remember them vividly as if they were yesterday. I often think about driving to Pennsylvania and visiting that special place I had shared with my dad. I wonder if I walked through the pines if I would feel my dad's presence there. I wonder if I prayed under those branches if it would carry my "I love you" up into the heavens to my dad. I wonder if he would look down from heaven and once again see me, his child, amongst the big pines. ☽

Bloom

PAIGE PETTICREW

A seed planted in the ground eventually turns into a flower,
With the right care

A person planted on the earth will grow,
With the right care

And just like a flower blooms,
So does a person

Every time a flower dies,
A part of me does too

Not necessarily in a bad way

But just like a flower,
People grow and change too

Certain parts of us die,
So that we can bloom

Adventures in Urban Gardening

EVA RANDALL

The side yard is completely fenced in and sunny after we had the tree, which was too close to the house anyway, cut down. My friends told me that I could grow about anything in this yard. Uh huh.

Let's start with the cucumbers. Soil was enriched, seeds were planted, and vines grew up the chain link fence. I saw visions of cucumber salads, sliced cucumbers with salt, and pickles (never mind that pickling cucumbers are a different variety—I know that now). And the cucumbers came, oh yes they did! They were firm and a decent size, and bright orange. Yup, not a trace of green. Turns out that there is such a thing as too many coffee grounds in the dirt. It was a bit (a very large bit) too acidic. The nice people at Cooperative Extension said that they were fine to eat though. Have you ever eaten an orange cucumber? Me neither.

Blueberry bushes would be nice. Off to Agway for advice and the two recommended bushes. Fifty dollars later, there were blueberry bushes growing merrily in the yard. They looked great. There would be blueberry pancakes, blueberry muffins, and bowls of blueberries all from my own bushes. Except the bushes produced a grand total of two berries. Those berries cost \$25 each. And then the bushes died.

My track record isn't so great, so a less expensive bush was in order. Strawberry bushes at the farmers' market don't cost very much and only one is needed. The first year my pretty little strawberry plant was mistaken for a weed and helpfully pulled up by a ten year old. The second year it was mowed right over. The third year I decided not to put a plant into the ground, so I bought a strawberry pot. Container gardening might suit me better anyway. The cats took umbrage to this pot being in an upright position so they knocked it over a few times. Nowadays the strawberry bushes at the farmers' market tremble every spring when they see me coming. They know that I'll be taking one of them home and it will be dead by August.

You'd think I'd just give up, wouldn't you? Nope. There are too many different things still to try. And there have been successes over the years. I planted, in containers too heavy for the cats to knock over, the ingredients for salsa. The tomatoes and peppers were perfect. Here's a note for anyone who wants to try this: don't rub your eyes when you've been handling hot peppers.

You've heard of pepper spray? Yeah, I'll never live that one down.

My friends tried to help me to grow things, too. I was given some mint to plant that I was warned would take over my whole yard. Mint would be so great for cooking with, making tea from and, of course, mojitos! But this is my yard so the mint stayed politely in the corner it was planted in for three years. I did dry the leaves for tea one year. After that the mint politely died.

A partial success can be claimed with the garbage can potatoes. I listened when people said to grow your own potatoes and carrots because they'll grow in anything. Because they will grow in anything, they are. Grow these yourself if you want to eat healthy food. The garbage can is a simple growing method for potatoes, too: put a bit of dirt in the bottom of the can, plant quartered potatoes and cover them with dirt. As the plant grows, keep adding dirt until eventually the dirt comes to the top of the garbage can. In the fall, you pour out the dirt and harvest at least ten pounds of potatoes. And it worked as advertised. But maybe the plant got too tall before the dirt layer was added a couple times, who knows? The whole can produced about three pounds of potatoes. And they were very tasty. This gets attempted every single year because hope springs eternal in an inexperienced gardener. The result has yet to change.

Popcorn has been a total success. There is a 4 by 4 box that is planted with popcorn seeds every spring. This little patch of popcorn paradise produces at least a couple mason jars of popcorn every year. Even the cats haven't been able to do much damage to the popcorn. As an added bonus, while it is growing it is the prettiest popcorn you've ever seen. I dumped a little planter of dirt into the box one fall before putting the planter away for the winter. Morning glories are hearty little buggers. I thought I'd removed all traces of them from the box. The morning glories wind around the corn stalks every year and grace them with beautiful purple blossoms. Every year I try to remove them right from the root. If only the other things I've tried to grow would be so reliable and come back just as abundantly as ever, year after year.

Lastly, let me tell you about my horseradish. It will not die. Why did I plant it in the first place? Because it was given to me and I like horseradish. I really wanted to put something else in that spot but I never will. The horseradish has been ignored, dug up, drowned, and planted over. It just grows a little bigger every single year. The horseradish cream made from it is wonderful, so I've learned to co-exist and found another spot to plant lavender. The lavender died anyway. Twice. ☺

Photograph



Death Valley National Park | Curtis Daniel

No U Turn

VIRGINIA SHIRLEY

The last Sharpie on the face of the planet and this is how you want to waste it?"

Lily is balanced on my back, about to deface yet another road sign.

"Hells, yeah!"

I feel her weight shift, hear the scritch scritch of felt on dirty metal.

"Almost done," she says.

Earlier, she'd tackled a pedestrian crossing the road sign. She climbed on the metal cables that acted as a guard rail, calves quivering with effort. A minute later she jumped down with a flourish. I straightened to see she'd drawn an enormous fart cloud coming out of the pedestrian's ass. The one before that, she'd drawn a surfboard, the one before that a flapping cape. The familiar wobble of her feet meant she was climbing down. This one was a deer crossing sign. I don't need to look to know what she's drawn. She jumps down and gestures at her handiwork.

"Look."

I sling on my pack and start walking. She grabs hers, struggles it on and trots up next to me. She leans into my ear.

"Aren't you even going to look? Hmmm? Just a peek?"

"I know what you did."

"No you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"It's not what you think." She grabs me by the shoulders and turns me back. "It's bigger!" The penis she's drawn is as big as the deer. She laughs so hard she snorts. She laughs at her work. She laughs at me. She laughs because that's what she does. I feel my whole self start to frown.

"Oh, don't," she says.

"Don't what?" But I know.

She walks backward in front of me, copying my face. Eyes bunched, forehead creased, lips in a righteous pucker. "This," she points at her own face, "is you."

I turn away. "No, it's not."

She jumps in front of me again. "See?" She points at herself, at me, and back again. "It's you."

"Fine."

“Fine,” she repeats, still with the face. I feel myself relaxing and she drops it a moment later. “Ah! There you are again.”

“Here I am.” I take a bottle of water from the side of my pack. I twist off the lid but instead of taking a drink I offer one to her. “Water?”

“Thanks!”

But when she gets close enough to take it I squeeze the bottle as hard as I can. A gout of water erupts. I drench her face, her chest. Dripping, she howls in delight, grabs the bottle and dances off down the road.

“You’re a real wierdo,” I call.

“Takes one!” she leaves the “to know one” unspoken.

We’ve been walking for ages. In fact, since the Virus hit it’s almost all we do. The Virus has some sort of fancy name Lily or Aunt Jo might remember, but the rest of us reduced it to initials—EHV—or, as it came to be known, the Exit Humanity Virus. More than a few women succumbed to it, but it single-mindedly attacked the Y chromosome. So most men are history. The few who remained tried to hold the line, tried to stay in control. But they soon understood just how outnumbered they were, and what a bad idea it was to try to maintain the status quo. (Status quo has got to go—what a terrible protest chant that made) Now “the boys” live in hidden pockets, are nomads, or are kept in “dude” ranches where we can keep an eye on them.

Why the Y chromosome? No one knows. Was it natural or engineered? No one knows. An act of revenge? Again, no one knows or has claimed credit. Lily once explained it with her Sharpie to a group of school sisters. She drew a large X on the wall, and next to it another, only missing its right leg.

“This is the X chromosome.” She pointed with mock reverence at the X. She moved her Sharpie to the other. “And this is the Y.” She shook her head sadly. “As you can see, it’s missing something. It’s incomplete. It’s weak.” She drew a fuzzy shape above the weak Y. “That’s EHV. Chomp, chomp, chomp.” She drew the Y again, only on its side as if it had fallen down. She made a whistling sound for effect. “Plunk. Dead. Any questions?” There hadn’t been any.

Since the virus we’ve tried to keep things simple. We didn’t try to resurrect the past, restart technologies, open refineries. We didn’t get things “up and running again.” Not because we couldn’t—hat wouldn’t have been much of a problem, even with more than half the population gone. No. We didn’t

because the old ways were such a pain in the ass. We'd lost our curiosity. Our drive. Most places had basic electricity, sure. But we weren't about to let cell phones and smart TVs take our brains away again. We planted gardens. Raised chickens. Stopped waging war with the trees, the bears, and the oceans. We hoped Mother Nature was digging our efforts and wouldn't evict the rest of us.

We have at least a day's walk to get to our Aunt Jo's. The scope of the sky is changing, getting ready to set the sun down over the horizon and lift the moon up in its place. We'll need to make camp soon, and I have a sudden lust for a roof over my head. I love a good sky map, love the sounds and the smells of fresh, clean air, and dirt. But tonight? I want walls, a floor. A kind of coffin. In front of me Lily adjusts her pack.

"Next exit is Woodside. It's only another mile. Bet we can find a nice place."

"Thanks." As I catch up with her she hands me half of her power loaf. "Thanks," I say again. We walk on in silence. No one else is around to talk to. We pass a small herd of deer nosing in the grass just off the shoulder. They lift their heads, gaze in boredom with their black glassy eyes. They chew, shrug, and then they're back at it. Not even a tail twitch. Lily gives them an exaggerated blink, then makes a buzzing noise that doesn't bother them one bit.

"Just took a mental picture," she says to no one.

In town we have our pick of houses, haughty in their day and now humbled with neglect. They are widely spaced, with ample lawns and majestic landscaping. No longer savaged into submission, lawns crept over sidewalks, bushes bushed, trees shed their leaves in careless unswept piles.

"Pish!" Lily says. "So very uppah crusty!"

"I bet they were all Stepford wives."

"With Stepford kids."

"And a Stepford dog."

"But you know that the cat didn't fall for that bullshit nonsense."

House follows house. Lily picks the one that is so overgrown it can hardly be seen from the street. We ease through the thicket of forsythia, exotic ornamental grasses, and oozing vines. The whole tangle moves with our every move, pulls and stretches, but ungiving. My pack gets hung up more than once, and we have to free each other from snags.

"This reminds me of those cool illustrations of all the jackass heroes that came in trying to rescue Sleeping Beauty."

“What are you talking about?”

“She slept so long that the thorns grew like webs and tore her rescuers to bloody bits.”

“And of course you think that’s cool,” I say, already knowing that she does.

“Ah-yup.”

And we are through. Ivy covers the house like a shaggy coat. It’s alive with chittering, scolding birds. Small trees grow in the gutters, lichens cover the shingles. Roses writhe in agony, drowned out by towering coneflowers. Greenery slithers over the paving stones, blanketing unidentifiable lawn ornaments. Something skulks behind us in the tangle. It is small, whatever it is, but it unnerves me. I look back to where Lily is busy prying the door. It surrenders with a creaky sigh.

“And we’re in,” Lily says.

“Do we have to rescue any skanky princesses?”

“Not tonight.”

“Thank gods.”

Inside is a museum of opposites. An ornate china cabinet, enrobed in diaphanous cob webs. Mold has bloomed in the corners and under the luxury wall paper. Mouse droppings like black rice in bone china tea cups. A squirrel’s den in the sink. Turkish rugs chewed indiscriminately round the edges. Bookcases that shelved knotted nests of twigs and hair. Insects amble unabashedly over every available surface. The Queen Ann couch garlanded in a lace of ivy that continues up the wall, over the drapes, and makes stained glass patterns on the windows. Lily pounds her fist into one of the chairs, cringing. Black dust billows. How many years until the house is swallowed entirely, consumed, digested, its remains shat out like prey bones in owl scat?

In our sleeping bags, in the middle of the living room floor, we lie not actually sleeping. Lily and I are the world’s biggest twin joke. She’s mercurial, light, gregarious, funny. I am a raincloud filled with rocks. We’re fraternal, but couldn’t look more different than one another if we’d come from completely different worlds. I’m fair and blonde, with blue eyes that look like glass. She’s olive skinned, has hair that flashes like a raven wing. Eyes like black mirrors. Aunt Jo jokes that our personalities were switched into the opposite bodies, making us a perfect Yin Yang. That we would wither away without the half of our self embedded in the other. Aunt Jo is right. But while she took us in after our father died from EHV, and my mother followed from grief, Lily is

the most real reason I'm alive. She's guided me through the entirety of my life, cheering me up and on, defending my weirdness to the family and the world at large. She pulled me from a dark mud cave of introspection. Lily is the light, and I am her shadow.

"I love you," Lily says suddenly. "And you've got it wrong." She waits before continuing. She knows what I've been thinking, just as I know what she's about to say. We may be polar opposites, but we are twins. We share a vital, important connection that most others lack. "You're my kite string," she says. "Without you I would have blown away a long time ago. Adrift. Alone."

