

Long River Review

lrr 2018

21ST Edition

A Collaborative Project

Creative Writing Program

Design Center Studio

Counterproof Press

University of Connecticut

Founded in 1998, *Long River Review* is an annual literary journal of art and literature staffed by undergraduates at the University of Connecticut. With a regular staff turnover, we gain fresh perspectives each year. We think it's better this way. Here at *Long River Review*, we want to publish all kinds of voices: voices from the mouth of the river and beyond, voices drowned out by other voices, voices that might not have otherwise been heard. At *Long River*, we want to create a space where new and established artists can mingle and share a glass of water or wine (or whiskey). We believe that the unpublished artist deserves as much time and consideration as the artist with a foothold. For here at *Long River*, we believe that we are standing, all souls bent over, harvesting the words and images on the current, all knee to neck deep in the same, long river.

NICHOLAS DiBENEDETTO

Acknowledgments

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All the UConn students who kindly
submitted their work for our
consideration

Masthead

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Contest Winners

All contests are judged anonymously by committees of faculty and outside authors. Special thanks to all who submitted, and congratulations to this year's winners.

THE WALLACE STEVENS POETRY PRIZE

Given by The Hartford, for the best group of poems by a graduate or undergraduate.

Erin Lynn, 1ST Place
Matthew Ryan Shelton, 2ND Place
Ricardo Alvelo, 3RD Place

THE JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

Awarded in memory of Jacob and Jennie Hackman for the best work of short fiction by an undergraduate.

Lucie Turkel, 1ST Place
Rebecca Hill, 2ND Place
Benjamin Eng, 3RD Place

THE EDWARD R. AND FRANCES SCHREIBER COLLINS LITERARY PRIZE

Given by David and Emily Collins for the best poem and best prose work by an undergraduate.

Jasmine Smith, Prose
Amanda McCarthy, Poetry

THE AETNA CREATIVE NONFICTION AWARD

Given by the Aetna Chair in Writing to support excellence in creative nonfiction

Kaylee Thurlow, 1ST Prize (undergraduate)
Brian Sneedeen, 1ST Prize (graduate)

THE AETNA TRANSLATION AWARD

Robyn Lerebours

THE AETNA CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AWARD

Kristina Reardon

THE LONG RIVER GRADUATE WRITING AWARD

For the best piece of writing in any genre by a graduate student
Kristina Reardon

THE LONG RIVER ART AWARD

Kelsey Miller

Gloriana Gill Art Award

Given in memory of Gloriana Gill for photography (preference given to black and white) and painting, drawing, or cartooning. Gloriana Gill's life was one of toil (she was a dairy farmer's wife in Pomfret, CT) and tragedy (she lost one son to a hunting accident and another in a car crash). She found a way to deal with her difficulties through art and humor: she adorned her walls, windows, and even the interior of their barn with paintings, cartoons, and stencils. She painted portraits of local farms, drew cartoons for a Putnam newspaper, and when their dairy herd was sold off, worked as an illustrator and graphic designer making educational films. From a gnarled piece of wood transformed into an elf, to scraps of cloth made into comical dwarf-sized figures, she could make almost anything into art or amusement. The Gloriana Gill Awards are intended to encourage the students of UConn similarly to discover the importance of art and humor in life.

ELIZABETH ELLENWOOD, *Photography*
CECILIA ESTANISLAO, *Drawing*



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Letter from the Editor

REBECCA HILL

Raise your glasses, because *Long River Review* is 21 years old! After two long decades, this creative child turned angsty adolescent can finally drink, and with its newfound legality, is facing new adult challenges.

Last year, we opened ourselves for the first time to what years of past editors-in-chief had written and dreamt about: we went national, accepting submissions from anyone and everyone regardless of UConn affiliation. We received submissions from places as close as Mansfield, Connecticut and as far as India. As the first group of editors who entered knowing we would publish nationally, we found ourselves faced with the same questions that are being asked in literary spaces across the country: How much does who we publish matter? What do the subjects and styles we publish say about what we think important literature is?

These questions aren't easy to answer, and what we've determined to publish, after reading hundreds of submissions, has come out of a process of collaboration. It did not take us long to realize that we didn't all like the same works! Pieces that inspired love from some panelists garnered hate from others. But what we came to determine is that it is far better to publish something that elicits a reaction rather than indifference.

Publishing an edition of *Long River Review*, I've learned in my time here, is like lassoing a multi-headed beast. It can't be done alone, nor can each person keep an eye on every head at the same time. The challenge is in trusting that for the heads you don't have eyes on, someone else is watching. Working on this staff has been a process of communication and shared vision. When I think back on my time with *Long River*, I remember the words panelists used to describe our intent at the start of the course — “boldly human” being among my favorite — and I remember the experience, close to the end, of listening to a genre editor describe what she loved about a piece her panel had chosen for publication. Although, she couldn't quite convey it to me in words, something in the language and style of this piece spoke powerfully to her.

The pieces we've published here are the ones that made us feel something. If, as our mission statement says, “we believe that we are [all] standing... in the same long river,” then the works we've chosen are the ones that, when we found them in the water, we saw something of ourselves reflecting back. These works we chose thoughtfully, imperfectly, but never indifferently. Whether you see something of yourself mirrored in their language is now out of our hands. But we give to you readers, the best we've found.

Virginia

CHRISTOPHER GARDNER

I understand now
Why you waded in currents,
Pockets filled with stones.

Art After Gunshot

MOLLIE KERVICK

Last night the wind woke me, squeaking
through cracks in my windows. So
I got out of bed, pulled on pants and my coat
and went for a walk.

At three in the morning the streets were empty,
except for a mutt and some beggars. I gave
an old man under a fire escape an old dollar
from my pocket. That's when I found you,
there on the sidewalk, a fresh oval wound
in your side.

I knew I only had a few hours to paint
the mural with your blood. I didn't use any tools
except my bare hands and a ladder to reach
the top of the building. I smeared your insides,
like translucent shadows on the cracks
in mortar and red brick.

It was hard to decide what to paint
on the wall; I was limited to only red
and my fingers. But I started with a line
that became an open hand holding half of
an empty heart.

It's my best kept secret, these paintings
I make with blood. What would
the town say if they knew? Because it's
one thing to see half a man's head spilled
on the street, and another to see him made
into art on your neighbor's wall.

But the wind keeps blowing me out of bed
and there is no shortage of bodies. So they'll
keep popping up around town, these murals
of hands holding halves of seedless, red hearts.

The anchoress

After the Visions of Margery Kempe

ERIN LYNN

There was a time I was tethered to nothing.
My mind had run ahead of my body, leaving it
longing on the trundle bed, spread on linen.

Balsam needle and Atlantic salt, I caught
taste on the wind, but my tongue ebbed
against the wall of my teeth, rinsed of word.

That was before the weeping came:
a midsummer's evening in thick hot weather
washed cold by the brine of my eyes, my pores.

I knew I caused the rain that wouldn't cease
that the creatures sucking my breasts by night
would always be sated by the ocean I was.

How many had slipped because of my sorrow?
They examined my body for its new unnature
and shut me in a hut of moss sweet stone.

There was nothing left to tell my confessor.
I heard that one who would not own her sin
should dry into snake-skin, bound and thinning.

My soul was a gull on a different mission.

Evolutions

AMANDA McCARTHY

i watched the paint peel today, dug
fingernails under layers like ripping
the wings off butterflies

each fluttered to the ground, like a man
falling to his knees and groveling
for the hand of god,

while putrid sunflowers erupted into
smoky pistils, hit the ground,
firebombs baptizing

london for the forty-second time, and so
I purge this house of impurities
just as the germans

purged the great wen. it is I
who gives commands, peels the paint,
takes to the skies,

skips the line. it is I
who dons the inkblot mask, becomes the judgment.
a hero never retires, never
quits, never hesitates, never
dies.

The Crabapple Tree in My Parent's Yard

McCARTHY MacDANIEL

It split in half, the one I always *wasn't climbing*. It struck
In my childlike fear of being fine, unable to feel
Lightning's damage eat inside and all the way out.
Childhood is a tree left in peels & pieces on the grassy floor.

Of them are the apples too bitter, fallen in a wreath,
photos from Easter morning: faces smile, stood on the place
I buried the bird I named to know what I was mourning. Jesus
For Christ's sake, so many conversational ticks from my parents
Spilled out with the sound of music or sound of Mom

Arguing with Dad from when divorce was what I feared.
Though I fight with boyfriends. We stir and stab and stir
Until it hardens like cement holding tighter; the pain we cause
One another, going to Walmart to get a new phone when my
Dad threw one against the wall; I feared him though what he
Feared from the limb he stood out on was not being enough,
Cemented each time my mom threatened to take flight.

The time I looked in the mirror and clipped bangs, I know it was regret;
Kissing my friend's boyfriend. I am sorry for the apples
No one wants to eat, but the view is freedom, from the top of
A broken tree, grown from the body of a bird; split open and dissected.

Conception

MATTHEW RYAN SHELTON

I'm reading in the paper they've unearthed
a Neolithic goddess figurine
in central Anatolia, a curved
simulacrum in marmoreal stone.
It dates to almost seven thousand years
ago, according to the Ministry
of Culture and Tourism. Here and there
small bees are circling the cedar tree

I'm sitting under in the afternoon.
I'm thinking of the goddess figurine
since everything is something else with us,
since something like a stone's analogous
to almost anything. And bit by bit
in time it becomes less indefinite.

In Patches

CHRISTINE BYRNE

I was born
with one eye
turned to see the other,
so you patched it.
The trick to strengthening
the muscles of the eye
is sugar & time
best starting
young, under proper
supervision. I grew up learning
by measurements & lying,
watching my brothers
& defying you

I was raised
in a white house
on a street of white houses
with you in the kitchen
making things &
screaming, I grew up
scabbed up
experiencing myself
fried chickpeas
greatnesses in humble
adventures, I grew up
with a father who
dreamed hard
& missed a lot,
who loved you most
of the time

You told me there's
morphine in sugar & loneliness,
that I'd decay sweetly
for the rest of my life.
Now I try to

solder up patches
everytime, train
my muscles to
filter your memory.
It's true I've spent
most of my life
with straight eyes
staring out
the back of Volvo windows,
watching golfers
then rolling down hills,
I've learned
to surround myself
with people who mean it

The time I spent
witnessing would later
dictate seconds of my life,
the way sounds
mimic fog
something on the stove
his footsteps with
the crank radio
coming from the garage.
My life has been
mostly fumbling
artificial mooncakes
your little crescent
birthmark, you
eating on the tile floor
after Christmas
saying sugar
& morphine
& lonely

Tío Tomas

RICARDO ALVELO

It's true I met you
 before I realized
 we're supposed to
 know things about ourselves
 or else
 be decided for, well
 I haven't discovered
 for myself yet
 direction — the purpose
 of his father dying,
 why you're peppered
 against your own thoughts so
 seasoned by madness, yes
 I know I
 haven't earned
 the way you look
 when you're thinking

All my life, I've lived
 next to you,
 weakened by
 how a half ripped pair
 of tailor fit jeans
 used to be yours
 became mine, & everything
 that is mine
 eventually
 I break moments into
 & although I don't
 love you anymore,
 you're still

Pernil skin crackles,
 Cover coquito cuticles

Swine is for me not him
 Don't eat where you shit
 He suggests

Impossible on Mi Isla

He chooses to forget about what Columbus stole
 From this rich port
 The dominos he mixed by hand
 Knowingly
 Capi Ku

Columbus never left
 The Santa Maria sits in my stomach
 The coquis haven't stopped coquiiing
 Ever since
 Abuelo played the cauto, everyone
 Salsaed
 You yawned and took another business call

Noh, I am not a cemetery

LELIA AGOORA

*In real life we go backwards
Tender to careless
Careless to violent
In between a seed was planted
And snuffed out in the dirt.
Since the 14TH century
The japanese held wordless plays
Where geishas spoke in colors
And the dead came back to life,
Possessed by abstractions.
I created a Noh of my own
And gave birth to a no name girl.
The cemetery path is trailed by engraved stones.
At its climax lies a fruitful plateau,
where beams of light recede suddenly at dusk
And slowly creep back through the trees
In infancy the cemetery was white and arid
I kept my hands near her face
Numbing the sting of the frost
In childhood the snow melted into yellow grass.
We play in light sweaters
I catch her behind the most animated tree
The sun sets amber
she's my age, the grass is jade
the trees are budding cherry blossoms
that fall in our bare laps
The fabric of the sky is crimson.
I fell asleep in soft soil
And woke up to white walls.
I told the nurse I was catching butterflies
She didn't know how to tell me it was january
I was her patient of the day
She was accustomed to the ghouls next door
Who lay idle in clean, white hospital beds
I was inching, then hurtling forward
From rape to death
Death to life
life to color
But in reality we go backwards.*

omakase

LILI FISHMAN

raw and ripe, it
sat

pulsing

on the counter.
she reached out and
poked.

how should we cook it?

place it in a pan and hear
it sizzle.
throw it on the
grill and
char the red right out. trap
the juices in a hotpot,
a quick transformation from
tender to tough and

drink

the broth when done.

no matter. we need to cut it up
either way.

vivisect the veins
and ventricles,
and valves.

slice thinly.

then
decide.

Things You Find on the Ground

MELISSA KARPUSZKA

At times objects slip from hands and bags
and whether from lack of caring or noticing
they stay abandoned there on the ground,
eggshells and inside-out umbrellas,
purple cans and sleeves of round crackers
crushed into uselessness by the pressure of shoes.

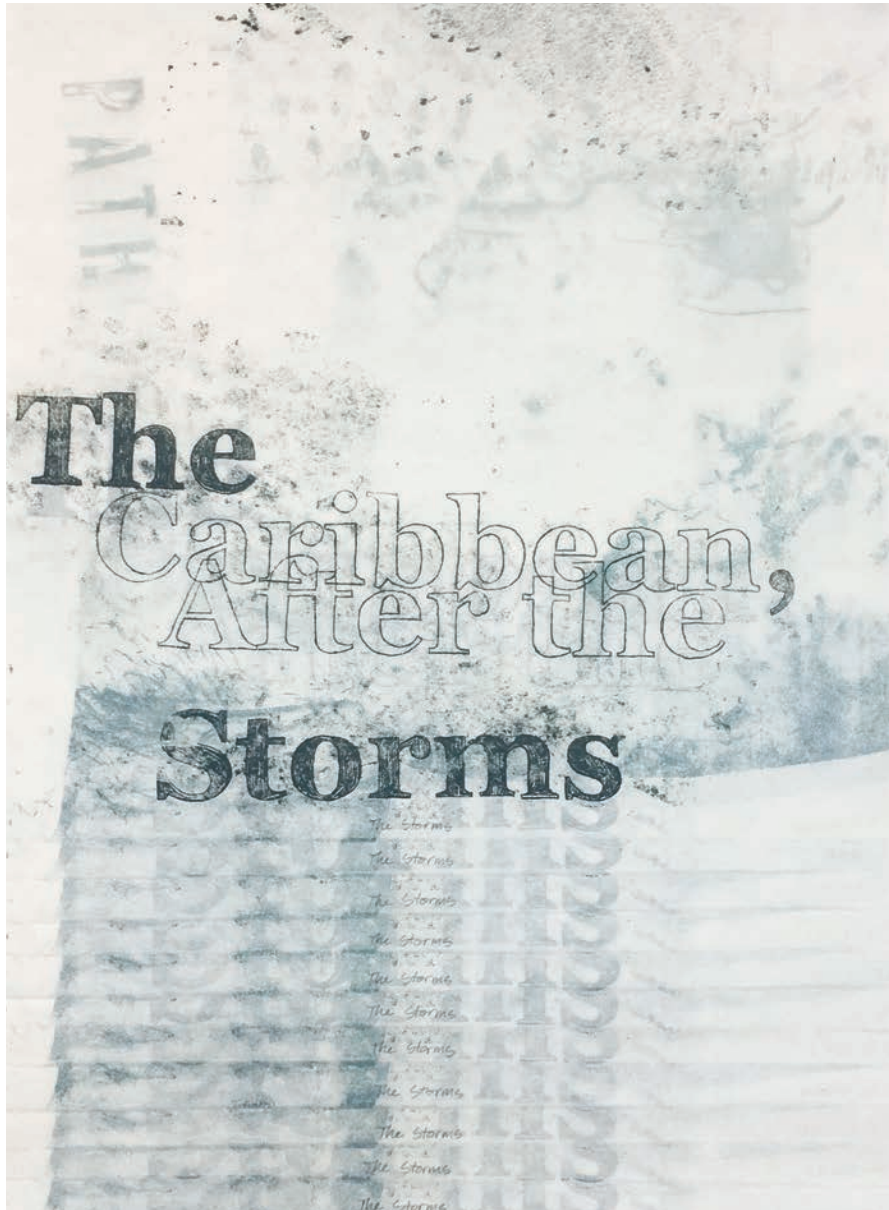
Nature places calling cards scattered
where people roam to remind them she exists,
bright pink flower petals, drops of dew,
a red leaf still half-green, the shadow of a tree
with branches interlocking like a web.

And sometimes the world tries to send us
messages, as the sidewalk that bears the words
Keep Safe in fading yellow chalk.
But fate doesn't always listen; it smashes
the man on the bike into the car,
shattering the windshield and sending him
flying to land on the solid pavement.

