

Volume 25

Quercus

2016

Quercus



Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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2016

(kwîrkûs) Latin. (n.) The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

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Renee Meyer Ernst

Tip of the Iceburg

Digital collage, 24" x 36", 2015

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Michael McFarland

Fire and Air

Digital photograph, 11" x 17", 2013

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i had a friend once

who brought
me a yellow
rose

and I felt as if
I could faint
for weeks

I have forgotten
her name

and I'm sure her
life is still
filled with dirty
pulsing streets

I hope she's
finding magic
there

when I left
she scrawled
an address
in a notebook

I do not know where
that notebook is

all of this is to say that
you remind me of her

that is why I smile at you
with such voracity

this dandelion
tucked
behind my ear
could be hers
or yours

–*Sarah Holst* '11

the heart of why

he wrote
the baby was
warmed by straw
and cattle's breath

that anyone who
has milked hope
from the udder
knows what it is
to touch the
heart of why

every day
I watch a dog
bounce over
dry grass and snow

the fresh cold
filling the space
beneath each
small flight

I kneel on the
kitchen tiles
and pray to the
tumbling god
of wolf kisses

every one
needs a hand
to wrap up in
when the flame
draws out
the fears

and they come
sliding down
like candle wax

the snow is heavy
on my eyelids
even in this house
full of flowers

-Sarah Holst '11

Glimpses

I.

A winter walk around our snow-patched prairie
witnesses once-tall grasses
rumped into matted mounds,
welcome dwellings for mice, pheasants, rabbits

and rubbed-out hollows
where deer hunkered
below storm, cold, snow.

Comfort is relative.

Above, a bald eagle
haughty-eyed against the raw blue sky
flaunts its frightful shadow over
the low-lying land-bound.
Its scruple-less scanning
for morsels of muscle
escapes them
for the moment.

II.

Snow flying in from the east
whisks across our prairie,
frosting inch thick
between deck and blue stem.
Trim lawn grass pricks
through the gathering white,
still tame landscape.

A small, dark figure
not there two seconds past
next to the iron railing
by the back deck steps.
Ears, a glossy eye
brave the whistling
tickle of oncoming storm.
A minute at most before it
ducks back under,
scampers through earthen
passageways to a pleasant
opening
warm with huddled mottled fur
punctuated by pairs of twitching ears.

What report it brought
I'd like to know.

III.

Back in town.
What tame lives we lead.
A baby aspirin each morning with grapefruit juice.
Two cups of coffee. Morning paper.

Jack Russell Rocket tugging
past driveways, hedges,
digging in heels at clumps of sticks,
nosing innocent tufts of yellow grass
along edges of those concrete slabs
we waltz across,
knowing things beyond our scents.

But what to make of that
spiny silver fishtail
sprawled ridiculously
across the sidewalk just ahead?

Ten stories up
two white-crowned
fringe-winged eagles
circling
over Mississippi, choppy, almost frozen
in its rushing tracks.

To our right
across the street
up on craggy oak
a giant dark-headed
long tail-feathered eaglet
waits for breakfast.

—*Nancy Hayes*

sleeping positions

we take flight, emulating rossini's magpies
in our quest to collect only fragments that shine
from our forays into the world,
and i'm not trying as hard as i should
to resist the urge to fall

we laugh at the sun, who surely tickles the gleam
from the fountain's gilded fish for our benefit
and i imagine them swimming through us,
our pulpy bodies still shaking with laughter

freefall

we go dancing, our bodies cello strings
thrumming deep with pizzicato,
fumes of honey whiskey twirling between
and around us, lifting our spirits
and the hem of your dress

yellow fronds reach toward you, spilling
from my purple iris mouth, pollen
fermenting as they fall
wilting through the air, spent
divulgence at your feet

tether

we share a bag of peaches sunday morning,
trails of juice weaving in and out of every room,
the pile of naked stones growing sticky
with unspoken words held captive in their grooves

i find myself fixated on magnets, the way they push

as hard as they pull, and while we teeter in between
never quite as sure where we belong, i envy
all their black and white and certainty

yearning

this morning i woke with my hands outstretched
and folded as in prayer beneath your pillow,
their emptiness insoluble and the air
reverberant with the sound of giving up

at night i haunt the park where we once flew,
let my legs dangle in the fountain
filled with light that isn't ours,
and walk back with algae dripping from my fingertips

before i go to sleep i wash myself in memories
and in all my dreams i drown

—*Bailey Keimig '15*

The Light of Fragile Things

Snow collects where you will soon
disappear to a name, a footprint filling.
You will close your eyes, pretend
we have been a lesson in color

and light: the light the flashbulb leaves
in our eyelids when it snaps, the light
that stays as overexposures: my hands
two slick-feathered starlings, blots

circling over white that widens.
Before you wake, I turn the blinds,
envying how slats of light bend
from my window to your ribs.

—Emily Kingery

Etymology of Compromise

There is only one use
for an oxen yoke,

one word for the weight
of giving up

together. But what is the word
for furrows rising,

for the terrible need
to imagine new skin

that does not sting,
that is not the raw groove

where compromise hangs?
It must sound the same

as braying animals,
clumsy, sad-eyed friends

who eat from troughs,
even in spring.

—*Emily Kingery*

The College Girls

We had visions more necessary than eyes.
We dressed up our names for funerals
and piled plenty of dirt on the flowers.

We spent our summers not begging
for forgiveness, but pinching apart
our cuts, to keep them bright, in case.

At parties, we flinched like lambs
in brambles, shook our hair to scatter out
thorns. We cried over them, ceremoniously.

Other girls said starving after.
They pushed our thorns into piles at the sink
and, sneering, called them pins.

We made our meals of coke, holding in
like balloons. Whole birds appeared
less to us than bones in a wing.

Where is my, we took turns wailing.
We thought of mother, pride, but
those were easy words,

too plain. We let the vowels of
where is my curve in our mouths,
like coming, or significance.

We repeated them like dead first loves.
We swapped our lives for theirs because
that is what it was to believe,

and no one said it would make orphans of us all,
and no one said it didn't count as communion,

that vision is not eating, but eating is,

that Oh, Christ is a phrase for girls
who dawdle in long aisles of bread,
waiting to be asked if they are lost.

—*Emily Kingery*

September

1.

The moon isn't always whole
or even half.
Sometimes it's not visible at all.
Do you understand?
Sometimes I am the moon.

2.

When I fell
it wasn't a song
swaying through cool winds.
I didn't float back and forth, back and forth,
gracefully. You heard me
but noticed the leaves,
and I learned the power
of a silent descent.

3.

I thought you were here
to save my life,
to pull me out of the
flames and tell me I
didn't have to burn
to keep others warm,
but you just turned your palms
toward my heat
and never offered me a hand.

4.

I've watched you
rise up from the night,
quivering and quiet,
your body a stained-glass reflection

of a September sunrise.
Red and orange and yellow and blue
hit the darkest parts of me,
forcing the night away.

5.
I would name the stars after the wrinkles
around your eyes,
and the nights that keep us awake after
the way you say my name.

—*Hanna Blaser*

Bones

Deer shed their antlers
and leave the smooth white branches in a field
to be welcomed by the dirt.
But what a treasure to find—
tiny bare feet running back to the yard
with antlers waving high above blonde curls
weighed down with October dust.

In the woods we take turns
jumping over the creek.
Sometimes we slip on purpose
and scream as shoes are pulled off our feet,
buried in a slimy graveyard.
We push sweaty bangs from our eyes
and smear mud
on our feet and legs
and across our faces.
When I see the skeleton of a raccoon
we break into a run
until we're out of the trees, with wild eyes,
dirt clinging to our legs.

There is a difference between an antler
and a bone.
Between finding something
that was left behind
and finding something,
knowing it's life's final offering.

When you're seven, the deer lives forever,
antlers colliding with tree bark
year after year,
and no one tells you

it has bones like the raccoon
hidden under short brown fur
that will mix with the dust that coats your hair
and the mud that feels like a second layer of skin.

—*Hanna Blaser*

Remnants

She was wearing a ring with a swastika on it,
and you remember nothing else about her
except that you treated her
as you treated all patients.
You do not know what lesson
her finger was meant to teach you,
or if you ever learned it.

Maybe that's just the way it is with people.
You remember a word, a laugh, a ring
and it becomes part of you.
Maybe you spend your whole life
collecting and coveting these pieces
the way a child cradles seashells in her hands
until one slips through her sandy fingers
like the loss of a limb.

I would like to cup my hands beneath yours
so that I could catch all the pieces
and place them on a windowsill,
lined up and clean.
I would like to force them,
beautiful and jagged and broken,
on an unfamiliar surface, so I could keep them for myself.
I would occasionally take them down and turn them over
and run my fingertips over their edges so many times
that they became my own
and you fell into the dust around them.

You don't know the lesson, or if you ever learned it.
You're staring at the blank screen
to see if you can find it there,
and my hands are cradling yours,

catching the half-said sentences that fall,
desperate to learn my own lesson
and become the ocean for you,
and all its beaches—
anything but a windowsill.

—*Hanna Blaser*

Ophiocordyceps

You were pure, once.
But as friends molted
into strangers
you wondered
why the tiniest things
become bigger
than the person
who hosts them—
creeping till they consume
an entire life
from the inside out,
baptized in the vein
of parasites—
until the turnings of time
eroded you as well
and cracked you
into colors
no one recognized.

—*Eric Herbst*

Ghazal

Have you wondered whence comes the light of the mind
or the modesty of the might of the mind?

A crow on a spire—auspicious or ominous?
The spirit may quail and prompt flight of the mind.

Some see in the shadows their nightmares incarnate.
As blinding as light is the fright of the mind.

Not to place first feels like crawling in last,
but love and kind words heal the bite of the mind.

To cultivate roses red with elation, not shame,
is to carefully fuel fierce delight of the mind.

—*Kayla Kuffel*

Here I Am

I am no Isaiah or Samuel,
yet here I am, begging for mercy.
I've expected my tacit replies
to garner your love, but you prefer
that I shout from mountaintops.

You can call me three times,
but if I answer, will you hear me?
Will you try again?

If I bolt awake shivering
with hair slick on my forehead,
he will say, as always, "Here I am,"
but the lights will be out
and I will be afraid.

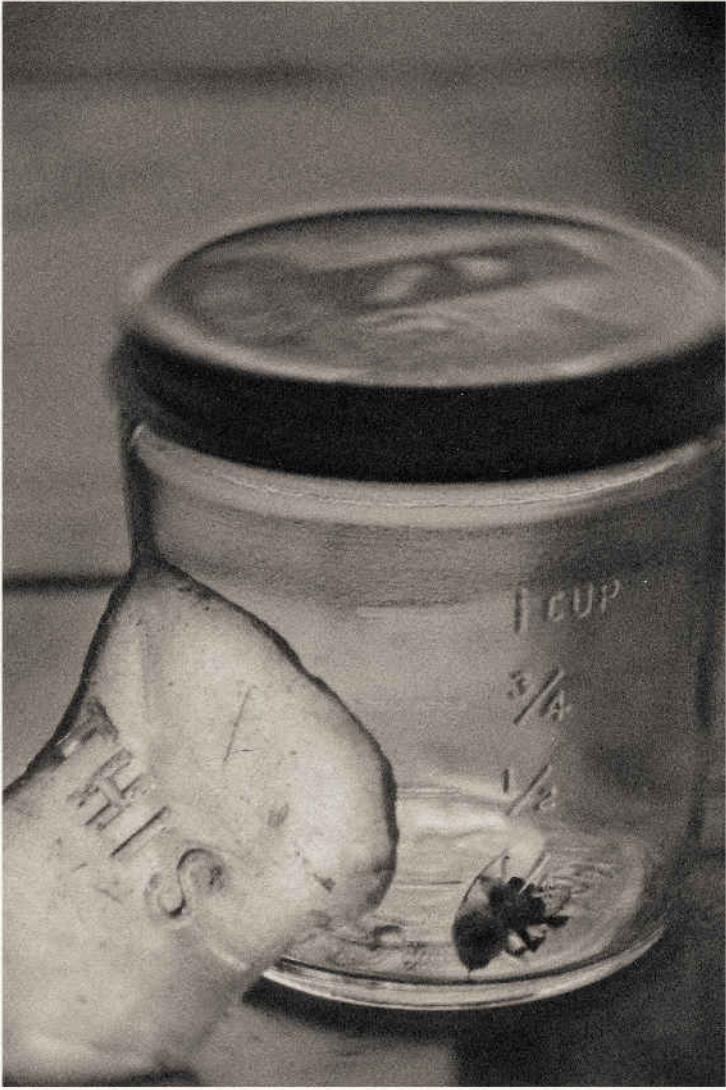
Yet here I am, knowing
who hurts, who doesn't, and who won't.
I know the shepherd from the wolf,
but I do not speak to either.