"Fucking go to sleep," I say.

"You too."

We're almost to Aunt Jo's. We're busy talking about how much we missed her over the last weeks, how we miss the menagerie of cats and dogs that have taken up residence with her. We're bringing back news and supplies and know we'll get a grand reception when we arrive. We're hoping she breaks out some of the peach brandy she makes – like drinking springtime that burns a little. And then Lily spies a road sign.

"Oh, yeah," she says and starts walking faster. She's already got her Sharpie out, and as she reaches the sign she shrugs out of her pack and uncaps the pen. "Come on," she waves at me. "Hurry up."

I drop my pack unceremoniously and start to bend so she can climb up. It's a No U Turn sign, and I can't begin to think of any clever way she can deface it. I erect myself. "There's nothing funny or wicked to do here," I say.

"Come on. You'll like this one." She gestures impatiently for me to bend and I obey. She climbs up and is done almost before she starts. She jumps down beside me. "Check it out." She's smiling like a loon, obviously proud. The sign now reads No, U Turn.

"Get it?"

I find myself laughing. "No, U Turn."

"No, U Turn!"

I give her a gentle push. "NO, U Turn!"

We stand looking at the sign for a few minutes more, pick up our packs, and head home. ∞

Hell Hath No Furry

VIRGINIA SHIRLEY

This time there were no stars or moon to light the way. All was darkness, and the Great Raccoon high on her stump was more imposing than she had ever been. But then, Fury had never approached her before, had never dared speak up. Raccoon motioned her forward with some impatience.

“Who addresses the Collective?” asked the Great Raccoon. She glared down from the stump, and if Fury hadn’t known her outside this role, she would have found it difficult to speak up.

“Fury Grey Squirrel, of Archer.”

“Furry Grey Squirrel,” a woodchuck snickered.

“She’s so small, how can anyone even see her?” It was true, she was small. Many, kin and human alike, mistook her for a baby. More than once she had used this to her advantage, but now she felt the disadvantage.

Fury ignored them all, puffed up her tail to its greatest bulk. Best just to get it out. “I’ve come to propose retribution.” With this, all the sniggering stopped.

“What’s she on about?”

“What could she mean?”

“I hope she doesn’t mean war,” said Pip Dog of Aldrich.

“We’d eat them right quick,” piped in Faust Cat also of Aldrich.

“Enough!” Silva Raccoon of South Wood commanded.

“The murder of all our brethren should be avenged,” Fury went on. “They kill us at will with their cars and trucks. They put out poisons and traps...”

At this the mice nodded vigorously.

“We’ve taken it long enough.” She was feeling bold now, and addressed the Collective directly. “We watch as if we’re helpless, but we’re not!”

“What are we supposed to do?” The chipmunks chorused.

“Shit on their windshields,” a Blue Jay shrieked. The Jays never bothered with names, and no one really wanted to tell them apart anyway.

“Shit on them,” a pigeon cooed.

“No, no,” said Fury.

“What then?” asked Raccoon.

“We kill them back.” Fury eased under the car. Dead of night, stationary or engine idling, going under cars made her nervous indeed. She hid the twitch of her tail, hoping Milla hadn’t noticed.

“Do you see anything?” Milla whispered.

“Not yet. But I smell it.” Proof was the worst part. After a target was identified,

they were observed by the network. Each kill was carefully recorded, be it mouse or woodchuck, squirrel or bird. Each was testified on in front of the Collective.

"I saw him swerve to run her over. Deliberate like. I don't care for her kind, but he swerved. Red truck it was."

"She never had a chance. It could have been avoided. It was the red truck."

"The red truck. On Way Street. Mid of the day, and he curbed Mikan like he was a low Squirrel." A quick duck of the head Fury's way. "No offense, none."

"None taken," Fury said. "Specially coming from an O'Possum."

When there was enough testimony, the Collective sent her in to collect ultimate proof. Hair, blood, meat. It had to be there or retribution would be deferred. Fury had gotten all of this started. She would see each case ended, even if she didn't like the work involved or the outcome.

"Do you see anything?" Milla asked again. Clearly, she was nervous too. Let her try climbing about under a car instead of being lookout.

Fury stretched her body as long as it would go. She didn't want to touch anything, didn't want the taint of death on her fingers. And there it was. Grey hairs, a wiry coat of blood... There were fine red hairs too, some tipped in black. The meat was jerky dry, dehydrated and cooked hard under the body of the car. Her nose wrinkled in anger and disgust.

"Witness," she said, and Milla crawled forward.

"I see," Milla said.

"And here." She pointed.

"Yes."

A light clicked on inside the house. The hair up her back bristled, her tail shook. They ran.

The Raccoon waddled in, parting the knot of other animals. They had mingled before Raccoon had come, but now separated into their own delegacies. Squirrels, grey and red. Cats, with chipmunks or mice on their shoulders so they could see and hear the proceedings. A few odd dogs. Birds large and small perched together, scratching their feet impatiently. Rabbits jostled the O'Possums, who showed them tooth-filled smiles in return. The Raccoon climbed onto the stump and raised her paws, opening them wide. She called for silence, even though everyone there had already gone silent.

"The matter before us is grave," she said. "The Red Truck is a blight upon us."

All sounded an agreement. "What are the tallies? What are the proofs?" The Raccoon asked.

Fury stepped into the open semi-circle before the stump. "At least two

Grey Squirrels. One Red. A chipmunk..." At this everyone's breath sucked in. Chippies were so fast it seemed impossible anyone could hurt them. And who would want to hurt a chippie? Even the cats in attendance were upset." They're so cute," one meowed.

"I'd never actually eat one," purred another.

"Did the chipmunk go knowingly?" the Great Raccoon asked, breaking the interruption short.

"It was not self destruction, no," she said. Her tail twitched violently and she took it between her paws, stroking it to calm herself.

"There were others?"

"Yes. A cat."

"What cat?" This from Faust Cat of Aldrich, the lead delegate from the cat clan.

"Orange tabby. Wide face."

Faust flattened his ears. "Ah, Morris."

"There was an attempt on a deer, but he made it across and over the hill. The Red Truck stopped and watched him run. He had a shotgun, but didn't use it."

"A deer, you say?!"

"These were all after your command for surveillance," she said. "And each report was a deliberate hit." A chorus of disapproval erupted from the delegates, and the Raccoon signaled for calm.

"Reason, reason," she yelled. "Continue, Squirrel."

She let go of her tail. "The deer are much vexed, and wonder if they would be allowed into the retribution ceremony."

"This will take some negotiating," said the Raccoon.

"Allow it," said Faust, and his cats howled agreement.

"Allow it," squeaked the mice and chipmunks together.

The dogs nodded, growling deep in their chests.

"I will put the matter before the Queen." With that, Raccoon slid down off the stump. A nervous hush fell over the crowd. A sliver of moonlight fell patchwork, through the leafless trees. It lit the fur of the Fox Queen, making her silhouette glow red.

"She's here," one of them whispered, and a nervous hush fell over the crowd. Raccoon bowed deep on their behalf and then she and the Fox walked soundlessly into the wood. For a long while no one spoke. Then one of the cats threw her leg in the air and began grooming. A dog yawned loosely and some of the squirrels began chasing their tails and each other. Fury resisted the urge to join them. Milla came to stand next to her, pulling at her own fingers.

“How will we ever include the Deer?”

“There’s always a way.” Her mind was turning now, though. If a deer, why not a bear?

He got in the truck, turned on the radio. Songs of lost dogs and pickup trucks issued forth. He nodded in time, but didn’t sing along. He wanted a beer. He didn’t go far when he saw a deer moving down the center of the road. It limped over by the side of the road, stood stock still. This one would be easy.

“Careful now.” The Chipmunks held onto the Deer by his ears. “That limp is brilliant, by the by. Where ever did you learn it?”

The Chipmunks had high squeaky voices that tickled his ears and the Deer resisted shaking his antlered head. They were there to bite him in case Red Truck tried to spot light him. They’d spur him to action in case the light froze him into a statue.

“Here he comes.”

“Don’t look at the light.”

“Will you shut it?” The Deer snorted just as the light struck him. He froze, mouth open and staring into the distance. The Man balanced the huge light on the front of his truck. He opened the door, careful not to shake anything and withdrew the shotgun.

“Uhhhhhh,” the Deer said. The Man raised the gun. “Uhhhhhh,” the Deer said again. He was sighting now, and the Chippers both bit down hard. “AAAAAAHHHH!” Deer bolted forward.

“Whu?” The Man lowered his gun. The Deer had circled back behind him, and he was confused. He’d never seen a deer break a spot light before. He had just enough time to see Deer charging, was even more confused when he thought he saw chipmunks hanging off the deer’s ears, squeaking through clenched teeth.

In the brush the whole collective tensed. “Wait, wait,” commanded Fury. “Wait for Deer to hit him...” But they were already flooding forward, a great tide of teeth and claws. Deer hit him, head low to gut, twisting just enough to hurt but not to kill. Yet. The Man went down, more confused than ever. Were those squirrels coming at him? He reached for the shot gun but the deer was stamping on it with hooves sharp enough to cut to the bone.

They made short work of the man. Each bit and tore, taking at least one turn. Larger delegates first, then when he was unmoving and it was safe, the chipmunks, mice, and even blind moles took their turn. Deer watched it all, til he was satisfied. Finally they were done and the man was nothing. Deer took a last stomp, then turned and walked away and into the woods.

Fury was breathing hard. She listened to the squeaks, purrs, and chirps around her. Some were already beginning to groom themselves back to normal. She thought they were sated and would soon go home as they always did. But Milla turned back to the truck and barked her angriest call to war against it. At first everyone just watched her bark, putting it all down to the Squirrel clan's tendency toward over-emotional behavior.

"Kill the Red Truck too!" Milla barked. Members of the collective poured in the open door. They tore out the seats, ripped the floor mats to pieces. They chewed through the dashboard, spitting out chunks of orange-colored matter as they went. Fury began to laugh. The truck rocked on its tires. Wipers went flying, wires were chewed through. The valve stems went next, and the truck slowly settled to the ground, as if it were hunkering down to rest. The headlights went out, and the Red Truck closed its eyes in final sleep. But they weren't yet done. The window gaskets went and the windows fell out the front and back. Pieces, unidentifiable bits, were carried off and pissed on. The spotlight was crushed, and foul smelling liquids poured from the carcass of the Red Truck and onto the ground. They were all making their worst sounds of anger and enjoyment until a Jay began shrieking an alarm. They straightened, frozen for a beat of their hearts. And they heard it coming...another car. One last look, and they fled. The Rats were busy tearing newspapers for their winter nests. Fury was out investigating another Man, and they awaited an invitation with great anticipation.

"We'll tear both man and car apart again," Dash Rat of State said.

"Can I go too this time?" his son Fleet asked.

"I think you're old enough, yes," Dash said, and Fleet's mother Zip nodded her approval. They all went back to tearing strips off the newspaper. If they could have read it, they would have been very proud.

Delbert Arkins, of Pell Street, was found murdered on route 13, near his home. His body was nearly stripped of flesh and his truck was destroyed. Police think this new development might be an attempt to hide or destroy evidence. Arkins is thought to be the fifth victim of the Woodland Killer. ♪

A Snowy Escape

SISSY SLICK

I never liked this stretch of highway, especially when it's snowing," Loretta said while tightening her woolen scarf around her neck. "I just tried calling the sitter and there's no cell service. I wish you'd find another way home from Rockford."

At that moment Nick, nearly missing a curve in the road and fearing Loretta may have noticed, quickly switched on the headlights. She was annoyed with him for having a third scotch at the restaurant while she finished her coffee and he was desperate to avoid another confrontation. Fortunately for Nick, Loretta missed it too.

With an hour's ride still ahead, they continued, in icy silence, along the deserted interstate to Davis Junction. Turning to face the window, Loretta looked up at the full moon seeming to keep pace with the moving car. It was one of those moons with a special name, like strawberry moon or smiling face moon, she couldn't remember. Shining down, its luminescence created the effect of millions of tiny diamonds sparkling on the snow's surface. Hints of white, blue, and yellow twinkled on and off as they drove by. Loretta's peaceful sojourn, however, quickly came to a screeching halt when an unexpected jolt to the car, followed by ear splitting sounds of scraping metal, brought her back to reality. "What the hell was that? Stop the car, you hit something," she shrieked; her arms instinctively stretched forward as she lunged toward the dash.

"I swear there was nothing on the road," Nick said in self-defense. "But I'll look around just to be sure." He found the metal box under the car. It was about three feet long, roughly fifteen inches high and crushed at one end from the front bumper's impact. "It must have fallen from a delivery truck," he said, smoothing the crumpled shipping label. "It's addressed to Mr. Hugo Arms, in Davis Junction, and the return label says Furever Yours Taxidermy." When Nick picked up the container, they heard a loose piece inside slide from one end to the other.

"Sounds like whatever's inside is broken," said Loretta, glaring accusingly at her husband. Together they pried off the lid releasing the nose piercing odor of formaldehyde. With that, a tiny red foreleg with a black paw tumbled onto the road. Loretta jumped back and screamed. She quickly picked up the detached

piece and, pointing it at Nick, blamed him for mutilating a stuffed animal that had already suffered at the hands of a cold-hearted hunter. “Now look what you’ve done,” she shouted. “This was a baby fox’s leg and you broke it.”

