

Quercus

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

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cover image:

Daniel Rairdin-Hale ('03)

The Geographer

Neoprene, tissue paper, acrylic, and synthetic hair
2019

inside back-cover image:

Megan Peterson

Sisterhood

Magazine collage, acrylic, and colored pencil
7.25" x 8.5", 2019

Special thanks to Chris Reno.

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Bloom

Imagine, if you would, a single flower
Whose buds prepare to blossom in the hour
While hidden signals, chemical in nature
And known by scientific nomenclature,
Infiltrate the bulb. Imagine them
Twitching to life, from root to stalk and stem
Into the buds, which sample them and ponder:
“Should I expand my beauty over yonder?
Or shall I stay congealed within this curl,
My secret wonder never to unfurl?”
There’s no decision. What must be must be.
The certitude of biochemistry
Insists the flower open, so it will.
It cannot choose to stop itself, or still
The wild expansion. So we too expand,
Through processes we cannot understand.

—*Philip Goldfarb Styr*

October 2019

I thought that it was fall; that was a lie.
Or if it was, it was a fall in hell
Where angels for their faults forever fry
And sizzle in the darkness, with the smell
Of sulfur their surround. I cannot tell
If Iowa is heaven in the spring
But if it is, then I am sure I fail
To sweat my sins out as I feel the sting
Of endless summer. I hate everything
Because I cannot breathe. False autumn burns
Not with the red-gold riot that should cling
To every tree until the season turns,
But with the fire of the fiends. And yet
When winter falls, I know I'll pray to sweat.

—Philip Goldfarb Styr

Fairy Tale (R)endings

It is never surprising when children are chewed.
They are always so awful at reading the signs:
A house in the forest constructed of food,
Or an oven designed on gargantuan lines.
They're under-observant of double entendres
But totally trust a convenient excuse:
The wolf who is tending Grandmother's dichondras
Needs but to make sure that his bonnet's not loose.
A voluminous cauldron should serve as a warning,
As should even a touch of a tooth as décor;
Some are force-fed to fatten them evening and morning:
It's rather remarkable what they ignore.
It is nonetheless noted by those who are able
(While the shifting of vowels is harder to hear),
That when "lovely to meet you" means meat on the table,
It should surely inspire a soupçon of fear.
Because they're so small, they don't notice proportions
Of giants or ogres that loom overhead.
Despite scattering breadcrumbs from their own small portions,
They're caught unawares when we grind them for bread.
In short, it's no secret that children are foolish
And frequently find themselves fed to a troll.
It's just being practical, not at all ghoulish,
To note they're delicious when stuffed in a roll.
But to every eager devourer reading,
Who might have been tempted to taste 'til they're filled,
I cannot but caution you all against feeding:
They always get saved—and then you get killed.

—Philip Goldfarb Styr

Her

I know her with a fuller face,
a black perm and red lips, loud
and taking up space long before
it was the thing to do. In this picture
she stands still, though time is marching
me with it, always older and older and
busier than the season before.

In my dreams she floats now, but
in my memories I know better: steel-
toed boots that stomped on rag rugs,
throwing flakes of dirt like confetti,
arms weighed down to earth by
five-pound buckets of potatoes, butter
beans, water, silk-laden sweet corn.

She is tougher than nails, unwilling
to bend under the weight of the hammer.
I am often broken in half by the quick-snap
of fingers on a dirt orange carrot. I know her
there, in that same living room: wood stove
burning us up, 80 degrees, head leaned back
on beige suede, long fingers searching for
this page, searching for her, but younger, for
me, but here, for us, but together.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Perdition

There is an ache for all that once was;
you feel it in your bones on the first snow.
How do we let things that never should have
broken break? I'm *devastated*, she says, *by all*
I cannot save. The fragility of life is that everything
else goes on when it doesn't. I want to tell her,
you cannot fuse two people together by force;
you cannot make bread without heat. Even the
branch so weighted by snow will eventually break
from the bend, and we are not half as strong or grounded.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Gardening

My father planted close rows of beans
in our backyard. We liked saying grace
for the bounty, life abundant—never mind
they were slender, easy for us to kill.

