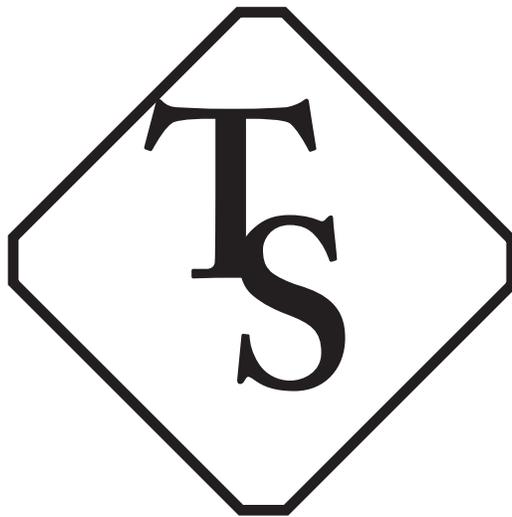


TOUCHSTONE

Spring 2016





Dear Reader,

For your sake and mine, I'll keep this short. No one wants to hear from the Editor-in-Chief anyway. But there are so many people that I need to thank for their help with this edition of Touchstone Magazine.

Without my team of primary editors, none of this would be possible. Without them, I would just be some lonely Editor-in-Chief poring over submitted material and trying to stitch together a magazine half-as-good as what you're about to read. Truly, any organization is only as strong as the individuals that comprise it, and I had some straight-up artistic warriors in my corner. Thank you so much to Brennan, Erin, Tom, Adena, and all of their reading teams.

Believe it or not, there are a lot of technical concerns related to making a magazine—more concerns than any one Editor-in-Chief can handle. So thanks also to those that helped with tasks that often go unsung: Robert, Seth, Kaitlin, and their teams that publicized the magazine, managed our submissions, and copyedited for us. Likewise, our stalwart designers helped craft the template for this magazine, which should serve Touchstone for years to come.

Speaking of people with greater technical expertise than myself, the employees at Hale Library's Media Development Center saved me from myself on Adobe InDesign too many times to count. Thank you, you Adobe Creative Suite Magicians.

And of course, many thanks to Kansas State University's Department of English and the Creative Writing Track—specific thanks to Dr. Karin Westman and our advisor, Dr. Kimball Smith. To thank our department and the individuals in it would take more space than I have here.

Alright, that's a sufficient amount of gratitude. Go on. Get to it. Enjoy our magazine.

-J. Hunter Gilson

Editor-in-Chief

Touchstone Magazine Staff

SPRING 2016

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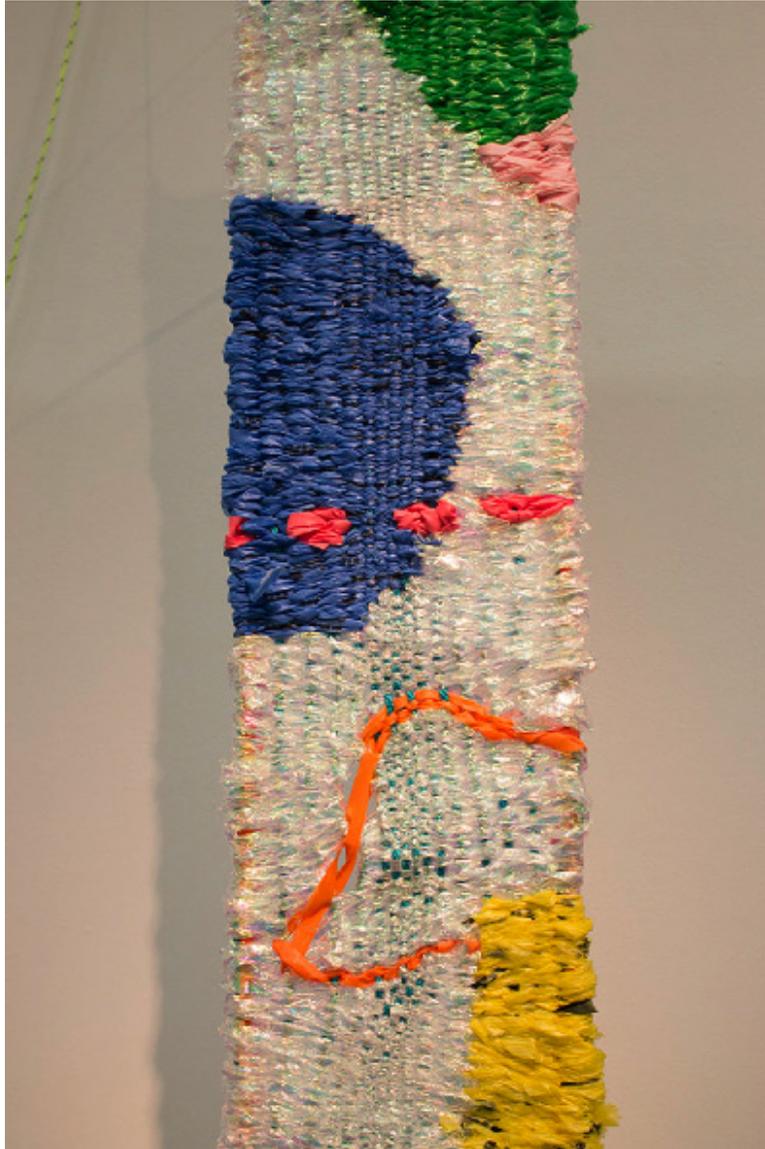
Lisa Allen



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Mixed Media
2015



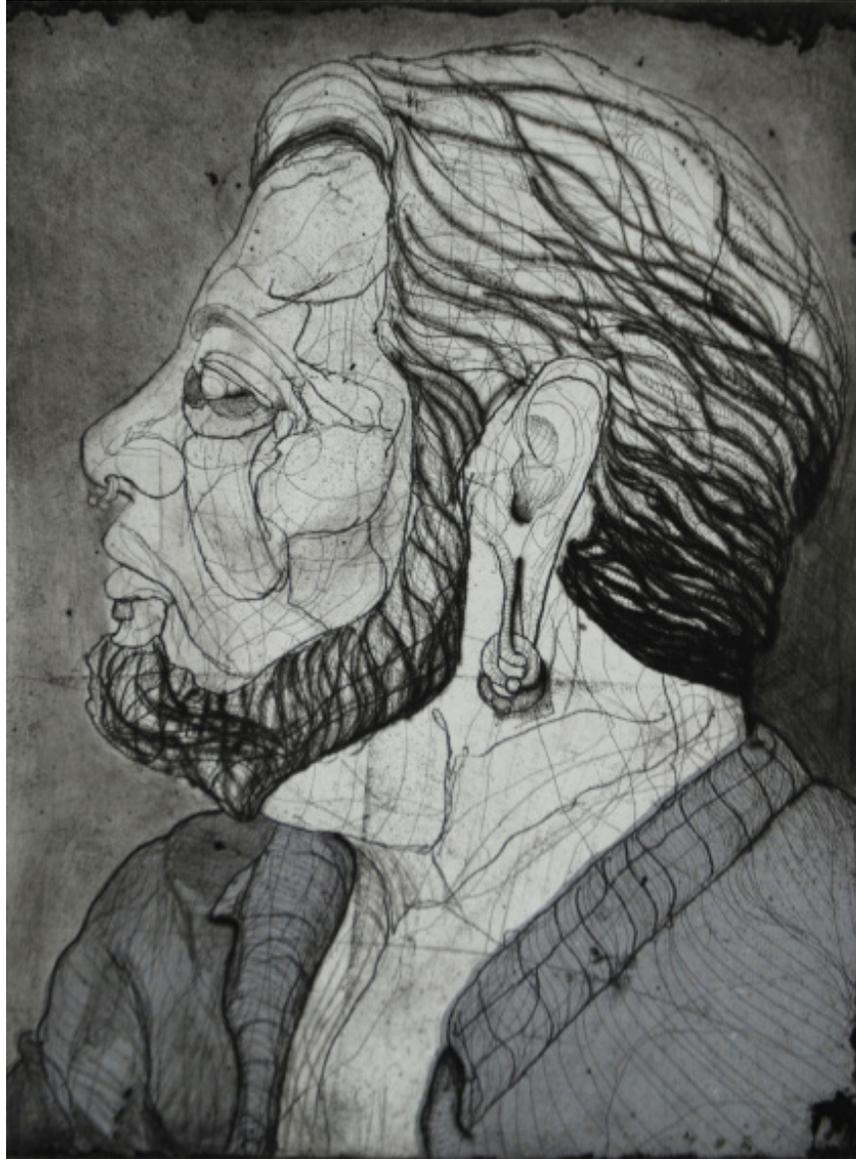
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2015



2 × 1 ft
Recycled Grocery Bags,
Plastic Films & Nylon Rope
2015

PORTRAIT JWF

Lisa Allen



Etching with Chine-colle
11 × 9 in
2015

TIME, SIR?

Megan Birdsey

After the game we find ourselves full,
bruised bodies squeezed against each other in the kitchen,
careful hands where lips should be, oh breast, oh back, on
Dura Mater, she splinters my skull open and
empties it with her long fingers, a blazing, purple
fire in my brain. I know that I love
girls, but this one is not a girl, she is
Helena, and I pray that I am not Theseus.
In her I see gods, no, galaxies, never-ending and I am
Jupiter, mooned but not endless, only heavy.
Kansas fills my bones heavy with lust and the
lions who guard my heart are quiet.
My body is wild, out of orbit and holding a tempest.
No, she is not space, but a storm, hovering
Over my head and ready to rain on my skin,
Pouring herself on shirts and shoulders, me
Quivering in the heat of the flash, the low-resting
Rumble of thunder on the edge of the earth.
Sahira, go, chase my huntress Diana, Artemis,
Tireless long-legged wielders bows, she
Usurps them, chases them through those woods that they own,
Violet beds of lilacs beneath their feet.
Write her name upon my skin with arrow heads, or
Xenolith, straight of the earth, of volcanoes.
Yes, she is heavy, moving, a constant
Zephyr on my back, the Northern Wind, only warm.

CROUCH, BIND, AND SET YOURSELF IN THE TEMPLES OF GODS

Megan Birdsey

Half-crouched, sweat-heavy, blood on our knees—
on Saturdays we break our bodies
on the houses at which we worship.

But on Sundays, when slight-light slides
through our unstained windows
we stick our bodies back together

Not with bread, but with beer
And ibuprofen. Count our bruises
One at a time, fingertips sliding

down bellies, up thighs,
to bury in pulpits just women,
not god , will come to call home.



I AM HERE

Sarah Edwards

I am a cloud full of green grapes. I grocery shop with the water animals, especially the whales and dolphins. I drink green tea with the Atlantic Seaweed, eat salads with bunnies that smell like pickles. I see the eternal souls of people, picking up what they neglect. I reach for the brightest light bulb and turn it on as fast as I can for others to see when they cannot see for themselves. I ride the waves with fear, but still I ride. I open the candy bar tenderly, scared that the goodness is an illusion, but so blessed and humbled after the first bite. Today, the angel hair noodles are anything but angels. They are becoming monsters in bubble baths, melting the ice in glasses of sweet tea before the first sip, cutting down a tree where a family of blue jays are just now working things out and becoming a family again, removing the climax of an African dance, planting screws in the rose garden, frowning after two precious children pray to the Lord. I am a cloud full of green grapes, protecting the goodness of every heart, bringing joy back into the eyes of the abused souls, forgiving and embracing the best I can, living for the moment of silence but also the moment of chaos. I dance with the heartbroken, I sing with those who cannot sing by themselves, I hug those who don't know how, I laugh with those who never have. I am a cloud full of green grapes.

CHEWING THE CUD

David Grubb

Gabe stared at the tumor on Old Man Stewart's neck, a grapefruit-sized node a few inches below his jaw. The growth bobbed and danced under his wrinkled skin whenever the neighbor talked or moved. Gabe searched the archaic kitchen for something else to focus on, but locating a distraction from the ominous feature proved impossible. As the old man continued chitchatting, Gabe became more hypnotized by the grotesque lump.

He would try to avert his gaze whenever the old man looked at him, but Mr. Stewart's baggy eyes were quick. Each time Gabe was caught gawking at the tumor his hands became clammier, mouth drier. The same thing happened when Miranda, a girl in his English class, always caught him ogling her tits.

Christ, he'd been there for less than ten minutes and the idea of future visits made the cold sensation between his shoulder blades icier. His latest punishment had begun and it was already shaping into the worst one yet. The edge of a counter pressing into his lower back started to make his legs numb. He shifted his weight and tried to find a way to end the visit as soon as possible.

"You been helping your father out?" Mr. Stewart's words drifted to him as if they came from an old phonograph on slow speed spinning a warped record under a bent needle.

Gabe's synaptic pause lasted too long and then he sputtered, "Yes sir. Well, as much as I can anyways."

"I helped my paw out—on this farm. Damn hard to work for, but I reckon we all are."

Old Man Stewart picked up a small knife and half-formed sculpture off a cluttered count-

er; he began whittling. Little bits of wood fell away from the chunky figure. The pieces became lost in an astounding mess of shavings, chips, and whittling debris that covered every inch of the floors.

Gabe used the fragments to keep his attention off the tumor. “Dad’s all right. Some of my friend’s fathers are way worse. I wish he’d give me more time to get to the river.”

“Sounds like me at your age. I loved swimming in the Platte, almost as much as I loved chaw.”

“What’s chaw?” Gabe perked up eager for the answer.

“It’s what they used to call chewing tobacco,” his voice faltered and he cleared his throat to finish, “the wife hated it. Made me like it even more.”

“I’m a snuff man.”

“What’s that?” A wisp of a smile crept into place on his wizened face.

“The fine ground up stuff they put in the small, round cans. Skoal and Copenhagen.”

“Oh yeah. I never cared much for that shit. It gets all floaty in my mouth—too much like dirt. So, you’re a fellow enthusiast of chewing t’backy, eh?” His smirk widened and the few yellowy teeth he had left poked out past paper-thin lips.

“Yes sir.”

“You ready to have a chaw now?”

“Heck yeah.” Gabe stood up straighter.

“Well, there ain’t no one here gonna stop ya, so long as you keep it between us men.”

“Should you...”

“Boy, does it look like t’backy can do me any more harm? ‘Sides, them stupid fucking doctors have shit for brains. How in the hell would they know this is caused by chaw?” He tapped the whittling blade on the huge ball protruding from his neck and then went back to carving.

“I suppose you’re right. Does it hurt?”

“Nah. There’s a dull ache, but other than that I feel damn good most days.”

“How long’s it been that big?” Gabe lifted up the pant leg of his button fly Levi’s and pulled a dark green can of Skoal out of his knee-high work sock.

“Hmm, ‘bout two years.”

Gabe’s head flinched, “Oh.” Two years to get that big? That’s it? “How old were you when you started on the chew?”

“Shoot, quite a bit younger than you.” He stared off, but his knife kept clawing and digging into the light colored piece of wood. “I’d guess eight or so.”

“Damn, I was ‘bout eleven the first time I tried it. Made me sick as fu—shit.”

He chuckled, a low gurgling sound. “How old are you now? Thirteen, maybe fourteen?”

“Good guess. I’m fourteen.”

“Let’s see, you put that fine, gritty shit in your lip thisaway?” He set his knife and the shapeless wooden form back down on the counter to mimic Gabe’s motion.

“Yes sir.”

“How in the hell do you keep it all together? Chew stays packed in your cheek all natural and such.”

“You gotta keep fiddling with it, using your tongue. Once ‘ya got enough saliva mixed in the wad, it’ll pretty much stay by itself.”

“Mind if I give it another try?”

“If you want.” Gabe passed him the can and thrust his hands into the front pockets of his pants.

They spent the next couple of hours talking and chewing tobacco. Old Man Stewart spoke of the years gone by and the shelled-in life of a Nebraskan dirt farmer. His hands whittled away at the figurine with few interruptions. A gold, tarnished spittoon passed back and forth between them. Similar to the co-owned combine Mr. Stewart and his dad used during harvest time before the old farmer “retired,” which sat rusting away in the east set-aside field.

Around four o’clock Old Man Stewart handed him a large bottle of Coke and a bag of store-bought cookies. A six-pack of Coors, held together by the plastic ring thingamajig, sat next to the Cokes in the refrigerator. Gabe almost asked for a beer instead of the Coke, but lost his nerve as the door closed with a loud creaking noise. Within minutes, he’d devoured four of the pink frosted cookies and drained half the Coke. The old man’s white, bushy eyebrows rose and remained

suspended for longer than Gabe took note.

Then the old man started up again and talked about one story or remembrance after another. He'd sprinkle in a farmer's almanac tidbit every so often, the way a preacher tossed in relevant passages during a sermon. The events and milestones seemed as if they were occurring all around the old man instead being mere memories in his head.

Gabe's punishment was turning out to be somewhat enjoyable, and the continued rush of exuberance made it hard to act casual. Plus, laboring away his summer was put on hold and now he could chew all day long without the fear of getting caught. The massive lump became something he could ignore, for the most part, but a foul odor remained oppressive.

Ever since he'd entered the old man's house a pungent, vile odor had taken root in his nose. For most of the day he had a hard time pinpointing the odor's true source. He ruled out old house smell because that familiar scent mingled with the terrible stench. The indigenous trees Mr. Stewart used for carving smelled good, an earthy wooden fragrance. When they went and sat on his porch the source became apparent. The unsettling, bittersweet stench came from the damn tumor.

A few years back the neighbor had carried Gabe home, right after his seventh birthday. He'd sprained his ankle in a field where Mr. Stewart had been baling hay since first light. Running full speed and dreaming about being a star running back, he stepped in a prairie dog hole. Back then the neighbor smelled of sweat, strange detergent, and fresh cut alfalfa. Now he reeked of cancer and little else. Even the light gusts of wind did little more than waft the unrelenting foulness about. Gabe hated the fucking stench and wished it would go away.

The creaking moan of matching rocking chairs sang out as they rocked back and forth on the dry-rotted porch. A late afternoon sun had dropped down into an obtuse angle from the horizon casting them in full shade. Every so often tobacco juice would spurt from one of their mouths and splatter on the hard-packed ground. It'd been a common practice for so long that the area beyond the porch edge was a darker color than anywhere else.

Gabe had noticed the discoloration before they sat down. Jesus, how much spit had gone into making that big, brown spot? How much spit did it take to defy rain, snow, wind and sun? What about all the spit that was deposited in other places? The spittoon, the man's fields, and the

little bit a person swallowed while participating in such a great pastime. The old man had been a chewing machine for most of his life and the stained ground was a huge banner of lifetime achievement.

The old man's first real lull created an awkward silence, but his voice had become so raspy Gabe was glad he quit. When the old man began snoring Gabe decided to slip away. A loud squeak from a loose board woke him up.

"Guess you're coming back, 'bout the same time tomorrow?" The old man shifted in the rocker.

"Yes sir."

A loud cough cleared his throat. "Your old man need less help this year or something?"

"I'm not sure."

"Humph."

"Goodbye."

"See ya."

•

After that, hanging out with Old Man Stewart became an everyday ritual instead of penance. Gabe would hustle along the graveled road between their houses to spend as much time with the old neighbor as possible. The three-mile hike took fifty minutes if he went all out and over an hour if he dallied.

Before that first visit Gabe had asked his father if could drive the tractor to his mandated visits. That way he could get back earlier to help out with the evening chores.

His father scoffed, "It'll be damn good for you to have the extra time for reflection. Maybe you'll get it in your thick head that dipping snuff is dangerous. Cancer is a terrible way to die."

What in the hell did he know about dying from cancer? His father was healthier than anyone in the county. Being a teetotaling, God fearing, hardworking dirt farmer kept him hearty, hale, and—strict.

He'd find excuses to stay at Old Man Stewart's house for longer periods of time. His dad

gave him concerned looks, but allowed his requests to stay later. By the end of the month Gabe would come home long after chores were done. He'd slip in the basement door and try to get to his room unnoticed.

His father would catch him and a short inquisition would ensue. The order to stop visiting their closest neighbor was always withheld, much to Gabe's surprise. Relief and disappointment would wash over Gabe in a puzzling wave of emotion. He'd get ready for bed trying to sort everything out. He'd fall asleep more baffled than ever before about his punishment, Old Man Stewart, and the maddening methods of his father.

•

One day the old man came to the screen door, but he stopped and made no attempt to open it. He stood and stared through the rusted wire mesh with a vacant gaze on his wrinkled face. His odd behavior made Gabe edgy, similar to his first visit. He used his boot to stir some whittle shavings on the warped boards of the porch while he waited.

The day was dry and hot. His clothes and roper boots were covered in dust from the long walk. Sweat dripped off his bangs, and chewing snuff had made the inside of his lower lip tender. All that discomfort paled in comparison to the haunting statue staring at him through the screen. Did the old man want Gabe to scam or stand there until the sun melted him into a puddle of molten flesh?

An iron taste from smelling the rusting screen door became apparent and stopped Gabe's grumbling stomach, cold. Before he could minimize his exposure to the rust, a hand speckled with age spots pushed open the door. The hinges protested, giving voice to the old man's state of mind. Gabe tried to enjoy his time with Mr. Stewart, but jumped at the first chance to leave.