She threw the severed paw at Nick, hitting him across his forehead, creating a dull clunking sound, like a baseball struck with a wooden bat. It seemed extra loud on the otherwise silent night. With this final blow, Nick sat in the middle of the icy highway holding the broken paw in his arms and wept. He wasn’t sure if he felt worse for the baby fox or himself.

“Where’s the fox?” Loretta said, walking to the front of the car and picking up the empty container. Nick stood, stuffing the leg in his jacket pocket as if he planned to keep it. With super-size snowflakes falling, limiting their vision, they struggled to see beyond the smooth surface of the snowy field. There were animal tracks beside the car continuing beyond the highway’s shoulder, and heading to the open field. Loretta, shielding her eyes from the falling flakes, saw in the distance a fresh trail of small paw prints heading up the ridge toward a grouping of pine trees. Strangely, there was one print in the front and two behind. In time, the falling snow filled them in. ☹

Mother Birch

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

She stands tall, limbs sprawling in sweeping lines of blistered white: an eruption of yellow-green fans from each wrinkled finger in fettered light. Her weathered skin speaks of wizened age and tales of chilling intrigue. Storms she'd overcome, providing refuge for forest folk soft under cruel plight—the fortitude of motherhood flaring bright—friends she'd lost—some withered, some mangled and cleaved by man. Suffering through torment and seasons with no end, yet here she tiptoes, in fine form and dignified pose.

Waif at Sea

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

Abandoned, my trust flounders,
Braced against slick rock,
Castaway like a rind well chewed—
Dashed upon the glossy cliff,
Emptying my hopes
Flush with embarrassed naivety,
Granted naught but a blade
Honed with magic of Fae,
I beat tired legs against hungry waves,
Jamming feeble fingers in the cacophonous crag,
Knotted threads trail in the ebbing tide
Lost to the creatures of deep under.

My strength wanes in stutters
Near sweet, eternal repose,
Only a memory stalls my submission
Promised meetings a reason,
Quivering I tread the rapid blue
Relenting not under fierce compulsion,
Slight of build my frame bends
Tilting under pressure,
Upwards my neck arcs
Vying for each gasped breath,
Waiting on the saccharine oblivion
Xylose with innocuous relief
Yet something holds me here

Resplendent in Recall

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

The incessant chirping of crickets lures me back to the playful exuberance of childhood, to days spent traipsing Little Pond, a place of treasures and creatures galore. With dragonflies big enough to veil our ruddy faces when they lit upon our noses, frogs slimy like the undersides of our sugar-stained tongues, and caterpillars capable of gymnastic maneuvers a tightrope walker would be envious of, there wasn't anywhere livelier. Junk that proved plentiful and fortuitous in the capable hands of youth littered the outskirts of the clearing. No houses nor adults stood near; nothing was constrained here. Every single delight—living or not—rocketed our whims and fancies sky high.

Fragile yet bountiful sacs of frog eggs slept within the murky corners of the pond. Like precious black pearls they tempted us, fingers and eyes drawn in tandem. Only knowing what would soon burst forth withheld nosy digits from piercing the bubbles of life. Water skiers swirled like idle bodyguards around the dormant eggs as tangerine newts looked on with all the pomposity of dragons. Above the tiny aquatic society flew crows and sparrows, occasionally met with more exotic fowl. The achingly beautiful call of a wood thrush could be heard by the patient, its flute-like song a welcome addition to the hush of Little Pond.

Dipping further into the recesses of my mind, I find memories of adolescent games and dalliances. One day might warrant extreme caution and preparedness, that only the most responsible of children were capable of traversing the unknown wilds. Exploiting the land and gathering all resources was paramount—a lesson learned from the Robinson family. Another day could bring spontaneity and sport. It couldn't do to practice restraint frequently; a child must make merry as often as possible! Too soon it would be schooltime again.

Only upon returning home was the magic broken. So deep was our enchantment, we did not notice hours swooping by or hunger creeping up our throats. The strongest of appetites was pacified with berries and honeysuckle, washed down with sweet water collected from the burbling creek a few hundred feet east. Time was a nonexistent thing and strife even less so. Such rhapsody was unrivaled by any other play site. Little Pond was truly one of a kind. ∞

Teensy

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

She rests snugly in his pocket, her weight much lighter than her purpose. Nim's thumb glides easily over her glazed brown back, but hesitates on her chalky white belly. It is difficult to stay gentle in the fervor of the moment yet he extends what little energy he has left to handle her with tender care. Nim turns his gaze upwards, up at the dense leaves glowing orange in the rising light—bowing to passersby from their lofty perches, up at the cloudless sky, blue spilling like watercolors into the purple of a relinquished night. The sight is uplifting, an ironic discernment given his current plight.

Fatigue slinks into his bones and life ebbs in waves from his fingers and toes. He can no longer feel the ruthless cold; in its stead a flickering warmth roosts in his chest, each fallen spark generating the fuel needed to stroke the torpid creature in his pocket. Nim drags his trembling hand against the ragged fin that pierces his thigh from within its flimsy, cotton confines. It's a welcome pain in the heedless oblivion before him.

A fuzzy shadow eclipses his vision and thoughts desert him. Nim is left with only those two points of pressure, a finger and thigh pressed against a precious clay whale.

Teensy. ∞

Kiss the Moon

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

Walls slick with condensation and blotched by mold seemed to loom and expand inwards, the yellowish-white plaster bulging obscenely. Curdled with the perspiration of a man unkempt and cigarettes whet arbitrarily, the air hung like a dense wool cloak on an August evening. Ami suffered the heat in her wilted fetal position—forced upon her with the aid of stiff ropes and wires rendered useless, at least for any technological purpose.

Bound as she was, each breath was a struggle—a pressed gulp. Brown skin stretched white under the panting upheaval of a chest desperate for air and wept red along coiled restraints. Her bleary vision gained from the slip of a blindfold she hid by turning her nose just so, revealed only the oppressive pane of plexiglass framed by curtains of blue. A raggedy stray cat who wandered past occasionally proved to be the only companion she'd make.

Ami drove her tongue against teeth held apart. Drool gathered in the corners of her mouth and dried already cracked lips. She did not pray, for religiosity was not one of her comforts; instead she thought of the people she loved. She imagined their reactions to her plight and hoped, wished upon every absent star, that just one would find her. Absently, she also imagined biting through the fibrous gag splitting her jaw and past the thick muscle of her tongue. Would it kill her? Quite a few works of literature assured her of the possibility, but what if she was left with a bloody stump and an angry captor?

Cackling jays bragged of their freedom from their perches up high and far as Ami ruminated in the gully of her thoughts. The putrid man, the man with bawdy blue eyes and excess weight, paraded through the blanket acting as a door—subsequently dissolving her internal reflection. He stood over her prone body and puffed like a grizzly bear emerging victorious. For a moment she fancied the idea that he might spare her any blather and move on. Such luck did not strike her. Clifton, her captor, chose to regale her with his reasons for binding her to this place. It was her own fault, he said. “You look at me with those big black eyes and taunt me with your blushing cheeks. Did you expect me to just sit around? You can't laugh at my jokes and assume I will just let you go.”

Ami let gravity pull her lids shut behind the bandana masking her face

and a silent scream echoed within her throat. Such pity she felt for this overly large child. He had been nice at first, indulging in chatter about recent books and shows of interest. They'd discussed music, the wonders of live shows, and the misery of being penniless. It was not long, though, before he initiated a long-standing trend of manipulating her. Clifton peppered compliments into conversations and pushed small gifts into her hands. He invited her to events and social gatherings, pledging platonic affections all the while. Ami of course could not deny his propositions. She was polite and had no desire to hurt him by refusing. She even had fun at times! Friendship was something she valued greatly. It became a challenge, however, when he asked her for a hug. To hold her hand. To sit close. She gently declined as his requests escalated, but this only inflamed him.

Fingers drawing together, Ami drove her blunt nails into calloused flesh. Anxiety blossomed in her breast as she recalled the events leading up to the present. She regretted letting herself be swayed by altruism and hesitating upon confessing her affections for Sappho. Sappho, the earthly woman who was attuned with the planet in ways she could not begin to understand. Who listened with open ears and tender eyes. If Sappho was here, she would call upon the Earth herself. Ami extended her belief in Sappho to the spirits she trusted.

Mother Nature. Gaia. Dewi Sri. Nokomis. She birthed the world humanity subsisted on. She scorned the men of violence and ignorance and sheltered the women who were made victims. Ami was one such soul she guarded. The small woman, wise in her youth and kind even under duress, was a bewitching character to the Goddess. With ribs of fossiliferous stone and a quartz heart, Nokomis felt the first pulses of piety as she gazed upon her charge.

The smell of soil recently turned and moss damp with life saturated the rancid air of before. Scythes of green raised from the stale earth and pierced the floors made of their fallen brethren. Clear water gushed from every chink, every fissure in the hovel of a room, flooding the filthy confines. Ami could not draw the breath to gasp, but she tried—it was, however, not needed. The liquid cradled her, raising her above the carnage wrought by greenery.

Angered so by the man who dared to touch a woman so delightful, so pure, Nokomis strode forth and embraced Ami. Brambles wound around their

clutching forms and grand plumes of water oscillated, prepared to strike any adversaries. Trembling with shame and fear, but too far gone, Clifton blustered, “You can’t take her! She is mine. She loves me!”

Muted red lips puckered into a disgusted frown as Nokomis peered down at the man leaking ammonia-scented fluid. She cuddled the woman in her grasp closely and laughed drily. “Ami belongs to no one except herself! She showed you kindness and your ego misinterpreted it,” she said. “Foolish child, her heart yearns for another woman.”

Clifton attempted to speak again, but was silenced with a flicker of Nokomis’ fingers. Vines slithered from her feet and up his body, drawing tight against his mouth. The Goddess stared at the man and thought of forgiveness for a moment. Then she laughed once again. Mother Nature did not forgive evil—she vanquished it. Turning on russet heels, Nokomis left Clifton where he was rooted and decided, without much effort, to never spare him a glance again.

Ami had lost consciousness some time ago, but she knew that she was safe. She dreamt of solid arms and a firm, yet soft, bosom. It was like retreating to the memories of being held as a baby by a mother warm with adoration. She slept soundly as she was passed into the grasp of another. When she woke, it was to Sappho’s bright smile and words of comfort. Ami could not proclaim a sound knowledge of what had transpired in that period of time following the rushing of water, but she could affirm that the Earth had saved her.

“Sweet woman, do be careful in the future,” Nokomis said when leaving the reunited duo. “Now, Sappho, I listen to your heart and I feel your love. Please, pass this care on to your darling and I will do my Goddessly best to aid you.” She dissipated into wisps of pussywillow and an effluvium of bergamot.

Like the ocean straining to kiss the moon, Nokomis lapped at Ami’s conscience, forever assisting with a whisper of wind when a paper falls out of her reach or wailing storms of tears when she grows parched in her traversing of a desert. Winter ceded quickly to Spring where Ami stepped foot and flowers swelled from cracks in pavement. And somewhere in the distance, dust gathered on the lone statue of a man bound and gagged in marble vines—incapable of plundering a woman’s grace anew. ∞

Furi

SIMONE STEGEMOLLER

Please go along at your own pace, but remember, patience is key" Ida said. Her voice was loud enough to carry, but not enough to startle. "Remember to take notes on anything of particular interest. I'll be answering questions towards the end."

Leaves heaved crackling sighs as feet trod upon their delicate skin. This group was unfamiliar with the ways of the forest. Their steps were heavy and awkward, slipping in mud and tripping over raised roots. Noise bloomed rampant as they moved about like toddlers in a toy store. Ida could not avoid a stuttered sigh. They wouldn't get many observations in if the group continued at this level of greenness. Should she reinforce the need for patience? Walking even slower would quiet them at least somewhat. Rising from her stooped position beside a decomposing log, she once again called out, "Try to stop as often as possible and walk slowly."

With that piece of advice she ducked down once again and flipped a page in her sketchbook. She took cautious breaths as she peered into the underbrush. They were near a pond, lush with lilies and frog eggs and humming with the sound of insects. It had at one point been linked with the river a few hundred feet west, which meant rich territory for the very prey she and the others sought. If the group could remain still for a good ten minutes they might just get lucky. Ida began roughly sketching the tall grass and limbs of trees past as she crouched in wait. A backdrop for the star.

Soon there was more graphite on the paper than not and behind her eyes was an ache from squinting at the sky and through low hanging branches. Now she couldn't be upset since many a bird had flaunted itself, warbling into the still air and flashing colorful attire, yet she still felt disappointment. She longed

to see one feathered creature in particular. None other would satisfy that something inside her which drove her into this very calling. Today was not the day, however; she could hear her group stumbling farther into the distance—their forms hazy in the filtered sunlight. She'd lose them if she didn't go after them now.