Hibakujumuko, or Hibaku Grandmothers

C. PATRICE ARES-CHRISTIAN

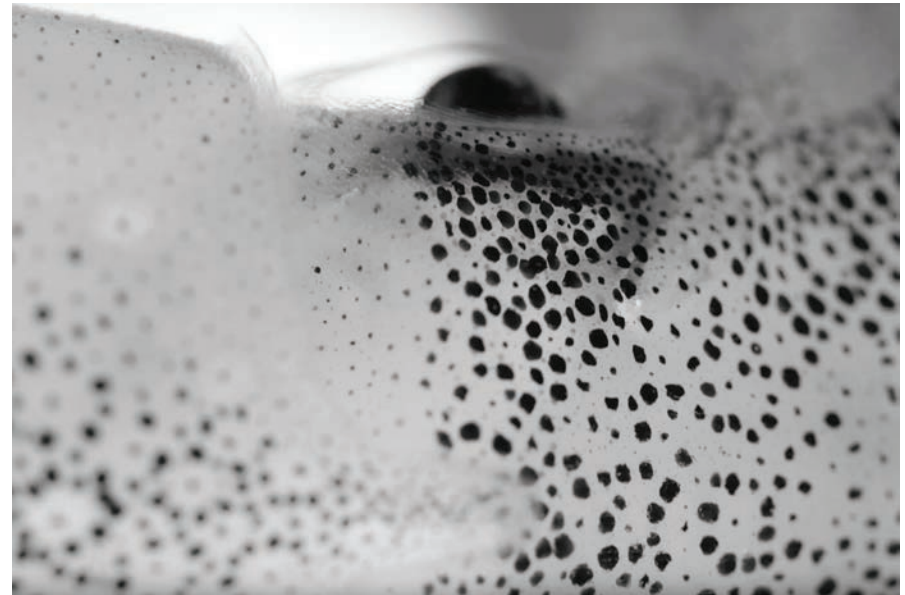
Did you know some trees survived
the atomic bombs in Hiroshima?
Hibaku trees, bombed, survived trees.
More than one hundred grandmothers
saw day turn to white, to black,
to ash and shadow and wail.
Limbs disintegrated, tree-bodies unwhole.
Retreating into roots, into Gaia,
unable to not hear screams and silences,
more than one hundred grandmothers slept
wept
gathered into themselves.
Slowly, grandmothers emerged, hibaku,
casting off the dead things
regrowing the missing things.
Some growing around what they had lost
 keeping their scars to mourn, to love.
The hibaku grandmother trees returned to us.
If you are quiet, they will tell you
the absences caused by man's inhumanity
and their own survival songs.



The Storms Will Intensify

Lithograph

KELSEY MILLER



Defense Mechanism 3

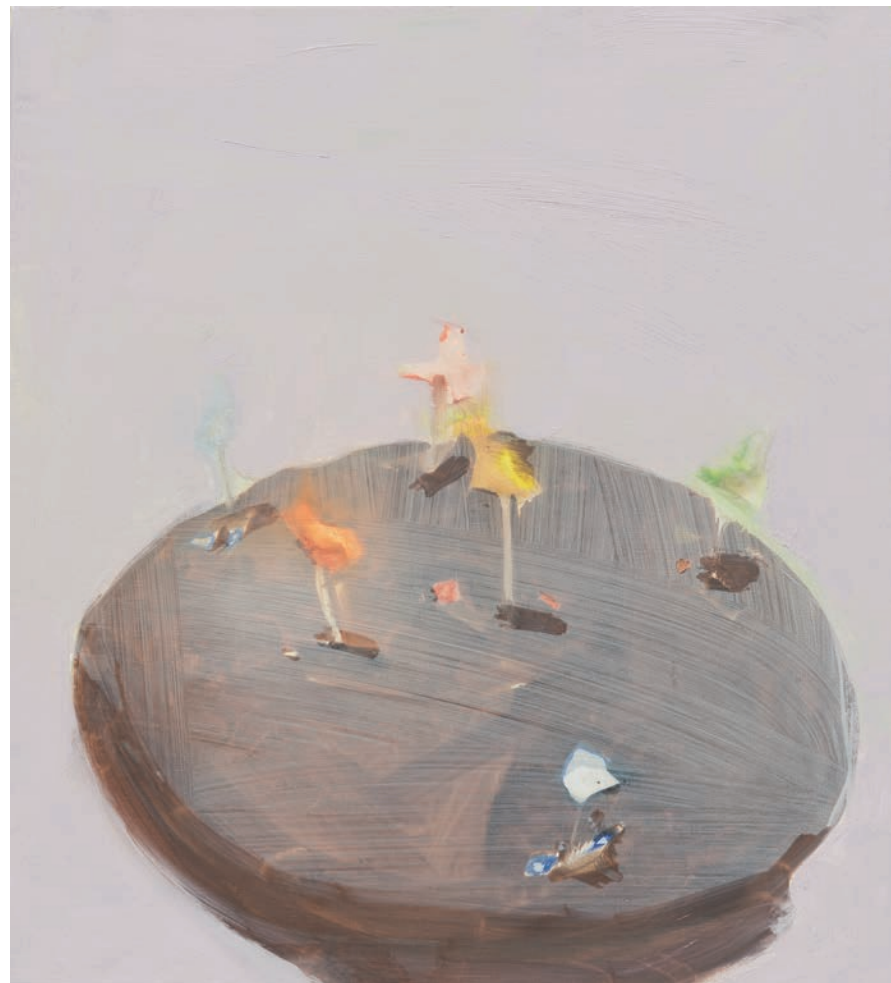
Silver Gelatin Print

ELIZABETH ELLENWOOD



October Bridge
Digital Photograph

COLIN DELEO



28 Cake
Oil on Panel

CLAIRE STANKUS

An Interview with Vijay Seshadri

An Excerpt

ELIZABETH SANKEY

Vijay Seshadri is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, essayist, literary critic, and professor. Seshadri's family emigrated from Bangalore, India when he was five years old to Columbus, Ohio. After graduating from Oberlin College at 20 years old, Seshadri found himself venturing across the United States to the West Coast, where he worked in both the fishing and logging industries. He eventually moved to New York to pursue a Masters in Middle Eastern Languages and Literature but withdrew and began focusing on writing poetry. Seshadri has worked as an editor, essayist, and book reviewer at *The New Yorker*, and as a graduate professor at Sarah Lawrence College in the writing program. He is the author of three poetry collections *Wild Kingdom* (1996), *The Long Meadow* (2004), and *3 Sections* (2014) for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. He has received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. His writing has been described as transcendentalist, witty, and intimate while also including his love and knowledge of mythical, ancient, and Middle Eastern texts. He kindly agreed to be interviewed by me via video call.

ELIZABETH SANKEY: I know that you once said the poem is a process of discovery, and this discovery can help us come to great conclusions. Going off of this, I'm curious if, through any of your poems, through any of your processes of discovery, you came to some sort of truth on your own? Something that was within your writing that you hadn't thought of before?

VIJAY SESHADRI: It's hard to say. I think through the investigation of one's own reality in poetry, a balance is achieved. There's a long poem in my last book, *3 Sections*, called "Personal Essay." It goes through many stages of confusion about life and experience, and then it arrives at a simple and straightforward notion that the only thing that is real are creatures around you. It's not that the speaker of the poem never knew before but that, somehow, he touches an existential bottom in the poem with that realization vividly in mind, and he finds a place to stand. In terms of not only moral experience and material experience, but spiritual experience. The real recognition these days for me is not derived from transcendence, in the Whitmanesque or the Emersonian sense, but immanence. What the Christians call the immanence, the presence of the Spirit in the reality of the world. These are things I play around with

in my mind and try to get resolved in poems. Poems live in a different realm than the daily realm. We're in the world and we are corrupted by the forces of the world. Poems allow you to leave the world in order to realize, in your own life, those things that are not of the world but make the world possible — what people refer to when they talk about morality. In poetry, you can live an alternative life, a life in some sense more real than quotidian life.

ES: I completely agree with you. I believe, even when you're in the process of writing, whether it's prose or poetry, you can escape to that little imaginary world entirely. It's a really interesting experience. I think it can tie in that spirituality people can feel when they are practicing religion. This brings me to one of your pieces, "The Disappearances," which, I would argue, is probably your most famous piece of writing. I think it's very interesting that you incorporate an allusion to Emily Dickinson within that piece. I was curious if you studied her work, if there was a deeper significance to this quote than just, seemingly, the quote itself? **VJ:** Your question assumes a kind of purposiveness in the process of writing that actually doesn't occur. Writing is instinctive; it's a connection to the subconscious. I know that Emily Dickinson poem and I know Emily Dickinson's poetry as a part of my nature. I wouldn't say inside out, but very well. When I wrote that poem, I'd read her for a good thirty years already. So, that fairly important Emily Dickinson poem just popped into my head, that line, after I'd written the first line, "On a day like any other day," is the first line. And the second line is Emily Dickinson's line, "like 'yesterday or centuries before,'" which fixed the first line on the canvas of the poem, which emphasized that the day the poem is going to unfold, to give the story that somehow transcends time.

ES: Timelessness.

VJ: Right. So, I thought, instead of trying to come up with my own words for that, I'd just use hers. There's something opportunistic about writing, but the opportunism is instinctive. You were suggesting a purposiveness, an intentionality in writing that writing doesn't actually possess. Writing is very much like being in a dream. Things are happening and you're just following along in some way. But certainly, Dickinson is an important writer for me.

ES: That's what I was more curious about, if there were any works of hers that particularly resonated with you, anything you read that may have evoked a pertinent emotion within you that caused you to add her to your piece? I totally agree with you, though, on the process of writing. I write poetry myself. You go in with a blind hand and let your mind carry you along with it.

VJ: There are thousands of lines of poetry floating around in my head from all of the people I've read over the years. I tend to memorize poems. I memorized that poem, — "After great pain a formal feeling comes..." There are also many poems I know by heart because I've read them so many times. At any one point in my strange, fitful way of writing poetry, images and lines from

those poems will arise. In that case, it was a happy fortuitousness. Quoting her right then and there worked. And I could feel that it was working and that it was opening up the poem. When you're writing — I'm sure you have this experience — a small idea can have a large resonance in your mind and lead to other ideas, to a vista. You can suddenly see the poem unfolding, or the piece of prose that you're writing. That line certainly did that. I needed the repetition of the simile structure there. "On a day like any other day, / like 'yesterday or centuries before,'" and then, "yesterday or centuries before," establishes a cosmic frame for the poem. You're looking at the whole span of human time. That seemed to be the ground on which the poem wanted to live its life. You let the poem go where it's going, and you follow it. The deepest act of any artist, I think, consists just in that: the ability to let the world be the world, whatever medium you are working in, rather than trying to impose your will on it... which is what worldly human activity does. Impose your will on the world in one way, shape, or form. Get money, get status, or get whatever it is you feel you need, whereas, the activity of art is just the reverse. It's somehow letting the world be what it is.

ES: Absolutely. That brings me back to something else that you've said, that "the details of the world are sufficient in and of themselves," which is one of my favorite things that you've said, because I completely agree with that. The human being has this enormous gift to be able to actually understand the beauty of the world and not only coexist within it but be able to appreciate everything they're surrounded by. Going off of this, I think you can resonate with those thoughts, maybe. I was curious if there's a certain part of the physical world in particular, or a place, or something in your life that may have been a very important aspect of the world for you?

VJ: I always loved just the experience of perception. I was always a sucker for beauty. Even though I can trace my ancestry and the part of India I came from, which is subtropical, back a thousand years, I never really felt at home in the world until I wound up on the central Oregon coast, in my early and mid-twenties. This was in the late 1970s, from 1977 to '82. I got there, and I thought, "Oh my god. This is the place I belong." I loved it there, I loved it so much. I was a commercial fisherman. I did various things in the fishing industry: I worked on salmon boats, I worked on crab boats, I ran a little fish barge during the silver salmon season in Yaquina Bay, in Newport. I don't think I'd ever really experienced happiness until then, certainly as an adult. My childhood had not been a happy childhood, as many people's childhoods are not — I'm not saying I'm exceptional in that way. My childhood was very isolated, and I remember when I was in Oregon I would say to myself, "Wow, this is what people mean by being happy! I finally understand. I finally get it." I eventually had to leave; I couldn't live my life as a fisherman. One of the reasons I was there was to be a writer and experience nature, in that period of the counterculture in America that came out of the 60s. That counterculture, though, was melting around me. I came back to New York, I went to graduate school, and I had a career. But yes, that was a physical place, a physical love. The thing about the mysticism you were talking about — it is the love and

appreciation of everything. But we are creatures, right? We're human. To be human is to love one thing more than another, to be partial. The idea of god in, say, a Christian mystic like Meister Eckhardt, is that god is helpless to love everything equally. But we're not that. We're partial in our love. And, boy, I loved that place!

ES: You were just talking a lot about your development as a person. At what point in time did you come to poetry? When was it that you became attracted to the art and then started writing it? Or, was it the opposite, did you just start writing one day, and find that you were producing great things, or did you find an affinity towards the art before you began writing?

VJ: When I was sixteen or so, American poetry was at a great high-water mark. It was intimately involved with the anti-war movement and social justice movements in America. That was a revolutionary period. Poetry had charisma to it. Great poems were being written. I never fell in love with poetry. I fell in love with individual poems, to the point where it was as if I had written the poems that I loved. I had just encountered them, I took possession of them, and they were fantastic. There wasn't a simple, dramatic, on-the-road-to-Damascus moment. This is usually the way it happens to people: One thing leads to another and before you know it you're suddenly absorbed. When I started out I said, "Oh, that's kind of cool, that Galway Kinnell poem about the bear. Maybe I'll read some more poetry," and much later I realized, "Oh, this is it!" It was a long process. Usually it is. Human love is like that. Becoming a Christian or becoming a communist, people suddenly realize, "this train of thought is taking me," inevitably to Christianity or to communism or to whatever, to asking this woman to marry me.

ES: It's a progression.

VJ: Yes. If you knew what was going to happen, you'd resist it. It's not in our nature to give up our autonomy to something else, it really isn't. It happens by degrees all the time, and that's how it happened with me. By the time I was nineteen, it had happened. So, those three years were pretty significant.

ES: And during this time, you were working in the fishing and logging industries?

VJ: No, I was in college then. From sixteen to twenty I was in college, and then I graduated when I was twenty and hitch-hiked to the West Coast and lived in the Bay Area for a while. Then I found myself in Oregon.

ES: While you were working in the fishing and logging industries, was that a strong period of writing for you?

VJ: I had a kind of tumultuous emotional life, and in my early twenties, a tumultuous writing life. I was in the Bay Area, trying to write a novel. The novel was too ambitious, and my life was too confused and complicated. I didn't know how to write anything big like that. That whole project and those

years were kind of a failure. I'd written poetry when I was in college, and my poetry had been well-received. It was always in the back of my mind that I was a poet. I started to abandon the Bay Area and relocate north to Oregon. There, I got back into poetry. I got increasingly gripped by it, this time not by poems themselves, but by the process of writing my own poems. Through those five years, I was writing a lot. In fact, I was just looking recently at all of that stuff, which is unpublished, those poems. I was thinking maybe I should do something with them.

ES: That would be really cool. I can't imagine when I'm a few years older, looking back on the poems I've written when I was seventeen and eighteen. I can't imagine what they're going to sound like...

VJ: You'd be surprised! It would be interesting. You get better and you look back and say, "Oh, that's dreck." But then you get farther along and say, "This is interesting, I had some really interesting experiences and ideas. I was working towards something."

ES: You've been mentioning, a couple times, that you had an emotionally difficult childhood. I was actually going to ask you a question about your parents being scientists, but now I'm curious, was there anything in particular about your childhood that made it emotionally difficult, or was it simply your state of being?

VJ: We came to Canada in '59. Between '59 and 1961, when we left to come to Ohio, where my father taught at Ohio State, I skipped two grades. I exhibited a certain intellectual precocity then. I think that was the big problem, the fact that I was in an older cohort. It was compounded by the fact that I was a late grower, and obviously by the racial stuff — I was the only person of color in any school I was in until high school, and then we were a small minority. I was this weird, tiny Indian kid who was wearing glasses very early, racially isolated, isolated in terms of development, physical, and emotional. That doomed me to social isolation. I had to struggle with society, and have expectations imposed upon me that I couldn't have met. It wasn't that my parents beat me or anything, none of that. Just isolation and loneliness, which ultimately had a great effect because I became a reader at a very early age. We didn't have video games or iPhones in those days; we just had books. There were only three channels on TV, and nobody watched TV very much compared to now. I wound up reading and finding the excitement of life in the imagination in a way that I didn't in real life. Later I had plenty of fun, after I went to college. I made up for lost time. I went overboard the other way for a long, long time. These things all kind of work themselves out.

ES: And you mentioned how you felt like you were outside of this 'mainstream' social group, or outside of the social norm. You've also made comments about poetry being just that, that "people don't really understand poetry." That it tends to be outside of the mainstream, and that it can't be made relatable to popular culture, which I completely agree with. Do you believe that poetry can ever be, in any sense, widely accessible? Or do you think that there is a benefit that it remains outside of the popular culture?

VJ: Absolutely, it can be widely accessible, and it has in many periods. A poet like Wordsworth was a best seller in 19TH century England. And Wordsworth is not a simple poet by any means. I think that culture changes, but poetry tends to endure; it's one of the oldest arts. Language is the fundamental medium of meaning, and that is never going to change. I don't know what you're referring to when you said that poetry is outside of the mainstream...I think poetry is a factor in cultural life even when it isn't recognized or acknowledged. I mean, look at how many people write poetry in America — it's just astonishing. Look at how many books are published; well over a thousand books of poetry are published every year in America. Of course, none of these poets are going to have the popularity of Beyoncé. That doesn't mean that the art is dying or diminishing in any way. The idea of being popular like Beyoncé is sort of absurd.

ES: The celebrity culture of this generation is shocking.