•

Gabe contemplated the strange greeting for many days yet never came up with a sound reason for his action. Even if the strange reception hadn't occurred, the shine of hanging out and chewing the cud had waned. The odd behavior helped the fading flavor become distasteful even faster.

The following day, about half-way to Old Man Stewart's house, Gabe's irritation peaked, as

it had been of late. He kicked the base of a young sunflower growing in the soft dirt of the road's shoulder. The plant flew up in the air with the root clump leading its way, a chunky, deformed arrowhead. It hung for a moment at mid-arc and then sailed into the irrigation ditch, causing a large splash. At mid-summer, the full flow of water sucked the young shoot downstream. The brown head circled by yellow petals disappeared into the murky water as it sank. The drowning victim image stuck with him as he plodded along.

For over a year he'd been careful and hid his cans of snuff in hard-to-find locations. One morning, before heading off to school as summer recess approached, he got distracted. On the bus, halfway to school, he became aware that something was wrong. The familiar sharp edges of the can pressing against his leg in the upper part of a sock wasn't there. Fuck. He'd left one of the small green, half-used cans of Skoal sitting on top of his dresser in plain sight. There was nothing to do but pray that one of his parents didn't find it.

No such luck. What a foolish thing to do, leaving the evidence right out there in the open. He'd hoped to be living on his own before his parents found out about his favorite habit. His father had always been a maestro when it came to punishment. This time would turn out to be his ninth symphony in the art of penance.

The visits to Old Man Stewart's place went on and his precious summer of freedom dwindled until two weeks of break were all that remained. His dread of school starting up intruded on every thought and tainted everything he did. Going over and chewing the cud had grown staler than early spring sweetcorn. Once a week would be perfect, but every single day had become a big bucket of suck.

His hustle to get to the neighbor's house had receded. He threw rocks and tossed sticks into the canal as he shuffled along. Whenever a vehicle came by he'd do something goofy. The first time he lay down on the road's narrow shoulder and stuck his arms and legs straight up in the air like a dead cockroach. The second time he sat cross-legged and pretended to be a meditating Indian. By the time he knocked on Mr. Stewart's door, an angry late July sun cast shade over the empty porch.

Several minutes passed, he rapped harder and longer. His alarm morphed into deep concern

and his drifting attention became focused. He walked to the back of the house and snuck a quick peak around the corner. The old man's beat-up farm truck sat on four bald tires in its normal spot.

More knocking went unanswered, he pulled open the screen door and slunk inside. He crept through the kitchen, past the bathroom, and down the long hall. It was the first time he'd ventured into that part of the house and the strangeness abounded off of everything. Upon reaching the closed door at the end of the hall he stopped, waited, and listened.

His breathing had quickened and heart raced. Heavy panting and blood rushing in his head made it impossible to hear anything else. He gave up, drew in some courage and pushed open the door. Old Man Stewart was lying in his bed, a rigid and motionless form. Shit, maybe he'd died in his sleep. The neighbor had been a little out of sorts the previous day, but as usual he had told stories, chewed tobacco, and whittled.

Gabe took a few steps closer, but the old man started thrashing around and moaning. He retreated to the door and stood in the opening ready to bolt. His neighbor's writhing and groaning intensified. When the old man lurched to one side the grungy, light blue top sheet slipped off and fell to the floor. The fitted bed sheet was stained with body fluids and tobacco spit. Holy hell, he's delirious, naked, and has a hard-on. Gabe fought the urge to run out of the room and away from the house.

The old man began ranting and screaming. His eyes had gone wide open and he kept yelling that the drapes were on fire. "Why are you standing there like a fucking tree stump? Put out the god-damned fire. Hurry, before it torches the whole house."

Before Gabe could react and pretend to fight an invisible fire, the old man stopped bel-lowing. He threw his head and shoulders from side to side like things were attacking him from all angles. After the attack ended he turned onto his side and began murmuring to the far corner of the room.

Gabe jumped at his chance, "Mr. Stewart, I've gotta go for help. I'm going to borrow your truck to go get my dad."

The old man flopped back over and stretched out his lanky arm trying to get ahold of Gabe.

The futility of his desperate action caused a nervous chuckle to slip out of Gabe's mouth. His hand slapped across his mouth, much too late to stop the rogue snicker. Rage consumed Mr. Stewart and if he'd been in better shape Gabe would've received the throttling of his life. Old Man Stewart succumbed to his weakened state. His face and body relaxed, his outstretched arm went back to his side. The other hand continued its furious activity without missing a beat.

"No. Let me go—it's time." His raspy, unintelligible voice would be lost on almost everybody but Gabe who'd become accustomed to hearing it.

"But..."

"No buts, do as I say."

Gabe began to utter a response, but the old man's madness came back before any words could form. His outlandish actions went on for many hours until exhaustion forced him to lie on his back. Prone and frozen, he held onto his erection while staring straight up at the ceiling. Gabe kept his sentinel position at the door. He remained stunned, unable to move any closer and too confused to do anything else.

Gabe fell into his own trance and it took him a few seconds to register the strange noise.

Old Man Stewart had started singing, "The Camptown ladies sing this song."

Then, as if they had practiced for weeks on end, Gabe sang out, "do-daa, do-daa".

That's all it took. They belted out the rest of the song taking turns. After that they sang four more songs in the same manner. The tunes were old yesteryear songs his parents listened to any chance they could. The final melody became a solo act. Gabe was unable to recall the lyrics because his mom disliked the song as regular listening fodder. She insisted the hymnal remain reserved for the house of God and select tragic moments.

The old man's graveled, garbled voice illuminated the sorrowful beauty of the famous song. About midway through his lone performance he became stuck, a tape deck set to loop.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved wretch like me..." He sang the line a dozen more times, taking a long eerie pause and gasp for air between each one. Then as if he could sense Gabe's growing angst he

quit. He leaned up on an elbow and glared at Gabe with his familiar, all-knowing smirk.

“Boy, get me a chaw.”

“I doubt you’re...”

“Do it now, boy.”

“Yes sir.”

Gabe picked up the foil pouch of tobacco that had fallen onto the floor with the sheet. Most of the contents had spilled out. He scraped the brown, twiggy strings of tobacco back into the bag. Time seemed to be critical and he left the wood chips mixed in with chaw. He stood up and handed the pouch to an outstretched hand.

Mr. Stewart pulled out a big wad of chaw chockfull of wood shavings. He looked at the mixture and then at Gabe.

“I’m sorry, the pouch...”

The old man shushed Gabe with a huge grin and packed the concoction into his cheek. After a few minutes he spat a slurry of brown liquid full of wood fibers onto the bed. Their eyes locked onto each other and the connection made gooseflesh spring up on Gabe’s arms. The look lasted for a long time until Old Man Stewart pointed over to the closet door. His bony finger and distorted nail were stained dark brown. Years upon years of pulling the damp leaves out of the tobacco pouch and packing them into his cheeks.

Gabe hesitated and then went over to the door painted dark yellow. He twisted and pulled the brass door knob as his mind raced. What in the hell was he going to find? The door swung open in silence like it’d been oiled that morning. Gabe cocked his head to the side as the door made a dull thud against the wall.

A large hand carved golden eagle stood in the little alleyway between the mounds of clothes, shoes, and junk. His mouth gaped open from the amazing craftsmanship and detailed paint work. He careened his head to the old man. Did he carve the eagle for him? The question went unanswered because the old man had rolled onto his back. His ancient, sagging eyes stared upwards, but he gazed at something a few feet below the ceiling. Within a moment or two a slight tremor shook

his old, broken-down body. Gabe began to weep.

After his tear fest subsided Gabe went to the kitchen. He hauled one of the rickety dining chairs into the bedroom and sat next to Old Man Stewart. His mind was lifeless and tepid like the body next to him. About an hour later he walked out of the farm house that had homesteaded generations of Stewarts. The orange sun, a disc cut in half by the sand hills, struggled to stay above them. He set the eagle on the ground and pulled a can of Skoal out of his back pocket.

Gabe stared through the ragged, hoary bushes lining the front porch; his hands fiddled with the can. The tarnished patch of ground was darker and more sinister in the fading sunlight. Soon, he popped off the top of the can and pulled out a large pinch of black grit. He packed the wad into his bottom lip. The familiar sting from snuff on raw tissue went unnoticed as he worked the grinds into place.

When he reached the dilapidated mailbox he glanced back down the lane and spat a stream of brown juice onto some loose, chalky dirt. His spit skittered along the surface until it caught hold and became a globular ball of muddy spittle. The rolling mass came to rest at the base of a gypsum weed twisting out of the gravel road. A small white flower in full bloom at the top needed rain and soon. He squinted through the oncoming darkness and wiped the dribbles of spit from his chin. Then he turned and continued walking home.



ALIENS EXIST

Aaron J. Heil

*H*ot, black coffee sloshed against her lips and hauled Diana Sprague into total wakefulness in the passenger seat of her dad's F-150 as they rolled along the dirt roads of their farm, toward the sections reserved for turkey hunting. Her stomach growled for real breakfast, but she could wait for a few hours. When Diana set the travel mug down, she took a breath. She had but few minutes to say what she meant.

"Dad? Did you know Mom believed in aliens when you married her?" she asked.

His eyes didn't leave the road. "I met your mother when we were fourteen years old. She is now probably the most intelligent person I know. I trust her judgment on the existence of aliens because she knows far more about it than I ever will."

Diana let that breath out. She should have known her father would give her an old repeated line. She'd skimmed ahead in her physics textbook and saw the detour into space travel. She imagined herself parroting that same sentiment at school when extraterrestrials came up, as it inevitably would, and being laughed at for a solid month.

"You never had any doubts about her?" Diana asked.

"Honey, when I realized I was in love with your mother, I decided I would support her in everything," Mr. Sprague said. They slowed to a stop in front of the section where they had set up the turkey blind. "Why do you ask?"

Diana knew he wouldn't open the door until the conversation ended. Unwritten rule: no talking on a turkey hunt, and the hunt begins once one person opens a car door. She undid her seatbelt. Silence could be so much more comfortable.

“I was just curious,” Diana said, opened the door, and slipped out.

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Yarp! Yarp, yarp! Mr. Sprague tasted bitter latex against his tongue as he let the turkey call loose a little bit to breathe. Other bird calls had already sounded - the meadowlark, flirting cardinals, a lonely dove - but Mr. Sprague’s sharp yodels resonated in the ears of their hut of invisibility in yellow prairie grass.

From the corner of his eye, Mr. Sprague could see his daughter try not to fidget underneath floppy camouflage. Diana’s eyes stared straight ahead at the line of dying trees. He still didn’t know why she had brought up the subject of her mother’s ideas on aliens. Maybe Diana would talk more with her turkey in the bag for the year. It might be the last turkey she’d shoot for awhile. He knew Diana hoarded the brochures she got from Creighton, Baylor, and Michigan. Long drives from Kansas. Too long to drive back for a single tom.

Mr. Sprague let out another yelping gobble. Then, the tree line began to rustle.

A dull taupe-colored beast - double the size of their pet beagle at home - slipped out of the wood on all fours. A curly tail stood straight up in the air. The beast bit off a piece of grass and began to chew on it.

“Dad? What is that?”

It strutted out, alone toward the decoy turkeys they’d set up. It sniffed cautiously at the biggest, most lifelike male turkey. The beast snapped, revealed enormous fangs, and bit the decoy in the neck. It tore the turkey out of the ground and began to rip up the false bird with five-fingered hands.

“Honey, I think that’s a baboon.”

Diana watched the baboon for five seconds before she reached for her phone underneath floppy folds of camouflage. She took pictures. She tried to upload a video. Mr. Sprague stared at the baboon. The way it tore apart that fake turkey with its little hands reminded him unnervingly of Thanksgiving dinner. He shuddered to think what might happen to a real turkey.

“Dad, look, there’s another one.” Diana’s phone kept clicking as she took more pictures.

Another, smaller baboon wandered out into the field. Mr. Sprague assumed this one was

a she and wondered exactly what one called boy and girl monkeys. As the shrieks and grunts of baboons filled the air, Mr. Sprague noticed the absence of the cell phone clicking.

He glanced over at his daughter, who had set her phone down and grabbed an arrow.

“Hold on a minute, Di, what’s going on?” Mr. Sprague asked.

Diana drew back the compound bow and fired.

She shot too quickly to hit anything. The arrow sprinted out of the turkey blind, skipped off of a tall patch of grass and hurtled end over end past the dark face of one of the biggest baboons in the field. He hollered, and all his fellow baboons - close to thirty - began running in the direction opposite of the blind. The wind picked up little pieces of foam from the obliterated decoy.

“Diana, what the heck were you thinking?”

“Did you see the teeth on those things? They’d have torn us up just like that decoy.”

“I’m sure they’re fine around people,” Mr. Sprague said, and realized how ridiculous that sounded. He tried to sell it anyway. “They probably came from a zoo or a circus or something.”

“The last time I went to a zoo the monkeys flung crap at the bars and all looked like they wanted to kill us,” Diana said. “Let’s go home before they come back.”

This time, Mr. Sprague didn’t correct his daughter, because he agreed.

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Porthos the beagle’s barking woke Mrs. Sprague. In her favorite threadbare bathrobe, she opened the door to find her husband and daughter returned much earlier than expected. Mrs. Sprague saw Diana jump out of the truck first, and slammed the door shut just after her camo-and-pink Bone Collector cap flopped out. Her blonde ponytail bounced undone as she jogged toward the barn.

“Do Grandpa’s old coyote traps still work?” Diana called back. As an afterthought, she added, “Hi, Mom, we’re back. We saw baboons.”

“We don’t need coyote traps.” Mr. Sprague slipped out of the truck. The dog ran off the porch and began running around him, barking. “Go in the house and get changed.”

Baboons? She must not have heard correctly. Traps? Mrs. Sprague thought of little Porthos stepping in one of the rusty jaws, losing a paw, and dying of tetanus. It nearly made her sick right then. Also, another coyote? Diana had already turned in the skins for seven of them.

“Hi honey,” Mr. Sprague said, before he ran around the side of the house. The dog didn’t follow him, but made sure he greeted Diana, instead.

“Mom, we saw baboons while we were out,” Diana said. She, too, ignored Porthos.

“What?” Mrs. Sprague wondered if she might not have woken after all. She snapped her fingers to try and shut Porthos up. “What baboons? What’s your father doing?”

“He’s going for the telescope.”

Mrs. Sprague darted around the house, and almost ran into Mr. Sprague on his way back with an enormous telescope cradled in his arms. Her telescope. It had been an anniversary present from him, who couldn’t tell Andromeda from Auriga, to her, who knew that both would be visible tonight, given a stiff breeze to get rid of some clouds. Through that, she could see all moving objects in the night sky, identified or not.

“What are you doing? You can’t move that.”

“I figure that we’ll be able to watch the baboons from here if I point this out at the field.”

“But, how will we-”

“It’s going to be cloudy tonight, and the stars aren’t going anywhere, honey,” Mr. Sprague said. “Besides, let me show you this. You’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Baboons?” Mrs. Sprague asked. She could read his thoughts with one look at his face. A request: Back to earth, honey. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. They’re practically in our backyard.”

So, Mrs. Sprague sighed, and went around back to the fetch the tripod for him.

•

Two hours later, Mr. Sprague sat alone out in his truck, his and Diana’s semi-automatic shotguns sitting in the gun rack behind him, as he watched a Sedgwick County Animal Control van roll up to the gate outside his section. He got out to greet the two men who got out.

“Hi,” Mr. Sprague said. “I’m the guy who called about the baboons?”

“This is the section?” One of them opened the sliding door on the van. He pulled out a pole with loops of steel rope at the end and a cage the size of a dog carrier.

“Yeah. Do you have more cages?” Mr. Sprague asked. “You’re going to need a lot more than

just that one.”

“Exactly how many animals did you see?” The first animal control officer asked.

“Like fifty of them.” Mr. Sprague fingered the magnum shells he’d slipped into his pocket. He felt like the crusty sea captain in *Jaws* watching Richard Dreyfuss lower himself into a shark-attracting deathtrap. “You sure you don’t need a gun? I brought an extra.”

The doubt could not be clearer on the faces of the two officers. Nonetheless, they strolled through the gate once Mr. Sprague opened it for them.

“Do I need to come?” Mr. Sprague asked.

“No, sir, we’ll take care of it.” As the two men stalked away through the tall grass, Mr. Sprague heard one of them mutter. “Better ask if he’s been drinking.”

“I bet it’s a prank,” the other responded.

Five minutes, measured by around thirty glances at his cell phone, passed before Mr. Sprague caught sight of them again - running back. No poles, but one of them had the cage swinging in his grip. They had one smaller, lady baboon in custody, and Mr. Sprague could see the rest of the troop trailing after them.

Mr. Sprague darted back to the truck, slid his shotgun off the gun rack, and slammed a few shells into the magazine. The animal control guys and the baboons almost had made the gate, but some of the largest snapped at the men’s hiking boots. Mr. Sprague aimed the gun in the opposite direction in order to avoid shooting a person. The next shot would go right at the baboons, though, he resolved.

Bam! The baboons all stopped, turned disorganized about faces, and hollered, screeching in an almost universal warning cry. They began to scamper back toward the safety of the tall grasses. Animal control ran through the gate and slammed it shut behind them. The captured one cried, wailed, and slammed her little hands against the bars.

The animal control guys barely took a breath. One had the radio out, pronto, “Dispatch, we are going to need more men and cages out at the Sprague? That right, sir? Sprague farm. We have at least fifty baboons. We might even need Wichita Animal Control’s help on this.”

•

That night, Mr. Sprague made popcorn before the evening news. He had insisted that the family watch the segment taped earlier that day together. He walked into the living room, past the portraits of Diana at the Cosmosphere, Yearbook Diana, and Diana's first buck, carrying a bowl of but-tery and salted kernels. He lowered himself down next to his wife on the sofa that sat underneath a large Hubble print of a nebula. His daughter curled herself into a ball around her cell phone on the loveseat. He still barely made it in time for the segment.

The news anchor informed them, "Both Sedgwick County and Wichita Animal Control were called out to a farm near Afton Township to take care of fifty-eight baboons that had infested a nearby field. While both the Sedgwick County Zoo and Tanganyika Wildlife Park have offered to take in some of the baboons, neither has any idea how they got where they are today."

"It's incredible," a woman whose title tag revealed to be a primatologist at Wichita State, said. "There hasn't been a documented case of baboons living in the wild like this, on this continent, ever."

"You talk like they're wild animals," the news anchor asked in an in-person. "Don't you think that they escaped from a zoo, or a primate sanctuary?"

"If they did, I'm surprised that no one's come forward by now," she replied. "These aren't the baboons they already have over at Sedgwick County; they're a totally different species. It's impos- sible that so many of these animals would escape and no one would issue a warning. That level of irresponsibility is just unprofessional."

"Whether wild or escaped, these baboons have a new home in two local zoos," the anchor's voiceover concluded. The segment ended, but not the news. Mrs. Sprague's head lolled against her husband's shoulder as they watched, not really paying attention.

Porthos thumped his way through the house and barked at the door.

"He wants out," Mrs. Sprague said. "Plus, we had better go set the telescope back up."

"You know," Mr. Sprague said to his wife, "we don't need a telescope to look at the stars together. Want to take a walk?"

Diana barely looked up from her phone. "I'm going to turn on something else on TV."

"Sure, just make sure you do your homework, too," Mrs. Sprague said. "Is that physics grade

still at a B?”

“I don’t know,” Diana answered. Her phone consumed her attention, but she tried to explain anyway, “I felt pretty confident out of the last test, and the next unit doesn’t look like it will be hard.”

“Oh, cool, what’s the next unit?”

Diana tried to slide the words by her mother. “Astronomy and Space Travel.”

“That sounds awesome,” Mrs. Sprague said. An enormous grin spread across her face. “If you ever need any help-”

“Gee, I wonder where to turn.”

Mrs. Sprague tried to smile it off, but Mr. Sprague could see the pressure building behind his wife’s eyeballs. The dog barked again - louder, now - and scratched at the door. Mr. Sprague took his wife’s hand and led her out the door.

Porthos slipped out with them when they left the house. Mr. Sprague decided that the pup didn’t need a leash. The dog began sniffing around and found a suitable place to do his business. Mrs. Sprague slipped free, letting out some pent up frustration with loud sighs. She finally grinned up at the heavens.

“God, it’s nice for October,” she said.

“Clear, too. Look at that moon.” Mr. Sprague chuckled, and recalled using the excuse of watching a moonrise as an excuse to take a slender blonde out on their first date, almost twenty years earlier.

“It’s waning. It turns such a pretty color when it wanes,” Mrs. Sprague said. Her husband watched her eyes strain at the surface of the moon, as if trying to pick out lakes and craters. They didn’t say anything for a few minutes, but just listened to the sound of crickets and the yapping, barking, and jingling of Porthos’ collar as he sniffed out exciting everyday objects, like fence posts, and trucks.

Mr. Sprague sighed. “Maybe loosen up on her about those grades, okay?”

“I guess I hope TV gets her into a good college then,” Mrs. Sprague said, in the same voice she had always used to imitate her mother. “She gets such good grades - if she had an A in Calc, I

bet she could get a scholarship at Stanford.”