Ida regretfully left her now familiar spot, intimate to her after so long, and collected the lost novices. She would lead them about for an hour or so more, let them take their pictures and scribble on their notepads, before heading back to camp. She would then take questions—as unilluminating as they were—and answer them until the next group came along. "Strong I'll stay" she whispered. She glanced over her shoulder, expecting nothing other than what she'd seen previously. Incredulously she saw a heron sitting daintily upon a stone submerged in pond water. Its elegant neck arced toward her then away, almost beckoning. Only the most excruciating force of will let her continue on her way, but not without one last look back at the magnificent creature. ∞



Preserving Beauty | Emily Stilloe

The Long Ride Home

S U S A N S T R A C Q U A D A N I O

Making another daytime drive
and returning on the long ride home.

I've made this trip a thousand times,
a thousand times I've cried.

Saying goodbye to family and friends,
meeting strangers and making amends.

Losing parts of myself and revealing something new
each journey proclaiming what's meant to be true.

The first time driving with a fully packed car
wondering what's to come, if I would get very far

The pain of leaving my old life behind;
the pull of their love like the pull of the tide.

Doubts and fears over two state lines
time to think—and dream—and analyze.

Saying goodbye to the people I love
Letting go of the past, the tenable tug.

I've come back to celebrate
And come back to mourn.

Learned to understand and appreciate,
things held tightly, things tattered and worn.

I've made this trip a thousand times
a thousand times I've cried.

The tears rolling down, and the ones held deep inside
Over all the old familiar miles, past every roadside sign.

This journey and my emotions get the better of me
misgivings and sweet sorrow are readily set free.

The rain on the windshield can't wipe it away
snowflakes falling can't melt their purpose astray.

Rising over hills towards higher elevation,
tears begin to flow without any hesitation.

I've come to bid you one last goodbye
to kiss you one more time and gently hold your hand.

To tell my mother one final time
my eternal gratitude, the love in my heart

Softly whisper my wishes for the next journey—
the bend in the road where we must part.

I've made this trip a thousand times,
a thousand times I've cried.

Never gets any easier, leaving behind all I've known
but I always need to let it go as I make the long ride home.

Mary's Companions

SUSAN STRACQUADANIO
for the poet Mary Oliver

I'm thinking of the dogs (believing there are more than one)
and maybe a frisky feline who serves
to keep the home free from mice.
These are the creatures left behind,
waiting for their truest friend,
their solitary walking companion,
the quiet, searching soul
discovering secrets amid the woods,
alongside sandy tidal pools and in the tall-grass salty marshes.
Who will care for them now?
Who has she entrusted to do this most holy of tasks,
knowing her time for venturing would someday come to an end?

These willing, excited walking partners
were probably part of the reason
behind her rising early
when invited to tag along on her personal quest.
While she immersed herself in nature's wonder,
making the trek to a quiet, shadowed spot
for poetic truth to sink into her being
then setting down to rest a while,
breathing in familiar scents and feeling the gentle wind,
these four-legged friends were free to roam
to search and sniff on their own,
never venturing very far away
until they too were ready
to nap in the open.

Resting beside their mindful, loyal leader,
keeping watch
with one sleepy eye.
Love radiating
from a warm hand gently touching fur.
Receiving messages reflected in the air all around
until the companions, with their Mary,
made their way back home.
Peace found in a simple day's journey.

Clouds

S U S A N S T R A C Q U A D A N I O

Always darkest before the dawn
Every cloud has a silver lining

Don't want to hear it,
no more benevolent,
well-meaning words.
I'm not on board
with this deal that's been made
without my approval.

Don't care if this has been known,
how long we've been aware of decline.
The outcome still shatters.
Its permanence still hurts.

Yet I know in my heart
there'll be breaks in the clouds.
The sun will again peek through.
What she would have wanted,
the bright side I have learned
from a woman
who could always find some light.
Whose strength
has been lovingly shared
firmly inherited.

The consolation is not easy to receive,
though I know peace will come.
I wrestle with the results.
A final piece of childhood
of a family unit is gone.
No longer the present,
from now on the past.

Little Observations

S U S A N S T R A C Q U A D A N I O

The little observations
new discoveries every day
made as a child
are things I dearly miss.

Thoughts come to mind when I'm walking
sightings from now and memories from then.
Like traipsing over tangled tree roots
snaking across the forest floor,
or seeing an elaborate spider's web
on cooler August mornings,
one that connects deck rails to chairs.
How it would always block our path
the same nuisance,
same intricate daily web pattern
to be broken apart and swept away,
but how the silky artistry first made us pause,
studying the lure of its prey
brought to a mesmerizing end.

I remember watching your eyes as they viewed the world.
The first buds of spring
peeking through the last patches of snow,
all the signs of life rebounding
pointed out eagerly
examined from afar
or carefully held in our hands,
nature's array of tiny trinkets
rocks, leaves, shells,
discovered by you for the first time
and brought to my attention,
my full fascination
all over again.

Your tiny hands helping to plant seedlings
the flowers we'd collected
side by side,
Mommy's little helper
crouched and busy
proudly lining pots along the walkway
with miniature garden gloves and tools
working the soil
and dusting off our dirt-stained clothes
to view our colorful display.

Counting the first fireflies of evening
then the first stars to appear,
searching for milkweeds in August
to welcome monarchs in September,
the long woodland walks
past tiny footprint mazes
and hidden burrows,
nests high on the branches,
bird songs,
their proclamations from all sides
warm summer grass buzzing with bees
and lying on our backs
dreaming on the shapes of clouds
what do you see?

A child's open, bright spark of curiosity
sets imagination loose again,
has a way
of shining a light on the world,
the forgotten and cursed,
the mundane
what's merely in our way
suddenly seen as new,
magical.

Those sweet, slow moments
the little observations,
reminders to be still—
take notice, take time,
becoming more precious
as they've moved into memories.



Green Pastures and Youth | Simone Stegemoller

The Little Girl and the Kitten: A Never Ending Love Story

CHERYL SULLIVAN

Among the things I thank God for the most is the love that he gave me for animals. My heart would be emptier, and life would be less without them.

—Anonymous

Once upon a time there was a little girl who was sad and lonely. She really needed a friend who would just listen and be there for her. Sometimes the little girl's life was kind of scary and she just needed to be able to go to a quiet place to be comforted and to share her thoughts out loud.

Then, one day while she was on an errand for her mother, she made a wonderful discovery. As she entered the store located down the road from her home, she noticed a lonely-looking little kitten sitting on the windowsill just looking inside the store. As she was leaving the store, the little girl decided to go back in and inquire whether the kitten belonged to anyone. She did so and the cashier answered no. As she was walked out of the store, the girl turned and picked up the kitten, hugged her to her body, and started home. The girl was elated! Little did she know at the time that this encounter would change her life forever.

As she walked home, the little girl began to bond with the little kitten, and what an experience that was. This furry creature needed her as much as she needed it. However, the girl had not asked permission to be able to keep the kitten and now was worried if she would be able to do so. Even though she had the kitten for only a short time, the thought of possibly having to give her up was overwhelming. So she began to plan her strategy to keep the kitten for her very own.

Upon arriving home, the girl spoke to her mother about the possibility of keeping the little bundle of fur. Her mother gave her the usual parental response, "you will have to ask your father." Oh boy, she did not even know if her father liked cats, let alone if he would approve of a kitten. The girl waited for what seemed like days for her father to come home. What would he say? What would he do? Her anxiety was increasing as the time passed. Then came the moment when she heard her father's car. What would happen next?

The door opened and the girl's father entered the kitchen. While she thought she had everything all planned out, she froze. What to do? What to say? Well, the girl decided to just approach the situation head-on and honestly.

It took a lot of convincing but the end result was that she would be allowed to keep the kitten and would be totally responsible for taking care of it. That was a responsibility she was more than happy to assume. And so their life journey began. They had so much fun together. The girl looked forward to every moment she was able to spend with the kitten whom she named Tinkerbelle, Tinker for short. The girl and Tinker found a special place in the field next to their house under a big maple tree. Sometimes the girl's house would become very chaotic and the two of them could find peace for a time under their tree. She could share whatever she wanted with Tinker. Tinker would just patiently sit there as the girl poured out her heart, or better yet, just hugged her friend.

A few years passed, and the girl's brothers decided they would like to have a dog. They did not have to do much to convince their father as he really liked dogs. So off they went to the local dog shelter to adopt a puppy. They came home with the cutest little dog, whom her brothers named Shep.

Unfortunately, they had her only a few days and she became very ill. The girl's mother took her to see a veterinarian and it was discovered that Shep had canine distemper, which at the time was not that uncommon in the shelters. The girl spent many hours taking care of the little puppy and the two of them bonded during this time. While it took a few weeks and many tense moments, Shep fully recovered. It was at this time that the little girl began to consider the idea of working with animals when she grew up.

Over a period of time, her brothers lost interest in Shep, so the young girl gladly took charge of her care. Now the young girl had two friends: Tinker and Shep. The three of them would go to their favorite spot under the maple tree and just relax. In this place, they could just be.

Time moved on and the young woman decided that she did want to work with animals and went to college. She truly enjoyed what she was learning and was sad that she had to leave Tinker and Shep behind. However, while she was at school, she adopted a cat and dog from the animal shelter and they became part of her growing animal family. Soon she graduated and began working in the field. Unfortunately, this was only for a short time and, due to some unfortunate life events, she was unable to continue in this type of work.

By this time, her beloved Shep and Tinker had aged and both developed medical conditions and soon were gone. This was very sad, but the young woman had many wonderful memories of their time together. She had learned so much from them with regard to love and friendship that would last a lifetime. On a happy note, the young woman had her newly adopted animals and, while it was not the same as her faithful friends, they filled that spot in her heart just the same.

As the years went on, the young woman had children of her own. She still had her animals and was excited that she could share this love of animals with her children. It was so exciting to see them love animals in the same way that she did. In addition, this love extended to other animals, which included rabbits and horses.

Time passed and the woman's children grew and they had children of their own. As life would have it, and much to the woman's delight, her children and grandchildren had a real love for animals as well. She cherished the times when she saw how they loved and cared for their animals. What the woman did not realize at the time was that a legacy was developing for a love for animals in each generation that came along.

Love comes in many forms. In this story, it all started with the little girl and the kitten and evolved into a never-ending love story. The little girl's initial love for the little, lonely, lost kitten resulted in a love for numerous animals that she welcomed into her life over the years and had the privilege to love and care for. However the best gift of all was the legacy of a love for animals that will continue on for years through her family. ∞

Where it all began:



Empty Space

TROY WADE

I have always been a light sleeper, but the sound I heard would have certainly woken everybody else up, had they been here. I'm not one to be surprised by noises in the middle of the night, but this particular instance just felt so unnatural.

I got down from the spot where I was resting, and immediately noticed a bright light shining in the distance. The noise was not as obnoxious now, but it was obviously coming from the same origin as the light. I wasn't sure what to think, and had no way to get in touch with my family. My fight-or-flight impulse was about to take over at this point, and the mysterious light was only getting closer.

Right as I was about to leave, the noise stopped abruptly, and everything came to a standstill. The light was still glaring, but it was clear to me that it was no longer approaching like it was before.

I decided to approach the mysterious light, and almost felt hypnotized by its ambiguity. The closer I got, the further I was from understanding what was in front of me. The loud noise was back, but I was no longer scared, just eager to see what was happening. A few minutes passed, and I was eventually close enough to make out a huge, yellow creature behind the light.

It looked evil and out of place, so much so that I cannot even put words to further describe what I saw—that was, until I saw the tree fall. And the next one. And the next one. This went on for hours, until they finally reached the tree that my family had been sleeping in the night before, and cut it down with their ginormous machine. What was once our home, along with other wildlife, has been turned into empty space for the humans to take as they pleased. ∞

Waters

MARK WILLIAMSON

On July 16, 2014, four Palestinian boys were killed by missiles while playing on Gaza Beach. This is for them: Ismail Bahar, Ahed Bahar, Zacharia Bahar, and Muhammad Bahar.

You can tell sometimes if you listen real hard how long the freight trains are that rumble through the valley from the length of the rumble as they go along the tracks that follow the river, and in the night you can hear the highway trucks that follow the river also. There is always the sound of the traffic, sometimes soft on a Sunday morning when the truckers sleep or loud like thunder on a Thursday, echoing into the hills on either side of the river. There was that time when the river flooded and the trains could not run because the water covered the tracks and the trucks couldn't run because the highway was covered as well and up on the hill stranded without power, in the silence of the night, I thought I could hear the sound of the river, the sound of the water, moving in the night through our valley on its way to the bay, and to the ocean. When it is time, I will go in the night to the shore of the river, ready to go to the place where the river enters the bay, and to where the bay enters the sea. Or I'll wait by the tracks with my bag strapped tight for the westbound freight that comes in the night, to run along its side and then leap, grab and land upon it to ride with the wind in the dark. It is good to know that the river does not stop moving and it will be there when it is time to go downstream, and that the thunder of the trains through the valley will be there when I am ready.