—*Kayla Kuffel*

Killing Bees in the Hosta Flowers

Little winged ladies crawl
up pastel purple skirts
sunrise to sunset,
collecting their findings
in shiny black sacks.
Among waxy, ribbed leaves,
the dancers
line the building
beneath the gutters
before a backdrop
of moss and brown.
This morning
they glittered
in sequins and sparkles.
By afternoon
the glitter dries,
but desire burns—
a drive to survive.
Ladies attend dancers
in a hot, electric buzz.
Dancers shudder
under the weight.
A shadow—a man—
squats before the stage.
His thumb and forefinger
close around the dance—
pinch, roll, snap.
Dancers and ladies
fall to the woodchips.

—*Kayla Kuffel*



<p>You flip to the first page and are introduced to the protagonist, as you often are, in the first frame. Her brother, Joe, makes an appearance.</p>	<p>She follows Joe's thickly printed, poorly drawn threats. She pulls at the ends of her skirt, at the seams that sever printed flowers. She struggles to keep up. On her face are blue and white dots and stress marks, showing the fear and anxiety of being left behind. In the distance is a rose garden.</p>	<p>Very early on, you realize she suppresses a monster. When Joe's back is turned, she whispers to the roses, "You have until tomorrow to fully bloom or I'll kill you."</p> <p>In the same frame, split by a thick, black line, she does just that.</p>	<p>When you scroll your eyes over, she learns about God's abundant love for all things and how she should love like Him. She's raising her hand too high, opening her mouth too wide, and asking too loudly, "Is it wrong to pick flowers, then?" The teacher (you know it's the teacher because her nose is comically long and stuck too high in the air) says, "Yes."</p>	<p>She asks, "What about the roses on your desk? Were those killed?" The teacher yells, sharp lines jotted around bold text</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"That's different."</p>
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<p>When she finds out the evil of picking roses, she goes to the garden and prays for forgiveness, begging not to be dragged to Hell, burned for her sins, for torturing helpless flowers.</p>	<p>In this frame she's sleeping. You expect Joe—or her parents (who were not introduced) or anyone at all—to find her. But only the night shades in a blanket, only the moon yawns with her, only the roses drip blue, empathetic tears.</p>	<p>In the following frames, Joe stops talking to her, and in lonely thought bubbles she blames herself. She thinks this is God's revenge. She thinks she deserves this for ruining His hard work.</p>	<p>Every attempt to connect with Joe fails. Her pleas become more bolded and take up more space, her cries take up entire frames, she's</p>	<p>B E G G I N G</p>
<p>S H R I E K I N G</p>	<p>For him to see her.</p>	<p>But as her words become more terrifying and vibrant, more elaborate and violent, Joe shrinks into the dark shading of frame corners.</p>	<p>She begins growing a garden, thinking if she gives God what she stole, He'll return her brother. She prays to Mary, prays to St. Anthony, prays to all the rotting corpses under cemetery flowers that shrivel and decay like everything else in her frame.</p>	<p>When they fail to answer, she begins thinking in darker colors, in darker dimensions. She compares herself to the roses placed in graveside vases or on caskets—beautiful and worthy of investment . . . if she dies tomorrow.</p>

The roses in Joe's cheeks continue fading. She wants them back, but nothing helps. Growing roses does nothing. You see her prick her wrists with rose thorns and the edges of rosaries, drawing beads of blood, releasing frustration from being alone in such a harshly shaded world.

Now her grandmother dies, and they think buying a \$7 bouquet of roses will ease her and her brother's pain, that severed stems and falling petals will bring color back into their white faces.

She loses everything. You think the artist draws her with too many scars for such a young girl. She never opens her mouth but has only light, small words engulfed by thought clouds. They all say the same thing: "I have no fear of dying."

In this frame, a new man is introduced. Long gone are the days of Joe. This one with a twisted grin, a cigarette in hand, and the caption "Ryan." And *he's* the savior.

He tells her to paint rosy cheeks and act in pretty ways. He removes all the thick, black colors, leading her through the brightest frames.

<p>You see her take Ryan to the roses and notice the blue lining the rims of her eyes.</p>	<p>As her tears grow fatter, Ryan reaches down to decapitate a flower. The caption reads, "No! Then others can't enjoy them! Leave it—please!" with dramatic violets and yellows circling the words.</p>	<p>But you scroll your eyes over and see that he picks it.</p>	<p>You feel hurt and cheated—the artist led you on and gave no fair warning.</p>	<p>Ryan, who you were sure was the hero, is the villain.</p>
<p>The frames of sweet talk turn into shouting turn into pushing turn into slapping turn into hitting turn into running as fast as she can, with him following after her like hunting a wild animal like a game of cat and mouse like a love story gone horribly wrong.</p>	<p>After violent nights, he buys her roses, sets them down on her beautifully sketched bed, and whispers in finely printed words, "Things will be different."</p>	<p>Every frame you start reading—</p>	<p>Things will be different—</p>	<p>Things will be different—</p>

<p>Things will be different–</p>	<p>You read the same words, like pushing through a boring comic, and you accidently start reading the same line</p>	<p>over and over start reading the same line over and over start reading the same line over and over start reading the same line over</p>	<p>This same repetitive story? Why doesn't she just walk away? All those roses look the same. Nothing will change.</p>	<p>One day, after several pages, she sits up, holds Ryan's flowers in her withering hands, and thinks in the most beautifully printed cloud,</p>
<p>How does this make it better? How is this any better?" She finally opens her eyes, and when she does, you see her run like hell, from frame to frame. She thinks, "If I stop, he'll find me. And if he does, I'll never be free."</p>	<p>You flip to the last page, eager to see her fate, and are a bit shocked to see how many blank pages the artist left at the end, knowing it was an expensive decision.</p>	<p>You flip a few pages back to find the last frame, just to see what became of the girl. The last frame is of her, sitting alone now, holding a book–you think it's a bit anti-climactic–</p>	<p>but as you bring your nose closer to the page and read the words</p>	<p>"IF YOU REALLY want to hear about it," you understand why–and she's pausing, staring at her bedside table at a glass full of beautifully fallen roses.</p>

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Sanctuary

They entombed me—the waves—
As my arms embraced them,
Flew through them,
With desirous freedom aching
In desperate hands' touch,
Sweeping into unclutched fingertips.
My flight's strength abandoned
In the brilliant tides of my grave.

To it, I resisted not—for fate,
It takes with distanced pleasure,
Hiding its ambiguous letters of hope
In the songs of its warbling birds.

I hear it as I swim, as the birds
Chant their uncertain hope
In a choral circlet above my mind—
A hope filled dirge, in tune
To angelic wings beating to stay
Afloat in the stagnant breeze.

I watch in the mirrored waves,
Listening beneath the tidal cloak
As the notes carry me toward
The glow of God's golden torch.
I grasp after their floating song
With an eager child's fist.

In final liberated breaths,
My soul joined the birds,
Swimming through the sky
With the strong strokes of
A solitary escape.