“Honey, everybody needs their own little time to just let things spin out,” Mr. Sprague said. He watched Porthos suddenly stiffen and start growling at the dark. “Her grades are good enough, and she’s had a weird day and now what is that dog -”

Primal shrieks from the near bushes punctuated the hound’s angry barks. Porthos’s aggressive growl soon turned into a cry. He ran out of the bushes, limping, a baboon in pursuit.

“Back to the house! Run!” Mr. Sprague said. His wife had already started running.

They’d nearly made it out when Diana stepped out the side door, holding her grandfather’s Vietnam War-issue M14. Before he got a word of caution out, Mr. Sprague glanced back and saw that the baboon had Porthos pinned and his fangs deep in the hound’s leg. Mrs. Sprague ducked behind her daughter, just before Mr. Sprague dove in the house. He ran upstairs and grabbed his turkey gun from the open gun safe.

Bam, bam, bam, bam! Diana peppered off round after round. Mr. Sprague trotted down the stairs, with the shotgun pointed at the ceiling, and a box of shells in his hand.

“It’s gone, but Porthos is still out there,” Diana said. She watched down the iron sights of the battle rifle in her hands. “I think I clipped its shoulder.”

Click, click, click, click, click. Five shells. Mr. Sprague set the rest of the box down on the floor. They heard Porthos whining and crying even from the house.

“Still got some bullets left, hon? Good.”

Mr. Sprague stepped outside the house, the shotgun hanging from his shoulder strap. Diana followed him, pointing the rifle off to the side towards the field. A few seconds later, Mrs. Sprague popped out, a few ratty blankets in her arms. Huddling together in a group, the family approached the howling dog, kicking around in mud made from his own wound.

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Diana held quivering, whimpering Porthos in a bundle of bloody blankets. She patted the faithful old boy behind his red-spotted tan ears. He seemed to appreciate the gesture. He didn’t deserve this, she told herself. Little Porthos had had no concept even of what baboons looked like, smelled like, let alone fought like. Poor brave little warrior. Diana held him tight against her softest worn-

out hoodie when they hit the same pothole they always did on the way to town.

Her mother nodded to her cell phone conversation with the veterinarian in Cheney. Her dad drove, silent so that Mrs. Sprague wouldn't miss a detail. Eventually, Mrs. Sprague thanked the doctor and set the phone down.

"They're going to have the emergency room ready for us."

No one felt the need to acknowledge the beneficial news. Instead, all kept quiet, afraid something might jump out into the headlights. Out to the left and to the right, Diana saw her mother's so-much-talked-about constellations fly by at seventy miles an hour. An idea wormed into her brain.

It erupted: "Mom, we don't know where these baboons are coming from. What if these are your aliens you just know are wandering about the universe?"

Her mother didn't respond verbally, but Diana watched her jaw drop in the darkness.

"Turkey season is now over for the year," Mr. Sprague said, his voice almost quavered. Diana couldn't see his face in the dark; by his tone she knew she didn't want to. "And maybe deer season. You will not talk to your mother that way, no matter what you or she believe about extraterrestrial beings, baboons, or anything else."

"Yes sir." Diana's voice tumbled out involuntarily quiet, and she stammered. She did not apologize, however.

The rest of the ride through the darkness passed in silence, except for Porthos's occasional whine. Ten minutes passed with the speed of thirty before they rolled up to the clinic in town, where a doctor showed them right into the emergency room.

"He must be a tough little guy," the doctor said. Diana set Porthos, still swaddled in blankets, down on the operating table. "Baboons are nasty. They'll almost rip each other to shreds in a fight, let alone something they want to eat."

"Diana saved him," Mr. Sprague said. "She shot at the one that attacked Porthos."

The doctor whistled his commendation. He shook his head and began probing Porthos's cuts. "You guys are the family that got hit by the baboons earlier today, aren't you?"

Mr. Sprague nodded. "Unfortunately, that's us."

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” the doctor said. He grimaced at Porthos. “He’ll live, but he’s going to need some surgery. I’m sorry, but I’m going to ask you all to sit in the waiting room for now.”

The Sprague family found three chairs in the waiting room. Diana sat between her mother and father. She could see a few of the stars, even with the lights of town drowning out most of them.

“We’re setting out those coyote traps when we get home,” Mrs. Sprague said. Diana looked at her mother, who was wringing her hands nervously and watching the same patch of sky. “There’s no telling what’s out there now.”

ABBY KERN

Feature Artist

Memory does this strange thing where it exists in conjunction with make-believe. I can recall with great detail the day I met my best friend when I was four years old. The ice cream truck came by and of course, all the neighbor kids ran outside. She was new, not one of the Ridge Club Circle kids. She got a pink power ranger popsicle—the weird face ones that sort of melt together into a blob of colors—so I also ordered a power ranger popsicle. We became the best of friends. But I also think that maybe our moms just scheduled a play date. I'm fascinated that this memory, that is so very important to me, could also just be made up. In my work, I try to re-imagine the memories once again in order to create a fantastical setting where the things I make up are the same as the things I remember. I reference specific elements from places that are important to me and recreate them to fit into my headspace of memory and make-believe. I try to treat the specific, personal memories, the made up elements, and the aesthetic choices as equals when I'm putting things together. I do this so that I can create settings that allow a person to take on their own meaning, while still seeing the interaction between specific and vague. I just like the idea that extremely important moments can often be partially fabricated. I feel like it opens up doors between our collective past. My power ranger Popsicle friendship could be someone else's favorite after school show with their sibling.

I think that's kind of awesome.

Feature Artist

Q: Abby, could you tell me a little bit about your background, and how you found yourself doing art?

So I started in ceramics in high school my sophomore year, and my teacher was really great and super and wanted me and a few other students to do extra projects, and I would spend all of my extra time during study hall doing projects. But then I actually wanted to do fashion, and ended up going to the University of the Ozarks, which is a small liberal arts university in Arkansas with around 600 students, and ended up having a really great ceramics professor, and then decided halfway through sophomore year that I wanted to do ceramics.

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Q: Could you explain your process, and where your inspiration for your work comes from?

So, my process is different depending on what I'm making. But the inspiration usually comes from a personal experience, whether recent or from the past, and thinking of ways to visually represent a feeling, or an impression. Then once I decide how to visually represent it, I make aesthetic choices, and figure out what other memories or ideas I have that would fit in with that, and it typically comes back to thinking about social perception of grief or memory, or interactions from memory, and my own day to day life and just what's going on around me... it transforms, and is informed by memories and a reaction to the world around me.

•

Q: Are there any specific artist that have inspired your work?

I really love Janine Antoni, she is a sculptor, who does a lot of weird discomfoting stuff and Rebecca Bogart really influenced me a lot in my earlier work. I've recently avoided looking at work because I want my work to come from a place of originality, and when I was in undergraduate school, I was so directly inspired by who I was around, and artists like Beth Cavener that I was in a head space that wasn't my own. But since I've been here at k-state I've been avoiding that direct inspiration to make a more authentic voice for myself.

•

Q: What is the hardest step in creating your art?

I don't know if there is one particular thing that is hard, but with each piece I make there is a moment, as I make it, when my idea is evolving... a moment of crippling self doubt about whether the idea is even good, or not and if I'm doing the right things to represent

the thing that I'm trying to say effectively. Getting over that hurdle of is this going to be terrible, and then seeing that its actually not a bad idea, and that this is going to be okay. But yes, I think its really just getting over that hurdle whether its talking through it with someone, or its making an aesthetic choice.

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Q: How has your practice evolved over time?

So, when I was in undergrad, my professor was asking a lot of questions that were rooted in content, why is it this color, why is it this size and looking for specific straight foreword answers for those questions. Since moving to a new place, I've let myself get away from doing that, and have given myself a wider array of thinking space... even in just material. Before, I would think of something that I wanted to make and immediately start thinking of how that would work with ceramics. Now I'm trying to not limit myself to thinking of it in those confines, if something makes more sense to be another material I'm open to that.. I don't want the work to feel so contrived, and forced.

•

Q: Could you describe a real-life situation that inspired you?

Yeah, probably, when I went home last year to visit my mom, and she made me clean our my closet and dresser, and I had this chest of drawers full of stuff that I had collected when I was a kid... old pictures, knick knacks, diaries, and I was just trying to decide which things were important enough to keep and what I could get rid of and there was this tea cup, you know, one of the ones with the blue floral print and the gold luster around the rim. My mom insisted that that teacup was this important thing to me and she said "Oh you can't get rid of that! You loved that teacup!" So I made this piece with it, because it fit directly into what I was doing with memory and the falsehood of it.... how this thing is so important to me through the eyes of my mom, but I had no recollection of it. I just thought that was a really great idea that I wanted to explore.

•

Q: How do you know when you're finished with a piece?

Um, sometimes it just happens and you just know, and other times you kind of have to try different things. I don't know, I'm mean its not just one thing... but little things that happen when I look at it. Sometimes I just have to decide to be done to risk not overworking it. Sometimes it just feels right.

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Q: Do you collect anything?

Not really, I used to collect glass animals when I was a kid but that doesn't really have to do with anything for me now. I collect things that I like, but not really any one specific thing. I throw

away as much as I gather. I have a rotating collection of knick-knacks that I've found at the thrift store that I think are cool, but when I find the next collection of things that are equally cool; I get rid of the old ones.

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Q: What is your art-world pet peeve?

I don't like when people get too hung up on anyone thing, whether its formalism, or contemporary anything. Anyone that gets particular about whether art is good or bad. I think its just silly to get hung up on that. There is beautiful art from all different times and places. I don't think there are any rules that can be universally used to decide what art is good or bad. However, I do think everyone should make their own rules or guidelines about how they make their art for themselves.

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Q: Do you have any hobbies?

I really like makeup, and doing my makeup and buying the fancy makeup pallets. I also really like watching internet videos of how to do fancy makeup and trying it out, even through I don't have the time to do it all that often! Another thing I do, I don't know if you could call it a hobby or not, but I love watching baking videos. I'm not a baker, and I don't try to be, but I love watching cake-decorating videos.

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Q: Where do you see yourself going from here? What is next?

Well, eventually graduate school will be a step, I'm applying this year, not sure if that will or won't happen. Next, next, I'm not sure, but definitely grad school, and then I would like to teach at the college level.

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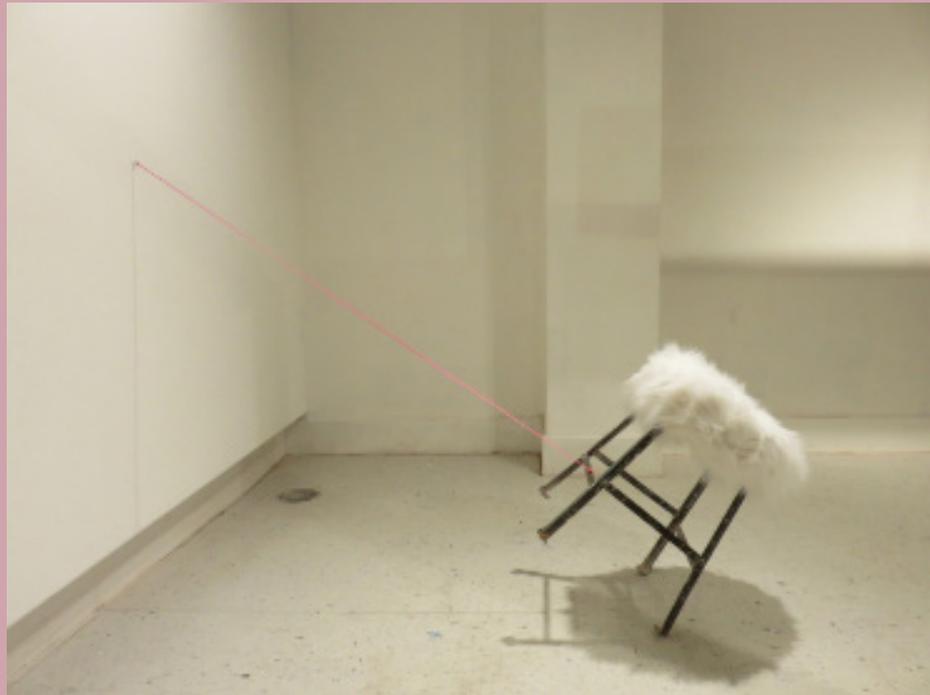
Q: Do you have any advice for younger artist?

Work harder than you think that you have to, and take every opportunity that you think you want to take. Don't not try for something because you're scared, own what you want to talk and think about. Own your artistic identity, and be proud of it.



Selections from THAT FUZZY FEELING,

2015





Selections from
I REMEMBER THIS, BUT NOT THAT,

2014



Selections from CLAYBIES,

2014

Abby Kern

Feature Artist



Selections from
OH MY,

2014



Selections from
OH MY,

2014



Selections from OH MY,

2014





Selections from
OH MY,

2014



ARTIST BIO

Abigail Kern is a sculptural ceramic artist currently studying as a post-baccalaureate at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. She grew up in Wichita, KS and attended undergrad at University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, AR. She graduated in May of 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art with a focus on ceramics. She has shown her work in Arkansas and Kansas.

TEXTURE BALL

Kirsten Heteji



Watercolor, Gouache
& Pastel on Paper
16 × 24 in
2010

Cactus Bud

Kirsten Heteji



Ceramic Earthenware, Terra
Sigilata, Maple Leaf Stems, &
Reindeer Moss
24 × 13 × 15 in
2015

BIG WHEELS

Charlie King-Hagen

*M*arv was looking at jams for his wife in the third aisle of a Love's Travel Stop. She'd figure he'd gotten it somewhere cheap along the interstate on the way back, but if the jar wasn't smothered by a Smuckers label in all caps, then the thought might be better received. So he was looking for a brand he didn't recognize. He reached for a jar with a checkered red and white lid. The label said "Bonne Maman." It looked like something local.

This Love's had a shower unit for truckers, a solitary cell with a plastic curtain drawn across the front and faint yellow stains like slung egg yolk splotched on the inside walls. Marv had showered for fifteen minutes, humming Springsteen tunes, hot water forming a red circle on his chest. Now, his towel damp and folded overtop the underbelly of his right elbow, his clothes gently stuck to places on his skin still damp from the shower, he carried hot black coffee in an orange Styrofoam cup and the jar of raspberry jam to the counter to be rung up.

"\$5.38. Anything else?" said the employee behind the register, sporting a red collared shirt, company issue.

"How much for the jam?" Marv asked.

"\$3.50." Marv let out a little tut. He could put it back. Chase her around when he got home. Maybe have a good day anyway. But she would like this. Would appreciate the thought.

"Alright," he said, and pulled from his wallet his Capital One card. The employee looked at him and took it wordlessly.

"I don't often buy jam," Marv said, turning to look outside, where the sun was starting to come up. He thought about the heat in the darkness. How he knew he was in Florida the mo-

ment he stepped out of Goliath and into very early morning and the air didn't cool his body.

"Humid, ain't it?" said Marv.

"Very." The employee handed back the card.

Back in Goliath, Marv placed the coffee between his legs and set the jam in the middle console. He eased out of his spot and gingerly guided the semi through the parking lot and then out to the freeway exit. Even without being hitched to the trailer, he couldn't help but drive as though all that shit was hooked up back there anyway. It was a habit. And you were a liar if you drove a multi-ton trailer around for three decades and said that didn't change you behind the wheel.

On the freeway a sign passed that read 20 miles to New Smyrna Beach. After that, roughly a half-hour until Palm Bay. He would call in an hour, then, closer to eight. Linda would be just awake, reading, the blinds to the window in the front room open so she could look out onto their plot. He might see if he could plant a seed about her making biscuits. That would go well with the jam. When he got home, Marv would give her the jar and say, "It never gets easier, being away," which might, afterwards, reward him lovemaking in the front room.

Cars passed him in the left lane. In earlier years, he'd have sped up. Send the trailer into a wobbly state, scare the daylights out of those two-door Hot Wheels that otherwise signaled, passed, and disregarded him. Now he was fine going the speed limit. Even going two to three miles under. Doing 85-90 didn't get you there quicker. Coming up on the right was a dark sedan – a Buick of some sort – its emergency lights blinking. Leaning against its trunk, a man appearing to be on the phone and gesturing wildly into the air, his silhouette lit up by the flashing red lights behind him. Marv went to signal his passing into the left lane but hesitated. He could sense panic in the man's gesturing. Marv glanced in his rearview and slowed Goliath, rolling to a complete stop about thirty yards up from the car on the side of the road. He shuffled over to the right door and got out. He walked directly in face of the blinking lights, holding his hand up to wave to the man.

"Dead engine?" Marv called, approaching.

"Something," said the man, who came to meet him at the front end of the car. Marv now saw that he was wearing glasses. "The steering wheel locked up on me. Won't budge now. Might be something with the engine. I don't know." Marv extended a hand.

“Marv,” he said. “Busted power steering belt, sounds like. You taken a look under the hood? Most cars it’s down and right of the engine.”

“Yeah, hood’s fine. I looked and there’s no smoke or funky smells or what have you. Listen,” the man said, checking his watch, “where are you headed? I need to get to New Smyrna Beach to pick up some barbecue. My wife’s coming to get me. I’ve a time set with the caterer.”

“Palm Bay, so I’m headed in that direction.”

“Great,” the man said. “Are you in a hurry? Gotta be somewhere soon? I’ll throw you some money to take me the rest of the way. It’s what from here, fifteen, sixteen miles?”

“Just going home,” Marv said.

“Great,” the man said. “Great. You’re a lifesaver.”

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Their trailer park was a safari on a budget. When he was home, Marv watched other residents coming and going in the park through binoculars from the front window. He observed others’ habits. Their gaits, their clothes, the frequencies of their haircuts. He learned these things but never their names, taking these character profiles and giving them new names once he was on the road. A pair of well-fitting khaki shorts became Andy Griffith. A collection of curls atop a head became Shirley Temple. Once he saw a man who kept his shoulders way back when he walked, much like Marv’s father, and so this man became John. And, soon, he found himself a peeping tom, hidden amongst a community full of previous generations’ celebrities and his own family members.

What he missed were Pennsylvanian winters, apocalyptic seasons. On wintry days in Pennsylvania, where so much snow built up that it looked like the condensational clouds above were being struck and shattered, and entire sheets of white sky were falling to the earth, he didn’t work. Didn’t rise in the dark, leaving Linda’s warm, sleeping form alone in their bed, put on a pot in the kitchen, sneak a shot of whiskey from the cupboard. He didn’t count the mile markers absentmindedly as he drove Goliath across 81 and overtop the icy Susquehanna River, headed to get hitched up and sent off on his next run, Jackson Browne playing quietly on his stereo.

On those days, now faraway memories, Marv slept in. He cooked eggs late in the morning and played scrabble with Linda by the window in the front room. Outside, the snow fell. In the

afternoon, he listened to audiobooks about motorcycle engines on his MP3 player and tinkered variously throughout the house. Tina might call with stories about his grandchildren. John, seven, drawing comparisons to Mike Schmidt in machine pitch and stargazing with a mini telescope he had received for his October birthday. Tiffany, ten, a cornerstone of her grade school's student council, negotiating her recent discovery of boys.

Marv drove north and south routes down the coast, one more semi on an east coast highway, Pennsylvania looming large, and then slid back south towards Palm Bay. Neither direction felt more homebound.

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"I gone into New Smyrna before," Marv said. He was no good at small talk. The cup of coffee and the jam were in the middle console.

"What for?" Charles asked.

"Spring Break trip when my kids were young." They had attached a shell to the bed of Marv's Silverado and drove down from Harrisburg, Tina and Wesley twelve and ten, tiptoeing towards puberty. The kids were back in the covered bed, sitting on lawn chairs tethered to the frame by rope. They opened the hatch to the back window of the truck so everyone could hear everyone else while Marv drove. Marv looked over at the man, Charles, sitting with his elbows pressed into his knees and his hands clasped. Marv could see that his brown hair had streaks of gray with the light of the cab shining on his head.

"What's the barbecue for?" Marv asked.

"End of the year celebration for my daughter's softball team. Final game is at ten this morning." Charles checked his watch again. "It's a bit out of the way for us, this place, but it's the end of the season and all."

"What's the name?"

"Lamar's. Brisket you wouldn't believe."

"Never heard of it," Marv said. He checked his rearview mirror. "Though it's been a long time since my last visit."

"You said a Spring Break trip?" Charles asked.

“The kids were getting close to high school. Schedules were gonna pick up. We went while we still had the time. Camped on the beach.”

“I admire your courage,” Charles said. “My daughters’d throw a fit if we went to the beach and didn’t choose a hotel.” He leaned back into his seat, cleaned his glasses on his shirt, and positioned them back on his face. “But why New Smyrna? Daytona Beach and Orlando are each an hour away.” He laughed, a short bark of a thing that hurt Marv’s ears. “New Smyrna’s got retirement communities everywhere. Entire damn city smells like a hospital gurney.”

“My son said the same thing,” Marv said. Marv had liked New Smyrna, which, to him, felt like Florida but in half time. There were few people, few fellow coastline dwellers, even in the summer, which meant more space and less errant Frisbees flying around. The sand on the beach was white and hard, conducive for pitching tents. But hotels, beach homes, and surf shops still lined the coastline like pillboxes.