The river spreads wide near the tracks and flows shallow, and in riverbed furrows the deep channels flow steady and strong always, and in the winter if the conditions are just right the shallow water of the river freezes and then thaws and breaks into chunks of all sizes and shapes, at all angles of position as they are moved by the motion of the flowing water beneath them. They gather across the span of the river and dam sections as they collect in heaping piles, shades of grey and white and blue and silver. The surface of the river is then faceted by these solid slabs of ice, and the fish that continue to live through the cold swim deep in the furrowed channels underneath.

In this valley the river flows from east to west and then takes a hard left to descend southward, where it is joined by the branch coming in from the west,

and together they gather their forces to twist and turn and then settle into the wide and powerful flow to the bay. It is easy to sit and stare at the river as it flows past, where all thoughts like bits of leaf or stick thrown into the water disappear in an instant in the flow. There is a line in the Isa Upanishad that says: “breath to air, and to the immortal”, which describes the joining of the self to the other as the spirit moves. In Benares by the Ganges there is a man who sits and looks at his flowing river as I do, and as our thoughts are swept away by the water they join each other in that movement. The same question is on his mind as is on mine, and the answer floats on the water, on the river that flows to the sea.

Several small and larger creeks flow down the slopes of the valley bringing water from the snows or the rains to empty into the river, and in those creeks there are fish that swim against the current, fighting the force of gravity and sheltering in eddying pools by the banks where limbs of trees have fallen by the creekside. Fishermen know they are there, and patiently drop their lines. There are also beaver who dam the creeks and create waterfalls and unnatural diversions in the flow. But the creeks, like the rivers, like the currents in the oceans, never stop moving and never end, and even in the driest summers there are deep channels that trickle.

The water in the creek was cold, and squatting by the bank Guan-Yin’s hands were cupped to drink the icy liquid as the snow fell, tiny flakes softly moving in the wind. The Bodhisattva stood and looked into the woodspace and felt the presence of the deer. The hunters had dressed their kill and left the carcass for the coyotes. The Bodhisattva put the body under a tree, covered it with rocks and brush, and in the sky through the trees in the snow falling by the hush of the creek, the hovering spirit of the deer took its angel flight.

There are times when the river changes colors, like when it rains so much that the muddy pools that have lain still for weeks are suddenly disturbed by the turbulence of greater volumes that push the water farther and faster to the west, and the river spreads to embrace the banks where sticks and logs and trunks of trees are ripped loose from the dirt and added to the volume of the ochre-colored river as it flows. Then it is dangerous to walk too near the banks, which have disappeared and are subject to sudden collapse, which sweeps the clueless observer into the water to disappear, in the river whose strength has

increased by fifty times its usual. There have been stories told of floating bodies found downstream ten to twenty miles from where the deceased was last seen walking by the riverbanks, little knowing that their feet had been seen by the spirits of the river who reach up from the flowing power of the muddy water to grab their ankles and pull them in.

In the creekbed in the summer there are flat stones like dinner plates large and small that collected there and, brought home, become the mosaic paving of the garden path. In between the blueberries, bee balm, and black-eyed susans, ancient stones never seen before reveal for the first time their textured etchings from the fossil histories of the great inland sea of the Devonian Earth. In a world so young and also old, the water covered the mountains until slowly Ra emerged from the depths to crawl upon the shore. Through the millions of unmeasured years, the waters retreated from the unity of inundation, and forests grew lush upon the hillsides. Plants bore seeds in The Age of Fish, and the great ancestor sharks swam in the waters of Laurentia. Upon the garden stones brought up from the creekbed, the signatures of those who lived long ago and long before.

The trees are almost asleep; the last leaves on the oaks are brown and rustling in the wind. The sky in early afternoon is grey behind the pattern of the branches in the air above the railroad tracks beside the creek. Light snow falls in swirling twirls like dancing yakshi in the clearing where the Bodhisattva is standing by the water as it flows with force toward the river. The smell of ice is on the air and Guan-Yin's hands are cupped to drink, and so they do, to taste the essence of the world. Across the creek the doe stares in silence at the Bodhisattva who sees her and remains as still as she. The eyes of one into the other are locked in unison of spirit in the snow, and the earth spins round the two forever.

The shallow water of the creek is cold and moves swiftly over stones.

Guan-Yin floats in robes of jasper green upon his back where once a daughter of the Susquehanna soothed her sandaled feet in secret pools, and with ears submerged the Bodhisattva hears the endless sounds of crying children in the tears of the entire earth.

There is a group of four children playing on the beach by the Mediterranean Sea, and under the blue sky free of clouds they kick a ball and shout. Four boys together, since their earliest memories of life have lived with the knowledge of

the other, and have loved and lived together. Today is a day like any other as the summer sun shines brilliant and serene upon the beach and the four boys kick a ball on the sand and run to kick the ball again. There has been trouble and the beach may not be safe, but they play because they are children, and they have loved each other forever. The first shell hits the jetty and one dies, the others run. The second shell hits them and they too die. On Gaza Beach by the Mediterranean Sea, as they kicked the ball and shouted, as they loved each other since the day that each of them were born.

The river is dark and moves silently in the night, flowing softly from its source within the mountains to reach the bay that joins the river to the sea. ☞

Terra Non Grata

JON WOODS

A summer patriot with a camera cruises in this morning and asks which way to the battlefield. Which one? I say, because anyone can see we wound up with more than our share. He's got the white Yukon at pump 6, and now his wife trails in with a baby on her hip, just to remind him they've already seen enough of that kind of history for a lifetime, and the kids are already crazy all cooped up. Spratt, the assistant manager, is skulking behind a rack of souvenirs for the easily impressed, listening in. He's written me up twice this month for acting uncooperative, so I put on my public face and listen to them griping about how far they've driven. His wife wants to know if we've got any attractions other than cannons and cemeteries their rugrats won't get bored with. I must get dozens of them piling in here every weekend just to gawk at the past.

"Well, the town also has a mastodon," I offer, "though it's still being assembled by the experts up at the Visitor Center. That's always a good place to start. And there are llamas at the petting zoo. Then there's our scenic view the county just finished. See, here, it's on the cover of this—" and I hand them the glossy state travel guide (which as far as I'm concerned is nothing more than Republican porno) and I pull out the centerfold map. "Here's us," I say, and then draw stars on a few landmarks; "here's how you get to everything else worth a look." Spratt scuttles off toward the back of the store with a jumbo diet soda. The driver, frowning through all this, throws down a few dollars for a package of gummy bears his wife is feeding the baby, and asks how much for the guide, but I brace up and tell him it's a freebie: the Bureau of Tourism got rid of a forest so they could have them waiting for our special visitors. He gives me a sorry-I-asked look and leaves, the woman and baby close behind.

That's when the calm of the morning is shattered as my brother Wesley stops in on his morning rounds. He's got another full truckload of roadkill—on the monitor I can see at least three deer and what looks like a coyote—and he jams his Highway Department pickup in front of the Yukon, boxing them in. Next thing I know he and the driver are going at it, like an episode of *Cops*. My brother's not a small man. Finally he pins the guy on the ground, then drags him to the back of the pickup and stands him upright. I figure Spratt, who's as sly as a tick, is just moments away from a conniption if he spots this, but luckily it ends there and Wesley releases the guy, who limps back to the Yukon, and the entire clan blunders off down the highway. Eventually Wesley strolls in, as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened, though his face is scratched up. There's moss in his beard, like he's camped out in the woods again, which explains why he didn't come home again for supper last night.

“Really?” I say—“you need to start in this early?”

“Those imbeciles took off after hitting the dog,” he says. “I was traveling behind. What’d you want me to do, Stink?”

“What dog?” I figure from the way he’s gone after the guy it’s got to be Baxter this time.

“What difference does that make?”

“They just kept on going?”

“Didn’t even slow down to take a look.”

“Where’s the dog now—you bring it here?”

“In the truck, Stink. Nothing I could do for him, poor thing. I need to locate the owner.”

Now I notice a box he propped up by the display of Ho-Hos. Green twigs and marsh grass poke out the top. “What did you bring in now?” I say. Last week it was a crate of pineapples, the week before a mattress that had tumbled off a delivery truck. I never know what he’s liable to show up with, driving around the town picking up road litter for the highway department.

Spratt comes out of the back with a case of shrink-wrapped burritos. “Do something with this,” he says, then he sees Wesley. “What’s the moron doing back? I thought I said I’d mail your paycheck.”

Wesley smiles at him. “That’d be alright if I had an address.”

“Well isn’t that just tragic.”

“Just give it to me,” I say. “I told you he’s staying with us.”

“What are you now, The Salvation Army?”

I’m ringing out a girl with animal crackers and a souvenir bear keychain, and Wesley and Spratt practice insulting each other. My brother was supposed to be helping out part time in the evenings, sticking prices on the merchandise and making sure there were no drive-offs. He had the job maybe two weeks before he was put on probation for fighting with customers whose T-shirt opinions he didn’t appreciate.

“Your truck’s blocking my view,” says Spratt.

“Hang onto your shorts. I’ll be out of here before you know it.”

“I know it now,” says Spratt, who begins unloading the case of burritos into a cooler.

Wesley ignores him. “This’ll knock your socks off, Stink,” he says. “Have a look.”

I figure he’s rescued a warren of baby rabbits again. So of course I scooch over and peer in the box. That’s when a muddy old snapping turtle hisses at me and I jump back, dumping over a cream soda on my new fifteen-dollar pants. Wesley roars like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever seen.

This gets Spratt going again. “Dammit, I thought I told you never to bring your trash in here—”

"It's all good," I say.

"It's not *all* good," says Wesley. "The dumbshit decided to cross the interstate."

"Keep your voice down. What do you plan to do with it? You bring that in the house and Beth'll have another fit."

He doesn't know. I tell him to take the thing down to the reservoir. My brother's slow but well-meaning, picking up strays and what-have-yous, and we have so many at our place right now that it's beginning to resemble a menagerie. But sometimes he comes down here just to tweak me into getting involved in some ornery, God's-green-earth scheme.

Two unmarked water trucks bully their way down the road, zooming past the cell tower that's disguised as a pine tree. We look up to see which way they're headed. Going north they're usually empty and moving fast. Going south they're loaded. I don't know where they're sucking up the water from now. A year ago Carla, who works down at The Busy Bee Diner, caught one of the drivers draining her parents' farm pond while they were away on vacation. He claimed the owner had given him permission, which was a lie. On our side of the road two sunburned men are working on the scaffolding of a double billboard, stripping off old ads for chainsaws and condos. By noon they'll have put up a twenty-foot woman lying on her side with a bottle of scotch, her blond hair draped over her bare shoulders, which I'll probably have to stare at for the rest of the summer. They pause to watch as a fire truck screams by.

That's when Spratt decides to inspect Wesley's cardboard box. "Holy Toledo! And get this roadkill out of here."

"It's alive," I offer.

"I don't give a fart—Stink, you go take that thing out to the dumpster A-S-A-P!"

I just know I'm going to hear all about this later, that's as certain as a tumor. Wesley leaves after this.

"Will we be seeing you at dinner tonight?" I say, but he's already gone.

About ten minutes later the sheriff cruises into the lot. "Where is he?" he says.

"He's in the office."

"You know who I mean."

"What's he done now?"

"I just want to talk to him. I came by the house and he wasn't there."

"I haven't really seen him today."

Cars are still coming off the ramp from the interstate and there's no letup to the traffic that's detoured around the new construction. Across the river they're taking down our part of the mountain that stands in their way. The dust settles on everything when the restless wind comes at us. It comes through cracks in the walls. It gets into the kids' cereal. It settles on us in our sleep. If I had applied myself years ago I could've been anywhere else, but instead I'm here in

this 24/7 palace, cashing out the feeble-minded and watching time passing like a bulldozer. Eventually I've had enough of this nonsense for one day, so I take off my smiley face work vest and head out. The county jail is no part of what I have planned for the rest of my afternoon. But that's exactly where I wind up, before visiting hours end, to look in on my brother, the crusading fool, because no one else around here has a mind to.

* * *

Two months before the arrest, I'm down at the diner before my shift, jotting on my placemat a list of all the things I'll probably have to sell to keep the farm. I'm not ready to consider dividing up our fifty-three acres yet. I'm not sure what's left in the barn that's worth selling. I've taken the job at the Gas 'N Go but it's only temporary. The same rigs we see everywhere in our dreams are parked outside the diner. The dishwasher and Carla are having it out again.

"Trucks are massing on the border," she says, "you mean you can't see it?"

"Come awn," he says. "You're about killing me." He goes back to mopping grease off the linoleum floor, which amounts to moving it from one square to another. All he wants is to be left alone.

I'm tired of hearing about the invasion, too – all the poisoned water, all the leases. It makes me sick how big people we can't see have engineered this catastrophe. The ooze finds its way through our fields, probably even down into the roots of the maple our folks planted twenty-one years ago after our baby sister Alice died. A while ago Wesley gathered a mason jar of the stuff and sent it off to a friend who promised to have it tested, but someone along the way lost the sample. We don't know what's in the water but we know enough to be concerned; we read that it gives you strange rashes, it causes fever, it poisons horses. And it erases memory. Julius, our closest neighbor, who signed a lease, says it's just leaf rot. It all looks like that. Nothing to be alarmed about. It's completely natural. Of course you can bathe in it.

Inevitability is the word I hear everywhere.