VJ: And the idea that it constitutes success and that people think of success in that way is equally absurd. Gertrude Stein — I think this was after she published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* — came back to America from Paris, where she had been living. Maybe the late 20s or early 1930s. She did a reading tour, and everybody was talking about her, there was a Gertrude Stein buzz. When she was out in California, I think — I'm fuzzy on the facts — a newspaper reporter interviewed her, and asked, "Why are you so famous, Ms. Stein?" And she said, "Because I have small audiences." Which is a classic Gertrude Stein paradox, but it's also true. Those small audiences, like the audiences for serious music, or the audiences that serious philosophers have in America, establish people pretty solidly if they are the right people. If a contribution is large enough, it will find a way to be amplified to the world. There are all these new poets now, young poets who are selling two million copies of their books. When I was your age there was a poet who had a similar profile, Rod McKuen. He wrote books with titles like *Listen to the Warm*. His books were everywhere. He was selling hundreds of thousands of copies of homiletic poetry, sentimental, simple poetry that made people feel good about themselves. Not exactly Wallace Stevens — it takes a lot of effort to understand Wallace Stevens. You have to sit with him. He is a difficult poet and he is a great poet. It doesn't take a lot of effort to understand or appreciate Robert Frost or William Butler Yeats, and they're just as great as Wallace Stevens. It's a complicated question, the popularity of poetry and whether it's marginal or not; I don't quite know.

ES: That actually reminds me of Rupi Kaur. Do you know her?

VJ: Right, she was the one I was thinking of.

ES: Extremely popular, anybody could pick up a Rupi Kaur book and completely understand and probably be able to relate. How do you feel about poets like her, how are they affecting the field and the art form?

VJ: I think they're ultimately good. It's great that poetry can spread its wings so wide. I'm certainly not going to be the kind of person to say, "Oh, that isn't poetry." It's like [Bob] Dylan's Nobel Prize. I grew up on Dylan. He's so important to my adolescence and I never felt the antipathy that other people felt towards his getting the Nobel Prize in Literature for poetry essentially. These are complicated phenomena. I would have given the prize to John Ashbery, who is a poet lots of people read just because he's famous, but few people really understand. He's not meant to be "understood," he's reconceptualizing the experience of poetry. That is complicated for people to get because they think poetry is supposed to be understood rather than experienced, somehow. I think *The Cat in the Hat* is wonderful poetry.

ES: You were just speaking about song lyrics, I want to compare these to your poetry readings. I was wondering if, after you started speaking your poetry, anything about the art changed for you?

VJ: I don't write poetry for the spoken voice, I write for the page. I think, certainly, that giving readings has changed, very subtly, the things that I write. I privilege, a little more than I otherwise would, the sonic element of the poem. People say that poetry is meant to be read out loud; that poetry is an out-loud experience, a spoken experience. They're wrong. It's not a spoken experience, it's a sonic experience. That's one of the pleasures of reading poetry, you hear a living voice rendered on the flat, two-dimensional medium of the page. But those sonic elements that you're developing on the page are inevitably transformed, unconsciously, by the fact that one is reading out loud a lot. You're playing much more to an audience when you're reading out loud; you know what they like and what they're absorbing. A lot of the wit in my poetry has been enabled by my experience of reading out loud. I enjoy making people laugh. My poems, I think, are funnier than they otherwise would be, though they would always be funny, because wit is a poetic fundamental for me.

ES: You were just making some comments that many think a poem needs to be understood, rather than simply just being absorbed. There are many different ways to read poetry and many different ways to try to analyze it. You're a professor, so I was curious if you believe there's a certain way poetry should be taught? Are there different elements of your teaching that you think are important?

VJ: This whole issue of meaning and its relationship to making sense and communication is a complicated and vexed one, and I never know how to articulate my position. I start with the idea, and I think it's a fairly solid one, that language becomes poetic when the ratio of implicit to explicit meaning is sufficiently high... that the language is implying a lot without saying a lot. You take, for example, William Carlos Williams's red-wheelbarrow poem: "so much depends / upon * a red wheel / barrow * glazed with rain / water * beside the white / chickens." What does that mean? Nobody could paraphrase the meaning of a poem like that. You could ask all sorts of questions. What it's

doing is giving you a clear image in the mind, rendering that image and then getting you to see the world is what Dr. Williams is trying to do. It's such a blessing, to suddenly have language allow you to see the world again as if it were new, the world you take for granted, in all its originality and its splendor and beauty. That is a little different than extracting meaning from a poem, which is the way poetry tends to be taught, especially at the secondary-school level. The poem is a problem and we have to find a solution to it, the way we would solve an equation. I understand why that impulse is there among pedagogues and teachers, and I don't quite know what could replace it. How could you convince people it's not about that, it's about something else? I think everybody should remember that the reason we make art is to give pleasure. The poet is in the business of giving pleasure, not in the business of indulging their own confession, examining their own pain. There might be painful things in the poem, there probably should be, given the nature of life, but the ultimate purpose is pleasure or joy even.

ES: Expressiveness, kind of a release. Have you learned anything in particular from your students? Has anybody ever brought to you a piece that was very influential?

VJ: I don't think I've ever been directly influenced by the pieces of my students. I have been influenced tremendously by my students themselves, by the way they learn and the process of learning. It's satisfying to have young people as interlocutors and to talk about literature to them, because it clarifies your own ideas, constantly. You come to see what's important and what's not important. Teaching enables me as a writer, it doesn't disable me. A lot of writers feel resentful about having to teach to make a living, because they do feel disabled by it. I can understand that, but it's something I've never really experienced. I get a lot of value and pleasure out of teaching.

ES: I'm curious, too. I have a quote from you that says if a student were to come to you and ask you what they should do with their life, you'd say to solve the issue of climate change rather than focusing on poetry. Do you think that poetry could serve an impact upon this issue? Could a student combine their love of poetry with aiding the world in some way?

VJ: Absolutely! I think what I meant with that comment about changing the world is that we need technical solutions. To be inspired to find technical solutions, you have to have a sense that nature is sacred. The environmental movement begins with poets like Gary Snyder and writers like Rachel Carson, who were really literary writers in the 60s. That reverence for nature is so much a part of the Romantic tradition. I don't, by the way, think there's nearly enough nature poetry being written. Poetry has become much more urbane than it should be.

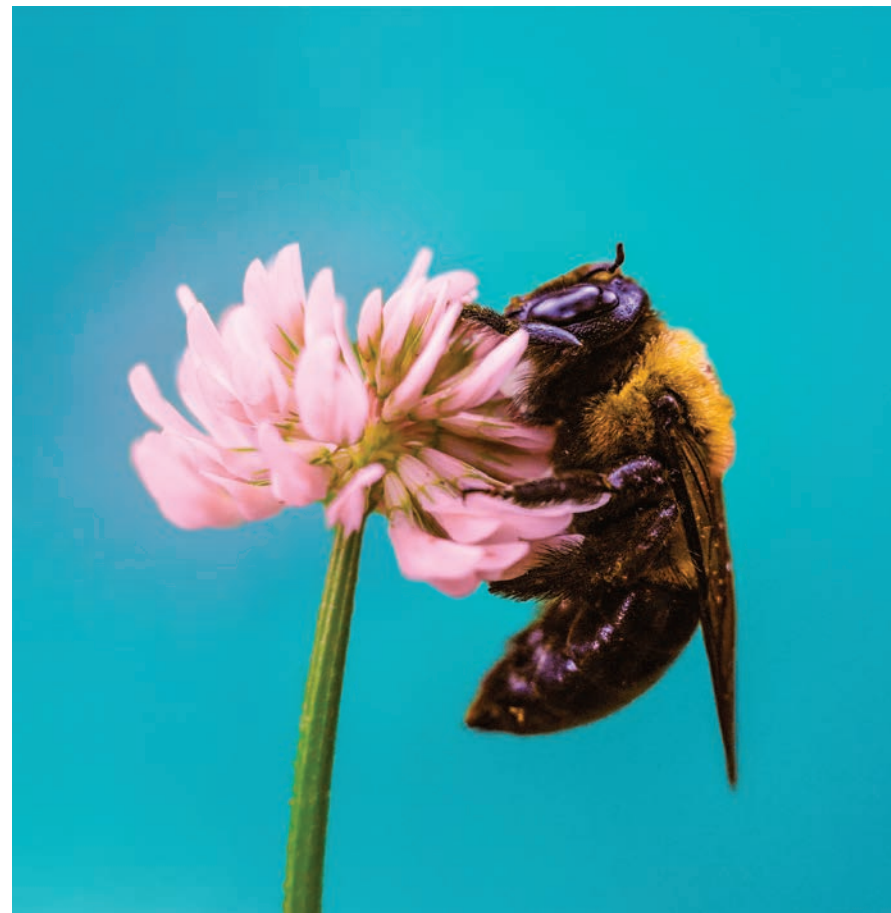
This interview has been edited for posterity and clarity. The full, unedited transcript can be found on longriverreview.com



Head in the Clouds

Colored Pencil, Pen

MICHAELA ABATE



Bumble Bee on a Flower

Photograph

JONATHAN BARTLEY



Undressing

Digital Art

ZO WALLICK



On Thin Ice

Digital Photograph

TAYLOR GIORGETTI

Spinning Mind but with a Small Body

An Excerpt

KAYLEE THURLOW

My head reverberates off the porcelain counter as my body slumps to the floor. I wish I could tell you what it felt like, but I was unconscious at that point.

I wasn't out for long, waking up a few seconds later, curled into a loose fetal position like an unborn baby who still has months left in the womb. I'm in a daze and move my head gingerly to see my friend standing over me, eyes wide with hands clenching my arms.

"What just happened?" She moans.

I grip the counter with my clammy palms to pull myself up. Where do I begin? "It's nothing," I lie. "It must've been the heat, I'm so sorry you had to see that."

I realize my mom could have heard and listen for the springs on her bed or the light smack of her bare feet on the dull hardwood. Hearing nothing, I stand and stretch my muscles, trying to examine my body for any pain. I close my eyes and feel heat bubbling under my cheek and just below my chin. A sharp pain settles on the left half of my forehead, but when I look in the mirror all I see are two light pink blotches on my chin and forehead. They look like fragments of Hubba Bubba bubblegum tape, nothing a little cover up can't fix.

Rylee looks at me nervously. "You fell on the curling iron when you passed out. Then, you hit your head on the counter, and then again when you hit the ground. Ky, I'm so sorry, I thought you were joking when you started to fall, like you're so tired you could drop or something. If I had realized..." She stammers to a stop.

It takes a few minutes, but I assure her that the heat had gotten to me and that I'm fine. Eventually, her eyes soften like the vanilla ice cream you put on top of steaming chocolate chip cookies. I hold in my sigh of relief; she won't tell anyone what happened. I hug her, thankful that my secret is still mine. She pulls back and starts curling my hair again.

I think about what it felt like before I fell. The room was warm; the heat was pushing down on me. I felt like a bag of chocolates sitting in a car in the middle of summer; the outer layers of the gooey chocolate, caramel, and peanut butter changing shape until they were a puddle of calories.

This had been happening recently, though I had never passed out from it until today. I would typically stop and grab something, waiting for my brain to catch up to me. I couldn't very well go ahead and tell Rylee what was wrong though. I needed to act like nothing had happened.

Rylee goes to my room while I finish powdering my face, trying to conceal the light burns. I think about how I won't be able to weigh myself this morning and groan. I would have to check in when I got home from school, but at that point, my weight would fluctuate from water intake. Oh, well.

Packing up quickly, I grab the apples, strawberries, baby carrots, and protein bar I had prepared the night before. I cut up some type of food every night so that my parents hear me packing a lunch. The apple is cut into sixteenths, the strawberries cut into small nibbles, carrots cut into fourths, and the protein bar into eighths: enough to last me a week if I needed to cut more calories. But it's tennis season which means I need to eat, so I stay on my strict under five hundred calorie diet. I make sure to burn off one thousand calories from my pedometer and then anything else I can from karate, weights, or at home workouts before bed.

School moves by slowly as I think of all the workouts I could be doing instead. Writing in my chicken scratch, I plan out the afterschool possibilities of a walk, tennis practice, tennis with Dad or a walk, tennis practice, kickboxing or a walk, tennis practice, weights.

The teachers mostly lecture as I try to figure out what I'm going to eat and what I'm going to do as my workout for the night. One teacher passes out a worksheet; my brain feels blurry as I try to do the math, a headache comes on as I try to focus with no energy. Finally, it's time to go home.

Dad picks me up and I have two hours before tennis practice. I race upstairs to undress, stepping on my chilled plastic scale: once, twice, three times. I need to get the same weight three times to know if that's my actual weight. I stare at the scale on the third step-up. I got one hundred and thirty-six three times in a row, completely unacceptable. I should be one hundred and thirty-one in the morning and I know my weight can fluctuate by five or so pounds, but I don't want to see it. I quickly step into my workout clothes.

Dad joins me for part of my walk. I know I can do four miles in an hour easily. So, with Dad and my dog, we walk the two mile loop near my house. Taking my dog means that we go slower than if it were just Dad and me; I go for one more two mile loop after, mixing walking with some sprints from telephone poles to mailboxes.

The streets are filled with hushed sounds. The birds chirp and leaves scuttle as squirrels race from branches to grass and back. Every few minutes, a car passes and I look down; I hate when people see me running. I can't imagine how grotesque I look in my shorts and tee shirt, my fat bouncing up and down with each stride. I make it to the white mailbox on the street before mine and slow my pace back to walking. The sky is beautiful this time of year: Gatorade blue with mashed potato clouds. My stomach grumbles. I decide to sprint one last time.

I've only eaten some apple slices and a fourth of my protein bar, my feet become as blurry as my brain was in math class. My steps become jello, smacking down against the pavement as shakes reverberate up my legs. I sprint the last bit to my house and then walk with hands on my head, holding off any cramps. I'm about three water bottles in on my daily six. Between the lack of food and overhydration, I feel like a Gushers fruit snack: my liquid insides bursting against my waxy exterior.

Dad's outside working in the garden when I get home. We have to leave in about twenty minutes. It's almost 4 PM.

"Hey Dad, I'm going to have dinner before practice tonight; I'll be out when I'm done. Maybe we'll do mom's kickboxing class tonight?"

"Yeah, we'll see how you feel after tennis. You don't want to overdo it."

Yes, *I do want to overdo it*, I think to myself as I head inside.

As the only vegetarian in the family, I've convinced Mom to only make dinners for Dad and herself; that I like my veggie burgers. I open the freezer and take out a veggie burger, covering it in the far back. In a couple of days, I'll go grocery shopping, tell them I bought more veggie burgers, and just move the unused ones back into the old box. The windows in the house are open, just in case Dad can hear I put a mug of water in the microwave and set it for two minutes — how long my veggie burger would've needed. Then I grab the family salad mom made and toss it around, making it look like someone's eaten from it before dad eats when he gets home. After a couple of minutes of standing around, I grab a plate and rinse it off in the sink. They won't know the difference. With weird tennis hours and mom at work from 2 to 9 PM, we never have time to eat dinner together.

I do need to eat something before practice, though. So, I eat another fourth of my protein bar and some fruit before heading outside to drive to practice. Practice is two hours of runs and hits; I have to practice singles today and my mind bounces around like Skittles falling to the floor. I shake my head, needing to refocus. I'm sprinting back and forth, trying to get the ball with my opponent's perfect placement. My feet screech into the top right box and I slam an overhead. For the rest of the practice match, I focus on shifting my weight back and forth in preparation to run, but I start to feel like the court is swaying instead of my body. We end our practice and I run up to Dad's cinnamon red truck with a smile; he's in his kickboxing clothes.

The karate school is only a few streets down from the tennis courts, so it only takes a minute for us to get there. I finish my protein bar from lunch and change into my muay thai shirt and shorts, then strap on my shin protectors and gloves. We warm-up by jogging around the room, but every once in a while, Dad and I race around the rectangular room, passing classmates as they laugh at us.

Mom works us hard in class. Dad and I team up. My punches jackhammer against the bag, and I put all my force into the quick jab-crosses.

Mom yells out, "Switch!"

We have to change to the next drill. I quickly rotate my hips to begin kicking the forty pound bag hanging from the wall, feeling my right leg swing, hit the bag, snapback, and kick-out with my left. Dad and I have to kick in perfect rhythm so that our left legs are kicking at the same time and then our right. After some more drills and cardio, our forty-five minute class ends. At this point, I'm dripping in sweat like a cold soda bottle's condensation on a summer day.

I get home and guzzle down more water. I fill my mouth and gulp until the bottle is empty. I slosh up the stairs, consciously cradling my water-filled stomach. I don't think I could convince Mom to go for a quick two mile walk

before bed; she tries to stay on me about not overworking myself. But if I don't work out the voice is sure to spite me: *you're not good enough. You're too fat, you'll never get skinny if you don't eat less and work out more.* My mind runs this on a constant loop whenever I don't have the proper motivation. I don't know how to shut the voice up.

I gaze in the mirror, pulling up my sweat-stained shirt to look for progress. There's none. Looking at the fat of my stomach congealing I realize, I look like a white chocolate crunch bar. I turn to the side. My wrists are naturally tiny, but they make my arm fat more noticeable. Like an ice cream truck snow cone, my wrists are the tiny point that grows into the thick snowcap. I can't stand looking at myself any longer and decide to chance asking Mom for a quick two-mile loop.

I walk down the stairs, counting each step as I go, and then checking my pedometer at the bottom. "Mom, want to go for a walk?"

"Ky, we both just got home, don't you want to read tonight?" she says. She slumps against her velvet green recliner while balancing a glass of water and a steaming plate of chips and cheese with salsa.

My mouth salivates at her plate.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

My father's name is 8934 — a temporary resident of Rochester's Regional Cryobank.