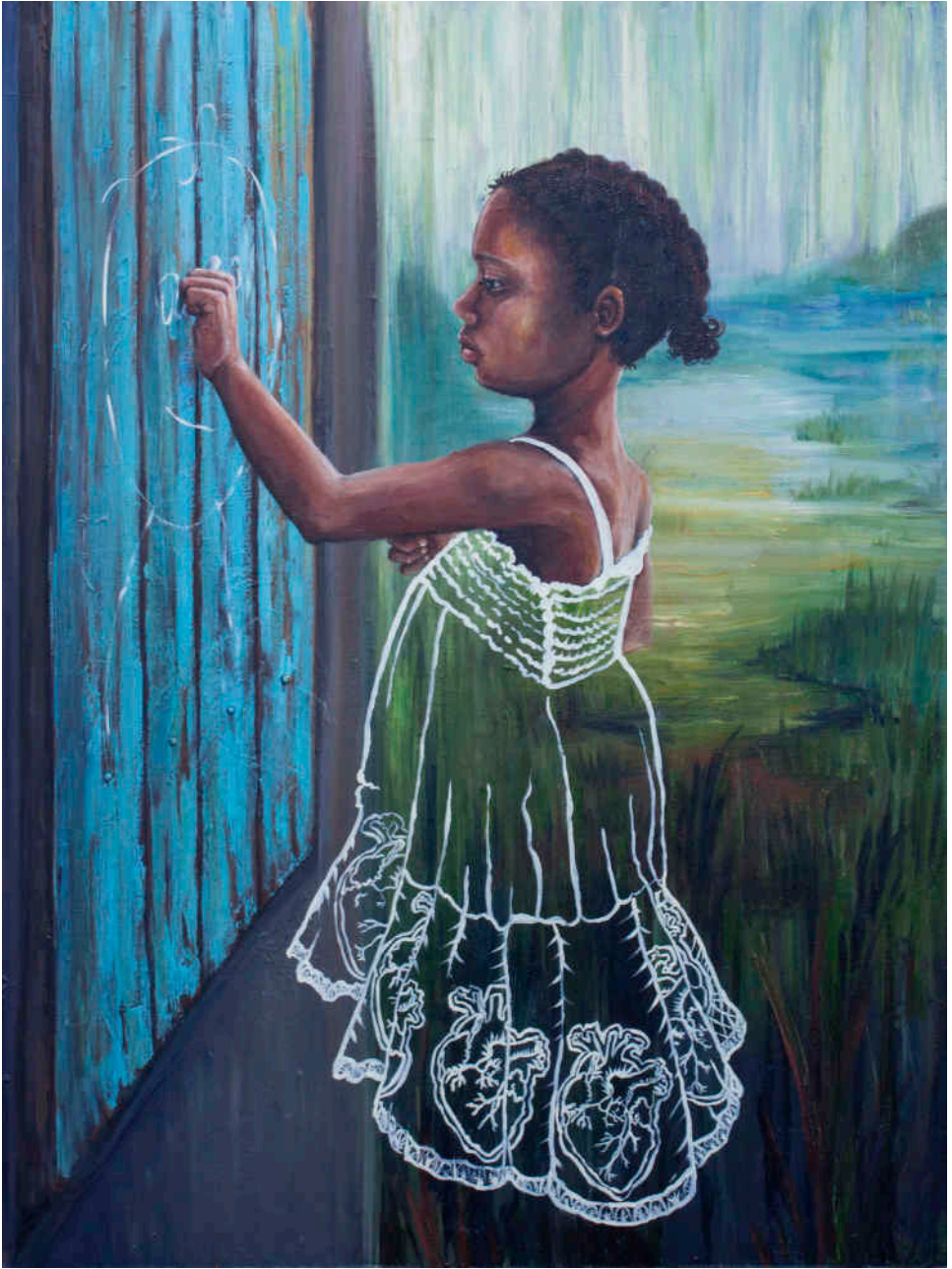
—Haley Denton

White Dress

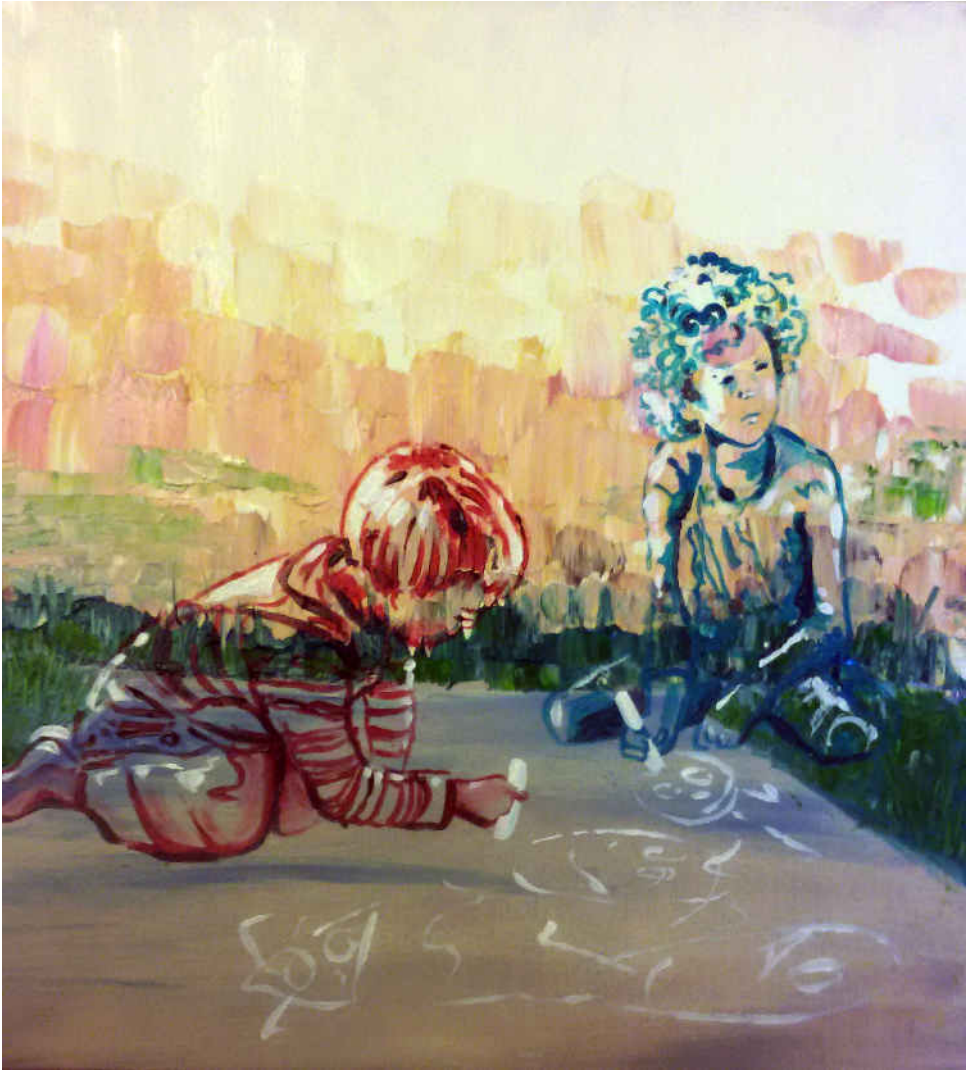
I wear my white dress,
The one that drapes
Over my shoulders, fixed
With the same embroidered
Lace that sways about my
Grandmother's kitchen window.
I wear this dress—the dress my mother
Has fit me into for Sunday mass.
My body stays clothed in my own
Personal mystery—a secret
I keep from the world. So when
I receive the Lord on my tongue,
Walk past Mrs. Jones with rosary
Stiffly pressed in hand, past the altar
Boys in sparkling robes laced with
A hint of bleach, I can don the attire
Of that angel the world believes
A lovely little girl should be.
I wear my white dress always
And succumb to the religion of
Smothering each bare arm in each
Thick sleeve until I sweat from
The pressure that rests upon me.
I wear it like a prison sentence,
Like it's my cloth virginal reputation,
My chastity belted across my collar—
A cotton noose of delicate appliqué.
It is the baptismal dress
They drowned me in.