I snapped the ready ones into a bowl
and left the others for dead on the stems,
knobby, too tough to enjoy. Tender was best,
but picking too small meant the decadence

of Herod's infanticide. I chose well—quickly,
in time for dinner—while my brother cut the grass.
In the kitchen, mom took my full, heavy bowl,
untied the loose ribbon of her straw hat

and lifted it from my hair. She and I took turns
in the garden. When it was mine, the brim
poured shade over my shoulders like sleep.
The blades of the mower hummed far away.

It is July again, but no one plants anything.
I drive to the store for pouches of carrots,
pre-cut into baby shapes and purchased cold.
I forget to eat them, discard the rot. I touch

the garden-fresh beans but can't stand them
without her. I choose radishes for the bitterness,
the hair on their heads. I admire the clean insides
exposed when the knife goes through.

—Emily Kingery

One More Dog Poem

I had no time for anything in the years I spent
lying in front of trains. I guess I went to college

and wrote obsessively about his obsession
with hallucinogens, got some thoughtful nods

with that poem about never wanting him
to cry for my sake, but mostly I stayed

on the phone until my ear went sore
from his manic reports on the progress

of his screenplay—basically *The Sopranos*
plagiarized to shreds, with all the commas

taken out. I wrote about a dog returning
to its vomit (I was the dog), another dog

being fed (his actual dog) while I waited
for him to do anything other than sleep

while I begged for attention (I suppose
I must have been a dog in that one, too).

Anyone who knows me knows I am
a cat person at heart. Why so many dogs,

they wonder, and I explain them away
with loyalty, which is a dressier word

than clinginess or codependence or
the martyrdom of youth, but it was

never about that. He never made plans

or remembered my birthday or voice

or name, and those were the good times,
when so long denied the pleasure of tears

I could invent them. I could throw in a dog
or two or three and sprawl out with a flourish,

tangle myself in a cord. I could cradle hard
for centuries that droning, impassive receiver.

—*Emily Kingery*

History

The umbrella pines look like cells from underneath. I am at the other end of a microscope, peering deep into the branching brown filaments of the canopy. They twist and spin away from each trunk's nucleus, splitting the high dark needles into stained-glass organelles of olive and sage and emerald. A veritable galaxy of pine needles and the spaces between them—I look closer and they separate even smaller. The outer border of needles forms cell walls, glowing golden-green from the sun above. Gaps between cells and blue-sky-shifting-cytoplasm swim from blue to green with my every step.

And yet I am underneath this, passing tree trunks of flaking bark too big to put my hands around and feel the lingering stickiness of sap, and I am so, so small.

My new shoes beat on old ground. Rubber soles roll over rounded gaps in Roman cobblestones, worn apart over thousands of years of water and ice and walking. I hear the slap of sandals as, in my mind, two boys race by, dodging carts and sellers and soldiers under the shade of trees. Though not my umbrella pines, they crown dark green just the same.

How many people have walked this road before me? I hold my breath, then force myself to release my trembling.

The curving cloud-tops of the pines arch, push higher into the blue dome of the sky, echo the arches held by keystones trembling day after day, year after year, for two millennia. Rounded waist-high walls bring me to a keystone of the past city. A bakery thousands of years old, ovens long gone cold and little more than holes in cone-shaped stone. I fill the reticulated brick walls with quick-stepping merchants, exchanging snips of jokes and arguments as they hurry to the docks. Barges wait on the river, weighted with grain, soon to be filled with bags of shifting silver

denarii.

All of this history, and I haven't even touched the trees.

—Megan Peterson



Samhain

I spiral
olive oil onto
the pumpkin seeds

before plunging

my hands deep
in the bowl.

I have loved you
for so long

now as
the baby sleeps
I catch the lift
of your voice
in slippery palms

and boost it
to the branches
outside the
kitchen window

where a flock
of winter
european starlings

has just landed
like so many
fist-sized
universes.