“That it smelled like a hospital?” Charles asked and laughed again. Marv squeezed tightly against the wheel.

“When he was older, fifteen, sixteen, I don’t remember, Wesley – my son – told me he’d come to hate that trip. Called me cheap. Frugal to a fault. Said I didn’t give a shit about splurging now and again for my kids,” Marv said and looked out his window at the surrounding landscape. Palm trees were lined in uniform on both sides of the road. Green interstate signs went by on the right. Marv always thought that the trees looked like parents forming a tunnel for their kids after the end of a little league soccer game. Marv tried to remember the last time he and Goliath had had a passenger. His kids had never come with him much. Linda more when Tina and Wesley had gone away to school. But that had stopped. Now she read at home and practiced the French she had forgotten from her childhood. She walked every day and attended bi-monthly informational meetings for the park’s residents.

A sign passed that read two miles to New Smyrna Beach. The roads began to feel amphibious.

“My girls are fourteen and eleven,” said Charles. “One a freshman and the other a seventh-grader. It’s what teenagers do. Sometimes you just got to give them what they want. You

know? Lose the battle win the war kind of thing.” Charles, Marv imagined, would never put up his wife and kids in a tent when there was a seven-story Marriott with a pool and free wireless Internet in the rooms. Charles, who made judgment calls from behind his glasses the way Wesley did. Perhaps he had married into money, earned none of it, the way Wesley had. Wesley, who met some girl while studying Communications at Penn State and, lo and behold, she was the daughter of a club associate of the Pittsburgh Pirates’ Triple-A affiliate in Indianapolis. Now he was working for the Indianapolis Indians, putting together club ticket packages and bobblehead nights, playing golf on Sundays with Dominican outfielders and starting pitchers from Maryland.

“You see yours often now?” Charles asked. Marv was silent a few moments, thinking back to their tent and back to memories of him and Linda lying on the sand while the kids slept inside the tent, pointing out constellations in the darkness. Wesley and Tina had reached an age to understand that a hotel room was unaffordable. In the morning, they helped Marv and Linda put away the tent and then assisted again to pitch it back up in the evening. Each night, after the kids had fallen asleep, Marv and Linda would take turns keeping watch outside the tent, looking out for nighttime beach patrols that might catch them and banish them back to the Silverado, where they would have to all sleep in the bed, sweating amongst each other.

One hot day, while Linda slept on her towel in the sun, her head resting near the put away tent, Marv took Tina and Wesley to build sandcastles, digging down into the sand until all that was left were shell fragments and salty foam. Tina ran back and forth from the tide, shuttling provisions of water with a plastic bucket, her feet slapping paw prints into the sand. Marv buried Wesley in the sand, and the boy watched him dig and form the walls of the castle. Marv wiped his brow and looked at his son every so often. He wondered if Wesley had come to understand that Marv’s being gone from the house two to three weeks a month was, in fact, irregular parenting. Ten was a growing up year, Marv thought. He had already had conversations with Tina where he explained in good detail the nature of his work schedule. Yet he didn’t see it much in the boy. A boy who didn’t ask questions. A boy who, over and over again, whined when Marv told him to eat packed sandwiches from the cooler and stop asking if they could buy corn dogs from the stands that lined the beach. A boy content to rest under a blanket of shells and watch his father build castles for him

in the direct heat of the sunlight.

Later, in the water, the three of them splashed about, and Wesley asked to be thrown into the waves. Marv, feeling vengeful enough, lifted the boy high above his head and tossed him forward seven yards, like a watermelon. Wesley's back smacked against the water, and the sharp noise – like a lit M-80 – was such that Marv turned back to the shore to see if Linda had heard. Wesley came bubbling back to the surface, arms thrashing for air, the wind knocked out of him.

“No. I'm out here two to three weeks out of every month. That's your standard,” Marv said. Charles rapped his knuckles against the far window glass. Marv laughed for one breath.

“That way for thirty-one years. Think you could handle it?”

“Jesus,” Charles said. “Not in forty lifetimes.” Gaudy Disneyworld billboards were passing by on Charles' side. Signs for lodging and gas. Exit ramps down into fluorescent, swampy villages, complete with drive-thru Starbucks, coastal-themed gas stations, Blackbeard's (with great fried oysters and pitchers of Bud Light for cheap), and, this close to the coast, surf shops.

Charles added, “That'd be a lot of time away from my wife.”

“What does your father do?” Marv asked Charles.

“Retired Postal Service employee.” Now they were descending into New Smyrna Beach from the freeway.

“You respect him?” Marv asked. The response startled Charles.

“Of course, yes. Always.”

“You respect his job?” Marv asked.

“Yes,” Charles said warily. He paused. “I mean, it's government work, so you can only expect—”

“Let me tell you the thing with Wesley,” Marv said. “The thing with Wesley” – he rapped his hand on the steering wheel with each word to accentuate the point – “is he doesn't respect me and what I do. He thinks he's some big guy now because he calls the shots over seven people for a minor league baseball team, while I haul shit up and down the highway.” Now they were driving over a causeway, overlooking the sound below and a row of seafood places bordering its coastline on the far side. It was close to eight in the morning. He hadn't called Linda.

“Where’s this Lamar’s?” he asked. Charles reached for his pocket.

“They told me they recently switched locations. I have the address written down.” He pulled out both pockets. There was no slip of paper. He arched up and reached into his back pockets and found nothing.

“You’re kidding me,” he said. He started to unbuckle his seatbelt. “I’ve got to get to this game.” Pastel-colored buildings appeared around them, and palm trees waved from everywhere, like a Dr. Seuss book. People should never be upset in this town, Marv thought.

“You lose it?” Marv asked. “You leave it back in your car?” Charles was fully leaned forward, his hands digging beneath the seat and looking for the address. He sat back up.

“Fucking shit.” Charles struck the palm of his hand against the glove compartment in front of him.

“Okay, let me call my wife. She’s got the address. We can drive around in the meantime.” Charles pulled out his phone. Marv could not yet see the actual ocean.

“Honey, hey. I lost the address to Lamar’s. I don’t have it. Yes, we’re here. We’re driving around. Just text it to me, will you? We’ve got GPS.” Charles pointed to Marv’s Garmin that was sitting on the dashboard as he spoke. Marv saw signs pointing to beachside parking.

“Okay just send it to me. We’ll figure it out from there. See you soon,” Charles said. “Wait. Stop. Stop.” Marv had turned in the direction of beachside parking and was driving away from the downtown area, heading towards the ocean.

“Where are you going?” Charles said. “Where are you going?” There was a large, mostly empty parking lot coming up on the left. Marv pulled in and parked the truck in a far corner. He smiled when he saw the blue of the ocean.

“I just want to walk to the water,” he said to Charles and killed the engine. “I’ll go quickly.”

“No, we need to go back downtown. We can probably find this place in three minutes if we drive around and look for it.”

“Please,” Marv said, “Just for a second.” Charles looked at him and then pulled out again the flip phone from his pocket and began dialing furiously. He opened his door and stuck the phone to his ear. Marv sat in the silent cab for a moment, then unlocked his door and eased out of Goliath.

He set both feet on the ground and then rounded the front of the truck, running his hand across the cold metal of its grill, to where Charles was giving directions on the other line.

“There’s a fucking sign for beach parking right when you drive in. I’ll wave when I see you,” Charles said. “Look for a parked semi.” He snapped the phone shut. He looked at Marv.

“Jesus,” he said. “Go if you’re gonna go.”

“Alright,” said Marv.

“My wife’s coming to get me here,” Charles said. He looked over Marv’s shoulder at the water and then back at Marv. “I’m waiting by your semi.” Marv looked at this man, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses, much like Wesley’s, contemptuous and confused. Marv thought, again, of that moment with Wesley in the water, when the boy’s head had finally cracked the surface. Struggling to regain his breath, he had looked at Marv with those same eyes, in them a hatred not yet clearly defined but beginning to form, in them a realization dawning.

“Wait here,” Marv said. He went back to his door and walked up into Goliath. He reached around the now empty Styrofoam coffee cup and took the jam from the console. Marv looked at it for a long moment. Then he walked back out of the truck and down to Charles. Marv put the jar in Charles’ hands.

“Take this,” he said. “Your wife or daughters might like it. I’m going to go to the water.” Charles stared at him in shock, the jar cradled between his fingers. Marv turned and headed towards the sand, took the stairs down to the beach, and walked out to the water. He removed his shoes and socks and rolled up his pant legs. He watched the water form itself around his legs. Europe was out there somewhere. Cuba too. But Marv wasn’t sure which was in what direction.

Thirty yards to his right, Marv looked up and saw a man watching a young boy swimming in the waves. They were here early. Behind the man and the boy, with their things, was another boy, older and immobile, seated in a wheelchair with inflated wheels, presumably built to handle the sand. Marv walked over to ask.

“That’s some fine looking wheels you got,” he said to the boy. He sized him up to be about seventeen. The boy was slack-jawed and smiling wanly, detachedly. The father saw Marv walk over and was approaching him now, keeping a weather eye on his other son in the water.

“I told him those are some slick wheels,” Marv said.

“They’re great for the sand,” the man said. “A real bitch to get down the stairs, though.”

“Marv.” Marv extended his hand. The man shook it.

“Peter. You from around here?”

“Pennsylvania.”

“Now that’s a ways. I’ve been there once or twice. You here on vacation?” Marv lied.

“With my wife, our kids and their spouses, and their grandkids. We’re in a hotel about a fifteen minute’s walk from here.”

“First time in New Smyrna?”

“No,” Marv said. “But it’s been a while.”

“We live about twenty minutes inland,” the man said.

“These boys got a mother?” Marv asked. The man smiled.

“She’s out of town for business. Just me for a few days.” Marv nodded and toed at one of the wheels.

“I imagine he can’t get into the water,” Marv said, looking at the boy.

“When she’s here, he can,” the man said. “We hold him on either side and guide him out on the surface. We can’t go very far, with the waves and all.” Marv looked down at the boy, who was smiling at him, not knowing at all who he was, and he suddenly felt fatigue wash over his body. He felt the age in his bones. Marv set his shoes and socks upon the ground.

“No man should be kept away from the water,” Marv said. “If you instruct me, I can help you get him out there.” The man watched him closely for a moment, deciding, gauging Marv’s virtue, and then walked behind the wheelchair and pushed it down to just outside of the reach of the tide. Marv followed. They each took an arm and a leg and waded into the water on either side of the man’s son. They dipped him down close to the water so he could get his hair wet, and Marv looked at the boy’s eyes, which were staring out of focus up to the sky. No one should ever be upset in this town, Marv thought again. They walked out five to ten more steps. Marv gently placed his hand behind the boy’s head and lowered it, until the water stopped just at the boy’s eyebrows. He sank to his knees and extended his arm to support both of the boy’s legs. Marv realized he was now

holding the boy alone, that the father had let go several steps back and was watching him curiously. Marv looked at the father and then back at the boy, and he ran his hand over the boy's wet bangs, which had fallen down over his eyes.

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Driving out of New Smyrna, Marv looked out above his dashboard upon the sky and remembered pointing out constellations with Linda in the night sky. And then the silence within their tent after, when the others had fallen asleep, and Marv, still awake, privately marveled at their sleeping forms, wondering how it all had happened to him. He now found himself weary when he took the Palm Bay exit and drove Goliath in the direction of the trailer park. Linda might be out walking when he got home. She said as much when he had finally called. She was not, by his estimation, sufficiently curious as to why the phone call had come later than he promised. Marv, in turn, refrained from retelling his morning via phone call. It should wait, he thought. It will make more sense in person.

It was a seven-minute drive from the exit to their park. Marv did it hitting only one red light. He rolled up to their plot and parked the semi in its allocated space next to the mobile home, where, inside, it appeared to be dark. Marv grabbed his bag from the sleeper, descended from the semi, and walked toward the door, fishing his keys out of his pocket. Inside, he sat the bag down on a couch and stood in the silence of their living room. It was quiet save for the divine sound of the Florida wind pushing up against the exterior of the mobile home.

“Linda,” he called one time, although she wouldn't respond. He hadn't even seen her coming in. He looked around and pulled open the blinds on one of the windows. He could cook breakfast. He could do pushups outside in their yard. He could take another shower.

Instead, he wandered into the bedroom and pulled his binoculars, a tinier traveler's pair, from his bedside table, didn't bother sitting down on the waterbed and sinking into it. He returned to their living room, pulled open the blinds of the windows opposite his bag, which looked out onto an expanse of field where you might see dog walkers, extended family get-togethers trickled out from the constricting space of one of the neighboring RVs, elderly women carefully dozing in the sun while their third-age lovers leisurely smoked cigars and practiced their putt shots nearby. Marv sank onto the cushions of the couch, picked at the flaps on the lenses of the binoculars until they

came loose, and lifted them up to his eyes. He looked out.

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ON RAIN: OR, A LOVE LETTER TO MY FATHER

Charlie King-Hagen

ESSAY

God forbid I forget the rain, sprawling, torrential Midwest thunderstorms, the type that drive the cattle back inside the barn. They would roar through the Kansan skyways come April and May, near the height of tournament season. If it was a Saturday or Sunday, and we were at some complex bejeweled with baseball diamonds, most of the teams and their families would flock back to the relative safety of our cars. If parts of our uniforms were especially wet and sour – socks, stirrups, athletic undershirts – we would lay them on the air vents inside our cars so they could dry. In our minivan, I watched rivulets of rain race each other down the passenger window while my parents discussed marital things up front and Kate drew in her notebooks with colored pencils, thinking about at-bats or balls I had misplayed in centerfield. From time to time, umpires or of-

ficials working the tournament would jog out to the parking lot and move from car to car with updates.

“We’re giving it about thirty minutes. Thinking it’ll clear up within the half hour.”

“Hoping we might be able to get the games up and going again this afternoon. Looking at a two-hour delay.”

Some complexes were more audacious than others. Soon, we’d be back on the field, judging fly balls that had been smacked up into the back end of the storm and avoiding standing puddles between the first and second baseline. But when the kind of storm came through that pounded against the infield dirt and rebounded in spurts of steam from the concrete, a lone official in a plastic poncho would come out from behind the gates and do the rounds, passing on news of

cancellation. Players would remove cleats and zip up bat bags. Car doors would shut, and, one by one, family vans and SUVs would filter out of the parking lot and head towards the interstate.

No other sport than baseball makes you so painfully aware of the weather, because all of its beautiful angles – the chalk lines, the lip where the infield dirt meets the outfield grass, the egg-like circularity of the pitcher’s mound – quickly wash away when the rain comes. You see it in the Major Leagues. The forecast takes an unexpected turn, a thunderclap booms overhead, and the grounds crew comes rushing out with the tarp, so the field, which has been meticulously mowed and groomed all day, doesn’t get washed to sludge.

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I remember a horrifying storm from when I was around seven or eight. My family was in Baltimore, visiting my grandma and grandpa (who at the time had recently had a stroke), and was taking in a Baltimore Orioles vs. Boston Red Sox game with our uncle and cousins. About the sixth inning, a clap of thunder so loud went off that Nomar Garciaparra, the Red Sox’ starting shortstop, dropped to his bel-

ly on the field, thinking he had heard gunfire go off. There were a few more claps, and then suddenly rain was pouring on the entire stadium. Hordes of people began leaving their seats, my family included, to seek safety in the form of the roofed concession areas. This was the first thunderstorm I can remember that really frightened me. Rain was coming down in aggressive spurts, gusts of wind were whipping flags around the stadium, and there was one thunder clap so loud that, when I close my eyes now, I can still remember how my much my ears rang when it went off.

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Since I finished playing baseball, my parents’ roles have reversed to some degree. For eleven years, Mom was my fan, weathering rain and shine, enduring weeks in hell-on-earth places like Springfield, Missouri to watch me play. My dad was my guide. People laugh when I say that the person who taught me the most about baseball is a former offensive lineman. But Dad was a college athlete, a center, and has always possessed a rich and intuitive understanding for competition. Upon the dirt fields behind my elementary school, he threw me batting practice for years, until I was strong enough to

bounce the balls off of roofs in the surrounding neighborhood. Hours we would spend out there, his throwing arm slackening and my legs losing their strength, bucket after bucket after bucket, trying to unleash some secret in my swing.

That age has come and gone. I went away and became a backwards-dressed bohemian. And Dad is an abominable writer. Writing's conventions unnerve him; he'd rather, and does, create his own words: butcepta – "I was going to go the store butcepta I forgot that I had a flat tire" – and runoft – "I'm so scared of snakes that when I saw that copperhead I just up and runoft." The fact that I am his offspring and can piece together a sentence with a pinch of flair may always mystify him. Now, when working on a project, or thinking about somewhere to submit a piece, or debating a new writing opportunity to take on, I turn to Mom, whose language is beautiful and refined. Her artwork lines our walls at home, and she draws connections between writing and painting. She reads, edits, calls me on the phone to make suggestions.

"When I paint, I want to take a single object or a still scene and bring it to life," she

says. "You know my paintings. That's always what I'm drawn to. So, when you think about your scenes, are you thinking about them in a visual way? Are you helping your reader to see what is happening?"

"Some of these sentences are awkward," she will say.

"I'm writing incoherent, mountainous sentences because I don't know what I'm writing about," I say.

"Remember the importance of variety in length. Sometimes a long sentence is only made better when surrounded by smaller ideas, right?"

My dad and I don't have such conversations. These days, we circle each other, bearded, each guarding a secret from the past, versions of ourselves we have had to retire. He has become the fan, and, unsurprisingly, these roles are new for us. I wonder, then, what in me he can turn to now, ask myself if he'd hoped for a boy he could raise to walk the fields with him, picking potatoes and planting seed, a boy who might pilot the combine underage, who might want to live out in the country, setting irrigation systems and watching the crops rise up from the ground – as he did when he was my age – and

instead got a former centerfielder who writes stories, who wants to speak multiple languages and live in other countries. For the first time, the foremost passion of my life is not something I can intimately share with him.

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Dad jokes that, if you have Hagen blood, you will wander through life under the condition that, where you go, rain will always follow. He says it has been this way since he was a boy, running around the 12.5 acres of my grandparents' farm in Douglas County with farm dogs and one-armed G.I. Joe action figures. Thunderstorms found him. Perhaps he would refer to rainfall, then, as the grand irony in his life: when it rains, he cannot put down fertilizer. He cannot work. But, without the rain, the grass would die, and my father's tremendous craft, growing landscapes, bringing anything and everything up from the dirt, would cease to exist.

Hagens grow things. All my life it has been this way. At my grandparents' farm in Douglas County, there are 12.5 acres of sloped farmland. It is ideal for toboggan sledding. It is where my cousins, Kate, and I shuttled each other around in wheelbarrows when I was eight and sang Steve Miller Band's "Rockin'

Me Baby" in unison over and over again, for three hours. Close to the house is a series of rows where they grow daisies, lilies, annuals, and impatiens, more pastel-colored flowers than you can name. You might occasionally spot the head of a barn cat popping up out of the shoots. On that side of the property, closer to the road, you can listen for the crunch of wheels against gravel, the approach of vehicles that dip and then rise again with the contours of the road on the other side of the property line.

And if I've just helped my dad launch a blitzkrieg on the Costco about ten minutes from our house, we will ease through neighborhoods on the way back, so he can check on the lawns he takes care of. We talk about things like World War II fighter jets, the reasons we both dislike *The Great Gatsby's* Daisy Buchanan, or what we would do with hypothetical lottery winnings.

"I'm thinking about it like this," I say. "I take \$1 million of it and put that in the bank. And then I live off the interest for the rest of my life. Retire at 21 and rock it Frankie Muniz style."

"How much is the current Kansas Pow-

erball, again?” he asks.

“\$80 million? Last I checked.”

“Okay, remember you lose half to taxes. So we’re working with about \$40 million. I like where you’re going with that interest business. I’m also thinking about retirement. Let’s put \$5-\$10 million of it in a small-business 401k for your mom and me. We’ll say \$7 million, so that leaves \$33 million.”

“How about a travel budget?” I say.

“Certainly. It’d be nice to get your mother back to France again. I know she’d love that.”

“We also could get you abroad for the first time.”

“Which I could be talked into.”

“Would such a financial cushion get you more interested in dabbling with the stock market?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He tugs at his black beard and looks out the window. “I’d still want my money as close to me as possible.”

We pause once in a while, and he looks carefully from the driver’s seat, surveying the earth, to see if his grass is sprouting up as it should, if weeds he’s treated have been vaporized, if shit like crabgrass and oxalis have been

replaced by healthy green grass blades. He becomes quiet for a few moments, does a once-over. If the lawn looks especially nice, he always has something to say.

“Man, who takes care of this lawn?” He looks at me and grins.

I called rain God’s tears when I was little, before I knew the different things that God meant, before I came to draw a line in the sand between the awe-inducing strength of Mother Nature and some amorphous God I never had much interest in. I remember being nine or ten and brushing my teeth while watching rain come down through our bathroom window. These were typically weekend mornings. I, like my grandfathers, am an early riser, and on mornings when it stormed I aimed to be up early enough to see the sky still dark green and the streetlight alight just off of our driveway. Then I would observe the rainfall from three different locations: the bathroom window, the window on our front door, and the screen door leading to our deck.