Carla finally comes to my booth with a plate of pancakes and scorched bacon—but she doesn't set it down yet because she's still arguing about what's across the river, with the dishwasher and the cook and anyone else who'll listen. The cook's torso appears and disappears behind the stainless steel window where all the orders are shoved through. Other trucks are cruising into the gravel lot. Two tankers have parked in the shade of the big walnut trees near the statue of General Cornelius Whatshisface. All I want is to eat, but the little copper bell over the door keeps disturbing my last few moments of peace, and sure enough my brother the instigator shows up, tagging along like he's always done. He goes right up to Carla and gets down on one knee.

"You ready to elope with me yet?" he says.

“Don’t trifle with me,” she says, “or I’ll have to hurt you.”

“Ahh,” he says, holding his baseball cap over where he thinks his heart is, “but you know it hurts so bad already.”

“What are you having, country boy?” she says.

“Whatever he’s having,” he says, and slumps down across from me. “This is my big brother.”

“I know that, Hon.”

At the far end of the diner three men and a woman are drinking coffee and gossiping about the piles of money they’re going to make when this comes across the border. Near them one of the landmen is making bullshit conversation with some of the more gullible locals; he’s got a bundle of papers that says as much. He’s trying to sign people up—he’s a closer. I want to march down there and thump his head. I hear somebody saying how can something miles away cause anything like that? They’re just overreacting. There are a lot of rumors started by irresponsible overzealous tree-hugging liberal types—he glances in our direction when he says this. Look, we’re all reasonable people. We have families, too. We’re just like you. Of course we care about the earth this is good for everyone. Everyone benefits. We’re all careful. We have to live here, too.

“Listen to those chowderheads,” says Carla. “Where’s the epicenter of greed? They’re sitting on it. Win-win my ass.”

“Can I just eat my pancakes before the next ice age?” I say.

“Ever think about what killed the dinosaurs?” says Wesley. “We’re all just temporary here.”

“I want you to do something, Stink,” Carla says as she sets the plate down. “Get involved.”

I dig in and she’s still standing there.

“She’s right, you know,” says Wesley. “It’s all right there. Guys like them don’t see what you and me see. That fella looks at a hill and wants what’s inside. He thinks of BTUs and calls that beautiful, then commences digging.”

“You stay out of this,” I say. “You’re nothing but trouble.”

“They want to poison everything in sight,” says Carla. “Doesn’t that make you mad?”

“Is there any more syrup?”

She takes a new bottle out of her apron pocket and slams it down in front of me. “That’s all you think about, isn’t it, feeding your face at a time like this.”

“That’s right,” says Wesley, “get worked up. Let him know which end is up.”

“It’ll come across the border,” says Carla, “you just wait and see. It’ll spread like cancer. Then what’ll you do?”

“Open your eyes, Darling,” says Wesley. “It’s already here.”

“Don’t start him down this road,” I say. “He’ll shoot his mouth off all morning if you let him.”

“Well, then,” says Wesley, “if you won’t do something, then maybe I will. “Maybe I’ll run for office.”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” says Carla.

“Oh right, I can just see it now,” I say. “Mayor of the Vagabonds. You don’t know the first thing.”

At the booth at the far end of the diner one of the men smiles and holds up his coffee mug.

Carla mutters something obscene. “I ought to refill it with the shit coming out of my tap. I’ll be right there, Sugar.”

“Watch this,” says Wesley. He gets up and strolls down to the other end of the diner and asks the closer whether he’ll come over to our house and drink tapwater. The man says thanks, but he ain’t thirsty at the moment, but when he is, he’ll be more than glad to come on over. Wesley, who dropped out when he was sixteen, says “I don’t know what more-than-glad looks like, but I know what too much of other things looks like,” and then he goes on to list a bunch.

“Hows about tomorrow?” he says. “That’s an open invitation. You come over tomorrow.”

“We’ll see,” the man in the suit says, forcing a smile.

“Or how about taking a bath in it?” says Wesley. “Will you be more than glad to do that, too?”

You should stop whining, is what the suit winds up saying. You should trim that beard of yours, too. You should think of this boom as a good thing, son—a win-win situation for everyone. It’s only win-win when you’re on the fucking winning side, says Wesley, the side the river’s not on, but who listens to a river? He comes back to the booth. Immediately Carla puts a plate of pancakes down in front of him. “On the house,” she says and then glares at me. “You might ought to be more like your brother.”

Wesley takes a few mouthfuls of pancakes in silence, then goes to the washroom and doesn’t come back. I don’t see him for the rest of the day.

That night the sky flares orange as the gas well near McAdam’s place explodes.

At the diner the next morning, of course, the jury in the back booth has already put two and two together and come up with one: Wesley.

Whenever I got angry with my brother this always made me relent, because I remember how it was for him in the old days.

I’m fifteen and in charge of him while Mom’s in the hospital. Dad’s always working overtime at the foundry now, trying to keep the doctor’s bills from capsizing us. Wesley and I have come to Shady Acres Trailer Court, down the road from the county landfill; we’re standing outside a doublewide with pelicans stenciled on the door. It belongs to Maynard’s mother. The dirt yard is torn up around the perimeter of a doghouse where a wary gray dog has scraped its chain. We’ve come here because Wesley broke their window playing baseball, and he has to apologize and pay for the damage.

"I ain't afraid of God," he says suddenly.

I look at where he's looking and then I see the red and white sign tacked up near the door.

"It's *dog*, Wesley," I say. "Remember? Beware of dog. We've been over here before."

"Oh," he says. "Well, that about makes sense, too."

In school he was always parked in the slow class, because he thought too much about what everyone else ignored. He hated the routine of school. Strangely enough, the year he turned ten he was suspended for going back into the school one Saturday morning, hoisting himself up through an unlocked window. He didn't destroy anything; he just wanted to see what it was like when no one else was around. He wandered through empty classrooms, examining the human skull in the science lab, the jars of dissected frogs suspended in formaldehyde; he opened up cabinets, he erased neglected blackboards. When he got to his own classroom he opened up the teacher's desk drawers, just to see what was inside. Then he noticed all the things she had confiscated from others. An eagle feather, a pack of chewing gum, a deck of cards. One by one he put them back inside their desks. After this he hiked along Salt Creek the rest of the day, studying dragonflies and sampling trout lilies. On Monday morning it was no mystery who had played Robin Hood.

* * *

A year ago when Wesley comes back from the war, my wife Beth and I take him in. He leaves his seabag up in the dormer where we have an extra bed and dresser amidst all the unpacked boxes from our parents' old house. He says it's all he needs for now, he doesn't want to be in the way. He likes the small space. The first week back he stays up there most of each day. At night we hear music from an old clock radio. He keeps the volume low. I don't think he ever sleeps. He comes down at all hours in pajama pants and no shirt. In the fluorescent light of the kitchen the weird scar on his back turns lavender. He eats a bowl of corn flakes and goes back up. Sometimes he brings the newspapers with him. We see help wanted ads he's circled in crayon, but also stories he's underlined: the progress of the war; Wall Street criminals still roaming free; in China a man has lost his face in a factory explosion, and now his family can't identify him; radioactivity traveling toward us; the spread of cholera and poisoned water; garbage floating in dead zones. He scrawls angry notes in the margins. He doesn't talk about the war. He'll talk when he's ready. We don't ask questions. Because I lent a neighbor our tractor after the spring floods, he owes me a favor, so I call it in and get my brother a job with the Highway Department. Wesley doesn't object. He wants to contribute to our household—he doesn't want to be anyone's burden.

* * *

When he started at the Highway Department, he was content just to do what he was told, still putting faith in obedience. Keep the trucks running, plow the highways in winter, drive around, scrape up whatever was on the road, dump the trash and the roadkill out back at the end of each day. Sometimes he came home with a dump truck and stories about dead animals.

One evening we were sitting on the porch steps. Wesley smoked his pipe, which made him look older than 25. He had just knocked off after dumping another load. I had a few bottles of red wine left over from when we went through our parents' stuff. I couldn't look at it anymore. I suppose it was just the wine talking that made him open up. Next thing I know I'm agreeing with him. Sure, giving them a decent burial, sure. Deer are people, too, he said. Damn right, I said. And so are groundhogs, all the riffraff of the animal kingdom, raccoons and weasels, porcupines and possums and skunks, all the underclasses. Especially skunks, I said. Nobody respects a skunk. Someone has to do something about them. Too easy to put them in halfway houses, prisons, the poorhouse, he said. Damn straight, I said. Too easy to write them off as needing to help themselves, stick them in the ground, use them for target practice, send them off to war. We were drinking out of the bottle now. If a corporation was a person, then so was a squirrel, so was a tree, so was anything you could name. "I don't expect you to understand," he said. "No," I said, "let it all out," and I let him go on jabbering as Beth joined us. The kids were asleep. There was still half a bottle of wine left and two more we hadn't opened yet. The three of us were looking across the river. The hammering of heavy equipment continued, the work lights were on all night, there was no letup to the noise. Time had no meaning to them.

"If it comes across the border we're leaving, that's all I know," said Beth, and took a last pull at the bottle.

"I know," said Wesley, "but that's the answer for everything we don't like, isn't it? Run away?"

The next day he found a dead groundhog on the road in front of the house, so we buried it in one of Beth's shoeboxes, burned incense, said prayers, the whole thing wasn't ridiculous then. It wasn't maudlin. I just wanted to see him get well. I didn't think it would go as far as it did.

* * *

Maybe the first indication that anything is changing is the day I come home and find the rabbits on the kitchen table – seven of them squirming around in

a plastic tote.

"Where'd they come from?" I say.

"It's a gift," he says.

He's got little money but now he's got us a family of orphan rabbits. In our kitchen. No, you see, I've misunderstood. He didn't buy them. He found them where the bulldozers are straightening out the bend in the river. He was afraid they'd get squashed. I'm too stressed out all the time, he says. Rabbits will help. I start to object.

"Ssssh," he says. "Just watch them for a while. You'll begin to feel it."

"Well he can't stay here forever," Beth says to me later in the privacy of our little bedroom. "You know that, don't you? We're not a shelter. Do you know what seven bunnies will look like in a year? Try a thousand."

"It's only temporary," I say, without much conviction. "Besides, the kids love him."

"James," she says, "Sweetie. Temporary is a week or so. You said that three months ago."

"Be patient," I say. "He's having a difficult time piecing things together again."

* * *

Beth starts to get the anonymous calls while I'm at work; now she chains the doors and won't let the kids get on the school bus. "We know where you people live," is all the caller says the first time. "Better think about that when you're doing what you're doing. Someone could have a tragic accident, someone could stumble one day, fall off a tractor, fall in a cement mixer. You should think about that." Then he hangs up.

"Who says such things?" she says to me. "What are we doing?"

The calls are for Wesley, but I don't tell her that. In the barn that evening I tell him whatever he's been doing to stop it, he's scaring her, and I'm afraid for the kids. Beth wants to take them to her parents. Wesley doesn't take the threats seriously. Even after they cut his brake lines, even after the night they run him off the road and he crashes into the ditch, even after he limps home without the truck, a gash across his forehead, slurring the words "We shall overcome."

"You're probably going to need stitches, little brother," I say.

"It's nothing," he says. "I've had way worse. I can't feel a thing."

I get the rubbing alcohol and the bandages.

I take the call the next time. I'm home shining my shoes for work.

"You see what happens when you don't listen?" says the caller.

"Who the hell is this?" I say. In the background I hear the sound of a machine grinding away.

At night the sky has an orange glow from a well fire eleven miles across the

border, and the dust still settles on our plates. At the supermarket we now buy jugs of water that comes from elsewhere.

* * *

Two weeks later Wesley is working along the county line road as heat mirages rise up lazily off the asphalt. He's been doing the job faithfully all summer, collecting roadkill. There's no end to them, he says, when he sits down at the supper table—you'd think we'd run out of them sooner or later. Every day, more. There's no letup to the trucks. Day and night they come. Oh, but he almost forgot. Today he's brought us a present. Two crates of grapefruits that spilled off a truck. He's managed to salvage the unspoiled ones. Beth asks politely whether he's kept them in the cab, and he says, of course, what do you take me for, and the story continues. Then he comes to the part of the afternoon that most disturbs him, where he finds the dead raccoon. Some kid's shiny purple party hat is attached to its head, its bloody guts spread all over the road. A party noisemaker lies next to it. Across from the animal a cluster of ribbons and nearly deflated balloons are dangling from a mailbox, with a big elaborate sign that says HAPPY BIRTHDAY BARRY! Flies are everywhere, maggots already inside the carcass. He keeps talking about desecration, until Beth suddenly gets up to have the kids help clear the plates, and then he notices.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I don't know when to shut up. Maybe nobody wants to talk to me anymore because I bring death out in the open for everyone to see—maybe that's why you got me the job, I'm the lowest of the low, a pariah. I'm not worth spit."

"Don't be pathetic," I say—"it doesn't suit you."

"You know you can't hear any birds from your front porch in the morning?" he says. "You know Wilson's creek caught fire twice?"