8934 was born into a Catholic family in 1968, with green-blue eyes and light brown hair. His blood type is A positive, hopefully unlike his personality. At the time of his brief tenure at the Rochester Cryobank, 8934 was a student studying medicine. Likely, a poor med student looking for some beer money, which he should have been careful about since a maternal uncle of his may have been an alcoholic. But no worries, I suppose, since his family had an excellent social history — whatever that really means. As he grew up, his hobbies became reading, writing and cooking. And who knew that in addition to saying that you're musically inclined, one can claim that family is a special skill/talent.

These are the only facts I know about my father. But if he can claim family as a special skill, I will, too. Though, I imagine we mean this differently.

I do not know what a father is. My tongue only knew the word mother and my eyes were accustomed to female relationships but weren't blind to other combinations.

I lived in a matriarchy. I didn't know what it meant to be fatherless, though many tried to inform me.

I was eight years old the first time I was pitied for being fatherless. I was in my neighbor's backyard, laying on the trampoline and counting the hawks that flew overhead. The summer air was sticky against our arms and legs. But the trampoline felt cool — the nylon threading air through our backs.

"I'm sorry you don't have a dad. That sucks," my neighbor said into our silence.

A silence borne out of my life story I had just told. So, I remained silent. I didn't understand her pity. Her eyes spoke concern as she reached out to comfort me, probably translating my silence as sadness.

"You don't see George as like a dad?" she asked.

Ah, yes. The stepfather. The man mom brought home to break the matriarchy line. My mother's husband.

No, I didn't see him "like a dad."

He was just George. A body that occupied space with guitars and old amplifiers, and inexpensive antiques. A body with an affinity for vehicles from the 80s. A body, while very capable of making sure the roof stayed intact and the cars had their oil changed, was not all that emotionally there — at least for a young me.

This isn't to say I didn't like him, but we had competing interests. We vied for my mother's attention in different ways and the three of us couldn't necessarily make it work unanimously.

He was a husband who did what he was told, though. He heated up the leftovers when Mom worked nights, dropped me off at ballet or piano practice, he'd put the dirty laundry in the basket. And he did his best to not put engines on the kitchen table.

A good guy but not a dad replacement.

Granted, how would you know what the replacement is if you never knew the original?

Once people found out you didn't know your father, they'd make a father replacement out of anything.

In sharing my life story with my neighbor, I mapped out the various relationships my mother had, since most kids my age had trouble understanding my story. They required more context.

"Well, my mom was married to a man before she was with Kerry. His name was John."

"Oh, so John's your father."

"...No."

"How is he not?"

"Because my mom divorced him years before she was with Kerry."

"That doesn't make sense. He has to be your dad."

"I told you, my dad is a sperm donor! He doesn't exist in my life."

"Ew! Don't say that word!"

Her face flushed when I insisted my truth. She sat up on the trampoline, staring. The fact that my narrative didn't fit the one she knew and understood seemed to hit a particular nerve in her nine-year-old experiences. She scanned the backyard, her eyes darting erratically. It looked as if she was trying to find an answer for my reality within the comforts of her own space, because I was clearly disrupting it.

"Well, Kerry is like your Dad," she snapped, sputtering bits of saliva with pre-pubescent agitation.

"What?"

"She does, like, Dad things with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, you know, Dad things! I don't know, but everyone has a dad. Everyone needs a dad."

Kerry is not my dad. Semantically speaking, this is impossible. If we were to base this off of her role in my life, then her exact position as a parent becomes muddled. But she is not a father.

Kerry was the one who made me do things. Actually do them, not just think about them. She put me in skis at the age of five and chased me down the mountain until I learned to turn and stop on my own. She threw a hockey-stick into my hands at seven and forced me onto her landlord's pond until I figured out how to skate without an aid. When I said I wasn't going to do sports in middle school because of issues getting rides home, she threw me a bus schedule and told me to figure it out.

But Kerry was also the most attentive. She was the frankest with me when it came to discussions of menstruating and sex — both are miserable, but we learn to live with it. Every time I visit her, we buy ice cream from Stewarts. I always get something with coffee ice cream and she always got something with chocolate chips. We spend hours in front of the TV watching *I Love the 80s* on VH1 while I comb her hair and massage her head. We paint each other's toenails as we talk, hers beige, mine red. And I still bury my head in her shoulders when I feel overwhelmed.

I can't call her dad. But I don't need to.

Because in addition to her, Mom, and George, I also have Kerry's girlfriend, Clara. She is the short woman with short, black hair and a fiery tongue, and claims Kerry and I always cheat at Rummy 500. Clara is ruthless and nosy but in a way that has kept me honest. It allowed her to keep tabs on me.

In high school, we often sat together to watch the news, usually CNN or Channel 9, and talk about the happenings in the world. In the midst of Nancy Grace, she once slipped. "Do you use condoms?" seamlessly into the conversation, taking a sip of her merlot.

Without even thinking of what she was implying by the question, I replied, "Well obviously." It felt like whiplash in the minutes that followed as I realized what I just shared with her. But she was already back on the Casey Anthony case before I could backtrack my response. Clara is my secret keeper. Honesty is always her strict policy — well, that and making the bed.

I have a plethora of parents. Their exact title or gender is arbitrary, because it's not these identity markers that matter, but it's how they parent that matters. I recall my times at my neighbor's house. She had a mom and a dad and a brother. A perfect little family, with baby pictures and family holiday photos on their mantle. Her parent's wedding picture sat framed on the right side of the couch. And their kitchen hung the plaque: "God bless this house." But I remember playing Sorry! in the kitchen and hearing her parents fight. Small, but pungent bickering. My friend would smile but fixate on the Sorry piece she had squished between her thumb and middle finger. I remember birthday parties where her mom and dad didn't see eye-to-eye on the happenings. We would all stand frozen beneath the piñata wondering if we'd ever get to hit it. I remember long bus rides from middle school when she would complain about her parents.

"They're always fighting!"

I felt pity for her.

There was always a parent at hand for me and I could switch them out as I needed. Like having different pairs of shoes for different occasions. Everyone was always there, so when I happened to fall, four people held the net instead of two. That helped me land on my feet on sturdier ground. No one needs a father. But everyone needs a support staff.

Take it Easy, Buddy

An Excerpt

JIM MCGAUGHEY

I used to think he was a little crazy. Intense, animated, his thinning, stringy hair framing his prominent forehead and round, expressive face, he could hold forth for hours, rapping on and on about a variety of subjects: revolutionary politics, intergenerational conflict, strange coincidences that might not be coincidences after all. He had developed theories about things like that and the longer he went on, the more worked up he became. But none of those raps matched the intensity of his stories about Vietnam. He had spent a year there as a trooper in the Air Cav, and his stories about the war came from a very different place — a place where the boundaries between then and now disappeared as he talked; a place where there was no forgiveness for fucking up; a raw place of hardship and dread, and grief, but also, a strange sense of excitement, sometimes even euphoria, that was hard to describe and impossible to explain.

To get him to lighten up, his friends would try to interject other topics: music, movies, fixing cars. Which sometimes worked and sometimes not. Yet, as absorbed as he often became in his own narrative, he always kept an eye out for how others in his circle were doing. He was the first to notice when someone seemed upset or withdrawn or was beginning to ruminate about bizarre stuff. If he thought that one of his friends was on the verge of losing it (which was a real possibility given the kinds of drugs some of them were doing), he would sit close and offer a soft stream of straightforward, brotherly advice: Oh man, I know how you feel, but you just can't do crazy shit like that. Usually, it helped. His concern was genuine, and you knew that he had been there too.

Most of the time, however, he just rapped on and on, the words pouring out with such intensity that he could, and often did, simply exhaust his listeners. I can still see him sitting cross-legged on his living room floor, his bowling ball belly resting on his thighs, sipping beers, passing joints, gesturing with his short but powerful arms. When everyone else was too wasted to move, he would just keep going, explaining how the wheels were coming off the establishment, expounding on why our generation had to stay true and never sell out, and spinning his compelling tales of life and death in the Republic of Vietnam.

He had been introduced to me simply as Sanchez. Everyone called him that, except Nancy, his girlfriend. She called him Michael. So, at first, I assumed his name was Michael Sanchez. I had known him for almost a

year before I learned his last name wasn't Sanchez. He was Michael Steele — actually, John Michael Steele. I never got a straight answer about the origins of the nickname, "Sanchez," but after I learned his full name, I started calling him Mike. He seemed to appreciate that. He was my neighbor in the small, isolated, low rent apartment complex known as Mt. Hope, located five miles east of the UConn campus in rural Mansfield, Connecticut. We lived there in the mid-1970s, and we became friends.

When I first met him, Mike was working second shift in a factory warehouse in Stafford Springs. He was also a UConn student, trying to be an English major. At least, sometimes he was. He had acquired the unfortunate habit of dropping courses and periodically dropping out of school altogether. Nancy told me that he wanted to be a writer and that he had exceptional talent. I had no trouble believing that — he was such a compelling storyteller, especially about the war. You were right there with him, humping up and down the fog-shrouded A Shau Valley, mopping the sweat from your forehead while you and your buddies searched for hidden tunnels and caches of arms. As he spoke, you could feel yourself growing uneasy, anxious. It was as if it was you, not him, scanning the tree line at the edge of the LZ, eyeing the flattening grass as the Huey hovered down, readying yourself to shift onto the skid and jump off into the chaos: breathing fast, sweating and swearing, adrenaline pumping; caught up in the force-field of fear, brotherhood and incipient violence that is infantry entering combat.

Of course, life in Vietnam wasn't all drama and danger, and neither were Mike's stories. In fact, he seemed to enjoy stepping back from the intensity of tactical description to offer an explanatory footnote — a character sketch, or something he had learned about the history or regional diversity of the country. You got used to certain things, he said: the stench of rotting vegetation, the sudden evasive maneuvers of low-flying helicopters, remembering to check inside your pants for leeches after wading across a stream. After you had been there a while, you learned some of the finer points of coping with the humidity — like how shaving the peach fuzz along your hairline prevented beads of sweat from accumulating there. He had seen ARVN soldiers do that, so he tried it and found it helped.

Mostly, this was mundane stuff, but sometimes he would drop a bombshell. Like the time he nonchalantly mentioned that when he was out on patrol, he liked to keep the trigger guard on his M-16 taped open and the selector flipped to spray. (See why I thought he was a little crazy?) He took grief for that, he said. It was very much against orders, but it made him faster on the trigger.

"But what if you had tripped and fallen? What if you had to hit the dirt hard or accidentally brushed against something?"

Annoyed, he glared at me. "I was always careful — always aware of my muzzle. You had to know, had to know, what you were doing. All the fucking time." Realizing that he was starting to shout, he took a breath and lowered his voice. "You had to be ready. Believe me, a half second can make a difference — all the fucking difference in the world." Sensing that I was still questioning his judgement, he spent the next hour telling tales about guys he knew who did truly crazy, dangerous shit, sometimes just for fun.

Over time, I came to understand that things were just different over there. When you live with the ever-present possibility of sudden death, when you walk around authorized and equipped to take human life, the rules change — there are different standards for what is acceptable, for what has meaning, for judging what is sane and what isn't. I tried to appreciate that and to remember that we were here, not over there. But sometimes, Mike's rap about Vietnam made me deeply uncomfortable. The weird thing was that I could no more stop listening to his stories than he could stop telling them.

My rapt attention must have somehow reminded him of the way new guys listened when they first arrived in country, trying not to look too anxious, but eager for whatever words of advice they could get. Sometimes, he would switch to mentoring mode, sharing the benefit of his experience so I would know what to watch out for. These were not easy, relaxing lessons: relaxing at the wrong time could prove deadly. You never knew when you would encounter an ambush, a tunnel, or a mine. Or when the humid shade of the thick canopy overhead would disappear, revealing a sunbaked wasteland of splintered tree trunks and muddy craters — evidence that the B-52s had been through the area, leaving behind a barren moonscape through which you would now have to carefully pick your way, weaving around the craters, watching for sharp, half-buried splinters, trying not to fixate on any decaying body parts you might see: disembodied half-heads, severed legs with protruding bones, bloated, lacerated torsos teeming with maggots.

A quiet detachment crept into his otherwise animated narration when he described a scene like that. Without saying directly, he was telling you just how unforgettable, how haunting, it was to see something like that; to have to pass through such a place and just keep going, as if what had happened there and the people it had happened to meant nothing. And that even five years later and half a world away, talking about it was hard.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Notes on Violet

After Maggie Nelson

BRIANNA MCNISH

In the dark space of my bedroom, my mother warns that my grandmother's ghost rests beside us. The frail brown Caribbean woman whose withered voice sang with memories of her family's ramshackle tin-roofed house in an impoverished village outside Kingston, of her family's chicken coop and cows back on the island, of her eight other brothers and sisters, of her father, whose worn dark hands worked tirelessly to make a living as a shoemaker under British colonialism, had died into a violet soft and heavy as rain. As if, I mused, her experiences — arriving in the early 1950s New York City amid the Civil Rights Era; maltreated and berated by the wealthy white women who employed her as a housekeeper for change each day — could somehow be contained in something so impalpable when what she faced was real. My mother tells me this as she smooths her hands over my braids. I am thirteen and I don't cry, yet. Instead, I stifle my tears with my lips pressed against my fist. My grandmother was gone but the weight was heavy, heavier than violet, and I could feel the color dissolve on my tongue like sugar.

Define violet: of a purplish-blue color.

Define purple: a color immediately between red and blue.

Define blue: a color immediately between green and violet.

Always between something, always slipped inside the fold of what was, or worse, what never had been.

"That is so your color," a friend cries as I slide my arms into the sleeves of her winter coat. A smile plays at her lips but there's the hint of something else buried in that smile, too: envy or longing, maybe? I'll never know. What I do know: my friend says the color is mine, mine, mine as if it's something I can kiss, hold in my fist, and never let it go.

Some way or the other, purple and blue have become intrinsically linked to blackness. Those nights heavy with stars and the way moonlight catches on shadowed trees. Those euphemisms for blackness are found endlessly in literature: for example, Walker's *The Color Purple*, and more recently, McCraney's *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. But when I see violets, when I see purple brush against dusk's soft, I don't think, Oh, right, that's black. I think: Look at how the color catches on its stem. Look at how sunlight sleepily rests on the pollen. Look at how its petals fold like skin.

However, nights have a way of tricking us. It's summer when the nights fall daybreak, pink and cloudless and heavy with stars. And then: here comes a deep, dark violet night, the kind that envelops you like a forceful kiss. Slowly, very slowly, I remember: wait, there's no such thing as a violet night. What I'm seeing is just an endless, deep pit of black space dotted with stars. While some call it Raleigh scattering, I call it cruel. I don't know how the world is fine scattering particles of light, making us believe these black images were, in fact, just tinged purple. But I suppose that answers my question. That maybe, just maybe, in the moonlight black boys do look blue. That maybe black bodies are made of infinite light.

On my tenth birthday, I run my bike down a hill intentionally. Intent escapes me; I only remember wanting to know how it feels for my bike to run down the rocky slope of my grandmother's backyard, to crush dandelions, to feel the moon beat against my neck. I don't expect to feel pain. My bike jerks over a rock and flings itself into the air with me stumbling to clutch its handlebars and gliding, gliding, gliding through the air and — crunch. Blood. Blisters. My head spinning. Wincing in pain as my father staggers to hoist me to my feet. My grandmother's lilting patois as she scolds me do not ever, ever do that again. Blood, blood, blood. I am not dead or significantly injured, thank goodness, but the fall left a mark on my ankle. It is bluish and crusted and lumpy and soft. My father places a band-aid over it. My grandmother didn't want me to wear it; why she wants my scab exposed to the world escapes me, too. But I do know one thing: after a week, it looks like a crescent moon blossoming on my leg. The moonlight's kiss, I think.

Imagine: my mother, age 17. She goes to her first Prince concert with glittery purple eyeshadow clumsily smeared across her lids. She croons "Purple Rain" at the top of her lungs, her arms flailing excitedly in the air.

After he died, I am quick to ask how she feels about it.

She's washing the dishes. A flash of excitement in her eyes softens into apathy within moments, especially as she tells me plaintively over the running water, "Well, I guess I'm a little sad."

"That's all?" I wonder out loud. "That's it?"

Imagine: for centuries, violet is a color associated with luxury. Only the wealthiest monarchs and princes don the color, but time and time again, throughout the Roman Empire are the reincarnations of violets. A mauve toga hangs loosely from a nobleman's body as the pale light of twilight kisses his bare arms. But little do those noblemen know the price of such a garish display of riches and beauty: thousands of Mediterranean murex seashells are painstakingly crushed along the Lebanon shoreline, each bleeding violet, packed into an expensive dye, and soaked in the undulating white of a toga dress.

The stories my grandfather offers of his homeland are not kind. Already addled by dementia and only vague memories of his dead second wife and son, he explains his childhood in a triptych. First: he is the eldest child of three other siblings, each of which may or may not have witnessed their mother beaten repeatedly by their father, a staunch supporter of British colonialism. Second: he is twelve and nearly done with schooling; somewhere along the lines he punches a boy in the face and spits on him for saying something about his skin. Third: he comes to America in some haze between the 1950s or 1960s (he can never settle on which, only that it was safely after World War II), leaving behind his first wife and his daughter, simply because he wants to pursue a better life. And somewhere in that haze, he meets my grandmother in New York, has my father, and fifty years later grows to regret coming to the country and wishing he either stayed home, or had gone to England instead. Either way, every story of his is marked by violet: by another brown body, by another bruise, by another night dreaming his life happened differently — or not at all.

My grandfather tells me he wouldn't love me if I were dark like my father. "Thank God your mother is such a light woman," he tells me as a child, nodding toward my mother. Pretty, long-lashed, fair; my mother is the color of bleached sand, of honeysuckle touched lightly with brown.

In the movies, there are only two ways you can tell strangers were in love:

- 1) Through the furtive glances shared in stores, on buses, on streets, behind awkward smiles, and
- 2) Through how the color settles on the scene.