—Haley Denton

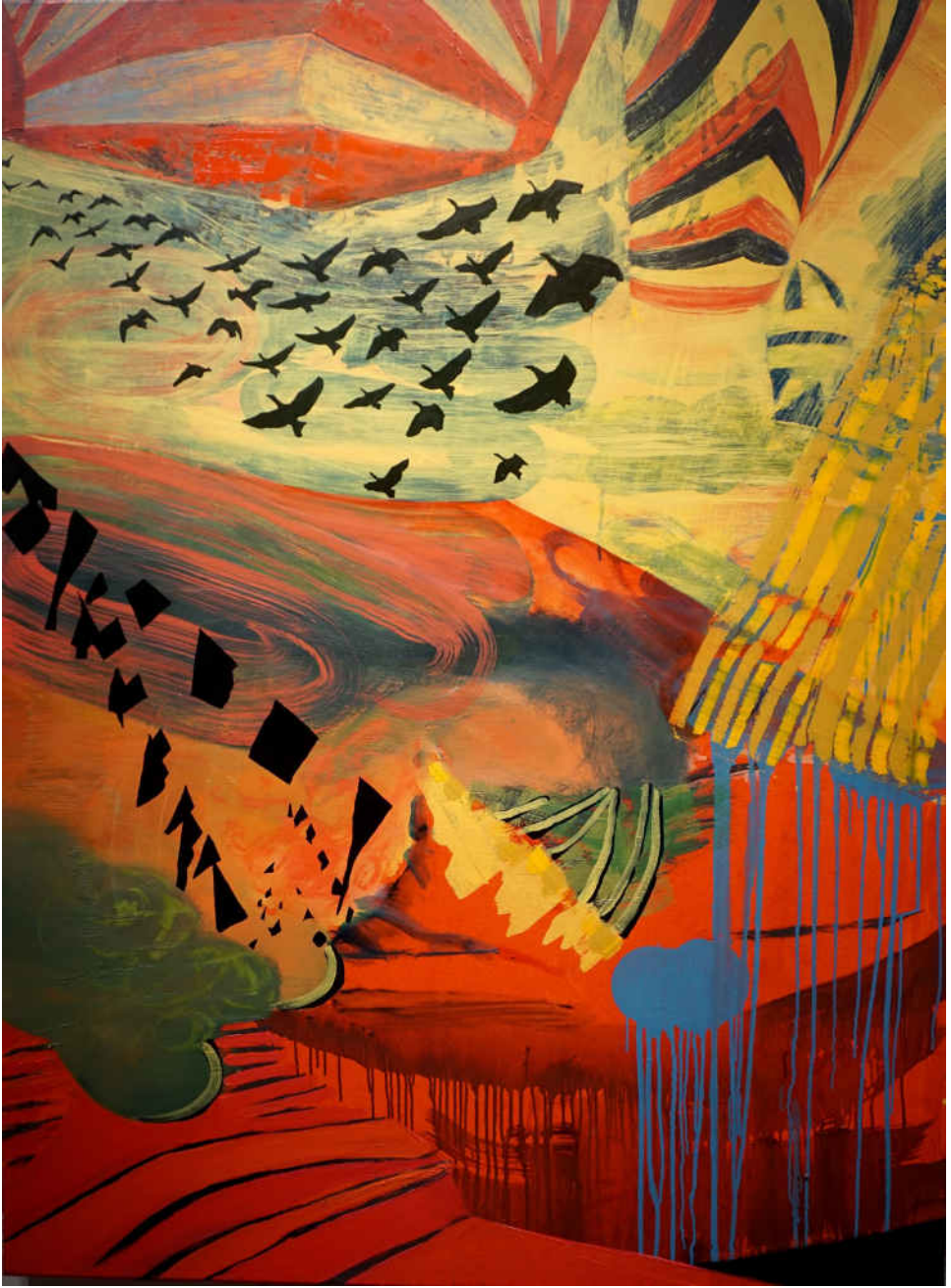


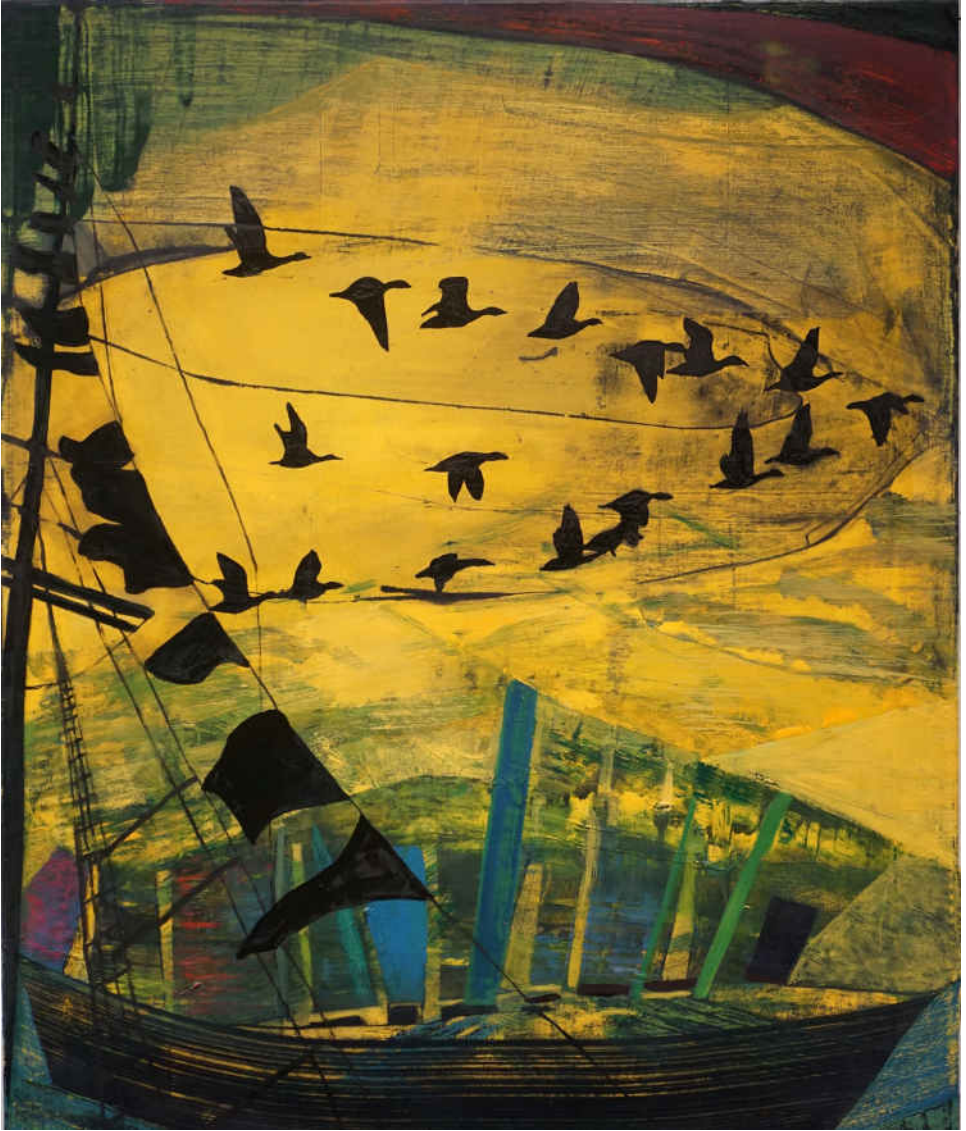




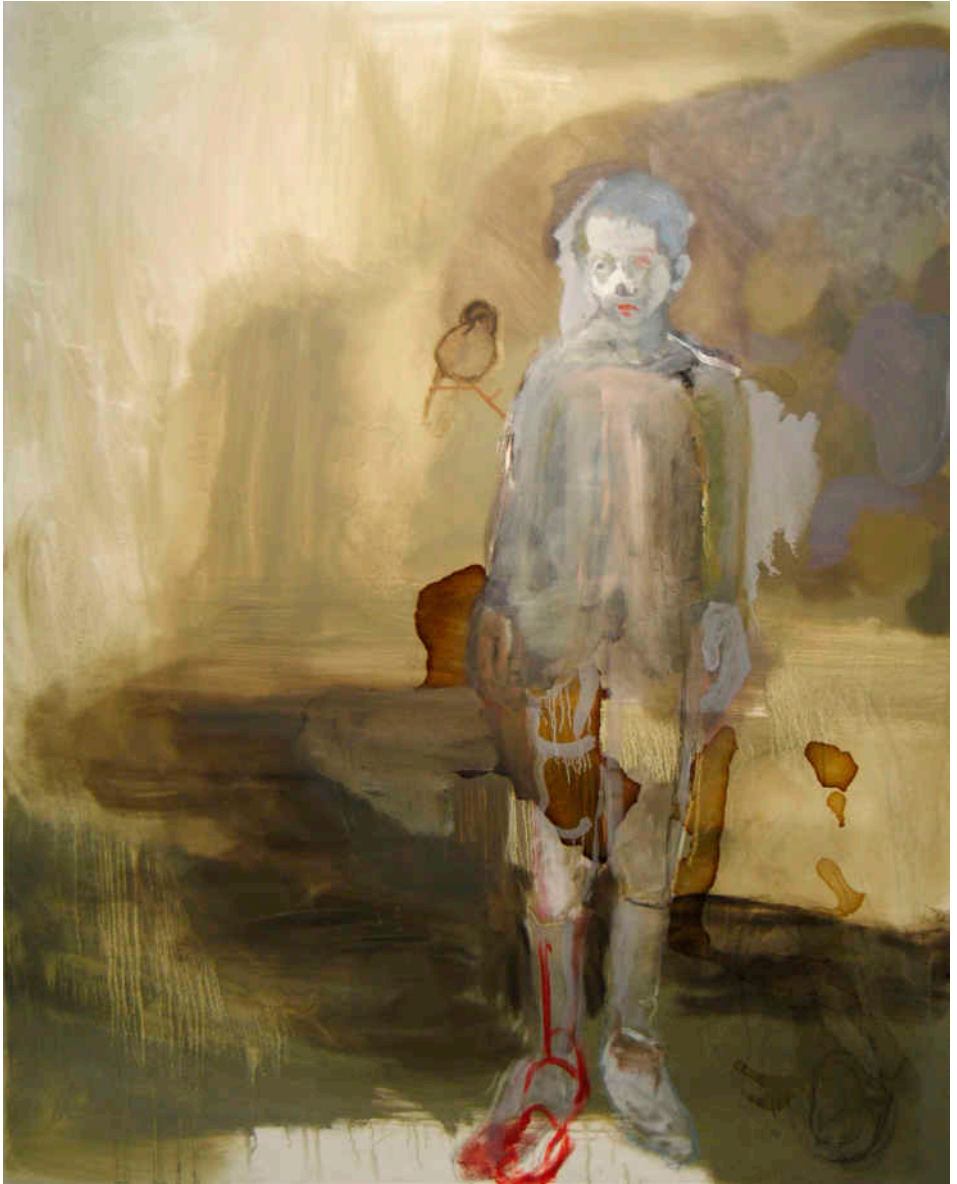




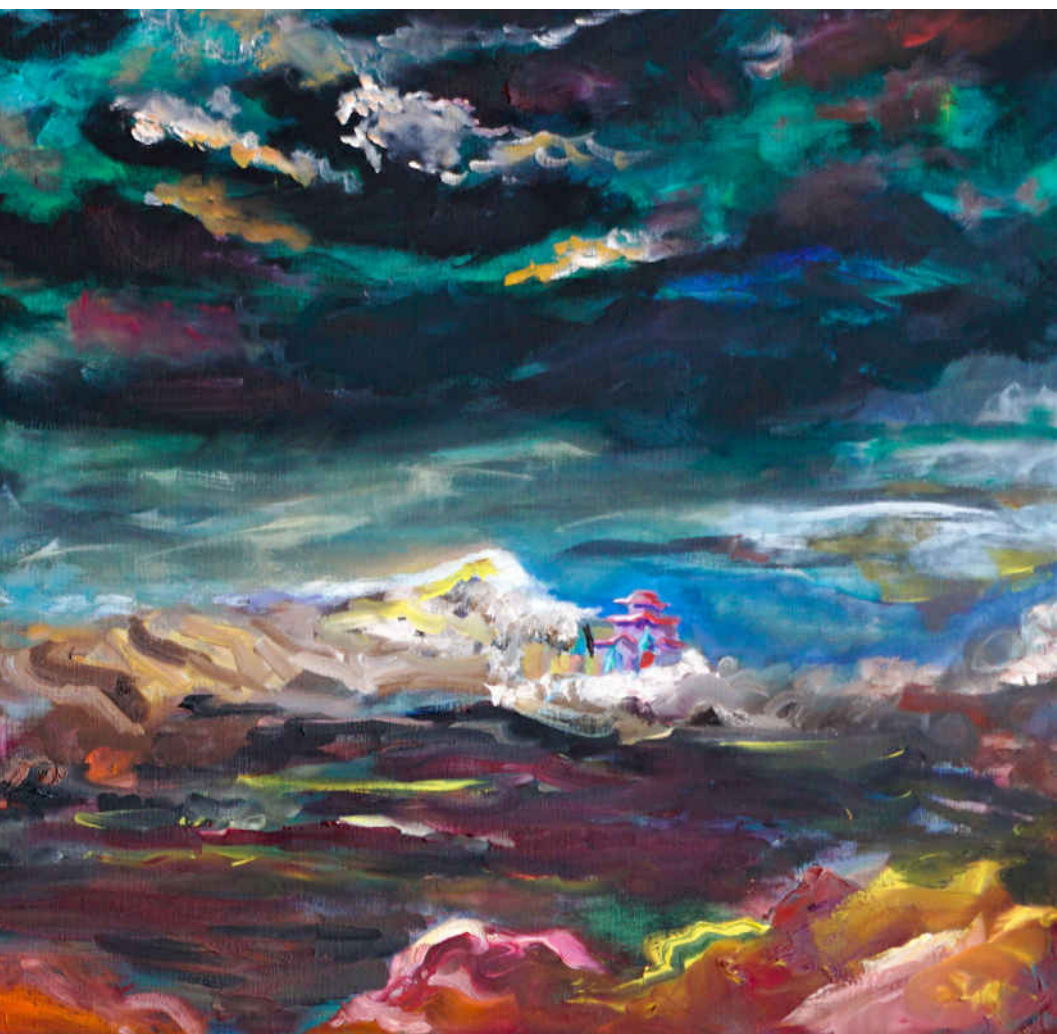






















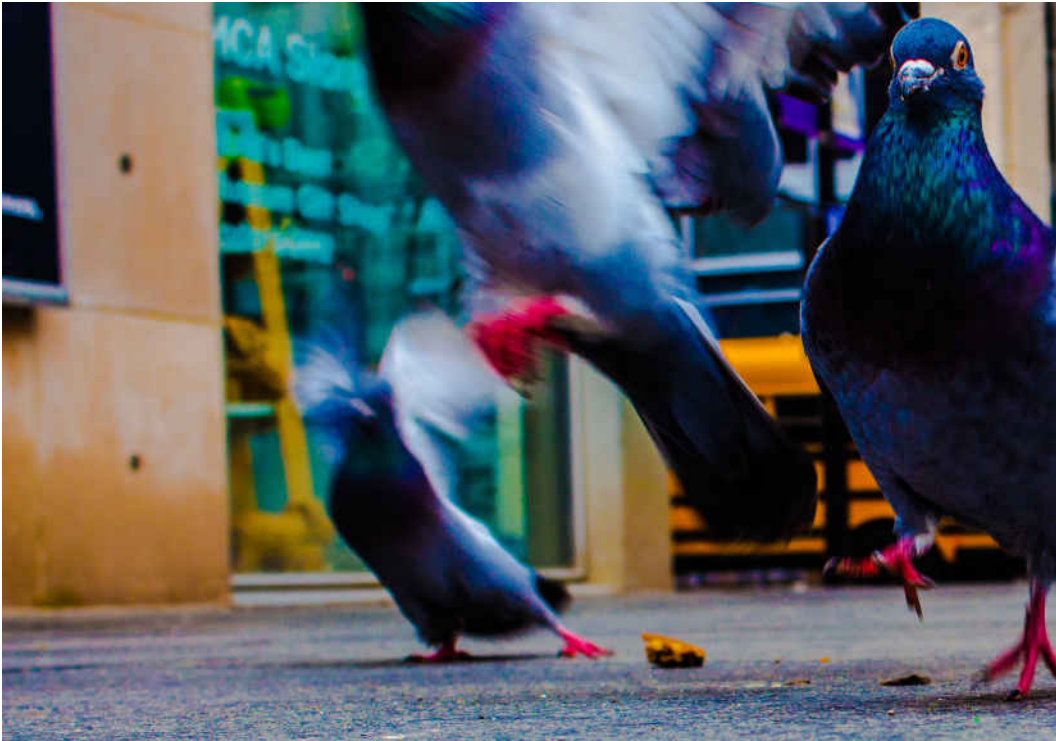




A CRIME TO REMEMBER

THE FEELING STAYS WITH YOU.