* * *

On the day the first well explodes he's four miles away, watching the vagrant shapes of crows as they drift up off the stained road and settle in a cornfield. He's got the day off, but he's still driving around the county – force of habit is all it amounts to. The Old Quarry Road is slick with oilspill. His windows are rolled down. Smell guides him to what he knows is there. He understands the primitive urges of the scavenger. He steers the pickup onto the shoulder and waits until another quarry truck booms past. One by one the crows swoop down again.

This time he finds two deer killed during the night: a doe and fawn crossing the road, up from the river where they've gone to drink the turbid water. Both animals lie twenty feet apart, the doe with its neck broken, its belly split open,

the fawn facing it, barely touched. A fifty foot smear along the road where her intestines exploded, a bloody map leading to the two bodies. Rigor mortis has already set in on the doe. More traffic screams past. Wesley drops the gate of the pickup, gets out the shovel he uses for spreading cold patch. Another truck. There's an eruption of flies. He pries the shovel under the doe, swears at all the drivers whipping past, lifts it up off the road, heaves it into the truck. The fawn hasn't turned stiff yet. He lifts it into the truck and drives on. He feels sick when he accidentally discovers Maynard's collie on Salt Creek Road, where it must've dragged itself into the willows, and the maggots are already inside its throat.

As a kid Wesley examined what he came across while tramping in these woods, amazed by how one life becomes another and in that way is never lost. He was always trying to understand such unity. The other kids laughed at him, called him peculiar because he could sit for hours along a stream watching water striders resisting the slow current.

But this is not that earlier time; this, he says, is a sacrilege.

* * *

Things got worse after that.

One night while we're sitting on the porch gazing at the stars he wants to tell me about his latest discovery. It's after he finds the two deer and the collie. I don't want to hear about brutality anymore, I'm sick of hearing about it, so I tell the kids to find anything else to do, but this is different and for the moment I'm relieved. This is what he's discovered: The road builders have erected new green signs along the highway. They all say *Scenic View Ahead*.

The valley is now being administered. This we've been told is progress. "So naturally I'm curious," says Wesley. "I drive along and soon I'm at the new Visitor Center. Now when did this happen?"

"They started work while you were overseas. I'm surprised you didn't spot it sooner. The dedication was a while ago."

"The truck attracts flies," he says, "so I park away from everyone. People pull in and leave, they don't stay long. Two guys in overalls are hunched over a boulder riveting a bronze plaque to it. Along the stone wall are brand new viewfinders, so I do like everyone else. I drop coins in, and I hear time running out as I look across at this valley I've never seen before. Cloud shadows are fumbling across empty farms. Then I see Mom and Dad's old place. The wells lying beyond it are hidden from view. People arrange themselves at the overlook wall and pose for happy pictures, then drive away. Below the overlook are the stumps of hickory trees. We used to collect hickory nuts somewhere around there."

"I don't remember," I say.

“Bushels of them. You don’t remember?”

“If you say so.”

“Scenic View?” he says. “So what do they call all the rest of it that doesn’t have signs? I can’t think of what you call the other places no one sees.”

I shrug, but I’ve got no answer to his questions.

* * *

A few days after he discovered the sign, he began to keep a loose tally in the glovebox of his truck. He told me it was because he was sick of the job, scouring the countryside for roadkill and keeping the highways clean for all the morons passing through on their way to the Indian casino or the shore or wherever it was they thought they had to get to so damn fast. Just so they could enjoy the scenery unobstructed. The previous week he’d collected seven deer, four raccoons, a pregnant opossum, three dogs, a turkey, fourteen cats, a cedar waxwing, as well as a snapping turtle, eleven squirrels, some sort of snake, a red fox, twenty-three groundhogs, a coyote and four skunks, an assortment of songbirds, plus about thirty-four things that were so messed up he couldn’t identify a single one. All of it putrefying in the sun. Of course I thought he was stretching things a bit. Something about the numbers didn’t add up. He scraped up whatever he happened upon when he was making his rounds along the town roads, the nocturnals as well as everything else. A sort of Noah’s ark of destruction, he said. It wasn’t Department policy to pick up the smaller things – birds, for example, and squirrels. “Let the turkey vultures sort it all out,” laughed Gordie, the Highway Superintendent, who told me over a beer that he was maybe taking the job too seriously. But Wesley picked them up as well. The months that would eventually lead up to his arrest were enormous. Around midsummer he suggested that the Department put up high fences or at least new speed limit signs. He showed his list to Gordie, who told him he was showing initiative and to keep those good ideas coming in, then did nothing about it. So Wesley brought his camera to work and started photographing every dead animal and bird he found. It was like genocide out there, he said, but with animals. Maybe if there were pictures they’d understand. He tacked up photographs on bulletin boards at the grocery store, the town hall, our one-room museum, the public swimming pool, the movie theater, and on telephone poles. Nothing worked.

* * *

Impulse takes over the day of his arrest. He arrives at the Highway Department early, punches in, checks his log. It’s a holiday weekend and he hopes to just pick up his paycheck and leave. But Gordie is waiting to

ambush him. He's been on him all week to get those stinking rotting carcasses down to the landfill. He blames Wesley for the Town Board still on him about it—they're worried about tourist revenue. But Gordie is the one who's had him pitching carcasses into the ravine behind the department garage all summer. So Wesley loads up the dump truck. He takes kerosene and drives down the highway toward the landfill. But when he passes the Scenic View signs this time he gets a better idea, because he's just found a dead rabbit along the shoulder.

He stops the truck, picks up the rabbit, then backs up the quarter mile distance down the shoulder. Traffic whooshes past, and some guy with a trailer full of caged pheasants lays on the horn and shoots him the finger. Wesley eases into the parking lot and just sits and watches all the travelers taking a break. It's hot out, and flies quickly congregate.

He backs up to the overlook wall and dumps the carcasses on the sidewalk in front of a viewfinder. The stench is unbearable. He works fast, using a shovel to dislodge the rest from the truck. A few travelers watch. They think he's part of the maintenance crew spreading fertilizer, so they ignore him. No one stays for more than seven minutes anyway. It's a holiday and there are places to get to. This is not a destination.

"Gross," says a mother with a toddler. She's the first to see it for what it is.

"Cool," says a kid throwing sticks over the wall. He's staring at all the antlers and guts. He wears a black shirt with zombies on it. "Totally apocalyptic."

Next, Wesley goes inside the Visitor Center where the mastodon exhibit is being assembled. "Special delivery," he says. The volunteer stares at the bloody rabbit Wesley throws on the counter.

"What in hell am I supposed to do with this?" says the volunteer. He gets on the intercom and calls the manager.

This produces a part-time guard, a little wonk who's been napping, and now this guy storms out of his cubicle, trying to appear official and smart. He's got handcuffs on his belt, and a new pistol he's never fired. His face is red with sleep.

"It's a dead rabbit," says the volunteer.

"Well no shit," says the guard. "What's it doing here?" He looks past the volunteer and sees the pile of carcasses. Then he notices Wesley for the first time. "What's this maniac's story?" he says.

"I was told to deliver these," says Wesley, "so that's what I'm doing."

"Suddenly the guard is on the phone to someone with more authority than him. He has a pad of paper out. "You stay right here," he says. "What's your name?"

"John Fucking Muir," says Wesley, and strolls out to the parking lot, where he puts up a big orange sign that says Emergency: Detour Ahead. He doesn't want anyone hurt. He pours half a jug of kerosene all over the pile of carcasses.

The volunteer and the guard, who's still on the phone, watch him through the window. They don't try to stop him. They're too afraid. Slowly Wesley begins lighting kitchen matches. Green flames leap up. He lights another and another, tossing them all over the pile. Maggots sizzle, the hides turn black. The guard and the volunteer are freaking out as Wesley does a little dance around the flames and chants. Don't worry, folks, says the guard, who's finally ventured outside—"nothing to be alarmed about"—but no one is paying attention to him. They're watching this crazy thing—thinking it's all part of some ceremony for their benefit. A man leaning against his car sips coffee out of a styrofoam cup and lights a cigarette. "Is this, like, performance art?" he says. Others take pictures on their phones. A woman throws up against the overlook wall. Now Wesley can hear a siren far away. He stops dancing. He studies the smoldering pyre, so he empties the rest of the kerosene on it. The flames flare up and greasy smoke drifts across the parking lot. Those who've been watching cover their noses and move back to their cars. Wesley gets back into the truck and drives away. In his mirror he sees two people swatting at the flames and pouring bottles of water on the fire.

A few miles away across the valley plumes of black smoke rise from a house on fire.

* * *

"What did you bring me?" he says, after I'm sitting across from him at a long steel table, the room's only barrier. He has a shiner now. He stares at the bag of carrots in front of me. A beetle skitters across the concrete floor and winds up near the guard, who looks on indifferently, then considers stepping on it but doesn't. "You bring any cake?"

"What cake?" I say.

"Somebody always bakes something handy into a cake so the prisoner can escape properly."

This amuses the guard.

"This is serious, Wes." By now I know all about the fire.

"I'm joking."

It's not the first time we've been here. He and his friend Maynard once borrowed a school bus and drove around town picking up all the throwaway kids who'd been put in perpetual detention for refusing to sing the alma mater, and they all went down to the lake to skinny dip because the water was still good then. Later they drove back waving a big banner with some naïve protest painted across it. I told Wesley this was bound to happen, but now he's mad because I'm not squatting in this cooler with him. Why am I still going along with everything, he wants to know. I've lost my own voice. I'm just as bad as

the rest of them.

“Sometimes you just can’t obey reason,” he says.

“You know what they’re going to do to you?” I say.

He bites into a carrot, then glances at the guard, who’s tapping at the beetle with his boot.

“They’re going to make an example out of you, Wesley.”

“Sweet,” he says. “It’s about time someone did.”

* * *

So now they’re going to rehabilitate him, since that’s the only explanation they can think of for why he did what he did, that he must’ve been on something. They’re going to take him somewhere to examine his brain because that’s what they do when people don’t agree with them. They make it illegal to think differently. They take them somewhere else and we don’t hear from them again or we do and they come back strange and agree with everything you say, no kind of people you want to be around for long—glazed happy looks in their eyes that focus on your shirt buttons, or an empty hummingbird feeder, or the dials on a car radio as you drive away from the county hospital past fields of ruined sunflowers.

* * *

This is the way it’s all supposed to turn out, with good naively triumphing over evil, with reconciliation eventually for all. At least, this is how I’d like to remember it. One morning I’ll be driving up to the Gas ‘N Go for my shift and I’ll suddenly do an about-face and head back down to the jail for a little chat with him. In my back pocket, however, I’ll have smuggled a pair of wire cutters. I know all the talk about him being exonerated is just talk and they’re going to keep him here. So I’m busting him out, I’ll tell him after I’m in—me, his brother—but of course he won’t quite believe a word of it because I’ve never followed through on anything I’ve ever promised him, because he’ll think I stand with them, and have I told Beth any of this, won’t she be sore when I show up with him. Just shut up, I’ll say. And for what it’s worth, it’s for real, I swear it is this time, I’ll tell him. I’m as serious as a heart attack. Tomorrow, I’ll say. Be ready, I’ll say, and then I’ll pass him the wire cutters. That night I won’t be able to sleep at all. I’ll be lying awake refining my plan, which concerns a pickup truck (borrowed from Maynard), a pair of heavy chains, a winch, bolt cutters, an acetylene torch, two ski masks, a shovel, miscellaneous tools, and so on.

It’s not a good plan.

The next morning of course they'll catch us both at the fence, him on one side, me on the other, together.

Then I'll be sitting in the cell next to him. My brother—he'll be the one with the big grin on his face. Stop looking at me, I'll say as I try to reach through the bars and sock him one. I only did it to make you shut up, I'll say, so don't think it's anything else because it isn't. I did it for Ma.

Ma's dead, he'll have to remind me about a dozen times.

And that'll be that. The first true thing I've done for anyone other than myself. For the first time in my life I won't feel like such a numbnuts, as if I finally stand for something, regardless of the consequences.

Beth of course will come to bail me out, but I'll tell her I'm staying put a while, I'll make a big deal about it, I'm seeing this thing through, but of course she won't understand. "What's gotten into you?" she'll say. "Oh, that brother of yours is what's happened, isn't it? I told you it would end this way."

Then I'll shrug. It'll be no use explaining. Wesley will be sitting on his bunk in the next cell, looking out the window at clouds moving past us, and I won't be scared of looking beyond myself anymore. "Well I hope you're happy now," she'll say, staring at him.

* * *

But this is the way it actually turns out, the unremembered part, anyway, with no good coming of it. The gas wells have spread like lesions and my brother is still lost to us. It's after the arraignment, after his sentence of 100 hours of community service. It's been six weeks since anyone in our circle of friends has seen him. Gordie hasn't heard from him. Carla hasn't gotten a call from him. One afternoon I read in *The Sentinel* that a body was found tangled in an eel weir forty miles downriver, so Maynard and I go shooting off down there to the morgue to identify him, if it's him, but it isn't, and so we go on waiting and hoping. The kids keep looking up the road for their uncle to appear on his goofy bicycle like he did on some afternoons. I have reward posters tacked around town. Beth keeps a candle burning by the statue of St. Jude because she feels sorry for everything she said. "He'll show up," she says. "You just wait and see." But I know she doesn't believe it because I don't.