I continue to do this today when I am home. These mornings feel secretive, the steady patter of the rain against our roof masking the creaking of my weight on our wooden steps as

I move about the house, the only light on our first floor being the green numbers indicating the time on our cable box. I go to the back door, where I look out at the rain, watching it hit the deck and bop fallen acorns around like kettle corn. Then I head to the coffeemaker, and soon I'm thumbing open a book or watching ESPN with the volume low. I always feel the slightest disappointment when, inevitably, someone in my family comes downstairs, the privacy goes away, and the solitude is lost.

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In French, the verb for rain is pleuvoir, and the verb for cry is pleurer. One morning my host mother and I were talking about the weather in Grenoble, particularly the wet climate I'd noticed.

"There's a lot more crying here than in Kansas," I said. "How often do you think it will cry this fall?"

She waited until I mixed it up a fourth time before correcting me, but did add, "It is a romantic way of putting it, the sky crying instead of raining."

I repeatedly mixed up the two.

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In December 2014, on Pearl Harbor Day, a

Sunday, a friend named John and I rode rented bikes seventeen kilometers from a provincial town called Bayeux to Omaha Beach. We woke early in the morning and pedaled away from the town and onto the highway, dipping towards verdant pastures and the sea level. A few kilometers in, rain began to fall, and by the time we reached the memorial, it was steadily coming down.

It was a great quiet that existed there, the kind that only comes during an exchange between the living and the dead. John pulled out his Nikon camera and wandered off, snapping photographs. I walked among the hordes of white tombstones, trying after not too long to burn in my memory each of the close to 10,000 names that stretched out across the fields. I happened upon an infantryman from Kansas, a Jewish man, whose name these ten months later I now forget, and began to cry.

Dad tried playing Medal of Honor: Allied Assault once, whose campaign opens with the full-on assault of Omaha Beach, June 6th, 1944. We were at my uncle's. The scene opens, and your character is in a landing craft, facing the beach. One of the soldiers next to you gets his head blown off by a sniper round, and then

your landing craft gets flipped upside down, and you must swim to the shore, splashing through shallows stained red by blood and human bodies. He gave it about ten minutes and then turned off the console, set the controller on the TV stand, and then said that he would refuse to buy them or let me purchase them on my own. I remember being furious with him.

“It’s just a game,” I said. “The characters are fictional. Everyone I know is playing it. Alex and Teddy’s parents let them have it.”

“I don’t care what everyone else is doing. The game is disrespectful. You’re too young.”

“But it’s American history. The game’s showing what happened.”

“Son, that is not history. They might be using real events for the game, but none of those soldiers just got unlimited attempts to take that beachhead. You shouldn’t get to restart from where you left off when you die.”

I thought his point was absurd and let him know. How else would you be able to complete the campaign? How else would you be able to access unlockable content? I was ten, and when you are ten and wishing to halve helmeted German soldiers with maelstroms of M1 Garand rounds, you do not consider how

the game might be distorting your understanding of war. Only now did I understand it was brutish behavior, and, these years later, wet-eyed, catching rain on my coat, counting the number of graves, I was ashamed to think back to these arguments and realize how I’d missed Dad’s point: that these men were human, had probably woken up from wet dreams they told no one about, had plowed fields and worked on cars and taught the third grade back home before getting drafted.

Before too long, they were huddled together in scores and scores of landing craft, instructed to run up a beach in the direction of incoming, heavy-caliber machine gun rounds intending to tear them into pieces, vomiting and pissing their pants out of fear and nausea. Terror I can’t fathom. The rain kept falling, and I could only hope that it was some higher being looking down and weeping earnestly upon 10,000 of her slain sons, supine, stripped of life, love, and conscious and subconscious thought, condemned to never leave – never even crawl away – from the place where they fell, where they bled out, where one final, sumptuous thought entered each of their minds. I’d like to think that it rains every day there. The water

comes down and washes away any amassed dirt or grime, keeping the grass surrounding each of the plots thick and bountiful.

•

Eleven or twelve years ago, during a day in which my family was vacationing with my cousins on the North Carolina shoreline, a giant storm cloud descended over our section of the coast. The rain came in the morning and endured throughout the day. Our beach time was taken away by the sky. Unsure of what to do, my sister, our cousins Sarah and Emily, and I put on sweaters and ran around in the puddles on the driveway of our rented beach house. We wound up staying out there for hours, until the rain had soaked out the cotton of our sweaters. Our parents came and went, laughing from the front porch, snapping photographs. The rainwater was cold, and the puddles sent chills up my calves when I splashed them, but we had come to be with water, to swim in it, to engage with it, and, at a young age, the four of us knew better than to waste a stormy afternoon by staying indoors.

•

I've never known love to be a word with my father, more a tireless act. This is a man who,

when I left for France, watched my entire flight trajectory, from Chicago to Paris, so that he'd know the flight got in fine. It's the way of the farmer, loving by way of growth, raising his boy with the sun, the wind, and the rain, with the muscles in his shoulders. We have always communicated our love by working together, mowing fifteen lawns in a day, building concrete walls, trudging through six buckets of baseballs on a Sunday.

I went to Grenoble before it became autumn, and of course the rain followed, and frequently showed up in the two seasons I was there. It was a record-setting fall in Grenoble, in terms of moisture. My host family commented on this fact several times.

"It is never this wet in the autumn," they would say. "Never."

In our front room, I sat on the couch and stared out through one of the windows, looking through the fog for mountains in the distance. I felt relieved, engaging in the singular act of observing the rain. I was tired by the mental marathon of primarily living in my second language. I would be speaking French well and confidently, even standing up to the subjunctive, and my brain would crash. I'd no

longer be able to grammatically form sentences. I got lost in conversation, no choice but to back out and detox, French argot whizzing by my head.

“Charlie, ça va? You seem tired.”

“Charlie is everything fine? You’ve been very quiet.”

In this way someone would ask. Gaspard, my host brother, seven of his friends over and the nine of us à table in the kitchen, because it had been over fifteen minutes since I last opened my mouth. Another host brother, Alexi, during a weekend excursion with his friends to a castle nesting on a hill in full view of some of the Alps’ tallest mountains, because I spent most of the two days wandering around by myself, afraid of speaking to others and tired of failing with the language. Claire, one evening deep in October once the days had gotten shorter, because she was worried they’d done something as a family to upset me or make me feel uncomfortable.

What I could not seem to communicate to anybody was, without the easy fix of turning to English, I suddenly needed silence, isolation. I discovered, within me, a growing introversion. On days where I was home at the

right time, the neighbor to the south would be giving violin lessons in her screened-in porch. I would stand close to the screen door in my host family’s kitchen, glass of water in my hand, face pressed to the glass, listening to the wobbly melodies of the student trying to stand up to the sweeping, full-bodied vibrato of the teacher. The music outside was given rich texture by the background noise of a storm. The French language was slowing growing inside me.

So, the way I see it, it was almost as if Dad knew I’d be in search of silence and, in lieu of other support he, being in another country, couldn’t provide, sent me with that Hagen gift, the call for rain, so that I could quiet the world, clear my head, watch the earth grow. I took a panoramic photograph of a row of graves in the Omaha Beach memorial that I had printed onto canvas, a Christmas gift for him. He opened it and then listened to the story surrounding my weekend visit to the memorial.

“It’s fitting that it rained when you were there,” he said. I agreed with him. Shifting gears on the ride back from the cemetery, thigh muscles raw as uncooked pork, every inch of my body, every orifice, every pore, every follicle of hair was wet. It rained so much that Sunday

that I was still looking for damp spots in my clothing when I arrived back to the Grenoble train station late that night. Yet the weather couldn't have been anything other than overcast.

But of course it's impossible to believe he gave me the rain, sent me off able to bring on a weather system and shower my French city, send water running down the crooked streets, if and when I needed. I can't pretend to believe that any sort of logic would back up such a claim. Stuff like that doesn't exist in your genetic makeup.

Yet, one afternoon this past May, I was home briefly from school, and it rained, a hard storm that brought Dad home from work early. He pulled into the driveway and parked his trailer. Then it was quiet for some moments. I descended into our garage to say hello to him, ask him how his day had gone, and found him sitting on the trailer, silently facing the open garage door, watching the rain come down outside as if it was his own creation. I could smell the water.

"Good day?" I asked quietly. He turned back toward me and smiled.

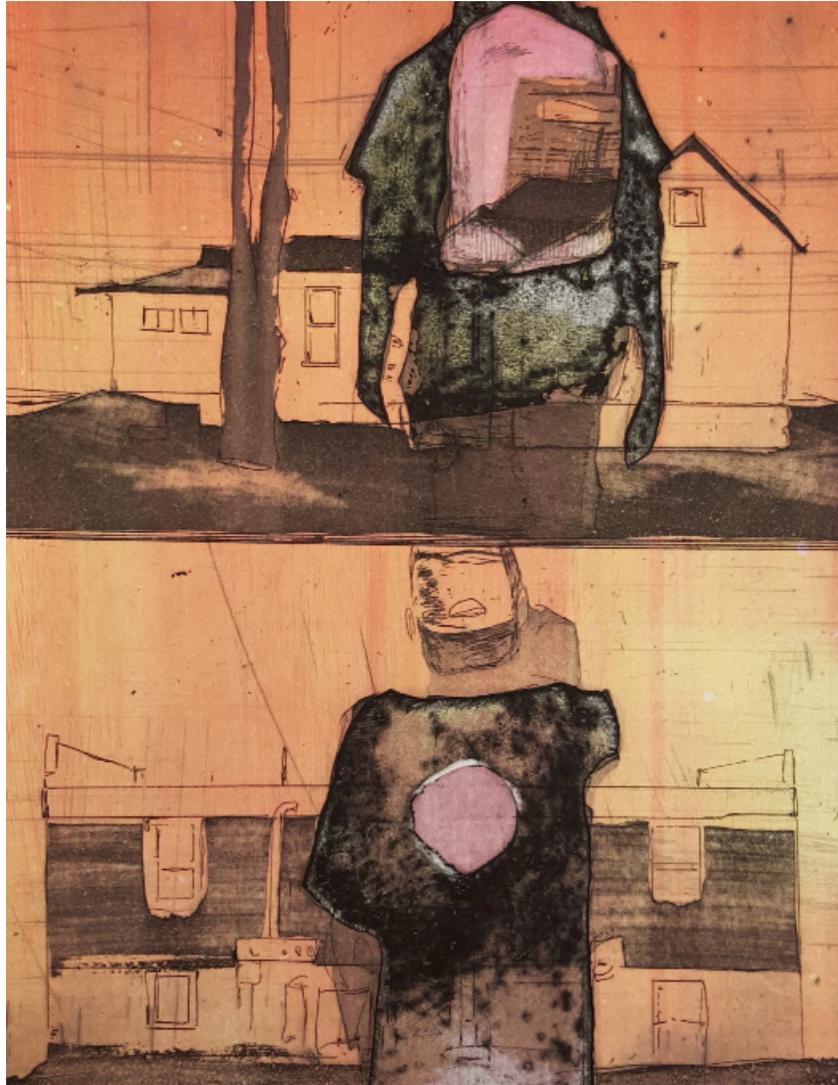
"Watching the rain," he said. "Come

sit."

So, I wonder.

HOME

Josh Nolan



Viscosity Etching
6 × 9 in
2015

ABSENCE UNFELT: EIGHT THINGS I DIDN'T KNOW I NEVER HAD

Margaret Lang

ESSAY

Roller Skates

“Mom, where are my rollerblades? Tanya and James want to go skate.”

“I don’t think you have rollerblades, honey. I don’t remember buying any.” My mom’s brown eyes met mine from across the garage where she was sorting old boxes. I frowned, looking back at the corner where we kept the fun things, distressed. There were some baseball bats, a tennis racket, a broken skateboard, several balls for various sports, and no roller skates.

I had an image of them in my head: they were pink with purple decals, slightly worn out, just my size – I could imagine these skates as if they were in front of me. I had always thought they were in our garage, just waiting for me to pull them on and use them, but apparently they were never real.

“Sorry guys, I don’t have any skates.”Tan-

ya and James were understanding, told me I could join them next time if I got a pair. I watched them skate off with a strange feeling in my chest, more upset about not having the skates than I was about being left behind.

Sure, it would be nice to skate with my friends, but I had a trampoline, and a hula hoop, and lots of other people to play with. But looking back at that corner, there was a little empty space against one wall where I had always imagined my skates were waiting. I thought I could use them any time I wanted, but I had just never felt the need. It wasn’t until someone else had told me that I should use them that I realized I never had them in the first place.

I was struck by the feeling that if no one had mentioned it, I never would have realized at all.

•

Shame

“Uh... I’m changing.”

“Yes?” I blinked at my friend, confused.

She had interrupted me mid-conversation to point out the obvious and now I had lost my train of thought.

“Are you going to watch me?” She raised an eyebrow, holding her shirt in front of her bare chest. I blinked again, realized.

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t even think about it.” I said, turning away. I frowned at the wall across the room, and wondered why it mattered if she was naked. We were both girls. It wasn’t anything new.

Then again, I had never felt weird seeing anyone’s naked body, male or female. Seeing one part of the body was no different than seeing any other part. Chest, back, shoulders, genitals, it was all the same. Except now, it wasn’t. I had been told to look away, like it meant something if I saw.

“I’m done.” She said, and I turned to face her again, smiling over my own confusion, picking up the conversation where I thought we had left it. I wondered if my friend always felt this tension around the subject of nudity – if she was the odd one, or I was.

Crushes

Crushes were easy, before I knew they were real. I had been to enough sleepovers with other preteen girls to know that I was supposed to have a list of traits I found attractive – my “type.” These were usually a variation of the following: tall, cute smile, dark hair, blue eyes, dimples, nice arms, and so on, ad nauseam. I decided it would be easier to find a single trait that made for good crush material and go from there.

After some very clever reconnaissance, I found the perfect indicator of a crush-worthy boy: the Justin Bieber swoop. This was before Justin Bieber was the sensation he is today, back when he was just beginning to be known – but the haircut was already a staple of the typical white suburban heartthrob. As long as I chose a boy with that haircut, I was golden.

All three of the crushes I had in my life were chosen this way. Three boys. Three haircuts. Blonde, brunette, black. I was never alone in my affections – there were always several other girls vying for these boys’ attentions. I paid them no mind, focusing instead on the fun new game I got to play – a strange sort of

hide-and-seek where the person who was “it” didn’t know they were playing. Every time I fell within my crush’s line of sight, I had to hide and giggle, just like the rest of my classmates.

It was fun. Until the game changed from hide-and-seek into something where girls were pairing off with boys and losing interest in playing games, and I began to wonder if I should have put a bit more care into making my list after all.

•

Control

You want to fall in love, I told my reflection. You want to meet someone and fall madly in love. You’ll get married, and have kids – my heart lurched a bit, and I frowned. You’ll adopt some kids. And then you’ll live out your lives together as partners in crime. Doing... doing...

My forehead met the cold glass of my reflection with a soft sound. I closed my eyes.

You want it, and you’ll get it, I thought, feeling sort of lightheaded. It must have been longing. He’ll sweep you up in his arms and kiss you. He’ll be perfect for you – he’ll know how to make you happy, and he’ll always support your writing, and he’ll cook too. I squared my shoulders, opening my eyes. He’ll love books, and trav-

elling. He’ll want to see the world. He’ll love that you write, and he’ll watch stupid movies with you all night. He’ll... be your best friend. That sounds nice. A best friend, but you’ll also... kiss, and hold hands, and sleep together. It’ll be even better than being just friends.

My smile was a bit shaky, and my face felt hot. I decided that must be a blush. The churning in my stomach was butterflies. I was dizzy with longing.

I turned on the water in the sink and ducked my head under it, calming down. *It’s just the normal feelings of excitement, I thought, exactly what I’m meant to feel. Because I want to fall in love.*

That my romance novels had described excitement in a way that sounded so similar to the onset of panic was just my bad luck.

You want this, I told myself, and pretended I wasn’t lying.

•

Sexuality

“So...” The hyper-casual trill of maternal nosiness bounced off the inside of the windshield and into my eyes, narrowing them into a suspicious glare. “Got any boys you like?”

I groaned. We still had a half an hour

left in our drive, and I had no way to escape. I let my head fall back with all of the drama I could – which was quite a lot, being an eighth-grader – and sighed to show my reluctance. “Not really.” I replied. I had looked, of course I had looked, but I had never found any boys who made me want... anything, actually. Not even a handshake.

“Okay.” My mother hummed, and I relaxed into my seat, surprised at how easily she had accepted my answer. I turned my eyes back to the passing trees. “Got any girls you like?”

I choked, surprised. And then I laughed. I had been wondering the same thing myself recently, ever since realizing I had no interest in boys, but I hadn’t expected the question from my mother. When I had schooled my features a bit, I looked up and saw my mother’s lips curved up in a sheepish smile. “What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing. Just... you.” I said, feeling suddenly very comfortable, exactly the way eighth-graders never felt. I was overcome by affection. I thought about my answer, not wanting to waste this strangely accepting atmosphere. “I... don’t. Have any girls I like. Or boys. Or anyone. I just... don’t really think about

people that way, I guess.” I don’t get crushes, I thought to myself, that’s all – there must be people like that. People who skip straight from indifference to love. A beat of silence passed in the warmth between my mother and I, and I continued to watch the trees zoom past.

“Okay” My mother finally said, softly. When I looked at her, there was a shadow of concern wrinkled between her eyes, but her brow smoothed when I met her gaze openly. “Okay then. How have classes been?”

•

Tact

“May I have this dance?”

I had read enough Sarah Dessen novels to know where this was going. I eyed the hand in front of me warily, leaning against my car door in the silence of the high school parking lot.

I knew my line. It was obvious. *But there’s no music*, I would say. And then he would reassure me. Depending on how suave he was feeling. *We’ll make our own*, or just *It’s fine, do you trust me?* It was obvious. It was easy. Hell, I even liked the guy – he was nice, and we had pretty similar sense of humor. I had the whole script in front of me.

But I didn't want to play my part. I opened my mouth, thinking of a dozen ways to gently refuse and escape this awkward situation.

"No."

He froze. I froze. I tried to explain, making several meaningless gestures with my hands before finally forcing out words: "I don't like it. It's... mushy." Mushy. Nice. Next I'd tell him he had cooties. I wished he would stop holding his hand out like that. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay." He said, lowering his hand - but it wasn't. Not really. He had put himself out there, and all I had to do was suck it up for a little while and let him dance me around the parking lot, but I couldn't.

"I'm just... not really comfortable with it." I wished I could stop talking. I wanted to just get in my car and leave. But I was held in place by the awkward tension.

"It's fine."

I looked at the ground. I had been leaning against my car, trying for a casual goodbye, but now I was pressing myself so hard into it that I could feel my lower back bruising against the edge of the window. Probably not the kind

of bruise he had been hoping to give me. I wondered if I looked like a cornered animal.

"Could I have a hug, then?" he asked, and I could hear his disappointed smile. *No*, I thought. I hugged him.

•

A Soulmate

"You just don't get it because you haven't met anyone you liked," my friend said, a little more bitterly than can pass for not being hurtful. "It's hard, you know. I love him. And being alone sucks."

I hummed in sympathy I didn't feel, listening as my friend ranted about her boyfriend. She was considering breaking up with him for the third and final time, and my patience was pretty much spent. I glared down into my hot chocolate like it had been the one to drag out its relationship long enough to pull me down with it. I sipped at it vengefully, burning my tongue.

It wasn't like she was entirely wrong. I hadn't ever met someone I wanted to fall in love with. And I certainly couldn't sympathize with any of her insecurities about being alone. But I did have people I liked - a lot of them. I had people I wouldn't mind spending my life

with. I had people I would move in with, or raise children with, or start a business with, or travel the world with... I had all of those people. Sometimes all wrapped up into one. They were my close friends, and I loved them, and I didn't like that those relationships were being treated as unimportant because they didn't involve romance or sex.

“— and he doesn't even understand what he did wrong! He said that about my *family* —” I made a few more encouraging sounds and watched the way my friend drank her coffee like it was going to disappear. Her grip was desperate. “— but I'm not exactly drowning in options. I mean, he loves me. Really. And I just... what if no one else will?”

It was sad, I thought, that my affection for this girl — one of my best friends, someone I would drive hours to have bitchy coffee dates with over subjects I had no interest in — would never be enough for her. She wanted a different kind of relationship. So what if no one ever loves her like he does? It's not like those feelings were making her happy.

Being alone sucks, she'd said. I didn't feel alone. I didn't feel like I was missing anything — no other half, no lost connection. I didn't feel

separated from people, or lacking for intimacy. I was by myself, but I wasn't alone.

“What you really need to do,” I told her, setting down my now-cold chocolate, “is what's right for you.”

•

A Heart

“Just because you're heartless doesn't mean we all are.”