THE CRIMES THAT DEFINED THE TIMES



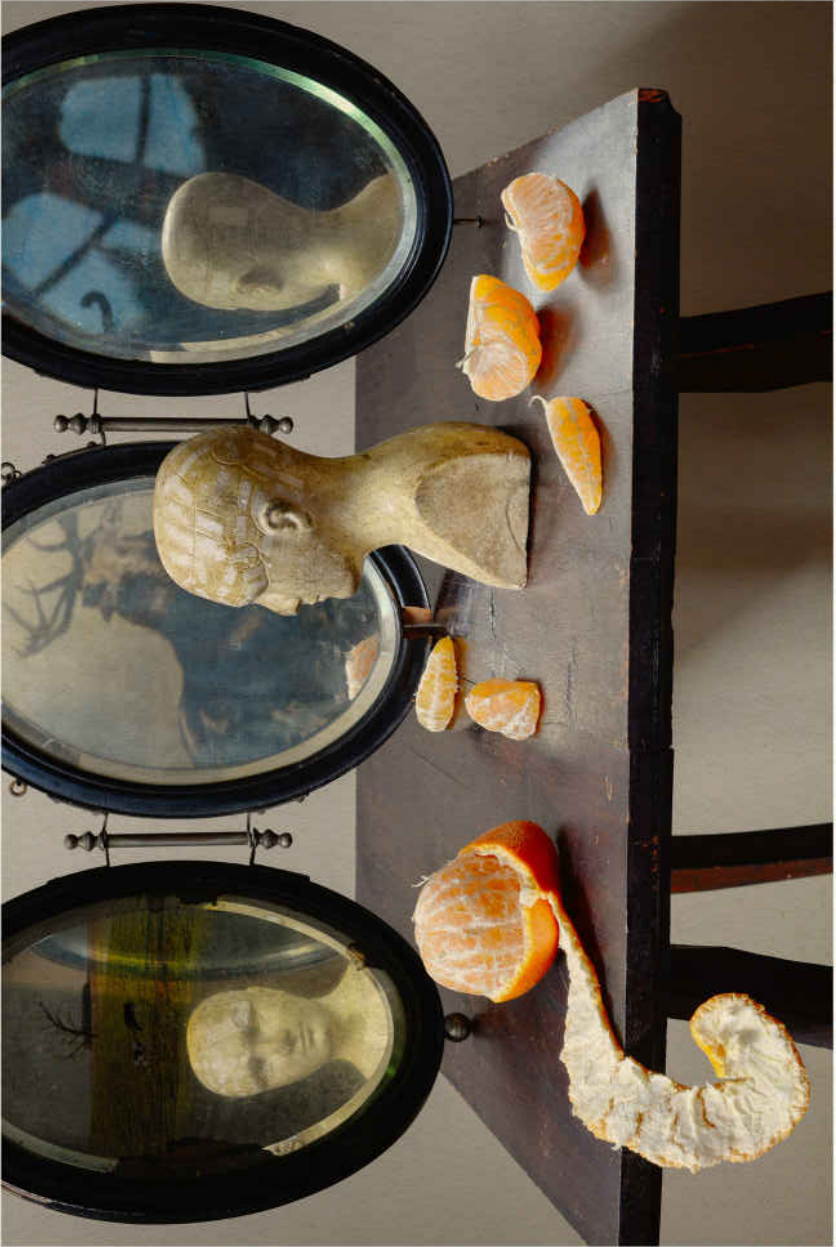




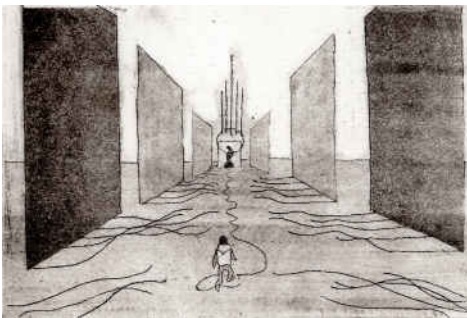
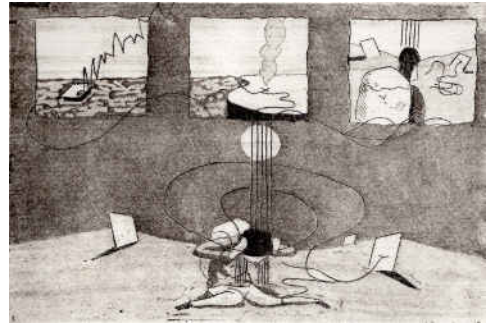
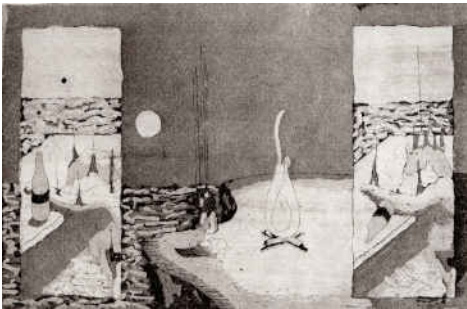
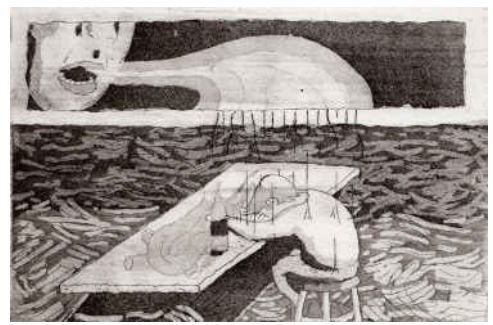
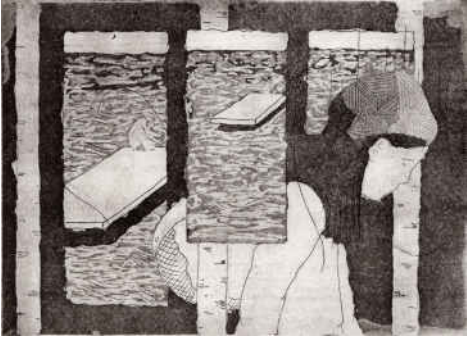
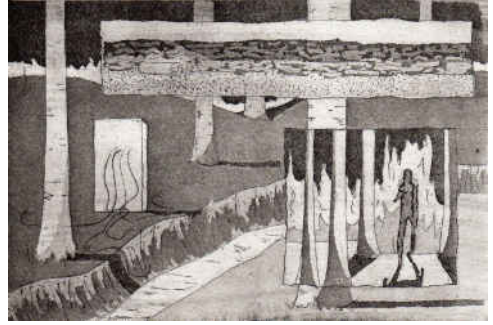
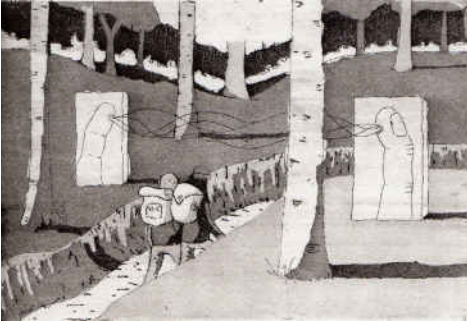




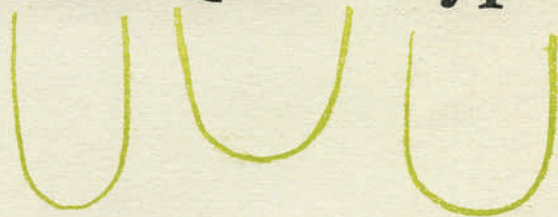




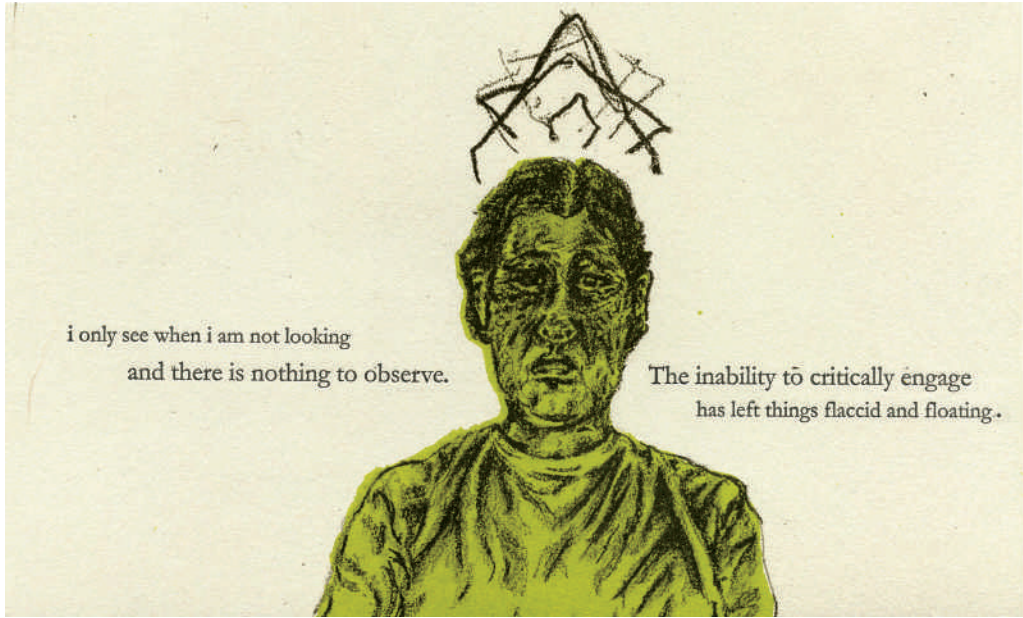




The Quiet Type



Joseph Lappie
Peptic Robot Press



i only see when i am not looking
and there is nothing to observe.

The inability to critically engage
has left things flaccid and floating.

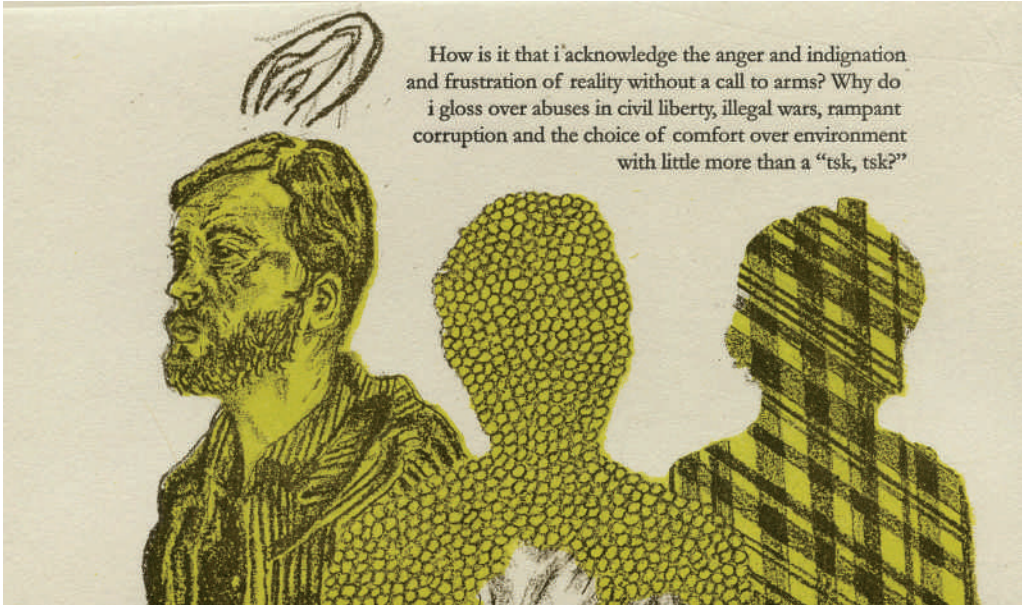
in a deluge of moments
cascading down while i hasten
to apologize for being in
the way. Sidestepping a
responsibility can be a safe and
warm thing to do. Nobility can
be found in supporting the
rally and the cause without a
physical or emotional commitment.

This is
a trickle that
I attempt to plug
with my finger in the dam.

damn.



How is it that i acknowledge the anger and indignation and frustration of reality without a call to arms? Why do i gloss over abuses in civil liberty, illegal wars, rampant corruption and the choice of comfort over environment with little more than a “tsk, tsk?”



It's an easy answer to be honest. Encased in a thick shell of three separate, yet equal barriers:

privilege

ignorance

fear

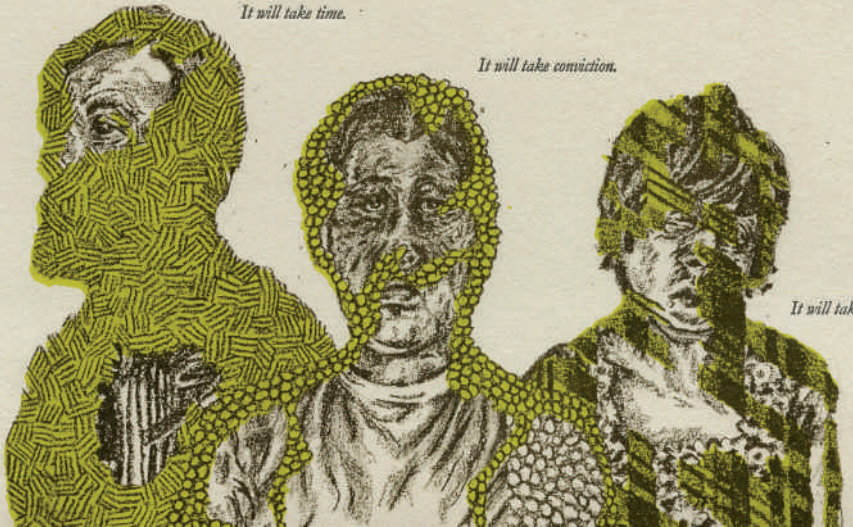


Body image has never been a strength, but it is time to strip bare these skins.

It will take time.

It will take conviction.

It will take.



The days of gray are coming to
an end in a cavalcade of...



Something.