"Maybe he drowned," says Spratt. "You ever think of that? You know, PTSD and all that, the way they do when they come back.

"You're a moron," I say. "You don't even know what you're saying.

"Or maybe he's camping out in the woods again," he says. "Maybe he's gone and reenlisted or, you know, maybe he joined a cult." I leave Spratt blathering away and go restock the shelves with pork and beans.

I haven't given up on finding my brother.

And I remember this indelible image of the afternoon Wesley shows up at the house unannounced, like he's not been overseas three years. There's a knock on the front door, and when I answer it, he stands there with his seabag slung over his shoulder and introduces himself to me, like we're total strangers. "My name is Wesley," he says, extending his hand very stiffly. We stare at each other a long moment. Then he laughs. "Earth Brother," he says. "How's it hanging?" We don't hug.

That evening we're working in the barn loft stacking bales of hay as they come up the conveyor. He's humming a tune off key. When he takes off his flannel shirt I see the globe-shaped scar on his back, an illegible tattoo covering part of it. I don't know which has come first, tattoo or scar. He catches me staring. "I knew you wouldn't approve," he says—"you can't even begin to understand"—to which there's nothing helpful I can think to say. That night he enters the woods behind our place, hiking by moonlight up the tallest hill overlooking the town. We won't see him again until morning. It's his way of coming back, I suppose, in darkness, watching the light gradually take over the valley again. ∞



Castaway | Jon Woods

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Chase Allen lives through the imagery given to him by the work of others and that of his own. He enjoys the concept of a soul and would be more than willing to transfer his consciousness to a robot if he had the chance.

Zachary (Zak) Allen. I am the President of the Fulcrum News Club. I am in my second year of school here at SUNY Broome and am hoping to soon go onto Binghamton University. I am a Business Administration major at Broome and am a former member of the Student Assembly here on campus. I am also a firefighter for the Town of Binghamton Fire Company.

Maria Bajwa became a doctor when she grew up in her old country. She attended SUNY Broome from 2015-2018 and got a certificate in phlebotomy, and an Associates degree in Medical Assisting, as well as Health Information Technology. Currently, she is working at the Nursing Lab at SUNY BCC and doing her Masters of Science in Healthcare Simulation from Drexel University, College of Medicine.

Orion Barber presently serves as the campus's student member of the SUNY Broome Board of Trustees. As President of the Mu Eta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa he holds himself to a high standard of excellence. Orion identifies as an existentialist enjoying wordplay and trees.

Alli Baumgart. At age ten my parents gave me my first camera—and I immediately fell in love with the art of storytelling. I'm currently a Communications Major, pursuing my dream to be a filmmaker. I also enjoy photography, writing poetry, and anything that involves travel or the outdoors.

Abigayle Bennett is an outgoing and charismatic student who loves both entertaining and helping people throughout the world. She has traveled 28 countries, created a not for profit business called OwLET'S Help You, graduated high school, and produced five songs that are available everywhere. She loves the arts but plans on becoming a psychologist. She is currently enrolled in the Human Services program at BCC, and plans to get her Bachelors degree from Albany University, and continue on to earn her masters and doctorates from Stony Brook University.

Kristin Bensen-Hause is an intuitive creative type who enjoys conversing with real toads in imaginary gardens.

Logan Blakeslee. In addition to being a freshman, I am also the Vice-President of Student Activities here at SUNY Broome. I love to read and write, but debate is also a major hobby of mine. It's my dream to become a lawyer someday, and perhaps a career in government will follow.

Alla Boldina is an adjunct English Professor and an artist. Rebellious by nature, subversive by choice, she seeks to inspire change through her teaching and art.

Dr. Jesse Boring is a professor, a husband, and a father to one son and one Akita.

I.J. Byrnes is a professor in the Philosophy Program in the Department of History, Philosophy and Social Sciences. She serves as the faculty adviser to Phi Theta Kappa, the campus' international honor society.

Lynda Carroll is an archaeologist, an anthropologist, and an adjunct professor at SUNY Broome. She is best known for her love of lawn flamingos, barkless dogs, and taphonomic processes. Past hobbies have included translating kitschy television theme songs into foreign languages, and interpretive dance.

Jenny Checchia is a writer and artist finding her way in an often corporate world. She loves to laugh and write and create and eat and is fond of anything gentle and kind. She lives with her partner in Johnson City and is currently a studying at SUNY Broome with hopes of one day teaching writing.

Curtis Daniel is a 23-year-old paramedic who likes dogs, hiking, snowboarding, and nature photography. This is his first submission into any magazine.

John Donovan is a current student at SUNY Broome.

Alyssa Ellerson is an eighteen-year-old young woman who has always had a love for reading and writing. Whether she's studying at school, trying to maintain a social life, spending too much money at Barnes and Noble or supposed to be doing homework, she always has a book on hand and a notebook to write in.

Mason Erle is an ambitious writer, with ever-growing aspirations for historical fiction, filled with limitless possibilities for the continuation of such learning and delving deeper into military value. From third person victories in the trenches, to surreal losses on the battlefield, the stories created here are more than memories; they're history.

Ed Evans is a regular contributor to *Breaking Ground*. He is an award-winning journalist, documentary filmmaker and a 2016 recipient of the prestigious SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Adjunct Teaching. He is a Senior Instructor of Media in the Department of Communications and Media Arts and the Supervising Producer of the 2016 SUNY Broome documentary film *Experiencing the Everglades*. Ed and his wife Robin have two children, Brian and Rachel.

Justin Evans. I Am a 21-year-old student from Connecticut who has a very strong love and appreciation for music and making aesthetics. I also have a newfound love for photography—film, to be exact—and hopefully wish to become a pro one day. I am a new student here at SUNY Broome and I hope to accomplish a lot of great things while I'm attending here.

Michael Fuller. I am a current SUNY Broome student who will be graduating this semester, if all goes well on that front. My passions include creative writing (obviously), astronomy and spending copious amounts of time playing PC games. One of my greatest inspirations for writing is observing nature, so this year's theme was of real interest to me.

Justin Groats. My name is Justin Groats and I am a second-semester student at SUNY Broome. I have been writing fiction since 2016 for a show that I want to be able to produce and act in at Cartoon Network. I am an active student in two clubs, the Creative Writing Club and the Improv Club on campus. I have a passion for entertainment and creativity, making people smile, and doing what I do best. I hope you have enjoyed my short story that I have produced with the characters from the show I am planning.

Alex Harding. So I've been called many things: writer, traveler, cartoonist, philosopher, and lifelong mate. I've lived in Binghamton so long I no longer feel cold—or bored. I write, read, write about reading, and work well with others. A patron of the arts and creative mind, I strive to impact the public zeitgeist one word at a time.

Steven Hendrickson. I am a 42-year-old, first semester Freshman at SUNY Broome, and a proud single parent of two, whom I cherish more than the air I breathe. After 24 years of taking a "year off" from high school, I decided it was finally time to better my skillset and further my education. I am pursuing a degree in Business Administration. However, I have a deep passion for writing and I figured I'd give some representation to the Business Department, that we too like to be well-rounded.

Deb Hibbard is a retired therapist and animal lover. Nature is her chapel.

Talia Horowitz is a psychology student, a lover of nature, and an avid reader, with a passion for creative writing. When she's not reading or writing, she likes to explore the world, drink tea, and spend quality time with her family, cats, and friends.

Linsey Howell. I am a Liberal Arts: Individual Studies major and a member of the Women's Soccer team.

Trisha Illsley is soon to be a SUNY Broome Graduate of the Radiologic Technology program. A lifetime resident of Binghamton, New York and lifetime lover of travel and the Adirondacks, she is a closet writer, and just making the best out of this gift called life.

Paige Kenis is a Freshman at SUNY Broome who writes stories and songs to express herself in her free time. She will be transferring to Binghamton University in the coming year to pursue her interests in psychology and mathematics.

Joshua Lewis' poetry has been published in literary magazines, such as the *Patterson Literary Review* and the *Edison Literary Review*. He lives in Binghamton and he is currently setting up a poetry workshop series through the Broome County Arts Council, along with writing poetry and fiction in his spare time.

Betsy Locke lives on the dairy farm first settled by J. Buckley and currently teaches French at SUNY Broome.

Sarah Luciani. I am a current SUNY Broome student working towards an Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts. I hope to then transfer to Binghamton University to complete my education.

Jenne Micale is the college's writer and social media maven. Outside of the snazzy PR job, she has a Ph.D. in English literature with a really cool dissertation, years of experience writing for newspapers, and a ridiculous backlog of poems no one reads.

Josh Mitchell. I spent two years at UB and decided to transfer back home and come to SUNY Broome. I've always had an interest in digital art and decided I should try and make something interesting for this year's magazine.

Christopher Origer, the editor of *Breaking Ground* and Chair of the English Department, is an avid hiker, writer, and grandfather, though not necessarily in that order.

Shivani Patel. I have been writing since I first learned how to make letters. I love that I can get a pen and paper and have so much control on what I write about—anything is possible. There are many directions you can go when it comes to writing, just trust yourself and let that pen flow into that creativity cloud. I am very happy and grateful to be a part of *Breaking Ground*, for it gave me the opportunity to let myself flow.

Lorin Paugh. I am a Criminal Justice major at SUNY Broome. I graduated from Binghamton High School and I remain in the Binghamton area. I began traveling throughout the United States after graduation from high school. At the age of 21, I have traveled to 37 of the 50 U.S. states. My goal is to reach the 48 contiguous states before I turn 25. All of my photographs are from my trips.

Emmanuel Pereira. I am twenty years old. I am Dominican and Colombian. I am currently in my third year of college at SUNY Broome and BU. I live in New York City where I was raised in the Bronx. I love music and anything that is innovative and creative. I have a passion for poetry that lets me manipulate words and convey my memories and conversations however I want. One of my dreams in life is very simple. In a world of creators and creations, the goal is not to live forever but to create something that will!

Rose Pero. I am a secretary in the Liberal Arts Division and a returning student here at SUNY Broome. I am lucky enough to be the English Department secretary and have the chance to be very involved in the creation of *Breaking Ground*. Hopefully someday my grandbabies will read my writing and be very proud of their Grammy Pizza! Much love to M and J!

Paige Petticrew is a 19 year old reader and writer. I am open minded, kind to others, and love sharing my work with the world.

Eva Randall. I graduated from SUNY Broome many years ago and now I'm back again.

Richard Schleider currently contemplates the complexities of our mass-mediated society and the profound power of photographic imagery as an adjunct instructor in the SUNY Broome Communications & Media Arts Department.

Virginia Shirley. Mnemosyne went out to where the grasshoppers dance and planted a word seed. She parted the earth, pushed it under with a knobby thumb, gave it a cover of loam. Before she departed, she planted a potato on one side of the seed and an onion on the other. The onion would worry the eyes of the potato, make it cry tiny rivers to water the word seed. Mnemosyne left the seed to its own devices. It pushed its way through the damp dirt. Stretched and sprouted and reached for the sun. Spread leaves, wound tendrils up and through. It bore a single, succulent fruit. Seventy-two days later, Virginia Shirley plucked herself from her stem, stood on wobbly legs and told her first, tentative tale.

Sissy Slick. As I was growing up, *Twilight Zone* was one of my favorite TV shows. That may be why I enjoy short stories with unexpected twist endings. I find these are the most fun to write as well.

Simone Stegemoller is a human with a great love for nature and the arts. She is particularly taken by trees, mountains, and cats. One day she hopes to hold a degree in Creative Writing and spread her affinity unto others.

Emmy Stilloe. This is my last semester at SUNY Broome and I'm really excited to say that I was a part of *Breaking Ground*. I'm even more excited to be done at Broome. My best friends called me every day to make sure that I would go to class because school is one of my least favorite places to be. This summer I'm moving to Kentucky, and helping to build this magazine was one of my goals to accomplish before I move out of New York. Being in this class was a great opportunity for me to branch out and take pictures of more than just my friends and family. It also helped me to grow as a reader because it allowed me to become more open-minded about genre and style and forced me to stop rereading *The Secret Life of Bees* for the thousandth consecutive time. I'm thankful for my friends for always supporting me, for pushing me to be my best, and for letting me take endless photos of them.

Susan Stracquadanio is a staff member in the Learning Assistance Department.

Cheryl Sullivan is currently the Office Manager and Secretary to the Dean for the Liberal Arts Division. She is a lifelong nature and animal lover who enjoys sharing that love with family and friends.

Troy Wade is a student studying neuroscience and has a major interest within the field of science and nature.

Mark Williamson, Ph.D. has been Adjunct Instructor of Art History at SUNY Broome since 2000. He is also Adjunct Instructor of Art History at Tompkins-Cortland Community College and SUNY Oneonta College, and was formerly an Adjunct Instructor of Art History at Binghamton University and at Onondaga Community College. He does not, nor will he ever, own a Smartphone.

Jon Woods, before getting a degree in forest management, worked one summer for a highway department. He does not know how to dance. His fiction has appeared in the *Wabash Review* and other obscure journals.



Alla Boldina | *Concrete Roots I*