I paused, recoiled, opened my mouth to deny it, but a hundred things held me back. I remembered coffee dates with my friends, a hand held out in an empty parking lot, talks in the car with my mother. I remembered hours spent in front of the mirror alone, three identical haircuts, a friend's naked skin. I remembered a pair of roller skates I never owned.

I remembered the word a friend had offered me, like a shirt that just might fit me. *Asexual*, she'd suggested; *aromantic*.

“I guess I am heartless,” I said, trying it on for size. It felt right, and I enjoyed my companion's surprised frown. “But what's wrong with that?”



BEHIND THE VEIL

Samantha Melby

ESSAY

In the United States, the hijab has held a long-standing tradition of misunderstanding and misconception. It's different, something most Americans have no contact with or knowledge of, making it a strange sight to see in Western culture. This is simply due to the fact that it's not familiar—it's unknown in most cases and sometimes feared because of this. What does it mean? Why are they wearing it? Here in Kansas, hijabs are often a brand new sight for some, like snow is to those who live close to the equator. Just like someone from Ecuador might ask, "What is this cold, white stuff falling from the sky?!" we can ask "What are hijabs and why do some people wear them?" so as to gain insight without judgment into a distinctive world held onto by generations of tradition.

The hijab is a piece of clothing cover-

ing the head, hair, and neck. The face, however, is usually left unveiled. It can differ from culture to culture, and you might see a woman covering almost her entire face except the eyes, which is a more common cultural practice among Bedouin families, especially in Saudi Arabia. However, the hijab is not simply a covering of the head, as it holds many meanings in the Islamic religion. When a woman wears this symbol over her body, it is also assumed that she be covered from head to toe. Whoever decides to wear the hijab must cover her entire arms and legs, leaving no bare skin exposed. I cannot fathom how women live in the Middle East and handle the unrelenting desert heat under layers of clothing. For one to understand the hijab, then, and its relevance in this modern world, we must wash our hands and feet, and step into the high-arched realm of Is-

lam.

Islam is a word that literally means “to surrender” and can also be translated into “peace.” In his definition of Islam, Brian T. Edwards explains the foundations of this religion, clarifying that “The monotheistic religion now called Islam first emerged in the Arabian Peninsula when, in 610 CE, during the month called Ramadan, an Arab businessman named Muhammed received the first of a series of revelations from God.”¹ These revelations would later become part of the Qur’an, revealing messages to the people thought to be straight from God of how to live one’s life. There are a vast amount of translations of the Qur’an, but when translated it is no longer considered the word of God. Only recounted in Arabic is the Qur’an thought to be the exact words of God. Though I have interviewed specifically Arab Muslims, I should add that only a portion of all Muslims in the world are Arab. In my own life, I have often thought of Islam as relating only to people who come from the Middle East, an idea that has become a modern-day stereotype, even though not everyone who comes from the

1. Edwards, Brian T. “Islam.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed. New York and London: New York UP, 2014. 137-41. Print.

Middle East is Muslim and vice versa. It is a global religion extending across all regions of the world.

Before coming to Kansas State University, I had never met a Muslim man or woman, nor had I even seen or talked to someone who was of the faith. The first Arab Muslim I met was Sulaiman Al-Bader, a warm, light-skinned guy with wild dark brown hair who immediately intrigued me. He was my spotter on the artificial climbing wall at the Recreation Center, and I was the clumsy American girl whose hands visibly shook while attempting to hike my feet up onto one rock outcropping after another. While I don’t think my wall-climbing skills were impressive, something clicked because less than a month later I found myself dating this alluring hazel-eyed Kuwaiti man.

Despite having met this man so unlike any I have met before, the rural areas of the United States are normally not the optimum destinations to go to if one is in search of diversity. However, universities bring everyone—everyone from the greeneries of Missouri, the farmlands of Kansas, the tropics of South America, and the sands of the Middle East— together. Everyone diverges into one

melting pot of knowledge, gearing up for the rest of their lives. This is where worlds meet, and where the mind has the ability to block out what it does not know, or create magic—opening up like a freshly-bound book waiting for the chance to be read.

Over the past year and through my boyfriend, Sulaiman, I have been introduced to and become close to many people who identify as Muslim. Of those people, most come from Kuwait as Sulaiman has, but I have also met those from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, Syria, and Lebanon. The most substantial concept that is often misconstrued by today's media is this: wearing a hijab is a woman's choice. Oftentimes the media has led us to believe that women in most Middle Eastern countries are forced to wear the veil, however this is most often not the case. As with anything in a multi-faceted and opinion-fuddled world, the hijab has the ability to be misused and sometimes abused. Though in some Muslim cultures oppression of women does take place, the Muslims I have spoken with all agree that every woman has a choice—to wear or not to wear a hijab.

Just as Christians have separated themselves into sects, such as Lutheran, Presbyteri-

an, and Catholic, Muslims have sects as well—the main ones being Shi'a and Sunni. Many distinct beliefs separate one from the other, but both Sulaiman and Lulu have said that Shi'a Muslims tend to be more conservative than Sunni Muslims. A Shi'a may be more likely to wear the hijab than a Sunni, but both sects can be seen wearing or not wearing this symbol of faith. In Manhattan, there are more Shi'a women than Sunni women, and most who are Shi'a wear the Muslim hijab.

On a Thursday evening, I sat down at Caribou Coffee just inside the K-State Union and waited for Lulu Al-Qaoud, a Muslim student at K-State who chooses not to wear a hijab. After meeting Lulu this past summer, I was immediately drawn to her sweet smile and her similar outlook on life. Here studying architectural engineering, we had been introduced by Sulaiman and his friend Abdullah on a spontaneous trip to Bluestem Bistro for a quick snack and coffee. Sitting here now, her stunning looks and long, luscious hair draw attention as she walks into the Union, smiling at me and embracing me in a warm hug. We laugh as I start the interview, and I begin to ask her questions about something I've never discussed with her

before.

“Basically, coming from your culture, what is your opinion on the hijab?”

“I’m from Kuwait. My mom is from Iraq, my dad is Kuwaiti. Wearing the hijab mostly depends how the parents were raised. If they were raised to wear the hijab, they will raise their kids to wear the hijab. My mom, she doesn’t wear the hijab—nor do my aunts; some don’t wear it and some do. My grandma wears the hijab, but she never forced my mom into wearing it. It was all up to choice. It’s up to you whether you want to wear the hijab or not.”

“Have you ever felt forced to wear the hijab?”

“I never, never in my family felt forced. We never even spoke about it. My mom always throws jokes, saying if I didn’t wear the hijab, why are you going to? I’m your mom.”

I thought this was interesting, as I would have thought that the hijab would be something at least discussed within a family of Muslim faith. I really wanted to know though, if people thought of her as an outsider, as someone of less belief in God than others who wore this symbol of faith.

“If you don’t wear it, are you seen as less

religious?”

“Yes. You’re seen less religious, and they will think of you in a bad way. They will stare at you from top to bottom and they will judge you no matter what. My mom, for example, she prays five times a day. When she wakes up in the morning, the first thing she does is pray, and then starts reading the Qur’an. Every day. She is so religious and has a really strong faith in God—even though she doesn’t wear the hijab. Wearing the hijab doesn’t really mean that you’re not religious, it’s just covering you. But very religious people don’t see it that way.”

I could see parallels between our religions, though not to the same degree. In Christianity, you are expected to be modest, and if you aren’t, you fear the labels and the belief from others that your faith in God is not strong. Though the hijab is a different form of modesty, I can understand where she is coming from.

Even though Lulu has never been pressured by her family, the insistence of veiling has been exposed to her through other observers of the faith. Kuwait is not as strict as some other Arab countries, but there are other people who judge her by the fact that simply because

she does not wear the hijab, she is not religious. Many of these religious Muslims, who believe that you must wear the hijab, have this view because of their belief that God will see a woman in a pure way if she veils herself. It must be noted, though, that it does not specifically state in the Qur'an that a woman must wear a veil—only that she needs to cover herself in a modest way.

Lulu doesn't wear a hijab, but she believes that "Even us who do not wear the hijab, we all say hopefully one day we will end up wearing the hijab because in the end it's something really important and good to God to be shown as a pure lady." This means that each woman hopes that she can put all her faith in God at some point in her life. We can think of the hijab as leaping off a platform, knowing that there's a net to catch you below; it's putting your complete trust in God, knowing that he'll catch you in the end. The thought process is akin to what it means to put your complete faith in God by becoming baptized, something familiar in my own life growing up in a Christian family.

The veil has a long history of tradition and religious meaning for those of Islam-

ic faith. One major component of the veil is that the "...hijab, when it is freely chosen, is not a sign of submission, but is an expression of willful commitment to Islam as a way for expressing a more meaningful female identity." In this way, the hijab serves to prohibit them from being looked upon as solely sex objects, and more for their mind and personality.² Modesty is regularly debated among all religions, as being revealing is commonly seen as devaluing a woman. The hijab ensures that a woman is not a physical distraction to men.

When I first began talking with Sulaiman, we had long conversations about Islam and what many things meant because I had received misinformation about many things in his culture, such as the hijab being oppressive to women. There were so many questions in my head, as I didn't really see the point to covering one's hair. I remember talking about the hijab on one occasion in his Jeep after having grabbed our morning coffee fix. He gave his opinion to me, saying "It's not degrading women, it's more like you're protecting women from sexual assaults and rapes and men looking

2. Sherif, Mostafa Hashem. "WHAT IS HIJAB?" *The Muslim World* 77 (1987): 151-63. KKS. Kansas State University. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

at them as pleasurable things, just like cars.”

This comes from his observations of American culture versus that in Kuwait, as he believes there are more rapes in the United States than in his country. With feminism gaining a stronghold here in the U.S., it's easy to say that men should be able to control themselves regardless of what women wear. Sulaiman's argument is not that it's okay for men to not control themselves and condone rape if a woman wears more revealing clothing, but rather that the hijab and being covered up discourages men who might act on it from doing so. It's interesting to look at what it means to cover up from a different perspective, as my first thoughts coincide with a feministic standpoint about women having the freedom to wear what they want. Yet, in the same sense that a woman has the freedom to be as revealing as she wants, a woman also has a right to be as modest and covered up as she wants.

In researching the hijab and discussing it with different people, I sought to sort out whether the hijab comes more from a religious or cultural context. I received diverse opinions on the subject, making it difficult to really decipher where the veiling of a Muslim woman

comes from. Walking to class each day, I may pass a Muslim woman wearing the hijab in one fashion, leaving the face exposed, and on another occasion I might pass a woman who is wearing a hijab with pieces covering her entire face save her eyes. Farzana Hassan discusses this topic and has researched this distinct area. She concludes, “That women covered themselves up for various reasons in pre-Islamic times indicates that the practice of covering the face was rooted in a pagan culture that Islam may have simply inherited.” This suggests that the hijab may have stemmed from a cultural phenomenon, rather than a specifically religious message. Hassan goes on to say that “The face veil was therefore not introduced by Islam and so is not intrinsically Islamic.”³ Though the hijab has obvious strong religious ties, it may not have been the root of head covering. To Mohammed Al-Mutairy, Sulaiman's roommate from Saudi Arabia, the hijab is a religious symbol, but he feels it is mixed with religion and culture. Lulu, on the other hand, disagrees, saying that “It's more of a cultural based thing, and it defers from country to country in the

3. Hassan, Farzana. “A Brief History of the Veil in Islam.” *Peace Magazine* 27.3 (2011): n. pag. KKS Kansas State University. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.

gulf area, the Middle East.” Although its roots can be debated, we cannot ignore what the hijab means to present-day Muslims.

I wanted to interview a woman here at K-State who wears the hijab, but since I hadn’t met any yet, I asked Lulu if she could help me out. She set me up with Nora Al-Qahtani, who I was unable to meet in person due to our hectic schedules. She is from Saudi Arabia, but other than that I do not know much about her. In her e-mail interview, though, when asked about what it’s like to wear the hijab, she replied, “Putting it on gives me a feeling of proudness and joy. And it does not affect me at all; it empowers me as female that seeks to be responsible and with a purpose.” It clearly holds a powerful meaning and responsibility for Nora, and rather than making her feel less like a woman, it makes her feel more like a woman, able to conquer anything that may come at her.

Nora is one who chooses to wear the veil willingly out of her relationship with God, and it takes on a large part of her life. A woman may choose to wear the veil for many reasons, but for those who do so out of belief in the Islamic religion, wearing the veil gives a message to others on how she will treat others and

how she expects to be treated by others around her. The choice to wear it is no small decision—certainly not one to be decided overnight, as it carries with it a weight of responsibility. By choosing to wear the hijab for religious reasons, you are not supposed to go out drinking or wear shorts in public, as it defeats the purpose of the veil. It must be worn when a woman is ready to give herself to God and commit herself to living in the image of God. In an interview given by Aminah Assilmi recorded on YouTube, a devout Muslim woman, she describes the role a woman takes on when she wears the hijab, saying that “What this tells everyone who sees me is what stands before you is a woman of enormous strength, enormous courage, and integrity; this woman will not lie, she will not cheat, she will not deceive.” Aminah Assilmi is an advocate for Muslim women and is very influential in the Muslim world. She embodies the hijab in every aspect of her life, empowering other Muslim women to do the same. The message one brings with them upon donning the veil thus is not simply traditional garb in their eyes, but a guiding path to live a true, honest, and good life.

Stepping back, when I was first ratio-

nalizing the hijab, my thoughts swirled around me, things such as “How do you swim? What can’t you do? Don’t you feel boxed in, like you can’t do anything fun?” Nora, who as a young girl was afraid of wearing the veil, thought it would keep her from doing things as well. “Later when you grow older you realize hijab won’t stop you from what you want to do. I can climb mountains, go on a jet ski, and swim in the ocean and even jump out of a plane with a parachute.” The hijab certainly isn’t blocking or deterring any Muslim woman from being adventurous or having fun as every person, whether Muslim or not, should be able to have.

Sometimes in the U.S., women who wear a hijab are singled out and discriminated against because of what they represent. You cannot always know if a man is a Muslim, but a woman wearing a hijab is easily seen, often making her a target of unwanted attention and focused hate towards Muslims. In light of current events, hatred towards Muslims is increasing, especially among those who do not understand the religion and lump all Muslims together. Lulu has witnessed the mistreatment of friends who wear the hijab, saying that “They’re not treated equally—they would

treat me better than a girl wearing the hijab just because they don’t want to associate with a girl wearing a hijab. One of my friends was walking and a person gave her the middle finger out of nowhere.” Muslim women, like this incident here, sometimes receive the brunt of hatred towards anti-Islamic sentiment, with those grouping terrorists and extremists together with all Muslims. Nora gave me her own personal feedback, telling me that she has not really received this type of discrimination, but that “It has happened a couple of times in my stay here in the States for the past 4 years, but so far everyone is nice and kind.”

After gathering all of my information, and with the help of my teacher and peers, I realized I wanted to feel what it was like to wear a hijab, to walk in their shoes for a day. On a Monday morning, I decided to put on my loosest dress, covering myself in the way that a Muslim woman would. I wrapped a scarf over my head, but I left the hair around my face exposed—different than how many Muslims wear it. Looking at myself in the mirror after I had finished with my ensemble, I had a brief moment of panic, afraid of what others would think of me. I was nervous at the thought of

going to classes and walking past people, worried that people would see me differently and treat me differently, but then I realized that it doesn't matter—the point was to get out of my comfort zone and experience what a Muslim woman might experience every single day. So I just went for it.

Throughout the day, I was shocked that nothing really happened, but I realized that people were trying not to stare, not to provoke anything that might not be okay. In this way, I was avoided. I had thought for sure I would get some kind of crazy reaction from people, something I could furiously write about with angered passion from my immersion experience. But it didn't happen. Sure, my classmates were a little weirded out and I noticed some glances, but it severely underestimated my expectations for my experience. I realized something between wearing my scarf around my head, and the next day when I was wearing distinctly American attire: as I walked to class with the scarf around my head, people averted their eyes—they did not want their gaze to linger. I only noticed this difference, however, when I walked to class the next day and got many looks from fellow passersby in my American clothes. The women I

passed now looked at me, and assessed what I was wearing. This was definitely not what I had expected to happen. I was more judged in what I was wearing in my American clothes rather than in my head scarf and loose clothing.

I have been intrigued by the wearing of the hijab, and what it means in cultural and religious contexts for some time, and it's because of this search for information that I have begun to see the hijab in a new light; not as tool that hinders women from doing anything that they want to, but as a way of focusing on all that a woman can be from the inside out. It's something that one mustn't pass judgment on, but come to a form of understanding. The hijab represents cultural background to some, and for others it symbolizes something much more powerful to the women who wear it. A woman may even wear one out of fashion or warmth—the reasons are endless and rely on the way of life, religion, and mind of each woman. It's not always easy to understand something drastically different from your own culture and way of life. Nonetheless, we must be willing to open our minds, and consider the thoughts and opinions of those who live in diverse ways.

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DEVOTION

Anna Meyer

Cal grins at Theo's brown shoes peeking out from under their mother's doll cupboard. That was way too easy. Momma told them not to play in here. Theo hates following the rules, so of course Cal thought to look here first. He tiptoes across the room. Theo probably won't even notice. Being twelve minutes older means he's twelve times sneakier. But Theo has good ears.

Darn it, Theo thinks when the floorboards creak. He really is the worst hider. Man, Cal knows him way too well. Better than anyone else in the whole world. When Cal rounds the cupboard's left side, Theo starts shimmying right, but he isn't fast enough. Cal's hand closes around his shirtsleeve.

"Gotcha," Cal says and sticks his tongue out between his teeth. Theo just shakes his head and wriggles through Cal's fingers. But Cal's too fast. He slips behind the cupboard too, and Theo's triumphant holler turns squawky when Cal begins tickling Theo's ribs.

"This isn't fair." Theo laughs and squirms even harder.

The doll cupboard groans and trembles from the two wrestling boys lodged behind it, but neither one notices. The glass rattles, and the wooden legs shudder back and forth. Back and forth. Inside, dolls collapse one by one. Their porcelain figures shatter with tiny crackling bursts and topple toward the ground. Then, with one final shove, the cupboard's frame lurches forward with splintering creaks until it lands face down with a deep, hollow clunk.

God dammit, Alice thinks. She glares at the ceiling, then at the boxes on the counter waiting to be unpacked. Not even one fucking day.

"Aw crap," Cal says, gnawing at his lip. Theo imagines their mother's mouth engulfing her

entire face as she yells. Oh yeah, she will most definitely yell.

“Theodore? Calvin?” Alice bolts up the stairs. Wide-eyed boys stand in her doll room next to an overturned cupboard. The very cupboard she’d told them not to touch. She grinds her teeth. Her eyesight blurs. “What have you done?” She tugs at her apron, then her earlobes, and then her hair, as if itching a festering wound. Her precious darlings lay scattered in pieces. God dammit. It’s wrong. All wrong. Jennifer’s curly brown hair lies next to Adrienne’s blue Oxford-footed leg and Emily’s headless body. Then, Alice spots her favorite yellow-haired girl. Her shrill shriek makes Theo cover his ears. She’s madder than ever.

“My poor Beatrice,” Alice says, kneeling amongst her children. She picks Beatrice up and touches the tiny crack running down her porcelain nose. Her darling, her only baby girl. Innocent.

“Me and Theo, we’ll fix ‘em,” Cal says. He reaches to pick up a broken limb. All Alice sees are small grabbing claws, taking everything and always wanting more. Her hand flies through the air, landing hard across Cal’s cheek. He gasps and stumbles backward, warm tears spilling down his face.

Alice cradles Beatrice to her breast. She thinks of what was and what could have been. Her nearly finished painting. Beatrice. Her star. Her perfect model. All gone. Alice turns her stony scowl on the boys. Filthy monsters. “Kitchen. Now,” she says and stomps out of the room. Theo rubs Cal’s stinging cheek and wishes that, for once, they didn’t do everything together.

Alice already has the wooden paddle on the table when the boys trudge in. She twists loose curls at the base of her neck. Beatrice sits in a highchair next to her. Watch me, Alice thinks. That way, she’d know how much Alice loves her. Cal keeps his head down as their mother grabs Theo. Little bastard child. She eyes Beatrice and prays this will be good enough.

Alice smiles as she exposes Theo’s behind. The one thing she loves. His skin. Soft, milky white skin. So smooth. Make it crack. “One lick for every goddamn one you broke,” she says. It’s only fair.

Theo’s face contorts as the paddle snaps against him. Cal clenches his fists. If he were braver, he’d take that paddle and break it and throw it in the creek. Theo bites down on his lip extra hard. His abused skin turns from pink to harsh red as the paddle smacks him for the tenth time. It’s over,

Cal thinks. There were only ten dolls.

But Alice doesn't stop. Dead. They're all dead now. Cal gasps when Theo begins to scream. "Momma," Cal says. He surges forward and grabs her arm. He yells in her ear. Tears drop from Alice's empty eyes. Momma! Beatrice? "Make her stop," Theo cries. "Make her stop." Cal screams again and again. Momma! He yanks harder. Momma! Beatrice is calling for her. Alice abruptly stands, and Theo falls to the ground with a heavy thud. Cal rushes to his side.