Susurrus

Winter air circulates in this dimming room
as the sun sets through the window
and shadows fall like snow.
Backlit by headlights
glinting through frosted glass,
you breathe, deep and even,
asleep against my chest.
With tired eyes, I trace
the contours of your dreams
mapped out
along the plane of your cheek,
and rest my hands
on the cage that holds your heart,
warm myself with its steady beat
from just behind the bars.

Susurrus [soo-sur-uh s] (n.) a low soft sound, as of whispering or muttering or a quiet wind; a whisper or a rustling.

—*Olivia McDonald*

Cicatarize

We met somewhere
between that lamp post
and Harrison Street
when the grass was dry and dead
and the sky was velvet black.
Your hair was longer then,
half hidden under a backwards hat,
ends curling in tendrils
around your ears,
fighting their confinement.
I loved that—
the disobedience of it—
how it matched your one-dimple smile
and your eyes that could never decide
if they wanted to be blue or grey.

I had to learn to love again
after the curls were trimmed away;
the ends were too short
to run my fingers through,
though they still tickled my palms.

You learned to love me again, too,
as your eyes traced the crosshatching
that split my stomach in meridians
of a hue that mirrored my hair,
the cotton shirt clutched in your hands,
the flush in my cheeks
that it was too dark to see.
I held my breath and waited,
knowing what you'd ask
and that I couldn't explain why

it kept happening or how
it might never stop.
But you stayed quiet,
and pressed your lips to my skin
as if they could absolve the pain.

Cicatrize [sik-uh-trahyz] (v.) to find healing by the process of forming scars.

—*Olivia McDonald*

Birthing Rooms

She had botched me from the beginning
A cursed birth in terse hands
I naively opened my palms to her
Black girth, this barren widow,
Belly full of nothing pink and toothless
Like the woman aching in bedsheets
I parted from with a snip and a clamp.

Oh, she never minded you mother;
She was bedside waiting for me
With her midwife slouch and forceps
In those greedy hands
Needing her burdens to become my own.
A cruel nurse, she kept me from your reach
Swaddled tight, clutching, never allowing sleep.

Terrified, I watched that barren hag
Knowing she had ahold of me,
Her whispers and breath became like clothes
And her thoughts would wrap and entwine my limbs
Like yarning spools of thread,
Until I have been woven and made just for her—
A white sheet, upright and starchy, disturbing my sleep.

At night I would sit up straight
Unable to unfold,
And you would rock me, Mother,
Not hearing her rustling skirts.
Her faceless form a blanket
To that white eye in the sky
As the years blew by.

And now I lie in another room,
Laboring and knowing
That black spirit of fear hovers near.
Though I can never bid her goodnight
I will not have her fussing about my knees
As she tries to birth someone
Other than me.

—*Carrie Chesney '02*

Proximity

You know me. You've seen me on the street. I pass by, nodding politely. You would never guess the way I watch you, calculating every move and turn. I know you will take a left, then a right, then a right. I dodge suspecting glances, brush them off with a toothy grin. Everyone's a sucker for a nice smile. Danger doesn't smile back.

But I do smile. The smiles are what keep me off the radar. A lonely chap walking along is nothing to be afraid of. But no one knows my secret. I keep it close to my heart. I watch you, and my secret creeps up into my mind. When I'm with you, nothing is the same.

I know you will meet Tara across the street. You two will embrace. Coffee as usual. There is hair flipping, coffee sipping, lady talking. I watch it all. I take in your movements, each one prodding my heart. I revel in the way you move. Tara is too stilted for me; you are my one.

Tara leaves and you order one more cup of coffee, like always. Your lips caress the mug, the faintest rim of coffee around the edge. I want to wipe it away for you. I want you to know me like I know you. I want us to be as close as we are in my head.

You would love me. The last of your drink is gone—time for your nail appointment just down the street. Fire Red or Petal Pink? I hope it's Fire Red.

You knew. Your fingertips blaze like fire. They suit you best, bring out the porcelain tones of your skin, so pale I can detect the faint blue of your veins, your life flowing through, day in and day out.

You walk toward me. I can smell the hint of your perfume, tickling my nose with its floral base. I hear the click of your heels as you draw nearer. The excitement bubbles up inside. You are so close. I turn my attention to your face and smile, the sweetest one I have. You smile back, unaware of any danger.

The sound of your heels fades from my ears. You think danger cannot smile back.

—*Emma McCreary*

Some Things Borrowed

Stella was a pretty girl. She knew what she liked—Red lips, winged liner, bronze chest, maroon cheeks. Sculpted to perfection. She loved taking what wasn't hers. Stella was a bad girl. She took from those girls. She shouldn't have done that. But what the other girls had was so pretty. She had to have. It had to be hers. It started out simple, only taking little pieces.

Stella didn't know how to stop, though. Once she got one pretty thing, she had to get more. She wanted to take more of what the other girls had. They didn't have to try to be pretty like she did. She had to put on her pretty. The other girls just were. This made Stella very angry. She didn't like anyone being prettier than her.

Stella was taller than all the other girls, and they made fun of her for it. She wasn't dainty like them. She clomped around with her big feet.

Stella's mom didn't let her dress the way she wanted. Stella's mom always put her in jeans and t-shirts and called her "Roy." Roy was not Stella. Stella was not Roy. Those two were not the same.

Stella had to steal the dresses from the store first. The dresses made her pretty. She had to leave the house early to get to the dresses she had stashed away. She wore them and felt pretty. But the other girls still made fun of her. They said her nose was too big.

Stella's mom said Roy's nose fit Roy's face. But Stella didn't like Roy's nose. It was too big. But Stella and Roy were not the same person. So she hid her nose with makeup. Darker here to narrow it. Some there to draw the attention away. Stella knew how to make her face look how she felt. The girls still made fun of her. They said she wasn't fooling anyone with her makeup tricks. The one girl who made fun of her the most had the prettiest nose Stella had ever seen. She wished she could have Becky's nose. It would have looked much prettier on Stella's face. Becky's nose

would make Stella look even prettier than the dresses.

Stella hated Roy's hands. They were too big. The other girls made fun of Stella for her hands. They said they looked like men's hands. That made her very angry. Stella did not like when the girls made fun of her like that. She just wanted to be pretty like them. Anna had very pretty hands. They were slender and soft. Stella knew Anna did not appreciate her hands the way she should. Stella knew those hands would look much better as her own.

Stella's mom said Roy was a bad little boy. He got into her clothes. Stella's mom knew she was missing some of her bras. Stella liked wearing the bras. She felt pretty when they she wore them. She felt even prettier when they were filled out. She liked looking pretty. Marjorie was pretty. Marjorie was able to fill out her own bra. Her breasts were nice and perky. Marjorie didn't like her breasts. She told the other girls. Stella knew she would love them more than Marjorie ever could.

Stella could never get her hair to look as beautiful as the other girls' hair. Roy's hair was always kept short. Short hair is not beautiful hair. Stella knew this from all the magazines. They told her long hair was beautiful. She wished she could have Melinda's hair. Melinda's hair was pretty. Melinda's hair was the color of the sun. Stella knew the sun was pretty. She wanted her hair to be pretty like the sun. Stella wanted Melinda's hair. Melinda did not love her beautiful hair like she should.

Stella knew she was a pretty girl. Stella had Becky's nose, Anna's hands, Marjorie's breasts, and Melinda's hair. Yes, Stella knew she was a pretty girl. She was missing one beautiful thing. Beautiful skin. Stella knew her mom had pretty skin. It was soft and smooth.

Stella watched her mom's beautiful skin as she moved.

Stella's mom told Roy he would never be a pretty girl. He was a boy. Boys make ugly girls. He was an ugly girl. Stella hated that word. It was a bad word. Stella was pretty. Stella was pretty. Stella was pretty. Stella wasn't ugly. Stella knew how to be pretty. She took pretty from those other girls. Stella was pretty. Stella was pretty. Stella was pretty.

Estelle is beautiful. She has a nose that is prettier than dresses. She has hands that are slender and soft. She has breasts that are nice and perky. She has hair the color of the sun. She has skin that is soft and smooth. Estelle is the patchwork of many pretties sewn together. Blood and tears have gone into her look. She has achieved perfection. Estelle came into being with the help of pretty, little Stella. Stella was the precursor of the beautiful Estelle. Ugly Roy was the precursor of pretty Stella.

Roy, Stella, Estelle.

—*Emma McCreary*

My Mother's Rules

The widow Edna Walcott stops by to visit Mom. She lives up the street and is always upset about something. Mom says to look at her proves she must have left her poor mother's tummy with fists clenched and a scowl ready to do battle with the first person who tried to be nice to her.

She had a husband, but he died. He fixed cars at the garage. Edna Walcott still talks about Roy Eugene Walcott, she says it like that. Mom says Roy Walcott always came home drunk Friday nights still in his grease-stained monkey suit. One night he knocked at our house shortly after Dad had run off, insisting Mom let him in, claiming to be worried about her being alone. Mom kicked him off the back stoop, his balance so bad from drinking he couldn't stand. I looked out from my bedroom window the moment Roy Eugene Walcott fell flat on his back. He limped off favoring his left leg. A week later he had a heart attack at work and died.

Mrs. Walcott pushes herself into our dinning room, going on about cats, stray and otherwise, chasing her wrens, and wanting Mom to keep our cat, Buster, inside as she considers him one of the worst offenders.

"That's what cats do, Edna," Mom says. "It's nature. If the bird can't protect itself that's what's going to happen. It's called survival, and no one's spared. No one, Edna. One day it's going to happen to Buster. He won't be escaping Bart Klein's pit bull forever."

"All I'm asking is that you keep him inside. That's not much to ask."

That's when I chime in, thinking I've got a point that needs stating. "But Mrs. Walcott, those aren't even your wrens."

She looks at me then with those eyes narrowing to slits to let me know she doesn't like me interfering. "I say my wrens because I feed them. And now I'm protecting them."

But her slits don't back me down. "It's not good to keep any animal inside all day. They need freedom." Buster hears me talking about him and comes up behind me, rubbing the back of my legs, purring and acting nice.

I didn't think eyes could get any narrower, yet they do. Mom jumps

in to help. “Even you’ve got to agree my boy’s got a point.”

Her hands go to her hips and she bends her narrow frame toward Mom. “I’m serious about this, Neff. And right now you’re leaving me few options.”

“Meaning what?”

“Let’s just say the world would be better off with fewer cats. I think of them as nothing more than rats with better fur.”

I can’t keep my mouth shut. “If you do what it sounds like you might, you’ll be just as likely to hurt your wrens, squirrels, and other animals as you are cats.”

She straightens up so erect that I’d never seen her so tall before. Had I been younger I’d have gone for safety behind Mom’s dress, had she been wearing one. She’s wearing her pedal pushers, the purple ones with white polka dots, an extra large sweatshirt she got from an Ozarks lodge bearing the name Whispering Pines, and her moccasins. She loves those moccasins.

“I don’t care about squirrels. Nothing more than rats with fancy tails. They carry vermin, you know. Disease and infection.”

Mom tells me that adults don’t like kids butting into grownup affairs, but sometimes I can’t help it. Maybe it’s because with Dad gone I have to do more. I don’t remember him much. Mom says I’ve put him out of my mind because it could get downright ugly. But one thing I can’t forget - Mom and Dad in the kitchen, Dad crawling on the floor, Mom over him with that frying pan saying, “Don’t you get up, Vern. Don’t even think about getting up.” Dad left after that, I think. I’m not sure though, my memories being all mixed up.

After getting what she wants off her chest, Mrs. Walcott turns around and marches out the door. Slamming it after her, Mom says, “Good riddance.”

“Think she’s serious about Buster?”

“No one better hurt what belongs to us. But to be safe, we’ll keep an eye on him until this blows over.”

Mom returns to her crossword puzzle, and I leave the house out the

same door as Mrs. Walcott. Mom never asks where I'm going. As long as I get myself to school, stay out of trouble, and do enough homework to keep the teachers, principal, and that school counselor off her back, she's fine.