While blue can consume the viewer with sadness, while yellow instills an uncomfortable hopefulness in the viewer's wandering gaze, something shifts with the emergence of violet. It can give the odd sense that everything is swathed in the moonlight, in waiting, in wanting, constant wanting, and leaves the viewer swirling with hunger.

For any matter, violet sinks below the horizon and dies into a whisper. Then, into nothing.

Ber er hver að baki nema sér bróður eigi.

Bare is the back of a brotherless man.

An Excerpt

BEN SCHULTZ

"I hate myself," my friend says.

He's played rugby and he's been in a fight apparently. Some kid named Brooklyn was swinging at him in a frat basement back at a smaller state school and everyone was egging them on; they were about the same size. Story goes that he and this kid knocked each other around a little and then they sat on some couch talking shit and drinking. They were friends after.

I look at his eyes and I'm not sure what to say. I suggest therapists.

"They don't know," he says. "They're not helpful."

Next day I get a text.

Sorry you had to see me like that, man. Won't happen again.

Relief washes over me. Day goes on.

My friend's dog dies.

Sucks, man.

This one friend never talks to us again after we graduate high school, he has a girlfriend and moves off somewhere. It's alright. We're not wondering what he's up to.

My uncle and I are driving. My aunt is in the back seat, reading a ladies' magazine.

"Your cousin isn't gay anymore," my uncle says.

I laugh, and express surprise.

"Haha, just kidding," my uncle says.

I laugh again. I'm not sure why this is funny.

My roommate and his fraternity friend watch my boy down a beer — only his third drink. He gets a little goofy, as he is wont to do. I know he's not drunk, this is a show of sorts.

"These kids are pussies," one says, just audible enough for me to hear.

I feel this weird sensation like I'm accepting a grade from a professor. This guy making this statement is not a pussy, so he's allowed to hand these things out. Give it some time, pussies no more, I think. This resolve washes over me. It's like I'm accepting a challenge. The team just accepted a challenge. You're on.

My grandfather and I talk about Hemingway. I realize that death doesn't scare me in the sense that death is physical, death is tangible, death happens. No man is really scared of death, because when we are boys, we punch and kick and bite and scrape. We cup-check, we chest-bump, there's always impact, and there's war movies. These guys are running out of a landing craft, they're ripped apart in a bloody maelstrom. They're heroes. The things that scare men are things you can't see. Sometimes you can't name them. If you named them, what would happen?

We've got a coach. He's a great guy. He's real old school, I admire him and have this odd love for him, as if he gets it. I feel like he understands a lot of things. He talks about kids that come see him with problems in a more urban town where he works at their school.

"Pull up your damn pants, man," he says to them.

My mom is a teacher, and she is appalled by how my brother's teacher won't let him go to the bathroom because the boys just waste time in the bathroom. Several boys in the class wet themselves, because she won't let them go.

I have to tell this teacher I'm sorry for something I said. I'm a huge wise guy, you see, and while doing a comedy act in front of the entire school, I shit on his whole life. His success with women, mainly. The other teachers love it since he's kind of a showboat.

If the history department taught me anything, it's that you don't make an earring out of the engagement ring when a woman turns you down.

Teacher is hurt next time I see him. My dad insists I write him an apology note, just a couple sentences, about my error in judgment.

"You didn't gotta do that," he quips, waving the letter at me in a hand that has handled rope and guns and leather and wrenches and ladder rungs and paintbrushes and steering wheels and shot glasses. I know I had to do that and I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't. Probably fail the class, right?

My brother and my grandfather talk about killing.

"You can't kill a man," my grandfather says.

"You can," my brother says, "if he's trying to kill someone you love."

"My friends in World War II, they couldn't live with it," my grandfather says.

My brother leaves, to answer a phone call from his girlfriend.

"Girlfriends, I never worried about them at that age," my grandfather says.

My grandfather is responsible, genetically, both directly and indirectly, for creating the lives of almost twenty-six people. He loves my grandmother very much.

Jesus is the greatest ideal of selfless masculinity, they told us. His body underwent the worst brutality any human body can undergo. He watches as His friends and family, like the media, the judges, want His blood but won't drink of it; they don't believe a thing He says. He's a savior and He's been

sold like an object. His robes are torn and shared. He feels scared and alone on the cross.

Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?/Father, father, why have you forsaken me?

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

We deem, quickly, that there are terms for men who aren't men.

Pussies don't look you in the eye. Pussies don't stand up straight. Most importantly, pussies don't move much weight, they don't run fast, they don't talk to girls, and they let women tell them what to do. Pussies always listen to their mother. They don't deal with cold and heat well. They like their sleep.

Faggots are a different breed. There's something inexcusably cocky about a faggot, apparently. I like writing, I like art. I sometimes wonder if they whisper about what a faggot I am behind my back. It would be kind of funny, I think, because I sit around discussing the hidden parts of girls the same as these other guys. In college, it changes. Faggots are incompetent. Some black dudes explain to me that faggots are fake, they're not really all in. They don't mean anything.

"Sam got arrested for humping a department store mannequin while high," someone tells me.

"What a faggot," I say, and we all laugh.

This tiny kid gets a sexual harassment charge at this silly minimum wage job for asking this stunning girl, "Can I feel your muscles?" He's hugely arrogant and annoying, so eventually they fire him.

No one says it, but I think about him in my head and his name fades; he's just a faggot.

Sometimes faggots try to start fights, and usually they're really touchy with women who aren't interested, but the real men know to ignore it. Faggots dress weird. It's not that they're gay, we agree. We agree that a lot of gay men aren't faggots. A faggot is not gay; he's inept. He's not there when the mammoth goes into the pit and the boys close in to finish it, he's not there when Piggy's glasses break. He's off in the woods, gallivanting around like the faggot he is.

My Inadvertent Death

GABRIELLE JULIA BACHOO

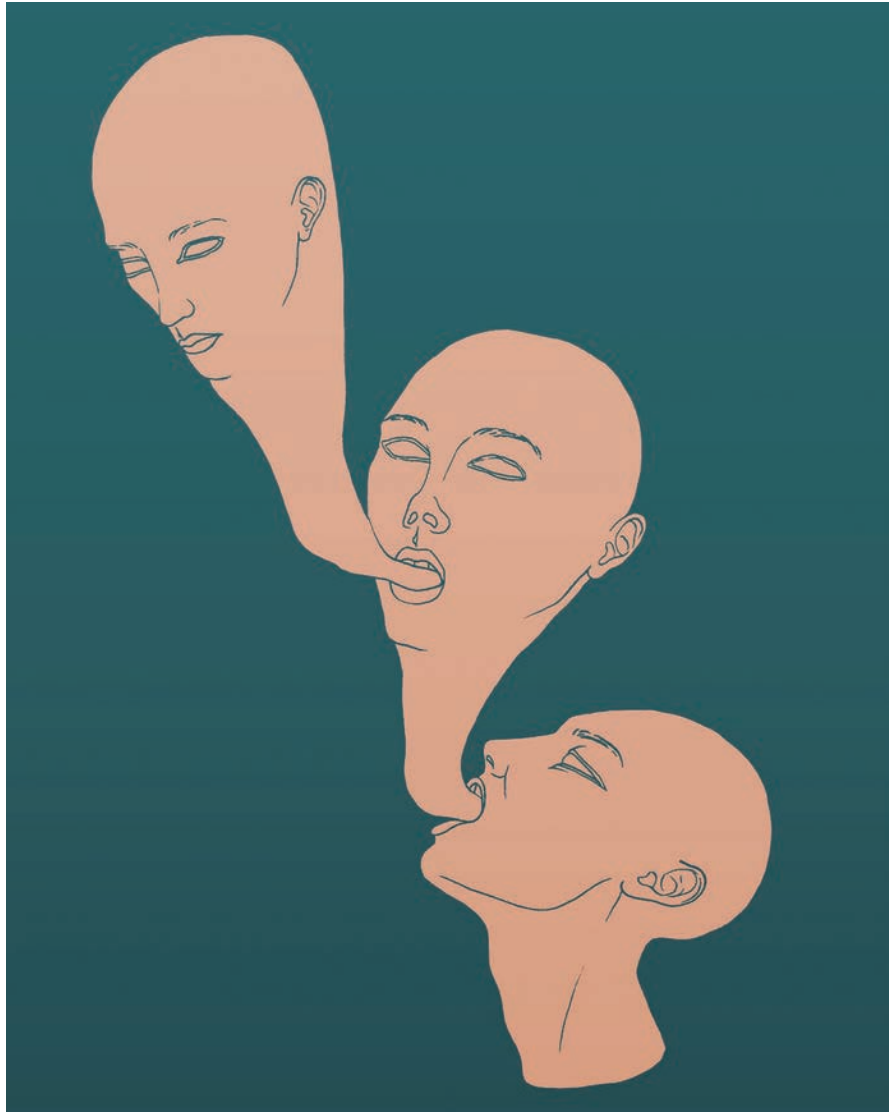
Maybe the twenty-three Christmas light bulb bruises are just twenty-three marks from a necklace he wore too tight and that stupid coffin is just another one of his dumb pranks, so he could jump out and scare me. How I wish he would jump out and scare me. 1-2-3-4-5 stop 6-7-8 *STOP!* *You have to stop counting.* There are twenty-three light posts on our street, at least there were only twenty-three that I obsessed about. Twenty-three children in the ballet class I teach on the weekends, twenty-three pairs of earrings in my mom's jewelry box, and my brother's twenty-third birthday this year haunts me. Or maybe it's my twenty-third birthday in four years that haunts me. Maybe I'll be better then. Maybe the number twenty-three won't kill me the way it does now. But what if I'm not better? What if I can't handle being twenty-three and I break the way he broke? But I'm not twenty-three, I'm nineteen. But I would stay nineteen forever if it meant I never had to turn twenty-three. Which is stupid. Such a stupid fear, to fear nothing as much as you fear a number. When did this number become a searing brand in the nape of my neck? Probably the day he hung himself from the mantle. Wrapped his mother's favorite Christmas lights twice around his neck and fell, the impression from the bulbs will be forever bruised around his neck. There were twenty-three bulbs to be exact.

9-10-11 The number twenty-four was his number, always was. He'd had the number engraved on his basketball shoes since he was ten, always making sure it was visible during all of his games. Sometimes, I wonder if those twenty-three light bulbs were a mistake. Was it supposed to be twenty-four? I knew it wasn't though, as he would never tarnish his lucky number like that. But then again, I never thought he would tarnish himself like that.

12-13-14 To say he tarnished himself is wrong though. I still go into a fit of rage when people call him selfish. As we sat in a church for his funeral service praying with the priest to ask God to forgive him for his selfish ways, I paused. Selfish, they'd call him, but he was never selfish. Well, that's a lie, because everyone is selfish, but he was selfish in the best ways. He selfishly forced people to get along, selfishly defied rules he thought weren't fair, and selfishly loved the people no one would ever love back. But all I did was selfishly count, 14-15-16, selfishly never speak to

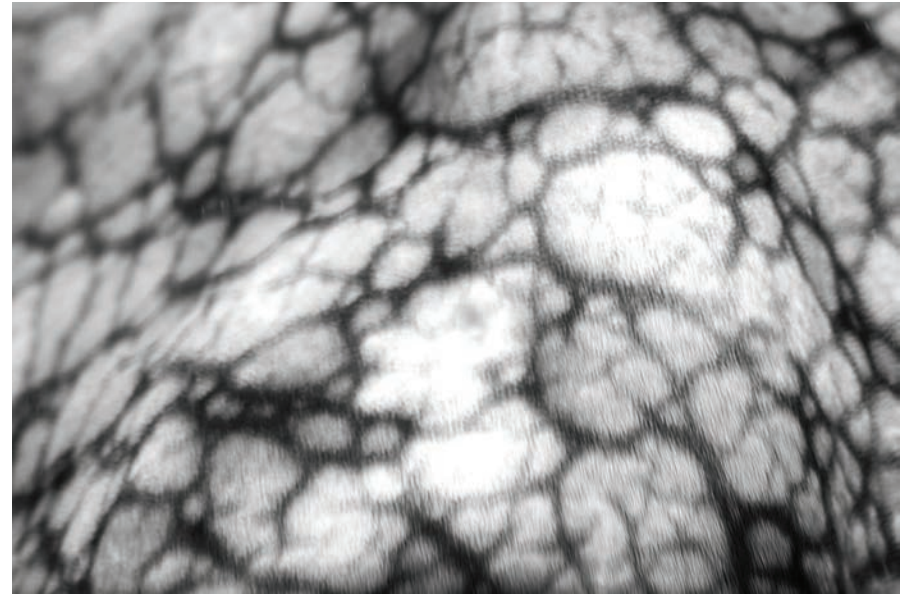
his mother because she reminds me too much of his death, 17-18-19, and selfishly question God's intentions to punish the people who "tarnished" themselves.

20-21-22 Most days I don't say his name. It exposes my new reality the way the numbers do... Raheim would be disappointed in my obsession. Disappointed in my fear of numbers, call me a wimp for disgracing him in my grief. Raheim usually gave horrible advice and the first thing he'd always say was, "move on." I'd shove him away, hating that stupid line. I hated when he told me what to do. At another point in time, I'd complain for hours, cursing at him and telling him to go be someone else's father. Whine that he knew nothing about me. But he was my best friend, he knew everything about me. And now, I wish for nothing more than to be able to accept his horrible advice and move on. 23.



Souls
Screenprint

MADELEINE BUGBEE



Defense Mechanism 4
Silver Gelatin Print

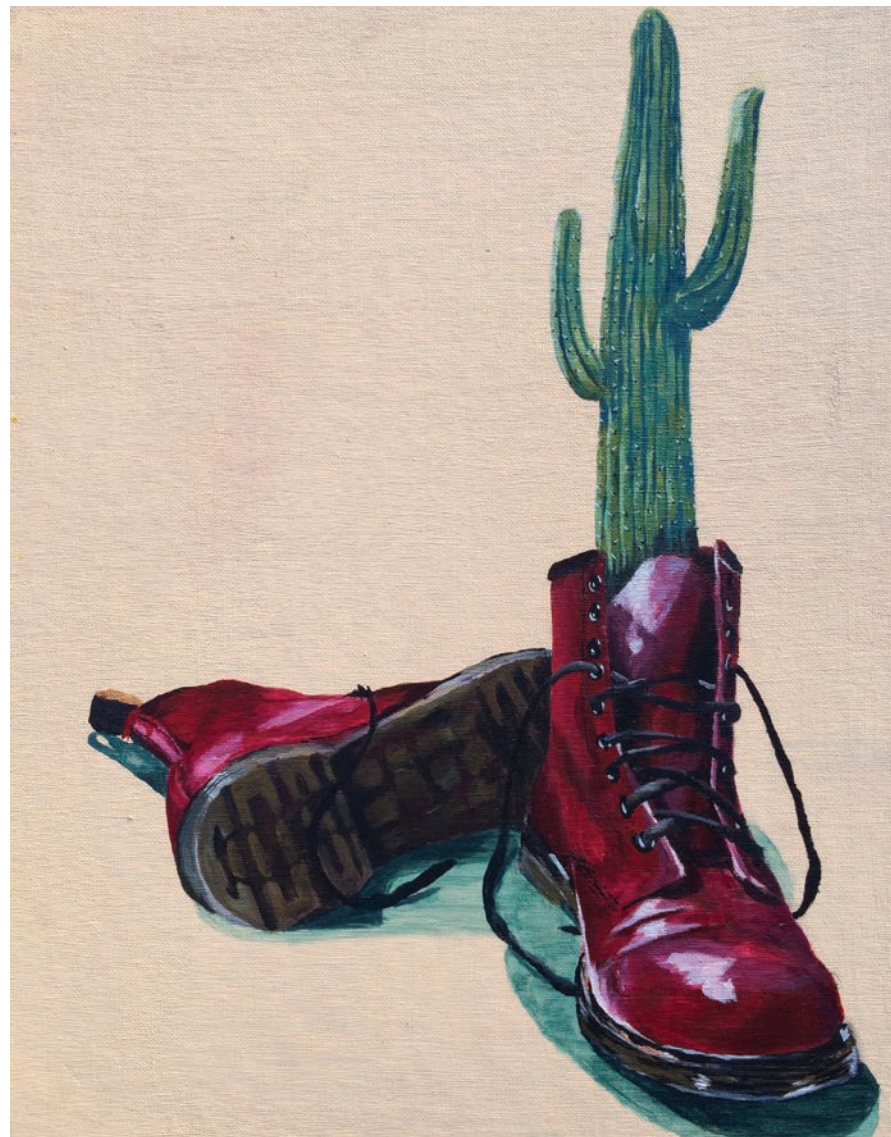
ELIZABETH ELLENWOOD



the one in which I learn to say goodbye

Digital Photograph

KALEIGH RUSGROVE



Saguaro

Acrylic on Canvas

KACEYLEE KLEIN

Don't Give Up

Translation of "No te rindas" by Mario Benedetti

ESTHER J. SANTIAGO RODRÍGUEZ

Do not give up, you're still on time
to reach it and to start all over again,
to accept your shadows, to bury your fears,
to free the ballast, to retake the flight.

Do not give up because life is that,
continuing the journey,
following your dreams,
disrupting time,
Running through obstacles and uncovering the sky.

Do not give up, please don't surrender
even if the cold burns,
even if fear bites,
even if the sun hides and the wind falls silent,
there is still fire in your soul,
there is still life within your dreams,
because life is yours, and yours is the desire,
because you have loved it, and I love you.

Because wine and love exist, it's true,
because there are no wounds that time cannot heal,
opening the doors, removing the locks
Abandoning the gates that protect you.