Alice's apron is soaked with Theo's tears. Wet baths. She hoists Beatrice from the high chair. Cal throws Theo's arm around his shoulder and hurries out. Don't look back. He doesn't. Alice cradles Beatrice and rocks back and forth.

Once upstairs, Cal locks their bedroom door. He checks it three times. Keep her out. He swears if she tries to come in, he'll slam her foot in the door until it breaks off.

Theo goes straight to his bed, crawls under the covers, and curls into a tight little ball. Everything hurts. He can't feel his feet. He doesn't want to move ever again.

"Theo?" Cal pads over to his brother. He doesn't even know what he's trying to ask. Theo's not okay. Cal lies down next to Theo and tugs on his shoulder. When his twin doesn't budge, Cal starts to rub his back. Theo tenses at the touch, preparing for the pain, but it never comes. Cal's fingers trace along his spine, gliding back and forth. Back and forth from the base of his neck to his lower back. So gentle that it's painful too. That sounds real dumb, but he's exhausted. Theo breaks with every stroke until he can't take it anymore. He releases a throaty, bubbling cry. Then he turns toward Cal and buries his wet face in Cal's chest. Cal holds him until his hyperventilating sobs are nothing more than hiccupping aftershocks. Finally, Theo wipes his nose and looks at his twin. Cal's been crying too.

"I'm so mad at myself," Cal says. "She hurt you, and I didn't do anything."

"Not true. You got us outta there. You made me stop crying. Those are things." Theo wraps his arms around Cal's middle and squeezes.

"Does your butt still hurt?" Cal asks.

"Yeah." Theo's lips pull to one side, and his brows furrow. "Can you kiss it better?"

Cal isn't sure he can do it better than Momma, but he says, "I'll try." Theo rolls onto his

stomach. Cal's warm palms settle on his hips.

"You sure you want me to?" Cal says.

Theo gives Cal a small nod.

"It might be easier if you took your pants off," Cal says.

Theo hesitates before shimmying out of his pants. He lies back on his stomach.

"I'll be extra careful," Cal says. Then he lowers his head, and his lips brush against Theo's back. Cal kisses all over, making sure he hasn't missed any part. An unfamiliar tingle spreads through Theo's insides, growing even more when Cal kisses the swell of his butt cheek. Theo closes his eyes. He doesn't notice when Cal has stopped.

"Hey, I'm done," Cal says. He notices the tension in Theo's body. Theo stays on his stomach. He doesn't want to turn over because of the uncomfortable feeling between his legs.

"Can I get under the blankets?" The pillow stifles Theo's voice. Cal raises his eyebrow but gives his twin the sheets. Theo presses his legs together and curls his knees to his chest before facing his twin.

"Was it okay?" Cal asks, his brows wrinkling.

Theo's face burns, but he nods. Then Cal's forehead relaxes, and he gives Theo a shy grin before leaning in and placing a quick peck on the lips.

"Hey, my lips aren't hurting," Theo says.

Cal shrugs. "It means I love you."

Theo's eyes widen, and then disappear into thin slits when he begins to laugh. His laughter isn't loud enough to drown out Cal's stomach growls.

"You're hungry too?" Theo asks.

Cal knows exactly where this is going.

"Stay here," Cal says. He puffs his chest out. "I'm the sneakier one. I'll get food."

Cal unlocks the door and creeps into the quiet hall. A sliver of light shines from beneath their mother's closed door. Alice stands inside, one hand on her narrow hip. She rubs the back of her neck and stares at the blank canvas taped to the wall. Paint pots cover Henry's old workbench. All she has left of him. He won't miss it. Too busy fucking their surrogate.

Alice dips her brush in black paint as a floorboard squeaks outside her door. Crap, Cal thinks, raising his foot. Cal stays frozen in the hall, wanting nothing more than to return to the safety of his bedroom. Be brave for Theo. He holds his breath and counts to ten. The door stays shut.

Alice doesn't notice. The longer she paints, the more she disappears. The more her instincts fade into nothing. Static white noise.

With a deep breath, Cal tiptoes past the door and down the stairs. "Ouch," he mutters as his foot hits the kitchen table. He cradles his stubbed toe. Maybe he should turn on the kitchen light. No, no time. He grabs some crackers and bananas and heads back up, scampering past their mother's door as she shrieks.

Fucking shit. Alice throws her brush on the ground. Her art is trapped. It's trapped inside her mind. Something's missing. She grabs Beatrice off the stand. She's all black now. The paint is still wet. Fine. Fine. A new doll. One more perfect than before. That's what she would do.

The sun is still asleep when Alice leans over Theo. She strokes his face. Exactly like a china doll. White skin and full dark lashes. His brown eyes flutter open. Alice swears they're glass. Theo flinches immediately. He wants to yell. Alice covers his lips with her index finger.

"Come," she says, "I want to clean you." Her voice is velvety soft. Theo knows he's too old for that now. He feels like peeling off his skin. He glances over at Cal's sleeping body.

"Let him sleep." Coldness oozes down Theo's spine. Or else. She beckons for him to come. Theo wants to wake Cal, but his strength is gone. What would he do anyway? Theo lets her lead him to the bathroom. Anything to make sure she doesn't turn into someone else again.

Alice's hands move automatically over Theo, soaping every inch of him. So soft. Almost perfect except for the hair. It's barely there, a thin layer of fuzz. Get rid of it. Alice reaches for Henry's old razor. Theo gasps as she pushes his legs apart. She drags the straightedge along his thigh. Prettier and smoother.

The first thing Cal realizes is that the bedroom door's open. He forgot to lock it after bringing up the food. He glances at Theo's bed. Empty. Crap. He slips from the covers and rushes out. Cal checks the doll room first, hoping Theo's hiding in there. Nope. Empty. Then he squints down

the hall. Uh-oh. His mother's door is wide open. Cal's stomach plummets below his feet as he peeks into her room. What a mess. Wet paint drips in rivers from clay pots. A wooden easel stands in the middle of a dirty floor. Blank papers cover the ugly red wallpaper. Momma's redecorating looks real stupid.

Muffled voices come from the hallway, and Cal's heart chokes. Oh crap. He scans the room for a hiding place, his eyes falling on the closet. Cal dashes over and slides the folding doors until they're almost shut. He needs the crack so that he can see through the wooden panels.

"You can be a doll for Momma, can't you Theo?" Cal hears their mother's voice, much closer now than before. Alice leads Theo into her room and closes the door behind her. Cal gasps when they come into view. Theo's completely naked. Why doesn't he have a towel? Theo shivers and covers himself with his hands.

"Sit down," Alice says, pointing to the end of her bed. Theo does as he's told. Cal knows something happened. He's being way too quiet.

Theo sits like a statue as Alice irons the pleats of the skirt. So pretty, Alice thinks and grins. Theo grins back. He must be doing something right. She's been smiling a lot. This isn't too bad. He wishes he didn't have to wear a skirt. Only girls wear skirts. Cal told him he doesn't even like girls. Ugh. He'd just die if Cal walked in.

Cal doesn't get what's happening. She's putting stuff on Theo's face. Theo sneezes as Alice pats dust all over his cheeks. Cover the imperfections, she thinks. That way he'll look just like porcelain. A marker, Cal thinks, when she smears pink across his lips. Theo's nose wrinkles. It smells like crayons. Alice's arm twitches as she finishes Theo's lip color. Perfection. Alice backs away to admire her work. Her eyes glaze over, and an unreadable expression clouds her face. What a perfect little girl in her yellow skirt and black plaited pigtails.

Theo's innards vibrate. Oh god, her eyes. She loves me, Theo thinks. She loves me. But she is gone. Something's inside her. He can just tell. He doesn't even know what. Alice's lips curl. "Deborah," she whispers. The makeup reminds her of Henry's wife. And then her fingers clamp around Theo's throat. Cal's fists clench, and he stands abruptly. What the heck is happening?

Theo sees only her desolate stare as he tries to breathe, air barely squeezing past her iron-

lock grip. Alice isn't paying attention. She glares at his thin, smooth legs. "I told you not to come back," she says. Damned woman. Then she begins laughing. Cal stays in the closet, his hands covering his mouth as he watches their mother. She grabs the hot iron and presses it to Theo's thigh. He'll never love you now.

Theo registers the heat, can smell his own flesh. Thick meat roasting under hot metal. You can't forget that smell. Putrid, sweet, charcoaled, so nauseatingly thick and saturated he can taste it. He gags. The iron sinks further into his skin. They're all screaming; her animalistic screech mixed with Cal's shocked yell and Theo's pained cry.

And then, Cal's barreling toward them. He pushes Alice as hard as he can, knocking the iron out of her hands. She teeters off balance and stumbles, her head hitting the footboard with a hollow crack. Then Cal's feet thunder out and down the stairs. He pulls the phone off the kitchen wall. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears. 9-1-1. He can't see his fingers. The ringing from the phone seeps into his head.

He hears a strange woman's voice. "9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

"Um, hello." Cal's voice shakes.

"Hello. Is everything okay?"

"My momma. It's my momma." Cal's entire body trembles.

"What's wrong with your momma, sweetie?"

"She hurt Theo. She's burnt him."

"Your momma burned Theo?"

"Yes. Yes, she has an iron. We need help. We need help." Tears spill down Cal's face, and he splutters, trying to gulp down more air. He has to talk.

"Okay, sweetie. What's your name?"

"Cal."

"Okay, Cal. Can you tell me your address?"

"3119 Fresco Drive. Please hurry."

The address was all they need, right? Cal drops the phone. It dangles against the wall one second before the Operator asks if he will stay on the line. Cal yanks open the kitchen drawer and

grabs the pointiest utensil.

“Cal?” Theo calls. His voice is hoarse. He cradles his thigh. He keeps his eyes shut, seeing nothing except blurry white matter. He’s not sure what his leg looks like. It still feels like heat is on his skin. He doesn’t know where Cal is. Where is he? “Cal?” He calls again. He thinks their mother is still in here, but she’s not talking. Will she be there when he opens his eyes? The pain in his leg is constant. It feels like it’s been cut from his body.

Cal races back to their mother’s room, kitchen knife in hand. His chest pounds. He’ll fucking kill her if she tries to stop him from reaching Theo. His brother is on the ground. He rushes to Theo’s side, his heart clenching as he hears Theo’s broken mantra. His name, over and over from his lips.

“I’m here, Theo. C’mon.”

Theo blindly reaches his arm out when he hears Cal’s voice. He feels Cal’s fingers wrap around the bottom of his waist. Then he’s being lifted. Cal struggles to hold him up. He half carries half drags Theo back to their room. He locks the door and drops the knife. Thank god he didn’t have to use it.

Then he hobbles across the room. Cal lays Theo down and sees the fleshy glob of mutilated skin left on his twin’s thigh. It’s red and bubbling. He’d probably have it forever. It’s bumpy and rough like the back of a toad. Cal imagines eggs bursting from the skin. Theo can’t think of anything except the pain. God. Cal shakes his head. If he had just locked the door, maybe it wouldn’t have happened. He wants to kill her.

“I fuckin’ hate her,” Cal says.

“Me too.” Theo’s eyes remain clenched shut. “Me too.”

Cal’s eyebrows furrow in a deep V. “What now?” He asks.

Theo winces. He can’t think. “I don’t know.”

“They’ll take her away.” Cal chews his bottom lip.

“That’s good,” Theo says.

“Yeah,” Cal says. “That’s good.”



TODAY'S LIST WITH LOVE

Lauren Pino

I woke up and felt next to me in the bed. I ran my hand over the sheets and took a few moments to wonder where he was and why it was so cold. I reached up to grab his pillow, but there was nothing there. A shiver of fear had me opening my eyes to the late morning darkness of a cloudy day. And I saw the bed was only set up for one. One pillow, one nightstand, one lamp. I sat up slowly, trying to understand where he had gone, but then it came back to me, the knowledge creeping back like a moment's apparition. He doesn't sleep with me anymore.

I take the stack of clothes that is always there when I wake up from the end of the bed. Dressing has gotten easier now that I don't work. That is, unless I have to go out. Simple lounge-wear works well enough for this new lifestyle that I hardly had a choice about. I changed and went out to the living room to look at the white dry erase board he hung up months ago.

"Today's List with Love - Ernie," was written in clear and neat penmanship. It was forced to be legible. Ernie couldn't write neatly normally, but he had the decency to make the effort for all this bullshit. I glanced down at the table set below the board and saw the photo that sat there. Was it new? Ernie's father was in the photo with me, but I look awful, and Ernie's father cut his hair. It must have been a while back because I'm not sure when it was taken. Maybe over the holidays.

I go back to the list, reading the first few bullets. "Double check that I locked the door." I checked without moving from my spot, and the lock was horizontal, locked. I moved on to the next one, "Go to the bathroom." I laughed at that one, and I followed the directive for joke's sake. The next was "Get some cereal and eat it WITH MILK. Do you want your spine to curve?" Fuck

that. Ernie buys nasty whole milk anyways. I still go to the kitchen and pour a bowl of Cheerios, not the honey ones, the bland ones, because it's too early to pretend I like sweet things. Back in front of the board, I start spooning the hoops in my mouth and read the next one, "Get some cereal and—" Oh, right, it's the next one. "Do a puzzle in the newspaper. I did the Sudoku already, sorry." Am I getting homework now? At least I like the crosswords. I grab a pencil, and the folded newspaper next to the photo of me and Ernie. I work on it for twenty minutes as I eat and get everything but the pop culture references because who cares about celebrity couples? I can remember trivia really well still, despite Ernie talking nonsense about my age and such. I am not that old.

"Make tea: First, put water in the kettle. Second, turn the stovetop on low medium heat. Third, remove when it whistles. Fourth, pour over tea bag of your choice in a mug. Fifth, turn off the stovetop." I was kind of peeved that he felt the need to outline all the steps. Some of it was just common sense to me. I filled up the kettle at the sink, set it on a circle of the electric stovetop, and turned the knob to high medium heat. Rummaging through the jar of tea bags, I picked out peppermint which makes Ernie gag because he still has unrefined tastes. I opened the packaging and dropped the bag into a mug that was set on the counter already. I grabbed the newspaper as I waited and took up the pen to do the Sudoku that was finished. I only wanted to grade Ernie's work anyways. He is so bad at these. I don't know why he tries. I found a mistake immediately, circling the straight-lined one. There were two in the row, so the rest of the puzzle was probably wrong. The kettle sounded, and I took it off and poured it over the tea bag in the mug.

I ended up doing all the instructions he needlessly outlined, didn't I? I should tell him to not do it. I walked back over to the whiteboard, noting the amount of photos I had taken with Ernie's father, which hung on the walls. Ernie and his mother love taking photos, so memories were always around. There were a couple of Ernie and me finally in my sight, but something seemed off about them. I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe I am getting too old. The next bullet listed things I could do. There were even movie and book recommendations. It was kind of odd because I swore I had read some of the books, but they were my favorites, so reading them again was no loss. Same with the movies. At least Ernie knew my favorites. I decided to grab a favorite book of mine off the

shelf. It almost felt like I was reading it for the first time again. There's a reason why it's a favorite. It took me a while to read through it because I like to go back to see the connections within the story. It was midafternoon when I finished reading, so I decided I should just take a nap after eating the sandwich that was in the fridge. I fell asleep in the chair by the door, where I find myself sleeping a lot these days, waiting for Ernie to come back.

The tumble of keys falling onto the kitchen counter woke me. I couldn't see him from where I was, but I knew who it was. His shoes were on the floor next to my chair. He probably came in and sat on the armrest of the chair to take off his shoes.

"Ernest?" I called.

"Yes?" he responded, without showing himself, rustling around, probably prepping for dinner.

"You are awful at Sudoku," I said.

"You are the one who—oh, yes, you are right. I forgot I did it this morning." He was taking out plates and pots now, cabinets slamming shut.

"And you call me forgetful!"

He didn't respond to that. Probably couldn't hear me over all the banging.

There was an abrupt lull of silence, until Ernie finally came out of the kitchen. He looked like his father and worse for the wear. He looked taller, but that was probably because I was sitting and he was standing.

Ernie had a serious look on his face. "Did you turn off the stove?"

I tried to remember, "I think so. Why?"

He looked away, "No reason. Just always double check."

Suddenly, I asked, "Can we sleep in the same bed tonight?"

Ernie looked surprised, but also hurt. "There's a reason, you know."

"I'm fine now. Never been better, and it's strange to sleep separately." I was going to continue, but his face was suddenly illuminated by the light he flicked on, and I saw the exhaustion working itself into the crevices and darkened parts of his face. Reaching out, I grabbed his hand, a

gesture I rarely indulge him with these days.

He smiled at the touch and gave a tortured, “Yes, we can sleep together.”

And I kissed the familiar knuckles of the hand in mine, and I peered up at him, saying “I love you, Ernie,” like it was second nature to me, but when I met his eyes, the first thought that came to mind was, “Who is he?”

SECRET SERVICE COMMUNICATION

Heidi Sampson

During sermons, my grandmother
would look towards the balcony
through her skin-toned glasses.
Taking notice of our attendance,
she'd gaze back towards the pulpit.
The drone of pastor's voice would filter
across his flock. Probably a message
of Eve's sin, of women stoned
for adultery. Words that pointed
towards our guilt as women. But
I didn't listen. I waited for her
to glance again in my direction.
We'd exchange a wink for a smile.
She'd pull her tan cardigan closer
to her body. In later years, her left arm
would protectively cover her right stump
while tuning back in for his message of sins.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Abby Schleicher



Printmaking-Etching
9 × 6 in
2015

DISCORD

Abby Schleicher



Printmaking-Etching
9 × 6 in
2015

SOMEWHERE OUT THERE

Abby Schleicher



Oil on Panel
36 × 24 in
2015

SEA MORNING

Andi Schubert

Richard de Zoysa, an activist, journalist, playwright, actor, and lover was abducted from his mother's house at 3.30am. Fishermen found his body the next morning. They told the magistrate this wasn't the first time they had brought in a corpse without fingernails.

but fingernails grow like tombstones
that curl round the tree bark
marking grooves for the milk to be tapped
the rubber drops into the shell and settles
and then hardens in the shape of a coconut

but fingernails grow soft like flowers
on funeral wreaths, the green-painted firewood
drips onto packed sand in the monsoon rain
the trees bend and sway in the breeze beneath the coffin
the roots grow from the fish eyes that they forget to remove

because fingernails float like dead fish
their bloated bodies float with the waves
birds start pecking at the nets before it reaches the shore
their talons clasping at the outer edges to pull
out the eyes and the tongue

but when fingernails swim
they come home to the shore again and again
like a rubber ball that was hit too far and declared
out. in the dark the fishermen cast their nets
praying for a catch in time for curfew

and fishermen keep casting their nets
this time they call for help again
the nets too heavy with fingernails and shattered bones
the sarongs in their trawlers cut into pieces
this is not the first time they took home a corpse

at home the family bible starts burning at
2 samuel 18... would that you instead of
I. keep the flame alive to burn diaries,
notebooks, lovers, brothers. the smoke
rises above the house to wake the fishermen
it is time to do their work

but the sea sand is wet from the morning rain
the men sing as they work hodi helei heleiya
the tombstone grows smaller in the shade of a rubber tree
if these fingernails weren't alive,
they would scratch your hands
right off their bodies

ENGL 11012 *AFTER SAM SAX*

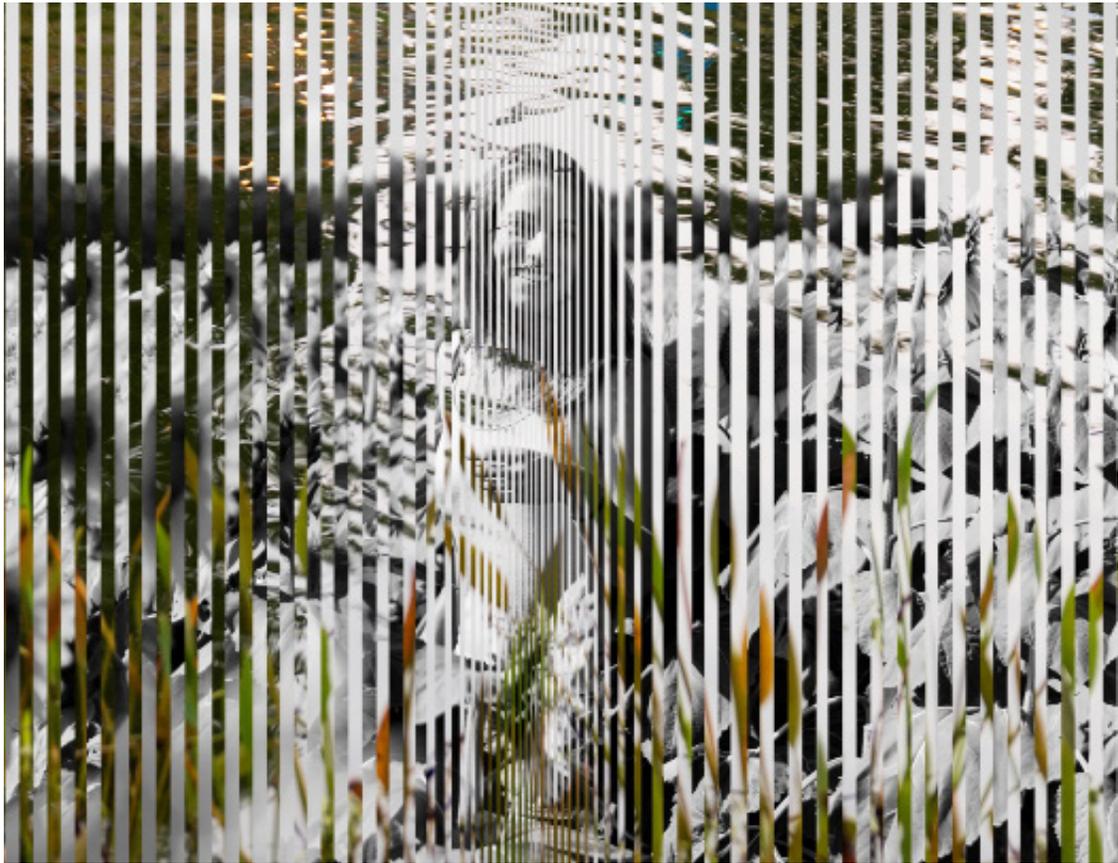
Andi Schubert

I saw a man run from
the burnt pepper scent to wash his eyes

& then saw a girl run to
the tear gas with a bottle of water

WHAT ARE YOU HIDING?