Anyway, Mom likes me gone because she has a secret. She tries to keep it from me, but I know she smokes weed, or what Randy Givens calls "spaghetti seasoning." Randy, my best friend Nate's big brother, does it too, so I know what it smells like, and that's something Mom can't always hide. Sometimes Nate and I ride our bikes to the convenience store next to the bowling alley where Randy works. He has us watch the store, letting us take what we want from the freezer, while he goes out back to do it. For a time he's all smiles and silly, playing around with the customers paying for their twelve-packs and candy. But before long he's back outside.

One time he got defensive and said, "Hell, we sell the damn rolling papers. If they didn't want people smoking it they'd make the papers illegal too."

When I said that maybe a lot of folks like rolling their own tobacco, he just shrugged. "You think the good citizens who come in wanting Zig Zags are going off to roll their own cigarettes? Why, people who buy papers often as not leave here with a carton of Camels, if they can afford them, those off-brands when they can't. Listen, I've thought about this. People say one thing but do something else entirely. People are hypocrites. Just the way it is."

Randy Givens is like that. Thinking he's got it figured out.

I don't let on to Mom that I know. She once said it's important for people to have secrets. That people without secrets can't be trusted to keep a confidence.

Mom has gotten support checks from the county every since Dad left. She does crossword puzzles when I'm around and who knows what when I'm not. The house is never clean, and she never cooks much. We often have something from a box, like mac'n cheese. Sometimes she'll bring home chicken from KFC, or for a treat, have a pizza delivered.

Once, she called out for Chinese, but said she'd never do that again, claiming all those vegetables left her insides gassy.

Then for some reason, even with the county giving her money, she gets out of her chair and begins helping Louise Jerkins clean homes. Some days she's gone when I get up in the morning, and sometimes she's not back until dark. She gets paid every day in cash and stores the money in a Tupperware container she keeps beside her chair. At night she counts it two or three times.

"Don't you touch this, you hear?"

Mom's at work when Mrs. Walcott comes by with a dish covered with aluminum foil.

"Is your mom home?" Since Mom's car isn't in the driveway, I wonder why she's asking.

I tell her no, then say something that as soon as it leaves my mouth I regret. Mom's beaten it into me that you never tell anyone your business, yet I say without thinking, "She's at work."

"Work," she says as if I'd just jumped from a hiding place hollering, Boo!

Having already said what I said, I can't now take it back. Besides, I'm proud Mom's doing something. "She's helping Louise Jerkins."

Her eyes go to slits in that way of hers. "You don't say. With her house-cleaning business?" She balances the dish with one hand while the other scratches an itch on her nose. She has trouble doing it wearing those oven mitts.

I think it's best to change the subject, so I say, "Did you come for something? Spices maybe?"

"I'm not here wanting anything. I'm giving you something. I've not seen Buster since our talk, so I made this as a thank you."

"That smells good, Mrs. Walcott."

"Let me put in on your counter. It's still hot."

Mom's always imparting rules to live by. Things like never tell anyone about family matters, because it's nobody's business, and never let on you need help, because doing so makes you look weak. And she tells

me to never invite anyone in the house when she's not home. But when Edna Walcott barges in there's not much I can do.

Mrs. Walcott steps past a pile of mail Mom says she's planning to open, then almost trips over a good-sized box I've been told not to touch. I clear space on the kitchen counter for the hot dish.

"I'm tackling these dishes just as soon as I get a minute," I say.

"I find a dishwasher saves me a lot of time." That's another thing Mom finds irritating about Edna Walcott - the way she's always reminding you of what she has that you don't. Like that time she bragged about her new alarm system. Mom still imitates the way she said, "Ties right into city dispatch, it does. First sign of fire or break-in, a responder's on my stoop."

Instead of leaving, she begins looking around the kitchen, going so far as to open cupboards. "A meat loaf sandwich needs mustard. Making sure you got some."

"We keep that in the refrigerator," I say.

Next thing I know the refrigerator door's open and she's bent over looking inside. "There it is." She turns around holding the jar and looking disgusted. "This is old, Luther. I'll bring over a new one. Somehow I ended up with two."

"Don't bother. What we have's good enough."

She shrugs as if to say, suit yourself, then goes to the front room and looks around, not even pretending to be doing anything but.

"Something else?" I say. I made a mistake letting her inside and I want her to go.

"Tell your mom to keep the dish," she says. "I have so many."

Mom also says never accept gifts because no gift comes free. Taking the meatloaf is enough of a mistake. Still, it's here, so after Edna Walcott leaves I cut myself a piece, lay it between two slices of bread and spread enough mustard to cover it. After eating, I get the dishes done before Mom gets home.

"Boy, am I beat," she says slipping out of her jacket the moment she walks in the door. "Fix me a pan of steaming water, Luther. I need to

soak my feet.” She limps to her chair and sits. “Is that mustard on your chin?”

I take a swipe at it. “Maybe.”

“Had a sandwich, did you?”

“I guess.”

“What do we have in this house that requires mustard?”

As I tell her about the meatloaf, Mom shifts and straightens in visible annoyance. “What’s that old busybody doing bringing us a hot dish? Does she think I can’t take care of you?” She pulls a fist of bills from her pocket and reaches for her Tupperware container.

“She wanted to apologize for the other day and thank us for keeping Buster indoors.”

She thinks about that. “Doesn’t sound like something she’d do.”

She thinks some more. “You didn’t let her in, did you?”

“I couldn’t stop her, Mom. She walked in. I can make you a sandwich.”

She waves off the idea. “That water hot yet? Better not be boiling. Don’t want my skin peeling like a bad sunburn.”

I bring her the stockpot, and she eases her feet in one at a time, making loud Oohhs and Aahs. “Just right, Luther.”

“Did the dishes, too, Mom.”

“That’s my boy.” Mom’s got that container open, counting her money. She’s smiling when she says, “Cleaning houses is too hard, Luther. I’m calling Louise tonight to tell her I’m not coming in tomorrow. I’m finished.”

“You’re quitting?” I ask.

“I’ve earned what I needed. Now, where’s the paper? I’ve got a puzzle to work on.”

The next night someone knocks on our front door. I’m in the kitchen scrubbing a pot when I hear Mom groan.

“Luther, answer that.”

“I’m busy, Mom.”

Mom groans again, but I hear the door open and someone ask, “Are

you Carla Neff?"

"What if I am?" Mom says. I go to the front room drying my hands and see Mom talking to a woman standing outside in the dark.

She says, "My name's Wendy Birge. I'm with the County Department of Welfare."

"So what brings you out here tonight?"

"I've come for a home visit."

"A home what?"

"A home visit," she repeats. Mom turns on the porch light, and I can see Wendy Birge is dressed nice and not really that old. "In exchange for receiving assistance, you agreed to home visits."

"I did what?"

"You signed the form," she says. "I brought a copy."

Mom huffs and stomps. "What's your name again?" Mom asks, stalling for time. Buster tries to get outside, but Mom kicks him back in.

"Wendy Birge." She acts as calm as if discussing the weather. She hands Mom the copy of whatever Mom agreed to.

Mom pretends to read it. "Miss Birge, you'll have to come back tomorrow. You're catching us at a bad time."

"Home visits are always unannounced, Mrs. Neff. If you don't let me in, I'll have to report it. It could cost you your benefits." She pauses. "This won't take long."

Mom clears the couch of clothes needing to be folded or washed - not sure which - so Wendy Birge can sit. Once the county woman gets comfortable she pulls a file from her briefcase.

When Mom settles back in her chair, I notice that the Tupperware container is no longer beside her. Mom says, "If that cat bothers you, push him away."

Wendy Birge pets his ears. Buster purrs. She says to me, "You must be Luther." Her voice goes up an octave like she's talking to a baby.

I half expect Mom to holler, You don't have to answer that. I nod and say, "Yes ma-am."

"Mrs. Neff, our records show you began receiving assistance about

three years ago.”

“You’ve got the records. Why you asking me?”

When the woman glances around, it’s like I’m looking through her eyes, and I see Mom’s piles and things that should be in piles. We don’t have a front room; we have paths.

She opens the file, taking her time as if we aren’t there. Mom is giving me the look that says I best keep my mouth shut. At last the county woman looks up from her notes. “Mrs. Neff, you remember when you signed up for benefits, an intake counselor went over the rules?”

Even I can see she’s setting Mom up for a trap. “What are you getting at?” Mom asks.

“One of the rules was that if you were to find work, you needed to notify us. Do you remember that?” Wendy Birge waits for an answer.

“Sounds like a rule you folks might have.”

“So, you do remember?”

Mom shrugs and sits back pretending to ponder whether she does or doesn’t. After a second, she laughs. “Is this about me helping a friend out in a pinch? Good Lord, I didn’t realize taking those benefits meant I couldn’t help a friend.”

Mom’s answer surprises the woman, but she recovers. “Did you receive payment?”

“If you could call it that. Gas money, a bit for food. Not much at all. Besides, it’s done with. She doesn’t need me anymore.”

“Can you ballpark what you received?”

“I hardly noticed. Why?”

“Because we need to offset your benefits by the amount you earned.”

“I just told you . . .”

Wendy Birge holds up her hand. “We don’t need to have that now. I’ll call your employer.”

“I doubt whether her records are any better than mine.”

“Regardless, this will be noted in the file.”

“Noted in the file,” Mom says in her sarcastic tone. “Fine, go ahead and note it. Well, is that it, then?” She stands up to show the county

woman the door.

“I’m afraid not. I have other inspections to make. It’s mandatory during a home visit.”

Mom sits back down. “Inspections?” Mom’s eyes narrow the way Mrs. Walcott’s does. “For instance?”

“I need to see the kitchen.”

“Whatever for?”

“You signed the agreement. You have a copy. Third paragraph.”

As she reads, Mom loses her fight. “Show her the way, Luther.”

Wendy Birge follows me; Mom follows her. I haven’t done the dishes, but they’re stacked and ready for me. She’s not interested in those. She goes to the cupboards and starts opening doors the way Mrs. Walcott had. Mom remains in the doorway, her left moccasin tapping the floor. After the woman goes through every one, pausing to make notes, she steps over two diced tomato cans and a bag of marshmallows on the floor and goes to the refrigerator. She opens the door and peers inside. Next thing I know she unseals a container that let’s loose a stink that hits me where I’m standing. It’s got to be the tuna salad Mom fixed a long while ago. She smells the milk too, but that’s okay.

Next she opens the freezer. The ice build-up is so thick that to get the pizza rolls, you’d need a blowtorch or a well-sharpened axe. Wendy Birge closes the door without comment.

“Used to be frost-free,” Mom says as a way of explanation. “Hasn’t worked in years. Nice if the county gave me enough to replace it.”

The woman makes more notes. Mom leans against the doorframe. I see new stains on her sweatshirt, and her petal pushers are so worn her knees are close to popping out. I want to help her.

“Is there anything else?” I say.

She stops writing and looks at Mom. “I do have one more question.”

I can tell Mom’s in no mood for more talking, so I say, “What’s that?”

“This is for your mom, Luther,” she says.

Mom says, “Go on then, ask it,” as if spitting a hair from her mouth.

“Do you know someone named Randy Givens?” Mom’s eyes flare before settling back down.

“You’re asking if I know Randy Givens? Well, I know the Givens’. Their youngest boy is Luther’s best friend.”

“Do you know Randy? The oldest one.”

“Yes, I heard that. You’re asking if I knew him, and I said I knew the family.”

“So, you don’t know Randy Givens? Personally, I mean.”

“I said I knew the Givens’ and that means I must know Randy. At least who he is.”

I say, “Don’t most people know Randy? He works at the convenience store.”

Mom says, “Listen, I’ve been patient. You come knocking on my door close to my boy’s bedtime, going through my house, poking your nose into this and that. I’ve answered all your inquiries, thank you very much.”