Living life and accepting the challenge,
recovering laughter, practicing the song,
letting the guard down, and extending hands,
spreading wings and trying again
celebrating life and retaking the skies,

Do not give up, please don't surrender,
even if the cold burns,
even if fear bites
even if the sun sets, and the wind falls silent,
there is still fire in your soul,
there is still life in your dreams,
because every day is a new beginning,
because this is the hour and the best moment,
because you are not alone,
because I love you.

No te rindas

MARIO BENEDETTI

No te rindas, aún estás a tiempo
de alcanzar y comenzar de nuevo,
aceptar tus sombras, enterrar tus miedos,
liberar el lastre, retomar el vuelo.

No te rindas que la vida es eso,
continuar el viaje,
perseguir tus sueños,
destrabar el tiempo,
correr los escombros y destapar el cielo.

No te rindas, por favor no cedas,
aunque el frío queme,
aunque el miedo muerda,
aunque el sol se esconda y se calle el viento,
aún hay fuego en tu alma,
aún hay vida en tus sueños,
porque la vida es tuya y tuyo también el deseo,
porque lo has querido y porque te quiero.

Porque existe el vino y el amor, es cierto,
porque no hay heridas que no cure el tiempo,
abrir las puertas, quitar los cerrojos,
abandonar las murallas que te protegieron.

Vivir la vida y aceptar el reto,
recuperar la risa, ensayar el canto,
bajar la guardia y extender las manos,
desplegar las alas e intentar de nuevo,
celebrar la vida y retomar los cielos,

No te rindas por favor no cedas,
aunque el frío queme,
aunque el miedo muerda,
aunque el sol se ponga y se calle el viento,
aún hay fuego en tu alma,
aún hay vida en tus sueños,
porque cada día es un comienzo,
porque esta es la hora y el mejor momento,
porque no estás sola,
porque yo te quiero.

The Waterwheel

Translation of "La noria" by Antonio Machado

ROBYN LEREBOURS

Afternoon fell to night
with sadness and dust.

The water sang
its common folk song
in the metal buckets
of the slow waterwheel.

The mule was dreaming
-poor old mule!-
to the sounds of the shadow
that sounds in the water.

Afternoon fell to night
with sadness and dust.

I'm unsure which poet,
noble and divine
joined to the sadness
of the eternal wheel
the sweet harmony
of the water that dreams
and blindfolded your eyes
poor old mule!

It must have been a noble, divine
poet, with a wisened heart
hardened by nightfall and wisdom.

La noria

ANTONIO MACHADO

La tarde caía
triste y polvorienta.
El agua cantaba
su copla plebeya
en los cangilones
de la noria lenta.
Soñaba la mula
¡pobre mula vieja!,
al compás de sombra
que en el agua suena.
La tarde caía
triste y polvorienta.
Yo no sé qué noble,
divino poeta,
unió a la amargura
de la eterna rueda
la dulce armonía
del agua que sueña,
y vendó tus ojos,
¡pobre mula vieja!...
Mas sé que fue un noble,
divino poeta,
corazón maduro
de sombra y de ciencia.



Ocean Sunfish

Watercolor, Gouache, Acrylic, Ink, Gel Pen

JAVANICA DAI



The Meeting

Digital Photograph

KATE LUONGO



The House on the Corner

Pastel

DEANNA LAVOIE



Fluid

Digital Photograph

BARBARA CLAYTON

Watering Flowers

An Excerpt

REBECCA HILL

Bubbe, Grandpa, and Dad were gone all the next morning at an appointment for Grandpa. One of Bubbe's mahjong friends came over to watch Leah and me. She found a deck of cards in one of the kitchen drawers and played war with us for a little while, and then she went into the kitchen and started talking on the phone to her friend. Bubbe had said no ice cream before noon, but Bubbe's friend put some cut up strawberries in a bowl for Leah and me before she went to gossip. Leah took one look at it and started wailing. When that didn't work, she retreated to sulk in the living room. I didn't particularly want strawberries either, but I also didn't want to hang out with crabby Leah, so I took the bowl out to the porch and set it on the railing in the shade.

The sun was bright out there, the air heavy, buzzing with heat. There was no shade on this street, no trees lining the road like they did at home, only short tough grass and waist-high shrubbery. Grandpa and Bubbe's little front yard did have one prickly cactus-like tree, but it was too squat and bulbous to give any room for shade beneath.

I counted the porch floorboards, twenty-five or so were in shade. I started across the porch from the railing on the left side, with the rule that I had to step on each floorboard. Since the boards were thin, I had to be up on my tiptoes. I was planning to stay in the shade, but when I got to the line where the dark met the light, the sun had already struck my head and shoulders, so I just kept going. At the edge of the porch, I spun to face the other direction like a ballerina. My eyes caught a big white truck parking at the street corner two houses down. I tiptoed back across the porch to the railing closest and watched as the gardener got out and unloaded his hose machine. He plugged it into the little supply shed between the first house and the second on my side of the street. Then he started it up. The water hit the dirt of the flowerbeds in front of the first house with a dry hiss.

I watched him come closer, it took him five minutes or so. When he was almost by the little grass strip that separated Grandpa's house from the one over, I called out to him.

"You can't water the flowers over here!"

The man looked over at me like he hadn't seen me until now, and then turned and shut off the hose. "What'd you say?"

I pushed the hair away from my face, suddenly aware of how strands were sticking to my forehead. "My grandpa doesn't want you watering the flowers over here."

The man looked at me. He took the baseball cap off his head, folded it in half, and rubbed it across his shiny forehead. The front of his shirt was soaked with sweat. "You want your flowers to dry out?"

Under his gaze, my stomach had curled into a ball. "No."

"Alrighty," the man said. He reached behind him to start up the hose again. "Wait!" I said.

He stopped and looked back at me.

"I — but it's humid! They dry out?" That was a silly question.

The gardener studied the flowers and then me. "These are hibiscus. They need to be watered twice a week to stay in full bloom. Otherwise, they won't have this bright red to make your grandpa's house look nice."

"You water these twice a week?" I asked.

"Yes, miss. And once a week the alyssum around the side of your house."

The ball in my stomach twisted tighter. There was a taint in my mouth that tasted like guilt. Where was Grandpa when this man came watering? "Oh," I said, "I guess you better water them."

The water fell on the flowers by the sidewalk with a dull patter. A half a second later, the screen door behind me slammed.

I turned to look. It was Leah, barefooted, sucking her thumb. She came and stood by me, looking. We watched as the gardener sprayed the flowers without getting any water on the sidewalk.

When I looked back at Leah, her nose was crinkled up. "It smells."

I sniffed the air. For a moment, I smelled nothing. Then, a cloud of water vapor off the hose hit my face, and a rancid smell engulfed me.

I leapt to my left to escape the cloud. "It smells!" I yelped.

The man looked up at us. "It's the sulfur," he said, "nothing wrong with it."

"In the water?"

"Yeah."

I could see another cloud drifting toward us. I grabbed Leah's hand, even though I knew she didn't like that, and pulled her toward the door. "Let's go inside."

A half an hour later, Bubbe's friend got off the phone and came looking for us. She found Leah climbing the couch. I was coming back from the bathroom. "Where's the strawberries?" she asked, "Did you finish them?"

Leah looked at me and scratched her head. "Yeah."

"Where's the bowl? I'll wash it out before your grandma gets back."

"I'll get it," I said. I went to the porch. The berries were still in the bowl, sitting in the sun now. They were sticky-looking, beginning to melt in the heat, and I realized in horror that there was a faint perspiration of sulfur-water coating their flesh, soaking in the humidity.

I snatched the bowl up. I imagined bringing it inside, and Bubbe's friend telling Leah and me to finish them. I imagined her eating them when we refused. I imagined Dad and Bubbe coming back and eating them too. What if they were bad? I had the sudden certainty Dad and Bubbe wouldn't listen.

I leaped off the porch and ran around the corner of the house. The flowerbeds there, against the side of the building, were not as neatly manicured as the ones out front. I dropped to my knees and clawed at the dirt beneath

a big flower bush. The earth was dry and didn't want to come up. I dug for what felt like a solid minute. Too long. What if Bubbe's friend came out and found me gone from the porch? There was dirt beneath my fingernails. A little deeper in the bed, it came up in big clumps. I pushed the clumps to the side and dumped the bowl into the uneven depression I'd created. Then, I piled the clumps back on top. They didn't quite cover the strawberries, so I pulled four leaves off the bush, each stem snapping loudly as it detached, and piled them on top. Then, I stood back. I could see a single strawberry slice, pockmarked with dirt, gleaming wetly red in the space between two leaves. I yanked one last big leaf off the bush and settled it over the berry. The site was covered.

Besides, the grown-ups wouldn't find it. I'd never seen Dad, or my grandparents walk around the side or back of the house, on any visit. The gardeners took care of the stuff back here. And if there was nothing wrong with water on the strawberries, they were good for the soil. I had just learned about composting in science the month before; it was better to put them here than in the trash. I went back into the house with the empty bowl in my hands, victorious that, should it come down to it, I had just saved the family from poisoning.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

The Nobodies' Federation

An Excerpt

CHRISTIAN J. BUCKLEY

Camila locked the door and expelled a sigh. Slumped on the toilet, she kicked off her heeled shoes. The strap of her twenty-dollar dress cut into her flesh. Beads of sweat collected on her brow. Eyes closed, Camila allowed the muted hum beyond the bathroom to flood her. The constant noise put her at ease, but the people who made it complicated the issue. Yet, each one was valuable to her.

It wasn't that she wanted to go out, rather she couldn't stay inside. Not on nights like those. Whether it was a bar or not made no difference. Camila needed to escape the reticence of her apartment. Nights, she found, were inscrutable creatures. In her twenty-one years, she'd never learned how to handle them. Energy rattled in her gut as the rest of the world lost consciousness. It was as if the entire day her mind remained sluggish for the sake of catching fire at night. She could call it introspection, but she didn't. It closer resembled her own mind raging against itself. Packed tight in her bedroom, the air burned faster than it filtered inside.

That's why she needed to surround herself with wider spaces and louder noises. No longer limited to four walls worth of air, she could burn as much as she needed. With all the noise, her concentration moved outwards and left her be. Given her age she settled on bar hopping. In her mind, I'm going to relax at a bar, suited her better than, *I'm going to wander aimlessly through a neighborhood with a high crime rate*. She wouldn't lie if someone asked her where she'd been, so the bar became her waypoint, resulting in an accumulation of uncomfortable shoes and pinching dresses.

That said, the actual practice of frequenting bars didn't come naturally. Most did not come to a college bar to mellow themselves. She forced her feet back into her shoes and addressed herself in front of the sink. She splashed palmfuls of cold water onto her face. Skin greyed, her under eye area was bruised with exhaustion. She pulled her frayed black hair into a ponytail. As her hands worked behind her head, her attention rose to the top of the mirror. Something had been tacked behind the frame.

The added height of heels allowed her to reach it. A letter: the envelope unmarked. Turning it side to side, curiosity prodded Camila to open it. She found a handwritten note covered in a loopy script. *"To anyone who finds this."* She had to wonder if she was included in this address. She may not have been someone, but she might allow herself to be an anyone. Before she could continue reading, an interruption rattled.

A knock against the door shook; Camila didn't have the luxury to inspect the letter in the bar's only bathroom. In a spur decision, she tucked it into her bra; breasts made asymmetrical. She pulled her dress down where it had bunched up and walked out of the bathroom.

Her seat was gone, an expected outcome. Camila usually stayed until the bartender made a last call. However, that night proved less insatiable than it had begun. With all the bodies, her nervous energy no longer turned inwards but pestered her to make an exit. She tired herself faster. Slipping from the bar without notice, piqued curiosity pressed to Camila's chest.

Homebound, she rounded the corner to her apartment for the school year. Camila's building remained a relic from years past. Creaky and in disrepair, it was ideal living for a university student. As part of her ritual, she would go around the back of the building to where the garbage was piled. There was a receptacle for unburnable trash, but most of the tenants' waste was thrown past the jowls of the incinerator.

Camila took the pack of Marlboros from her purse. Lit, she exhaled smoke into the air. She preferred to keep her habit near the machine in hopes that their burning would blend. She imagined even without the cigarettes, smoke would pour from her lungs. If she kept it all inside, nothing good would come of it.

Camila leaned against the building and reached into her dress. She removed the letter and smoothed the piece of paper to read.

To anyone who finds this,

I've been thinking about air lately. The idea of breathing it, to be more specific. We as humans have a lot of orifices, you know. (Don't think of something dirty — this is scientific!) With all these entrances, the stuff floating around slips right inside. Invisible, there could be anything hovering in front of our noses. Kind of ominous, if you ask me.

So, I've been wondering what's clogged in all this air. What if it's not getting cycled out again? These days that's how it's feels. Like I'm soaking up a bunch of bad stuff. Scary, right? I tried holding my breath to see if I'd feel better, but I got dizzy. Sometimes, it feels like I'll explode, like someone came and filled me with their garbage. But there's no way that could happen — I'm a nobody, after all.

Here's my idea: I've swallowed death. Think about it, we take breaths to stay alive, but each one brings us closer to the endpoint. I think life and death are a lot more intermingled than you and I are made to believe. Each day, we swallow a little more death with our life. Wouldn't it be interesting to shove it down my throat all at once? I'm kidding. It's just that it feels like I'm the only one who's noticed. A big bloated slug stuffed with death — that's me!

Now, you probably think I'm a lunatic, but that's not it. Sometimes I don't understand myself either. It just comes with me; not everyone has the luxury to be intelligible. I'm harmless, though. The trouble with all these thoughts is that they're the kind you must let out. And as I said, I've felt clogged lately. So, I needed to write a letter. If I tried to say these things out loud they'd jumble

into a mess. Talking with people is difficult in practice. Letter writing is an unappreciated mode of communication, don't you think?

Anyway, I've taken enough of your time. If you kept reading, thank you, it means a lot. Or maybe this all got shredded up. Maybe this letter is already biodegrading in a landfill. Spooky. Well, that's enough! (For real this time). Perhaps this letter made you laugh at least!

Whoever you are, I hope your air is clean,

C.M.

Camila read the letter twice more. C.M. had to have been someone at the bar that night. It couldn't have been from any time prior; the staff would have cleaned the stall out. She couldn't imagine such a person camouflaged amongst a crowd of sweat-slicked college students. Attention seeking or insane — the letter writer was something she couldn't place.

The initials were all the author had offered. However, further beneath, there was a return address, a post office box located somewhere downtown. The information there didn't give any further insight into the identity of the author. Could they have opened a post office box simply to receive responses from strangers? It was odd, but Camila couldn't say the idea didn't suit the writer. Such a thing suited someone who believed there was something wrong with the air.

Her grip tightened on the letter. She could write back to him. But, the whole thing seemed too ridiculous. What reason did she have to reach out to a stranger? Then there was the matter of what she could offer. *Hello, I also feel burdened with something stuck inside me! I like your air idea, want to hear about the metaphorical fire I've decided is inside me?*

Ashes smeared against the pavement as she stomped out her cigarette. She tucked the letter back into her dress. With that, she went inside her apartment. She undressed and crawled under her blankets. That night she couldn't sleep at all. However, not for the usual reasons. This time her mind was ablaze with thoughts of death swimming through the air.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Canaan

An Excerpt

JASMINE SMITH

Blindness, they said. The little redhead and an older gentleman with silver wings at his temples said he was going to go blind, said there was nothing they could do. Too much bleach, they said. He looked as if he'd been slapped. They both gave their sincerest doctor apologies before the youngster refilled that prescription from before. It'll stave it off for a bit, she said.

He drove us home, which probably wasn't safe, but he insisted, and I never could say no to him. He drove right past the drugstore, way over the speed limit and parked like a maniac. At home, he all but ran to his canvas. He painted furiously with no music behind him, splashed a fiery crimson all over his blue piece until it wasn't blue anymore, then sat on his stool staring at it like it had done this to him.

"Why is this happening to me?" he asked. "How can I paint if I can't see?"

In his fury, he kicked the easel over and started wailing and swearing at the top of his lungs. I didn't pull him towards me, I didn't hold him the way I did the day before, I knew it wouldn't be enough, poor thing. Losing his vision meant he was losing everything he held dear. Painting was his passion. Seeing his art on the walls of this house made him feel alive, testing new brush strokes and color mixes and splashing across a canvas – it was all what he lived for. So, I let him rage, just watched from behind the kitchen counter. I wasn't going to be the one to take something else from him, not that there was much left to take.

He didn't come to bed that night. I slept fitfully, his lingering smell on the pillows not bringing its usual comfort. I don't know if he slept on the floor, the couch, or the kitchen table. He looked like he hadn't sleep at all when he walked into the bedroom early the following morning, way earlier than he normally woke – but what was normal anymore? I was perched against the headboard just staring out the open door, the feeling of the sun through the window draining instead of filling me. His arms were extended in front of him, waving back and forth slowly, his footsteps even slower. I pulled his face to mine and kissed him, brushing his tears away with my thumbs and focusing hard on not letting any of my own fall. His eyes were glossed over, faded from their brilliant forest into something pale and unlovable. I didn't think it would happen so fast. I regretted letting him drive, not making him fill the prescription, but I just kept kissing him and catching tears with my thumbs.

"I can't see you," he said, "I can't see."

It was stupid how it happened, really. He worked part-time at the cleaners for most of his life. He couldn't hold down a real job because he couldn't keep himself away from a canvas for too long, but he remained steadfast he wouldn't be a freeloader. So, he spent his time cooped up in the afternoons bleaching and pressing clothes with a little Asian lady who didn't speak much English. She was teaching him what she spoke. He'd come home around eight or so some nights, trying to speak it to me. I didn't want to discourage him, so I tried to keep up, nodding and pretending I understood and sometimes even actually understanding. That place is what did it to him.