Kendra Smith



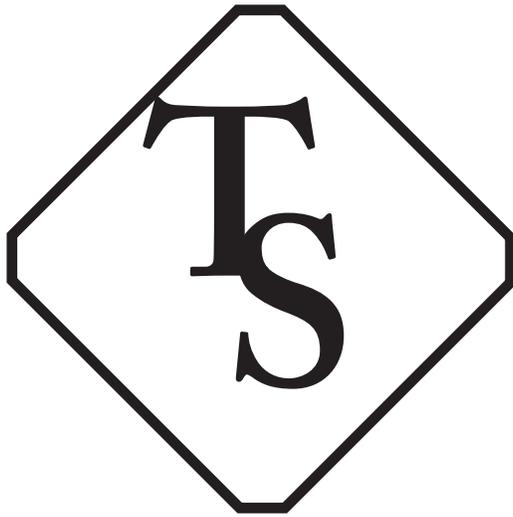
Photography
12 × 12 in
2015

THE DISCIPLE

Brett Marshall Tucker



Ceramic
26 × 10 × 28 in
2015



THE DIRECTOR

Dustin Vann

“*W*hoa. I should really nab film roles more often if this is what I’m in for!” I said.

Nate collapsed in a sweaty heap beside me. I was still a gasping, trembling mess thanks to his “gift”—his third one in the last hour—and he snuggled closer to me.

“Only starring roles get this sort of treatment,” he said.

“Don’t I know. My fucking phone commercial wasn’t met with this much fanfare.”

“I loved the fucking phone commercial! It was cute. And I thought you were rewarded handsomely for it.”

“Yeah, because being a viral sensation is every actor’s dream.”

“It’s every actor’s boyfriend’s dream, for sure. Oh, so you’re sleeping with the guy who talks to elephants on his cell phone while *Scandal* is on commercial break? What a service you’re doing for our country.”

I nudged him off me, playfully, but he found his way back. He ran his fingers through my chest hair; I felt the laugh in his mouth thump against my chest.

“Guess it can only go up from here,” he said.

“I think I’ve hit the top, honestly,” I said. “The lead in a Lane Garrow film. How many people can say that? And the guy’s amazing. Super intense, yeah, but away from the camera...he actually ate with us at Craft Services today—”

“Nice to hear he’s letting his actors eat these days.”

“God, not this again...”

“Cara Rush herself told *In Touch* he threatened to chop off her fingers if he saw her eating

anything other than trail mix on the set of *Winter's Vengeance!*”

“We’ve gotta get you hooked off that shit.”

“Would you rather have me addicted to tabloids, or Internet porn?” Nate asked.

“Internet porn, definitely! At least then we could have some fun together.” Now it was his turn to worm away, but I pulled him back. “Look, Mr. Garrow’s not like that. He’s passionate, yeah, but he just wants the best out of all his actors. He thinks this film can get us to the Dolby Theatre come February.”

“Mr. Garrow? Yeah...definitely not a Charles Manson in designer clothes.” He perked up to kiss me. “I’m glad your first week’s going well. Just be careful, Scott. ‘Kay?”

I nodded, and he rolled over to fall asleep. I wondered how easy he would sleep if I told him I would be hitting my female costar in a scene next week. Or if he knew that the whole time he’d been on top of me, I’d imagined he was Mr. Garrow.

•

Mr. Garrow had three rules on set:

- Everyone called him Mr. Garrow.
- Everyone stayed in character at all times (I was still “Roman” when taking a piss break, and the PA was always “fuck-up,” even when he got Mr. Garrow’s coffee order right).
- What happened on set, stayed on set.

I took the second rule so seriously, the third rule was almost irrelevant because I knew I’d never break it. I’d done more than accept the role of Roman; I’d split myself in half for him.

“Scott?” Nate said.

I didn’t answer him.

“Jesus, fine—Roman?”

“And he finally learns!”

“Whatever.” Nate sighed, resting his head on my shoulder. He was trying to get me to cuddle up with him and watch reruns of *Chopped* like we usually did, but he kept forgetting that Roman wasn’t gay and he hated reality TV. “I don’t understand why you’re going all Daniel Day-Lewis for this part. You weren’t like this when you did *Sharkjaw*.”

I shuddered at the thought of the insanely stupid Syfy channel movie I'd done two years before. "Sharkjaw was a necessary evil. We had to pay for this apartment somehow."

"But your character—Asher, right?—was way more charming than this Roman douchebag. Roman's so...stiff. And not in the good way."

Suddenly Nate straddled me on the couch, his hand wandering where it hadn't been in days.

"You've gotta stop," I said.

"I think I know Roman better than you do," Nate said. "Because right now it feels like he's batting for the wrong team—"

"Stop! Please."

My demand ended Nate's conquest prematurely; he stared down at me, lips pursed in a defiant pout, before he swung off me.

"I'm sorry," I told him, "but Mr. Garrow really wants us to live as these characters. Roman's not gay, and he hasn't had sex in four months. Four months and six days..."

"So basically, Garrow said you can't have sex with me, and you're listening to him?"

"I'm doing what I need to for this character because I want to."

Nate rose from the couch with a huff. "Okay, well, I'm gonna go take a shower. Scott can join me if he wants to. Night, Roman!"

He removed his clothes piece by piece as he walked down the hall. Mr. Garrow had warned me about this, that there would be some people who "wouldn't understand" this method, but that we couldn't let them "spoil the movie." Just as Nate was about to pull off his briefs at the end of the hall, I did what Mr. Garrow would want me to do. I pulled out the folded-up photo he'd given me my first day: a shot of my onscreen wife, Lisa Tenney, ripped straight from his copy of the Playboy issue. She wore nothing but a pair of underwear, and I stared at her hard until Nate finally closed the door.

•

The first time I really talked to Lisa Tenney, after our final screen test for *Do Us Part*, she had this to say to me:

"You know, I've wanted to beat the shit out of the romantic-comedy for so long, and now

Do Us Part's gonna give me that chance."

I nodded along, fully supportive of my leading lady's cause. She was the more established of us two, a decent actress who had spent most of the mid-2000s on the Kate Hudson-express to Career Hell before she (or her agent) decided that gritty thrillers were more her style.

I just didn't think she'd take the whole "beat the shit out of" thing so literally.

Our movie, *Do Us Part*, centered on Roman and Claire, a young married couple who decide they hate each other and begin a sick game of 'Uncle!' to get the other to end their union.

Today, things were getting physical for Roman and Claire: The script called for Claire to kick Roman in the balls, and I—Roman—would return the favor by hitting her in the face.

"C'mon, we've talked about this," Lisa said to me. We were in our personalized set chairs, waiting for the crew to build the scene, and I was an erect coil of nerves. "Mr. Garrow knows this scene will really pop if we actually go at it. He sees this potential in us. He told me so last night..."

"You talked to him last night?"

"Oh, we were up late, just talking. It got pretty deep."

My stomach gave a nauseous curl. Mr. Garrow had hardly spoken to me—me, Scott, not Roman—since production began. What had I done wrong?

"Did Claire speak with me last night?"

We stood at the sound of Mr. Garrow's voice. He'd snuck up on us, standing behind us with his arms crossed. His brown hair was slicked back, but I could still see the beginnings of gray at the roots. It looked good on him, that startling blend of young and old.

"Uh—no," Lisa stammered. "No, she didn't."

"Didn't think so," Mr. Garrow said. "Now, how about you go read over your lines one more time." Then he turned to me. "Roman and I are going to have a talk of our own before we start."

He grabbed my arm as he led me out to the lot, the warm pulse beating from his fingers and into my bone.

"Which one's yours?" he asked, indicating the line of trailers in front of us. I nodded toward the last one on the left end, and he guided me forward, up the metal steps, and into the trailer. It was a hot and small space.

“Remember what I said, the night I took you and Lisa out to Spago?” he asked.

“It was just after our casting had been announced,” I said. “You took us out to celebrate—”

“I know fucking why I took you out. What I want to know is: Do you remember what I said?”

“You...you said you thought we had what it takes, to do whatever it takes for this movie...”

Mr. Garrow inched closer. I felt my back press up against the bathroom wall, droplets of sweat bleeding into the back of my shirt.

“You’ve been looking at the picture, just like I told you to.” His breath was a hot orange flame over my eyes. Against my mouth. “Haven’t you?”

“Y—” I began, before he held up a hand.

“No need to answer. I can see it in your face. It’s so stiff. And your hands.” His own hand trailed down my arm until it rested against one of my clenched fists. His fingers danced along my knuckles, tickling them. “You’ve been working so hard, and it shows. You’re doing all you can to fulfill this role, to be the best husband you can be. And look at how she repays you. She gets you all worked up—makes you beg for her—and she crosses her legs every time. You try to spice it up, send her your best attempt at a nude photo, and what does she do? She sends it to your boss. All you want is to make love to your wife, and now you’re fired because of it.”

The flames continued to hit my mouth. I was licking them up now.

“Doesn’t it make you want to hit her?” Mr. Garrow asked. “Doesn’t she deserve it, after all you’ve done for her?”

My thoughts played in reverse: Nate, shimmying out of his boxers; Lisa and her topless photo; my nude photo, forwarded to my boss; my ass out the door; Claire, crossing her legs once more. It all came to a halt from there and I was breathing so hard, thinking of my bitch wife who had taken the one thing I had left—

Mr. Garrow backed away, and I led myself back on set. I shook the white from my hands, planted myself firmly on my mark, and waited for the magic word.

There she was. Claire. Waltzing around our kitchen like she hadn’t royally fucked me over. I hovered over my mark, waiting to hear the magic word from Mr. Garrow. She’d get her blow, and

then I'd get mine. I watched her leg rise, meet up with the gap between my legs: Pain hit me and I let it, joyfully welcoming the loss of air and knee-buckling that came with it, because I knew the sooner I accepted it the sooner it'd be over. Then it'd be my turn.

My crotch was still throbbing when I wiped away Claire's nasty smirk with a hard slap. She fell to the floor with a strangled gasp, clutching her wounded face. I moved a step forward and she wriggled backward away from me. Her right cheek ballooned out inches further than it should. She sprayed a scarlet loogie across the linoleum, and a chunk appeared in the red. A tooth.

Mr. Garrow yelled "Cut!" and our kitchen became a movie set again, a rush of movement and people dismantling the fantasy.

Where the fuck is she taking my Keurig? I thought as I watched a crew member whisk away my coffee machine.

"Excellent!" Mr. Garrow exclaimed in my ear. He beamed and touched my face lightly before kneeling down in front of Lisa.

Lisa. On the floor still, being cleaned up by two crew members. They were careful to walk around the blood.

Holy shit I'm a woman-beater. What would Nate say if he found out? Suddenly I remembered something about his mom being slapped around by an old boyfriend when he was little. Christ...

"I am so sorry," I said to Lisa later. She'd been whisked to her trailer to get patched up, and I stood next to her as she sat in front of her vanity with an ice pack on her cheek. "What the hell was I thinking? We should've done stage hits..."

"Anne Hathaway just won an Oscar for losing thirty pounds and singing for five minutes," Lisa said over the pack. "We've all gotta step it up now. So just shut up and hand me that bottle of Tylenol."

I did, then left so I wouldn't have to look at her anymore.

•

I went for Nate right when I got home. He couldn't ask me about anything because my mouth never left his, and I could barely think of anything—not the guilt or what Mr. Garrow would say about me now—because I was too busy ripping his clothes off.

Later on, when we'd finally made it to bed, Nate traced his fingers over the bruises on my knuckles. I tried not to show how much it hurt.

"Can you at least tell me how you got these?" he said.

"Someone fucked with Roman," I said, "and he let them have it."

"Ooh, kinky."

He began kissing my faint purple knuckles one by one. Which hurt even more.

•

Mr. Garrow knew I'd slipped. I could tell by the way he pressed the knife into my hand. He wanted to see me bleed.

I'd be reaching a whole new level of bat-shit today: Tired of Claire and all her bullshit, I was determined to take her down via some self-mutilation. The top of my thumb was coming off, but I'd made sure my wife's fingerprints were all over the chef's knife I'd chosen first.

"You're off," Mr. Garrow said in my ear. "I don't want to know why, do I?"

I nodded. I noticed "fuck-up" the PA standing behind him, Mr. Garrow's morning coffee in hand, struggling to determine if he should interrupt or not.

"You know what you have to do, right?" Mr. Garrow went on.

I stared down at the knife. I pictured cold steel kissing skin and half my thumb abandoned on the counter.

"Yes," I said back.

"Remember to smile." The hiss of his breath in my ear was like steam, damp yet relaxing against my skin. "Do this right, and it'll be award-worthy."

Then he broke away, yelled at everyone to shut the hell up, and got behind the monitor. I walked to my marker by the kitchen counter and placed my hand on its cool surface. To calm the shaking I closed my eyes, but then I saw Nate and what we did last night, and I couldn't be that person anymore. I wasn't going to let Claire continue to fuck up my life. This thumb would be the last piece of myself I'd give to her.

I heard the magic word, let out an angry rush of air, and brought the knife down.

It tugged and ripped at my skin before slicing through bone with a thin crunch. A hot rush

of red sprayed out, decorated the marble like some abstract painting. I stared down at the mess I'd made. What would Claire hate more: the mess I'd made, or that she'd be going down for it?

I brought my hand up to examine the wound closely, saw how clean of a cut I'd made. Then I pressed my left index finger into the red, lightly. It tickled, which made me giggle, which was the last thing I remembered before sinking.

•

Hours later, I woke up in a bed at Cedars-Sinai with my thumb reattached. The doctor explained to me how lucky I was that they could sew it back on, but I was too busy chasing the bandaged lump around with my eyes to pay him much attention.

“He just got so into the scene,” Mr. Garrow was telling the doctor. He sat beside me on the bed, hair disheveled and eyes glassy. Like what I'd done had truly upset him. “My producers and I were telling him to stop, but Scott's such a game actor. There's no stopping him once he goes for it. A director's dream, really.” He smiled at me, and he squeezed my hand with his.

Mr. Garrow didn't let go, even when the doctor went away. Instead he brought my hand up, mangled thumb and all, and pressed it to his cheek.

“Award-worthy,” he said before kissing it.

“Scott, oh, God—”

Nate ran in, truly a crying mess, and Mr. Garrow dropped my hand.

“What the fuck's this?” Nate said. “They've made me sit in the waiting room for hours, and he's been back here all this time?”

“That's my fault,” Mr. Garrow said calmly. “I insisted that no one immediately involved with the situation come back here until Scott woke up. Didn't want any press sneaking back.”

“I think Scott can tell the difference between a paparazzi and his own boyfriend.”

“Well, Scott did mention to me once that you were some sort of photographer...”

Nate's face glowed red.

“Anyway,” Mr. Garrow continued, “I'll give you two a moment. Just don't tell him too much, Scott. Don't wanna spoil the movie!” He sauntered past Nate and out the door.

Nate rushed over to me, sat right next to me on the bed. He didn't respect my boundaries

like Mr. Garrow did. “They kept saying you got stabbed,” he said as he smoothed a hand over the top of my head. “God, I thought you were dying, and the whole time it was just your thumb.”

His fingers trailed down to the site of injury, ready to cradle it and kiss it—but I snatched my hand away.

“Still hurts,” I murmured.

But Nate wasn’t buying it. His posture stiffened, and I could see his lower lip wobble. I remembered how cute it was when we’d watched the end of *Edward Scissorhands*, but it wasn’t cute now. “You know,” he said, “I really wanna ask how the hell this happened, but don’t know why I should bother. Not like you’re gonna tell me.”

“Nate, please...”

“But at the same time, I’ve gotta know. Spoilers be damned!” He laughed, and I could hear the sob bubbling in his throat. “I need there to be a reason why I’m here. So just please, give it to me. Please.”

I wanted to, so bad. He was pleading and I wanted to tell him everything was okay, like I’d always been able to do before. When I looked at him now, though, all I saw was Mr. Garrow. Mr. Garrow and purple knuckles and thumbs detached from bodies and Mr. Garrow all over again.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

Nate’s face lost some of its color, becoming a soft pink. He wiped beneath his eyes and sniffled. “When you’re done here,” he said, “I want your shit out of my apartment. Whatever you need, it’s yours. But after that...I’m done. I don’t know who I’m talking to anymore, and I can’t do it. You and Garrow have fun making your God damn home movies.”

He turned away so I wouldn’t see the tears, like he did every other time we argued. Only this time, he walked out the door and didn’t look back.

Three Months Later

I saw him today.

I’d stopped inside a Starbucks at the Grove for a Frappuccino when I saw him come out of J. Crew. He’d been shopping with some friends, a woman and a man I’d never seen before. The man resembled a young Johnny Depp, only Winona Ryder wasn’t his type: even from across the way I

could see his arm around Nate's waist. He'd probably seen the raised birthmark on Nate's hip—the same one he'd been humiliated to show me the first time we had sex—countless times already.

And Nate. He just looked happy there was finally someone else to share the birthmark with.

I left for Lane's as soon as they'd walked by. I had to keep reminding myself to call him Lane. "I just bought you a condo," he'd said to me. "I think we're past that point by now."

He was right; we were. We'd both done so much for each other: He'd bought me my condo just off the 405, and I'd cut parts of my life away to be his star. And now, a month after wrapping *Do Us Part*, I'd committed myself to him again. This morning he'd gotten the new draft of *Arc of Silence*, our next film together. It was the saga of a mute male prostitute, and even though we wouldn't start filming until after awards season, Lane wanted to start rehearsing right away.

Lane opened his door immediately after I knocked. He already had his robe on.

"Come in!" he said with a beam. He was always so happy to see me. Usually I was, too, but I couldn't stop thinking about Nate, how it had been months and then there was that birthmark I'd forgotten all about.

"I saw Nate," I blurted out. "Just now, before coming here."

I saw Lane stiffen momentarily, digging his feet into the Italian carpet before continuing his walk to the living room. "Did you talk to him?"

"No. I've been trying to live in this new role, like you asked. I even wrote down my Starbucks order," I added with some forced laughter.

"Good. You're already doing such good work and we haven't even started filming. Just wait until you read this new script..."

"I wanted to, though. He's got a new boyfriend."

"Does he? And how would you know that unless you talked to him?"

"I didn't! They had their arms around each other, so I just assumed—"

"Then why in the hell are you bringing it up!" Lane's face reddened, and his hair, slicked back before, danced across his forehead in rhythm with the force of his words. "Does it matter to me who that sack of shit does in his spare time? He left you, Scott. Tossed you aside, without a

home, and now you wanna gossip about him like some little fucking high school girl?”

My mouth was a well of silence (I was really getting the hang of this role.) “Lane, I’m sorry,” I managed to dredge up.

I saw the violence die off Lane’s face as he stepped over to me. His body wash made him smell like a flower pulverized by metal. “I don’t mean to be so...abrasive,” he said. “When he left you, though, it hurt me, too. He couldn’t see the good in the sacrifices you were making, that it would’ve all been worth it if he’d held on a while longer. Before you got here, I’d been on the phone with the studio heads. They’d just watched a rough cut of Do Us Part, and they’re already calling you the next Big One. And that’s just the guys in suits! Wait till everyone else sees it. Nate’s gonna see you on that screen and regret walking out on you.”

He brought a hand to my face. I flinched at first, then pushed myself further into his palm. “He’s gonna want you back,” Lane said. “Are you gonna take him back, after everything he did to you?”

Metal and flower, it turned out, was a beautiful smell once you got used to it.

“No way,” I said.

“Good.” He shoved something into my hand: a silk robe like his. “Now get undressed and meet me in the bedroom.”

He let me change in the downstairs bathroom. A TV screen was embedded in the wall across from the toilet, and I turned it on for the hell of it. As I traded clothes for a robe, my fucking phone commercial came on the screen.

WANDERLUST OBLIVION

Timmy Wolfe



8.5 × 11 in
Digital
2014

CARVINGS OF TEETH

Timmy Wolfe



14 × 6 × .5 in
Ceramic
2014