She smiles and closes her notebook. “You’ve been helpful, Mrs. Neff. You’ll have my report once it’s filed.”

“Luther, show her to the door.”

“That’s all right. I know the way.” She thanks us and gathers her things.

After we hear the door close and know for sure she’s gone, Mom goes to her chair and sits down groaning. “It was Walcott,” she says. “I just know it.”

“Know what, Mom?”

“She called the county. They don’t come skulking around unless they have reason, and that means someone snitched. I know it was Edna, only how did she know?”

“Why’d she ask about Randy?” Mom’s too preoccupied to answer.

“Isn’t it your bedtime?” She re-crosses her legs, her mind mulling things over. “Wait one minute. It was you, wasn’t it? You started this.”

“Started what?”

“She brought that meatloaf by and you told her I was working.

Didn't you?"

"I may have said you were helping Louise. Don't think I said it was for wages."

"She knew I was gone and came here to snoop. Haven't I told you time and again our business is ours alone? No one else's? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Time for bed, I guess."

"Sweet dreams."

The next morning. Nate's pounding the door all excited and telling me something bad has happened. Mom's not up yet and I haven't even brushed my teeth, but he insists we get going.

"It's Randy," he says, once we're out of the house. "He's been busted."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't be stupid. Yesterday he got arrested right in the middle of his shift. He's in jail. They say he's been dealing."

I think, Randy dealing could explain Mom being evasive with the county woman. May even explain her quitting Louise Jerkins because she had what she needed.

I don't say anything to Nate, but I worry all day. After lunch I call home. When Mom doesn't answer, I worry some more. I imagine being called into the principal's office and finding Wendy Birge waiting to take me to foster care.

After school I run home, and when I barge in I find Mom on her knees with her head inside the refrigerator. I smell bleach and lemon juice.

"Mom," I say, which she hates me doing. She prefers I just ask my question because that way she doesn't have to stop, look up, and say "What?" But I'm so relieved and proud of her for doing something, I say "Mom" again as she pulls free a stuck container from the back. With caution she removes its lid as if the slightest jiggle will cause a chain reaction.

"Luther, can you recall when we last had beans and franks?" I can't

recall ever having them. She hands me the container. "Scrap the contents into the garbage then put it in the bleach water. Better yet, throw the entire thing away. We've got enough margarine containers." She takes her time getting to her feet. "And you say 'Mom' again, I'm going to bust you."

"Mom," I say, teasing her. Maybe I'd been worrying for nothing. Maybe Mom's not been buying from Randy.

She pretends to be upset by balling her fist and cocking her arm, but I can tell she thinks it's funny. "Follow me to the front room. I've got to rest."

She settles in her chair. "Nate told me some bad news," I say.

"Well, go on if you think I'd be interested."

As I tell her about Randy, Mom gets quiet. When I'm done, she says, "Luther, go find Buster. I haven't seen him all day. He may have slipped out when that social worker left last night."

I'd been so concerned about Mom that I hadn't missed Buster. I leave to find him. Across the street Mrs. Griffith is shaking a throw rug. I ask if she's seen Buster. She and her husband are so old everyone ignores them. She can't hear too well either, so I ask again.

She gives her rug another shake. "Is he lost?" I hear her husband shout something from inside the house.

She turns. "What's that, Grif?" He rolls his wheelchair onto the porch.

"I saw Buster," he says. He puts his hands under his lap blanket because they quiver.

Mrs. Griffith laughs. "Grif's a one-man neighborhood watch."

"Where, Mr. Griffith?"

His hands come out from beneath the blanket and he rolls himself closer. "This morning, Luther. In Edna's yard." I take off without even thanking them, shouting for Buster.

Mom once said that cats don't make dying a public event, that they prefer passing alone in the quiet and the dark. After considerable looking, I find Buster between Mrs. Walcott's house and ours, under a hedge,

on his side and already stiff.

I come in the back door and see Mom in her chair, her crossed leg bouncing as if shaking off flies.

“We have company,” she says. Before I can ask who, two police officers come into the living room. They ignore me and begin looking through drawers.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

She waves me over and hands me a piece of paper. “It’s called a warrant. It entitles these men to look anywhere they want. See, a judge even said they could.” Louder, she says, “We used to have something called a Fourth Amendment in this country.”

“What are they looking for?”

“Read the warrant, Luther. It’s in there. Short version, though, marijuana. Ever hear of it?” I nod that I have. “You ever see me using it? Ever see it around?”

I shake my head no to both questions. One can be truthful and still not be honest.

“They’ll be done soon.” Then she smiles and starts in on her crossword puzzle. “What’s a six-letter word meaning rain?”

“Shower? Deluge?”

“Deluge,” she says and jots it down. “I knew that, by the way. Just testing you.”

Mom puts down the paper when the older of the two tells her they’re done. “Well, am I in trouble for using too many extension cords? Having an overdue book?” He doesn’t smile.

“Doing our job.”

“Why not do it again? You probably missed something,” she says to needle him.

I say, “Officers, our cat’s been poisoned.” Mom’s head pops up.

“Buster’s dead?” she says.

“And I know who did it, too,” I say.

“How do you know it’s been poisoned?” asks the younger officer. He has a red face I don’t like and looks big in the chest like he lifts weights.

“She threatened him. Mom and I both heard her, and now she’s done it. Are you going to do something about it?”

“File a complaint. We can’t go off investigating something like this without first getting a complaint,” the older one says.

“It was Edna Walcott,” I say. “She lives next door. She’s home right now.”

“File the complaint,” he says again. “But unless someone actually saw her giving your cat poison, I mean actually putting the poison in your cat’s mouth, well, good luck.”

They leave, and Mom and I put the house back the way it was. I think about Buster, Mrs. Walcott, and where Mom could have hidden what those cops were looking for.

Mom says never let anyone know what you’re thinking and how you feel about it because people not knowing gives you the advantage. So when I go outside and see Mrs. Walcott at her bird feeders, I don’t let on about Buster. She’s filling the feeders, humming as she scoops and pours. She’s wearing a sunbonnet, leather gloves, and a jacket with long, loose sleeves.

She doesn’t hear me coming. I go right up behind her and say, “Afternoon, Mrs. Walcott,” which startles her. She sees that it’s me and says hello and goes back to filling the feeder.

“I’m bringing your pan back,” I say. She squints figuring out what I’m talking about. “You gave us that meatloaf.”

I can tell she doesn’t like being bothered. “Didn’t I tell you to keep it?”

“We don’t need another pan.” I don’t explain Mom’s rule about gifts.

“Just set it down, then, Luther.”

“It’s washed, Mrs. Walcott. I don’t want to get it dirty.” Underneath that sunbonnet I can tell her hair’s fixed. Her hair’s always done up regardless of what she’s doing. “If your door’s unlocked, I’ll set it in the kitchen.” She’s not happy, but I smile and say, “That was good meatloaf, Mrs. Walcott.”

She pulls keys from her jacket pocket. They're tied together with a white shoelace. "Come on, then." The back door's locked even though she's right outside.

We go into the kitchen. A covered pot simmers on the stovetop. The kitchen smells like cabbage and roast beef. "Set it on the counter." She wants me to leave, but I'm in no hurry. "Is there anything else, Luther?" I lean back against the counter and look around like she did the day she brought the meatloaf. I consider opening a cabinet, moving things around.

"Luther?"

"What are you fixing?" I say, pointing to the stove.

"Beef stew."

"Smells good."

"It's not done yet." She doesn't act friendly, probably afraid I want a bowl to take home.

"You having trouble with rats?" I ask.

"What are you talking about?"

I point to the D-Con on the window ledge. "Over there, Mrs. Walcott."

"Can't be too careful, Luther. Go on now. I've got work to do."

But I don't move. Mrs. Walcott turns to her stew, removes the lid releasing a cloud of steam and stirs it, acting like I'm not there.

"Some woman from the county came by our house the other night," I say.

She ignores me at first, but finally says, "Is that right?"

"She took an interest in our kitchen. Same as you did when you came by."

She stiffens a little, but doesn't turn. "I think you should leave."

"Mom says you're the one who called them. Called them because she helped Louise Jerkins that week. Called because you didn't like Buster." Watching her stir with her back to me makes me madder. "But you don't have to worry about Buster anymore, because he's dead. I think he was poisoned."

She doesn't turn, but her voice shakes a little when she says, "You have to go, Luther. Right now or else I'm calling your mom."

"Call her," I say. "She's home."

When she does turn she's got no idea how close behind her I am. She takes a step back, but being up against the stove she's got nowhere to go.

"Get away, Luther."

All I want is to scare her for killing Buster and calling the county. But when she reaches behind to steady herself, she knocks the boiling pot far enough off its burner so that the low flame catches her sleeve. Mrs. Walcott bats her arms about, striking the pot so hard that beef stew slops over killing the flame. In an instant the fire spreads up her arms and chest. I'm too stunned to move.

"Help me," she says, waving and lurching to the sink. I watch her fumble with the faucet while the fire melts more of her clothes. I grab a dishtowel and beat at the flames. The water sprays around the kitchen as the fire moves down her front. Burning, she falls on her knees surrounded by smoke, water, and the smell of beef and cabbage. Her mouth moves, or maybe twitches, but no words come out. It's hot, she's melting, and I don't know what to do.

Scared, I drop the dishtowel and run.

When I get home, Mom asks, "Where have you been?" We hear a fire truck in the distance followed moments later by an explosion.

Wendy Birge comes back two days later. This time Mom doesn't give her a hard time.

"What an awful thing that happened to your neighbor," Wendy Birge says. "I hear a gas leak caused it."

"That's what we hear, too," Mom says. "Nothing more than an accident."

As Mom says this, I recall how damaged and helpless Mrs. Walcott looked right before I ran off. I can't forget the smell of roast beef and cabbage. Mom never asked about it, but for some reason she reminded me once the fire trucks had left that some things are better kept to one-

self.

“Must be hard losing a neighbor. Were you close?”

“We’d been neighbors for a long time. Just hope they clear up that mess soon. Right now the entire neighborhood smells like a fire pit. So, what’s this about?”

“A follow-up visit,” she says.

“I suppose that was on the sheet you left me, too.”

“It’s routine.”

“And all this is because the county gives me money?”

Wendy Birge smiles. “Policy, you know.”

“Get on with it then. Luther, lead the way.”

She’s got to be surprised when she opens the refrigerator and finds the inside clean and smelling like a pine forest. She opens a container holding what’s left of the Hormel chili from the night before. She checks the date on the milk. She finds the freezer defrosted.

Mom says. “Want to see more? The medicine cabinet? Luther’s sock drawer?”

“I’ve seen enough. Thanks.”

Then Mom gets ornery. “Weren’t you asking about Randy Givens the last time you were here? Yes, I believe you were. Didn’t I read that he got arrested on drug charges? Anyway, two officers came by here with a warrant. You know anything about that?”

She shakes her head, pretending she doesn’t. Mom always says don’t trust people who have power to disrupt your life. Those who get paid to help you always turn out to be liars.

Mom moves Wendy Birge to the front door. Once there the county woman stops and says, “The last time I was here I may have accidentally let your cat out. It was dark and it happened so fast that I wasn’t sure. But I keep thinking about it.”

“We’ve already established that accidents happen,” Mom says.

“I didn’t see your cat. Hope nothing bad came of it.”

“It’s been my experience that rarely will anything good come from an accident.”

“Oh, no. Did something happen?”

“Don’t worry. I said ‘rarely,’ not always.”

She leaves and Mom turns off the porch light. Mom says, “Luther, remember this. Never apologize and never admit to something even if you did it. Do that and you’ll minimize a lot of anguish.” She sits down. “I asked Louise if I could return to work and she’s agreeable. Nobody needs to know about it but us.”

—James O’Gorman