One day, my love came home sick as a dog, all heinous red eyes, complaining his throat and stomach were killing him. He spent nearly all night tucking his face in the toilet retching. I sat with him, of course, rubbing his back and keeping his hair out of his face, whispering comforting words into his ear. Eventually, when his stomach was spent, I pulled him to the bedroom for the sleep I knew he needed. When morning came, he was much the same and I had to drag him to the doctors. He never liked doctors, always had conspiracy cooked up about how they slowly poisoned people and then took their brains for experimentation, but I had to take him. I wasn't going to let him choke on his life in the bathroom floor because he was a stubborn little thing.

Chlorine poisoning, said a stuffy little red head who looked fresh out of school. Too much bleach, she said. She pushed him onto a bed, had a nurse twice her age put him on oxygen and ordered him to stay. She said I couldn't join him, in her prissy doctor voice, because we weren't family. I left but was damn mad about it, storming out of the place, a few curses past my lips every few steps. I didn't leave the parking lot, just sat reclined in the driver's seat of my car listening to his tape of sad violin music he painted to. I thought about how odd he looked with those tubes poking out of him. Ironically, the miserable tones of the tape reminded me of his smile and the gleam in his eyes; and how he put every bit of himself into splashing colors on canvases in ways that only made sense to him and his weird art buddies. I reclined a bit further, thinking about how even though the art made no sense to me, I still found it beautiful. When convinced one was good enough, he would let me pay for the painting. I'd take it, get it framed, and hang it around the house. It always boosted his confidence. He'd come home and see it on the wall and nearly burst into tears — the crybaby. Then, he'd kiss me and tell me I was the best thing that ever happened to him and I'd have to wipe my eyes.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Our Modern Love

An Excerpt

LIAM THOMAS

We met on the bridge, neither one of us intending to be met by anyone at all. Something flushed through me upon seeing her that I could not quite explain. In my throat, a noxious tangle of shame and embarrassment formed. This dissipated as I began to understand. A single black flat dangled from her pointed toe, up from there my eyes moved to the hem of her skirt, I crawled through green cotton vines towards a pronounced clavicle, an ocular leap to the soft crest of her jaw, and finally I swam two rivers to green stars. Her shoe fell. At the distant sound of the black flat entering the water those hundreds of feet below, the spell took hold.

I approached her, climbing over the edge of the railing to the narrow few inches of steel girder at the precipice. The moon cast the bridge's shadow on the jagged cliff faces on either side and the rocks below. She looked so beautiful in the pallid glow of it all. In that moment, she seemed the only real thing in world. I reached my hand out to her and she, equally under the thrall of uncanny purpose, took it. Our commitment to the end was unquestioned, devised each alone in entirely different lives, executed together as the night wished.

The plummet was something in itself all together. In the seconds, we fell. In the speed, the shaking fury of the wind in our descent, in the waters seeming to surround us just before impact; she never let go of my hand, nor I hers.

And then, my head broke water. My eyes could not make out where the night ended and the waves began. In that ebbing black, I heard it. Laughter, spitting, coughing water, laughter all the same. Turning to the sound, I saw her, frantic arms and cackling head bobbing in the double dark. There in the churning oil black sea, we met eyes again. Together we swam to the shore, laughing all the way.

On the beach, we thought it and said it to one another. We understood something only we were ever meant to understand. In the sand, our ears first tasting the others' tongue, voices lost in the crashing waves. Groping like blind children, we spread our sandy fingers across one another's faces. Our gritty fingers told us what the shadows hid. Soon, clumsy fingers took hold of goose bumped flesh, salted lips grew close. Absurdity, two suicides death dared not touch, the absurdity of it all welded us together. An absurdity without confusion, in its place divine truth.

We ran with it.

With my thumb outstretched as our shivering bodies meandered down the road, I found myself whistling. She, recognizing the tune, sang along. All down that unlit highway, almost getting hit by every car that passed by. We screamed like old Jay Hawkins: *I love you! I love you! I love you! I don't care if you don't want me, I'm yours! I put a spell on you...*

Half way across the country in a little motel, she stood barefoot in the jagged remnants of a glass lamp.

The radio played a doo-wop tune as she sobbed. "They're going to take you away. I see them. You can be so naïve to them. Even when you're not around I see them. And without you...I hate it. God, I hate it all!"

I don't remember how it began, an offhand comment about a waitress in a diner maybe, or a quip about the cleaning woman's queer walk. It didn't matter. It was happening. I jumped from my place on the bed and held her close. She sunk her nails into me and held me tight enough to feel the curve of my ribs on her cheek. I only loved her more for it all.

I answered, "Don't you think that's how I feel about the pigs that look at you? I see them when I'm not near you, I see them like feral animals around you. I have these visions of them swarming you. Fucking animals." The wood paneling shook as I screamed the final words. Now, I was crying.

Now, we both cried in the cross-cut light that came through the shades from the streetlight outside.

Her eyes crawled their way to mine. "Don't you see? My life is tied to yours. I hate all the women that want to take you away from me. If I lose you, I die! If I lose you, I'd die..." She broke from my grasp and flung herself onto the bed, twisted and coiled in on herself like a snake in its death throes.

I picked up a piece of the jagged light bulb glass. Mounting the bed, I moved on my knees to her. Seizing her hand, I yanked her upright. Puffy, emerald eyes questioned me as I placed the sharp tool in her hand.

"Wha... what?" she asked.

"Angel,' I said, 'I am yours.'" Then, in one swift motion, I dragged her bladed hand across my chest. I bled.

She immediately dropped the ruby glass and pressed her hand to my wound. Then, she understood. The confusion, the fear, the terror all faded to the understanding that illumed us. She took her blouse off before I could utter a word, offering her left breast. I took the stained red glass from her hand and mirrored the incision. In the dark we met, wound to wound.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

When Frank Sinatra Came to Town

An Excerpt

KRISTINA REARDON

When Frank Sinatra came to town, I didn't know it. I didn't know he was in Titograd, I didn't know he knew Titograd even existed. I didn't know what his music sounded like or what the words meant in his songs, and I didn't know he had bad taste in clothes.

All I knew was that my boss, the commander, shouted to me in his song of a greeting, "Zdravo, Ana, zdravo!" as I walked away from my government desk. And after he sang, "Hey, Ana, hey!" with the bubbling vibrato of a neighborhood shopkeeper waving me in, he said, "The girl who was supposed to check coats at the concert tonight didn't show. You want the job?"

And I quickly said yes in a sharp staccato. I didn't want the job. I just wanted to get home to my daughter. But I needed the money, and I believed in following the twisting paths in front of me to meet my fate, however small, so almost thirty years ago, I turned to face him, and I sang back, "Da, da. Yes, I'll take it."

The melody of life in Titograd in the 1960s did not follow a light, easy piece of sheet music, and it wasn't just because I thought in Slovensko and had to speak in Srpski, even to my five-year-old daughter, Irena. The melody was always changing, the chorus twisting mid-refrain, the notes caught between genres, even after Mr. Francis Sinatra, American citizen, came to town. Sure, there was the stout square of an army building that Irena thought was a castle, but in her eyes, it didn't take much for something to become a castle. Anything with four stone walls, a four-four count, anything with more than one room, more than one note, was a castle, was a song, to her.

But it wasn't really the building or its weekly musical guests from across Italy and the former Yugoslavia Irena liked. It was the soldiers, the ones who took her out of my office when I was typing, adding and subtracting figures, lining up decimal points in columns, earning half the pay I deserved, half the pay because I wouldn't join Tito's communist party. If I could get Irena to stay in our *dom*, our one-room home in the *barakas*, I left her there. If she wandered away from the *barakas* and came to find me here, well, that was life, that was our song, a bit out of tune. It was a fact, it was written into the many verses of our collective song, that little girls named Irena sometimes walked a half mile from home alone, dragging a stick along the ground, to their mothers' offices in government buildings, and that was life. None of that apron and cooking for husband nonsense that was on TV in America,

not when you didn't have a husband. No loving Lucy or whatever that was my sister wrote to me about from the United States in the 50s. Nobody could possibly love Lucy in Titograd, I wrote to Rozi because nobody knew Lucy, who was she even, what a stupid name that was for a TV show.

You never no believe what kind of music be on radio, Rozi wrote in English, trying to teach me. *They sing there is a season for everything, even they use the word heaven on the public radio...I say no thanks, I go church for my religion. But see, Ana, here you can go church if you want, no problem, and if you not go church, well, then you just listen radio!*

Kaj pa Frank Sinatra? What about Frank Sinatra? I wrote to Rozi in Slovensko after he came to Titograd, and to my coat check.

Frank Sinatra? The Voice? she wrote back. What he say a few year back? That he be in the September of his leto? September of his year? He be a real cad.

It wasn't Frankie who was a cad, though, I thought. It was Ivo. Ivo Vidmar, who told me all those years ago, after the war, that it would be a good idea to come to Titograd. To leave the farm. To say goodbye to Rozi, to not follow her to Hartford. To say goodbye to everything.

"Ana, Ana," he said, taking my hand as he led me onto the train. "Do not worry. I will take care of you."

And he got me a job at the army headquarters, just down the hall from his office, and bought me a typewriter with his own money, so that I was twice as fast and organized as the others. And the clicking of my typewriter keys set the tempo for our days, became the metronome of my job and our marriage until they became the same thing, as each letter emerged, running out onto the paper in front of me in quick succession, in a uniformity that left no margin for error.

But between the long, straight lines of text were the many things that Ivo Vidmar did not know about, could not possibly know about, could not possibly take care of. Things I didn't want him to take care of. Things like my mother's death when I was five, things like my father selling old items in a cart to people in the town, people who said, "Is that what newspaper editors do now, now with the war? Is that what Matko Vidmar has become?" Things like soldiers coming through and shooting people in front of you, blood spraying on your left foot as you hid behind a bush during a raid and said the Hail Mary in your head — *Zdrava Marija, milosti polna*. Things like soldiers deciding to search inside bushes, things like soldiers making bargains with little girls about things they don't know about, things that you hope *Zdrava Marija* didn't see, things like not having to die on the outside but wondering how much it takes to die on the inside, and things like fireworks exploding in the sky in Titograd sounding like guns, things like wondering if your body explodes and then fades away into smoke when every single bullet noise enters your ears. Things Ivo didn't know about. Things that made Ivo leave.

The sort of thing that made you keep more things from Ivo, even when he was there, until there was nothing left between us, nothing at all, and my marriage became like the typewriter in my Titograd office when it ran out of ink, keys leaving the faintest imprint of words I wanted to write.

The day my boss asked me to work on the coat check, years after Ivo had been relocated to Kosovo, Irena had come to visit.

“Okay, Irena,” I said when she knocked on my office door after lunch, “you can stay, but play under my desk where no one can see.”

“Okay, Mama,” she said, but when my supervisor came into my office, she jumped out. “Guess what I saw last weekend!” Irena said.

“What?” my supervisor asked, reaching down to smooth her hair. He had been gentle with her ever since Ivo had left.

“Marija. In Slovenija! In the big house with a tower where she holds her baby! They put water all on my head and said-”

I kicked Irena’s leg. She swayed a little but did not fall.

“What about Marija?” my supervisor said to me, nan-owing his eyes only slightly.

“Oh, that baby doll your cousin has?” I asked Irena in a voice that told her that yes, it was a baby doll.

Irena stared up at me. My eyes said to her: I have a wooden spoon at home and I will strike you with it one hundred times if you do not stop talking.

“Yes, the old doll my cousin has, the one named Marija,” Irena said.

My supervisor looked at me and then Irena, Irena and then me.

Yes, my voice whispered inside, yes, the old baby doll otherwise known as the Virgin Mary, otherwise known as the Virgin Mary holding Jesus, in a building otherwise known as church, where water on Irena’s head was otherwise known as Baptism. I had waited until Irena was five, until it was safe to baptize-most things were safer in Slovenia than in Montenegro but nothing, nothing was truly safe when you got back to Titograd.

“Ana, we would like for you to join the Communist party,” my supervisor said. “We will double your pay. You won’t have to live in the barakas by yourself with Irena. It will be safer.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said, pulling Irena back near my desk. “But, really that won’t be necessary.”

Four hours later, when I was leaving my government desk with Irena, my boss said, “Zdravo, Ana, zdravo! The girl who was supposed to check coats at the concert tonight didn’t show. You want the job?”

“Da, da. Yes, I’ll take it,” I said.

“I’ll get one of the soldiers to watch Irena. She can have some cake,” he said, “if we can talk after the show.”

“About what?” I said.

“About joining the Communist party,” he said. “I think it would be good for you.” I took Irena’s hand in mine.

“All right,” I said. “After the coats are collected, we can talk.”

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Riverbank

An Excerpt

SARAH PASCARELLA

1951 | Lowland Green, Indiana

Frank paced around the choir room, nervous energy coursing through his veins.

Bertie was ten minutes late.

He sat at the piano bench, closed his eyes, and let his hands float over the keys. From memory, he played the opening notes of *The Water is Wide*. He tried not to embellish, to keep the song as simple and beautiful as when he had first heard it, and sang:

The water is wide, I cannot cross over. But neither have I wings to fly. Give me a boat that can carry two, and both shall row, my love and I. A ship there is, and she sails the sea. She's loaded deep, as deep can be. But not so deep as the love I'm in, I know not if I sink or swim.

“That’s lovely, Frank.” Bertie’s voice cut through his reverie. She stood at the end of piano, a peculiar look crossing her face. “I’m sorry I’m tardy. Will you play some more?”

Frank obliged, starting from the beginning. He didn’t sing that time, only played the melody. Bertie cocked her head to one side, humming along. Frank had always felt a kinship with her regarding music – with one listen, they could both internalize a song as though it were a language in which they had always been fluent.

Frank stopped playing and Bertie came around to the bench, her eyes flickering over the empty music stand. “Do you have the sheet music?”

Frank handed it to her.

She scanned it, still humming softly, and then nodded toward the keys. He began to play again. This time, at the first verse, she began to sing. By the final stanza, Frank thought his ribcage would crack against his heart’s violent palpitations.

O, love is handsome, and love is fine, she sang, and love’s a jewel when it is new. But love grows old and waxes cold and fades away like morning dew.

Frank stopped playing as she finished. Her delicate features were knotted.

“That’s terribly sad, isn’t it?” she said.

She was just inches away from him on the piano bench. He leaned toward her and kissed her; she startled at his sudden touch, then softened.

They sat for a few moments together, until Frank leaned slightly against the piano keys. The resulting sound jolted them apart.

“You’ve wanted to do that for a while,” Bertie said. It was a statement, not a question.

Frank looked toward the ceiling, sheepish, and nodded.

Now, Bertie was the one to kiss him. She held him close, feeling something akin to when she had kissed Lou Rangeley. It was a bit tempered, though, comparatively — whereas Lou had made her knees buckle, with Frank she felt a gentle stirring, a muted passion. Frank pulled away, then rested his forehead against hers, took her hands and brought them to his lips. Bertie closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. In her loneliness, she was grateful for his touch.

She missed Lou, there was no denying that. But in recent days the uncertainty had been weighing on her. Lou hadn't officially declared his intentions, although he certainly seemed to be en route to return to Lowland Green, to start his life with her. And there had been the nights before he left. The thought sent her bloodstream racing. She opened her eyes, and saw only Frank before her, wholly devoted as he had always been. He was hers for the taking, if she so wanted. The lyric resonated in her mind — *but love fades away, like morning dew*. Somehow, she felt Frank's devotion was everlasting. Lou's, though, she couldn't be sure.

She noted the time and stood to leave. Frank fumbled for his bag and pulled out some sheet music.

"Will you take this one? It's a folk song. Maybe we could sing it... next time."

She gave it a quick glance. "Nothing religious here, either?"

Frank shook his head.

For a week, they practiced. Frank tread carefully, opting for traditional songs that weren't religious. Toward the end of the week, however, he pivoted: *Wade in the Water; Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. Through the songs' sheer beauty, he hoped to win her over.

They were in his living room; Frank at the piano, Bertie to his right. She skimmed the new music, one eyebrow raised. "All right," she said. "Let me hear this one."

He obliged, glancing at her every so often. Bertie listened, nodding along with the rhythm. He finished the opening notes.

"I'll sing this one," she said.

They ran through the song twice, Bertie's confidence improving on the second go-round. Her phrasing had more attitude, her crescendos powerful. Frank longed to stop playing and just listen to her acapella.

He tried to concentrate for the song's piano interlude, and had played several chords when Bertie interrupted him, humming something entirely different.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

"The song?"

"No, what I was just humming. The phantom notes."

"What?"

She studied her score. "I hear a whole series of notes here, even though they're not written. It's like a natural chord progression the composer omitted — I hear it plain as day in my head, but it's nowhere here. Yet when you play that part, the different melody is all I can hear. It seems like the only natural thing to sing."

"As if you're a co-composer of sorts?"

"Partly," she said, and hummed a little more. "Or more just what the human ear is programmed to do, how we find complements and patterns everywhere. Would you play that section again?"

Frank obliged. Just a few notes in, Bertie sang over him, completely improvising a new complementary melody. She used simple syllables, la's and dee's, but her voice was strong and clear. Frank looped back and started the interlude from its beginning, hoping to hear her new addition again. Bertie was right — now, that he had heard the other melody, it seemed natural and fitting to his own ear, and the song much improved. She finished singing, and he told her so.

"Let's try it from the beginning. This time, I'll add in the new melody as if it had always been there, start to finish," Bertie said.

When they came to the song's conclusion, Bertie smiled. "You may be onto something, Frank. Perhaps one could be so inclined to believe in your... religious leanings, if one always had been taught with music like this. It does seem like if there were a Supreme Being, that He himself would have created this music."

The breath caught in Frank's throat. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

"But...does this make you feel like you could believe? That it could return you to faith?"

Bertie paused. "I'm not sure, Frank. I don't know if I'll ever be sure."

Frank couldn't look her in the eye, and just nodded.

"I know that disappoints you."

"It doesn't disappoint me, Bert. It makes me worry for you."

Bertie laughed, but it wasn't mean-spirited. "You needn't worry about me, Frank. The choices I make, the doubts that I have, are on my soul, not yours."

He reached out and took her hand. "My darling Bertie, don't you know that my soul — and my heart — are yours for the taking? And if we don't come to agreement on this...this struggle of faith, I worry for us both."

Bertie's eyes widened, and she pulled her hand back. "No, Frank, I wasn't aware."

Frank sat rooted at the piano bench, his expression pained. "Why don't you think that faith is important? Can't you see that it is everything?"

Bertie didn't say anything.

"Would it hurt — just to try, even a little, to believe?"

"Don't you think I already have, Frank?" Bertie's voice cracked with exasperation. "I didn't just wake up one day and come to this conclusion. I'm not *that* flighty."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were."

"Regardless of your feelings, I know you've taken me on as a little experiment," Bertie said. "I don't want to insult you, Frank, but I'm just as stubborn. You won't best me. Not in matters of faith."

Frank chuckled, knowing while Bertie was stubborn, he was more patient.

"All right, I just ask you keep an open mind. You may be surprised."

“Likewise,” Bertie said, then glanced at the clock. “I think we’re done for today.”

“Those phantom notes, as you call them,” Frank called after her. “Where do you think those came from?”

Bertie paused. “From us, Frank. From your beautiful playing and my voice, together. Us.”

Frank sighed. “Then that’s the essential difference between you and me, Bertie. To me it was nothing short of the Divine, manifest in you. You, and you alone, heard them. They were there for the taking, and you knew enough — were inspired enough — to take them.”

Bertie swung the door open. “Goodbye, Frank.”

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Fourth of July

An Excerpt

LUCIE TURKEL

I had agreed to take my sister to the pool club because it was July 4TH and I had nothing better to do. I drove us in my dad’s car and let my sister sit in the front seat, even though she wasn’t allowed to. It made her excited.

“Tonight, Mom said I could watch the fireworks with Audrey,” my sister said, “and I’m going to wear the red shirt I bought with my own money, buy an ice cream, and maybe even a hotdog!”

She was babbling, and I listened to her. “That sounds awesome,” I said, and I meant it.

At the pool club, my sister swam in the shallow end while I watched her. She wore a bathing suit with an American flag design, red goggles, and tried to swim fast. I remembered when I was my sister’s age, I liked to swim fast and wear goggles at the pool club too. Now, whenever I went with my friends, it was so we could tan and talk to boys. It wasn’t as much fun.

My sister swam to the edge of the pool where I was sitting. “Come in with me, Sadie!”

I smiled and said okay, because I always said yes to whatever my sister wanted. She was so cute, she reminded me of when I was little like that. It was a nice memory that I liked to think about.

I swam fast with my sister. We mostly stayed in the shallow end, but I held her hand and led her out to the deep end at one point. I let her climb on me and I swam around with her on my back for a little while. My hair got messy, but I didn’t care, because I was laughing, my sister was laughing, and the sun was shining. It felt good.

After a while, my sister said she was hungry, so we got out of the pool. My hair was wet and ugly. My bathing suit was sticking to my ass in a weird way, but it was okay. I let my sister order whatever she wanted. She got curly fries and a Coke. We sat in the grass with our backs to the tennis courts as my sister ate her food. I stole a curly fry.

“Hey, no fair!” my sister said, but she laughed and let me eat another one. Her hair was starting to dry in the sun, it looked soft and light.

When my sister had finished eating, I said, “Wanna play ping pong?”

“Yeah!”

My sister and I walked over to the tables. There were two next to each other, they were both available. As we were walking, I ran into Oliver. He worked as a pool boy at the club and I had hooked up with him a couple of times earlier in the summer. I didn’t really like him, but I did it when I

came with my friend, Rachel, who would hook up with John. The two times we did it, I was bored and had nothing better to do, it made me feel bad if I thought about it for too long.

“Hey Sadie,” he said. He was always nice, and I was afraid he liked me too much.

“Hey,” I said. I felt tired all of the sudden. I felt my sister standing next to me, though, and it made me feel a little better.

“How’s your day going,” he asked.

“Fine,” I said, “yours?”

He shrugged and smiled at me. “It’s cool.”

“I’m just here with my little sister.”

“Hi!” my sister said.

“Hey,” Oliver said to my sister, “I love your Fourth of July bathing suit.”

My sister beamed. Oliver was really sweet with kids.

Oliver straightened up and looked at me. “Are you coming here to see the fireworks tonight?”

I knew I wasn’t, but I felt bad saying so. Instead, I said, “I don’t really know yet.”

“Okay,” he said, “because I was thinking maybe we could hang out after.”

I smiled and there was nothing else to say. Instead, there was uncomfortable silence and I felt like my sister was in the middle of it. I felt bad about it.

“Okay,” Oliver said after a beat. “Well, I have to get back to work. Hopefully, I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

He smiled at me and walked off.

After that, I felt too tired to play ping pong but I knew my sister wanted to, so I got the paddles and the ball anyway. We started playing. I would miss shots on purpose, so my sister could win. The sound of the ping pong ball was soothing and the look of concentration on my sister’s face made me happy.

“Was that your boyfriend?” my sister asked. She hit the ball and I missed an easy shot.

I served the ball. “No, just someone I know.”

I could tell my sister didn’t understand, but she didn’t ask me anything else. I knew what she was thinking. In second grade, there are people that you’re friends with and there are people that you’re not; there’s nobody you just know. Everybody had one purpose, it was easy.

Read the full piece online at longriverreview.com

Summer’s End

An Excerpt

BENJAMIN ENG

He could deal with the raccoon before Dad came home. Wasn’t this the perfect opportunity for him to prove himself? He could do the right thing, right now, and no one would have had to tell him to do it. Jackson laughed aloud and clapped. He just needed to...needed to...what *should* he do? Dad wasn’t home yet, so he can’t ask him, and Mom and Maxwell, God bless them, were useless in these situations. There was only one place to look for answers. Jackson walked over to his desk, booted up Google on his laptop, and searched, “what to do with trapped raccoons.”

Google returned with two answers. First, do not let it go. Relocation was illegal in most states, and most animals didn’t survive the ordeal anyways. The second answer, interestingly enough, wasn’t related to the original question. Instead, it covered various ways of humanely disposing raccoons. Poison was illegal, and Animal Control wouldn’t arrive before Dad did. The most popular method was to shoot it, but Mom held the keys to the gun locker, and Jackson knew she wouldn’t open it for him.

He realized he’d started snapping his fingers, a forgotten habit. He had just stopped himself when he saw one unique blog post, “Just drown the thing. Fill a trash can with water, put the cage in, and come back a half-hour later.”

Jackson agreed with the replies: that was a brutal method. But unless he let it go, he had no other option. And he shouldn’t let it go. “Why else would you set a trap for it?” another blog asked. It all makes sense. But it’s so brutal. *If only I had a gun!*

Jackson saw the book he’d laid aside when he’d rushed to the desk. On the page it was opened to, the sheriff had just arrested the mayor for corruption.

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” the sheriff said.

That’s right, Jackson thought to himself. He glanced at the computer screen. It’s clearly the right thing to do. Besides, Dad would do the same thing.

Jackson peeked out his bedroom door. The coast was clear. He slipped down the stairs, his resolve hardening with each step. *You’re doing the right thing. A man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do.* Mom spotted him as he opened the front door, but he stepped outside before she could say anything.

Rainclouds roiled overhead, incontinent. A spare trash can sat next to the main one, in front of the porch. He grabbed one of its handles and dragged it into the garden, dropping it within sight of the raccoon. He looked for the hose, someone had put it away since the last time Jackson had been here. He returned to the trash can, aimed inside it, and pushed the lever. No water

came out. He checked the faucet; it was closed. He opened it, returned to the trash can, and soon listened as the drumming sound of water hitting thin metal was replaced by the quiet splashing of water entering water.

The raccoon watched him from its cage, head cocked to one side. Out of the corner of his eye, Jackson saw Max and Mom watching him, too, from the window. They kept swinging from side to side as if they were in some comical dance routine. *They can't see what I'm doing*, Jackson realized. He'd hidden the trash can behind the fence without realizing it. Of that, he was glad. He glanced down at it. *Almost enough water...*

To be safe, he filled it until water spilled over the edge. He put the hose on the ground and picked up the cage by its handle on top. The raccoon stared haughtily at him. Jackson carried it back to the trash can; he used his free hand to tip the cage over and dunked it straight in, accidentally splashing himself in the process.

The raccoon burst into action the moment the cage hit the water. Its claws skittered on the bars, but it temporarily disappeared under the surface. The head burst into the air, blinking madly and blowing fine mist out of its nostrils. Then, it just stayed there, staring at Jackson.

Jackson's stomach filled with concrete. *The trash can isn't big enough to fit the cage*. Enough of the cage stuck out the top for the raccoon to breath. Unbeknownst to him, he'd started snapping his fingers again. He was too busy looking for the hose. His eyes swung wildly until he found it, lying in the same spot he'd put it down. He snatched it up and let loose a steady stream into the raccoon's face.

It flinched and turned the back of its head to the onslaught, but it didn't dive under the surface. Jackson stepped closer, so the water would hit it harder. The raccoon didn't budge. Even when he stepped right up to the trash can, putting the faucet head up against the cage like a gun to a man's head so the water hit it with the most force, the raccoon clung on.

Jackson panted. Was the hose setting wrong? He searched through his options, selected the "flood" setting, and sprayed the raccoon down again, only to watch the water wash over it like a stream over a stone. He railed against the animal in his mind. Why wouldn't it die? Couldn't it tell it was making it harder for everyone? Did it think he wanted to do this? He wanted to let it go, he swore to God, but he couldn't, and he didn't have a gun. This was the only way, and it was too late to turn back now. So, it should understand that and die!

He threw the hose to the ground and looked up to the sky, looking for something. God, aliens, the roiling clouds: he didn't care what, as long as it told him what to do. Then an idea slipped into his mind. *The river*. He glanced in its general direction, then down at the cage, then at the river. The water should have been deep enough. He fished the cage out of the trash can and lifted it onto his shoulder. Water dripped off and ruined his shirt, but he didn't notice. He couldn't see the raccoon; it still clung to the end of the cage now behind him.

Nina's Wall

KRISTINA REARDON

It wasn't such a big deal the day Mama told me I had no father. I already knew it. It wasn't like he was there one day and then disappeared. He was never actually there. I believed I had a father the way I believed that I breathed air, even though I couldn't see it. But after my tenth birthday, Mama made a big deal about it.

"You don't have a father, Nina." She tied on her apron and got ready to pull the flour off the shelf the way she always did after work. "He just doesn't exist."

"That's fine," I said. What else can you say when you know you have a father and your mother knows but won't tell you. For Mama, my father must have been real. Maybe he was air to her, too, the kind that you could see — like when it was cold, and your breath came out in little white clouds.

"Really, Nina!" she said. "You have my last name. There is no father!"

It felt like the more I didn't ask about it the more Mama got upset. What was I supposed to do? Beg her to show me something invisible? I accepted that having no father was just a part of who I was: the unlucky girl who hated chickens but had to pick up chicken eggs. The unlucky girl who did not, under any circumstances, like polenta but had to eat polenta. The unlucky girl who wanted a father but didn't get to have one.

"If anyone asks you, then you must say this, exactly: I have no father," Mama said. "Do you understand? If an official comes by the house and asks you anything, you tell him that I am the only one that matters."

This was strange. I understood not having a father. I did not understand why she was being so insistent about it. I got it. No father. Noted. One breath in, one breath out. Invisible air.



Neon Children

Jelly Roll Pen, Paper

MATTHEW MORPHEUS



Peek'A'Boo

Photograph

JONATHAN BARTLEY



Man on the Metro North

Pen on Paper

CECILIA ESTANISLAO



Mushroom Mystery

Digital Photograph

COLIN DELEO

Contributor Biographies

MICHAELA ABATE is a freshman in the School of Fine Arts at UConn. She hasn't yet decided on a concentration but is leaning towards Illustration since drawing is, at this point, the only medium she has experience with, however, she hopes to gain experience in others.

LEILA AGOORA is a junior at UConn, majoring in Economics and English.

RICARDO ALVELO is a first-generation college graduate. He obtained a BA in English with a concentration in creative writing from UConn.

C. PATRICE ARES-CHRISTIAN is a graduate student earning her PhD in Asian American and African American literature. She is currently finishing a manuscript of poetry.

GABRIELLE JULIA BACHOO is a junior at UConn, Storrs, and is pursuing a double major in Elementary Education and English with a concentration in creative writing. She believes that teachers can change the world by piquing kids' interest in literature and writing.

JONATHAN BARTLEY has been an artist for most of his life. He previously lived in Jamaica until he moved to America during his high school years. He has tried many forms of art from photography to sculpture, but he now studies graphic design. He has an eye for things that are commonly overlooked.

CHRISTIAN J. BUCKLEY is currently having an existential crisis and is fond of flamingos.

MADELEINE BUGBEE is a senior pursuing a BFA in graphic design at UConn. She's always loved printmaking and illustration, so her design is informed by these interests. Nature and surrealism are themes in her work and she aims to assess the past and present via these topics.

CHRISTINE BYRNE is a junior English major at UConn and is concentrating in creative writing. She was born and raised in Norwalk, Connecticut. She makes beaded jewelry from electrical wire in her free time.

BARBARA CLAYTON is a senior graphic design major at UConn. She has always loved photography. Recently, she began exploring the way humans communicate using only body language, to explore a more vulnerable side of herself that she hides.

JAVANICA DAI is a student at UConn and an art hobbyist. Her favorite fish is the coelacanth.

COLIN DELEO is a first-year photography student at UConn. He loves and accepts the world for what it is. The purpose of his life is to spread the beauty of the natural world through photography, so people can appreciate it enough to care for it as he does.

ELIZABETH ELLENWOOD is a photo-based artist currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree at UConn. She has been exhibited in national museums, galleries & universities, including recent solo shows at the Sharon Arts Center and The Danforth Museum.

BENJAMIN ENG is a senior Physiological and Neurobiology major. He wants to be a doctor and finds referring to himself in third-person incredibly odd.

CECILIA ESTANISLAO is a Graphic Design and Illustration student at UConn. She was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1996 and resides in Greenwich, Connecticut with her family.

LILI FISHMAN is a fourth semester English major with a concentration in creative writing. If you ever call her name and she doesn't answer, it's because she has headphones on.

CHRISTOPHER GARDNER is a sixth semester English major at the Waterbury UConn campus. He enjoys analyzing literature and novelty lamps, especially lava lamps, but not the kind with glitter in them; those aren't real lava lamps.

TAYLOR GIORGETTI is currently a Fine Arts student at UConn majoring in graphic design and photography. She has also been the designer and winner of the Desk Book Directory Cover contest for the last three years from the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce.

REBECCA HILL is an avid fan of pineapple themed home décor.

MELISSA KARPUSZKA is a third year student at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, majoring in creative writing with minors in Latin and Linguistics. She is from the Cleveland, Ohio area.

MOLLIE KERVICK is a PhD student in English at UConn where she studies Irish literature. Her creative work has appeared in *Knee-Jerk Magazine*, *The Paradise Review*, *Torrid Literary Journal* and on Irishcentral.com.

KACEYLEE KLEIN is a sophomore working on a double major in English and Political Science. She has been creating art for her entire life. Creating is both a reprieve and a form of expression for her in which she can both hide from the world and express herself in her art.

DEANNA LAVOIE is a sophomore pursuing a Fine Arts degree with a concentration in graphic design at UConn. With a love for drawing ever since adolescence, she realized her interest in representational art, especially those based in nature. She has had previous works displayed in her local Town Wide Art Show and the Berlin Fair Art Exhibit.

ROBYN LEREBOURS is a second semester math major. She loves to travel and hopes to someday be a high school math teacher.

KATE LUONGO is a UConn freshman studying English. She lives in Newtown, Connecticut and loves photography and creative writing. Her dream is to be a children's book author.

ERIN LYNN is pursuing her PhD in Poetry at UConn, where she also teaches English. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University, and an MA in Irish Writing from Queen's University, Belfast.

MCCARTHY MacDANIEL is 1 of 6 children who doesn't get enough attention.

AMANDA MCCARTHY is an aspiring plant whisperer and french toast connoisseur. Her goals involve a secluded treehouse in the forest, an illustrated poetry collection, and finding a beach grandma.

JIM McGAUGHEY has worked as a carpenter, caseworker, lawyer, and disability rights advocate. Along the way he met many remarkable people. Recently retired, he now has time to tell some of their stories.

BRIANNA McNISH is a third-year Honors student studying English at UConn. Her fiction previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Split Lip*, among other places. She is most definitely a cat person.

KELSEY MILLER was born on the island of Antigua, earned a BA in Studio Art from Wellesley College and is currently teaching printmaking at UConn while completing her MFA.

SARAH PASCARELLA is a Boston-based writer and editor. Her fiction has appeared in *Embark*, *ink&coda*, and *The Quotable*, among other publications. She has a Master's in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College, and is currently working on a novel.

KRISTINA REARDON is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies at UConn. She holds an MFA from the University of New Hampshire and teaches at the College of the Holy Cross.

ESTHER J. SANTIAGO RODRÍGUEZ is a junior English major at UConn. She transferred to UConn from the University of Puerto Rico where she studied for two years. She loves reading books, and always keeps pen and paper close by in case inspiration comes. Also, she enjoys getting involved in the community.

KALEIGH RUSGROVE is an MFA candidate at UConn. She earned her BFA from Endicott College in 2014. Her current exploration in photography is focused on the development of fabricated narratives and the constructed image.

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