—Sarah Holst ('11)

death and foxes

in the photo
the dead fox
had stars
in her eyes

and I read
the story of how
the old woman
found her on the roadside
and brought her
to your door saying

*I think I was meant
to bring you this fox*

you did not say why
and I did not ask

I looked at the picture
with my head
heavy and alive
on the pillow
the baby asleep
next to me
his brow sweaty
against my temple

it was the day after
the day I learned
that my grandma
was dying and
all day I had
been picturing
her hands

feeding chipmunks
and raccoons

just like she
taught me not to

—*Sarah Holst ('11)*

Lake LaVerne

These images did not make my last poem.
I wanted them to emulate Monet,
to float between reflections of a home
like Giverny. But here no lilies sway.
Instead green algae blooms below gray sky
while naked trees lean down from shores above
and scraggly branches hang nearby
my muddy shoes. No idyll, yet it's love
that bonds me here in idle thought
of beauty found beneath the bubbly grime,
the fizz of microscopic life. At first distraught,
I'd fixed on ugliness. The second time
I didn't whine but sighed in gratitude
for nature live—no painted platitude.

—*Nancy Hayes*

One week after the burn

black acres crunch acrid
as we traipse across what was
winter prairie:
dead stalks, seed heads leaning
on stiff stems
blond mounds of blown-over grasses
now ash, charred clumps—
bluestem remnants once nine feet—
here and there intact nests.
Black to green
by next week.
Not a battleground, but a garden
of possibility.
Nine feet
by July.

(Field Notes, April 6, 2019)

—Nancy Hayes

Mom?

“MOM!”

“M-O-M!”

“Ugh, where is she?” Jessica thundered down the back stairs, not impressed that her cries had gone unanswered.

“Mom! Where are you?” She heard a noise coming from the kitchen and went in, expecting to see her mother, but all she found was the kettle whistling at an annoyingly high pitch. She took it off the ring and turned off the hob. “Well, she has to be here somewhere if she was making tea,” she said out loud to convince herself that everything was perfectly normal, but she didn’t really believe it. Something didn’t feel right.

Jessica went to the adjoining living room and saw a plate of chocolate-chip cookies on the coffee table—her mother’s favourite. As she made her way to the foyer, she heard a crunch beneath her feet. She looked down and saw cookie crumbs. As she thought of how much trouble she would be in for walking them into the carpet, she realised that there was a trail of crumbs leading to the front of the house. She followed them to the foyer, where she found the front door ajar. The crumbs didn’t lead outside, though; they led to the basement door under the front staircase.

Jessica stood there, contemplating her next move. She had to decide between going outside to look for help and following the crumbs downstairs. The door leading to the basement was cracked open. She opened it fully and called out one more time: “Mom?” When there was no reply, she inhaled and began her descent. As she made her way down, she tried hard not to think of all the times her brother Alex would trick her into going down in search of lost treasure, only to be confronted by him in a scary mask, leaving her in tears. She had hated the basement ever since.

At the bottom she looked around without seeing anyone; she heard only the washer and dryer. “Mom?” she tried again. She rounded the wall of shelving and in the left corner saw her mom swaying to and fro while she folded laundry. “MOM!” Jessica

screamed, and her mother spun on her heels and pulled the head phones from her ears.

“Jeepers, creepers, Jess. You practically scared me to death! Don’t creep up on your momma like that, okay?”

“I scared you? Seriously? I’ve been calling you for like an hour. I was worried.”

Her mother laughed. “Oh, honey, don’t be so dramatic. I haven’t been down here for an hour, so I’m sure that’s not true. Anyway, what did you need me for?”

Jessica’s bottom lip protruded like a petulant child’s. “I can’t find my favourite white top. I wanted to wear it to Sam’s house tonight.”

Her mother reached back and pulled a white top from a stack of folded laundry. “This one?” the garment in question hanging on the crook of her finger.

Jessica beamed. “That’s the one.” She leaned forward to grab the top and kissed her mother on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom. You’re the best.”

“I really need to teach you kids to do your own laundry! Here, grab a bundle while you’re going up.”

As they crossed the basement, Jessica questioned her mom about the cookies. “Why did you make such a mess?” she asked.

“If Alex or I did that, we’d be in big trouble.”

“What cookies?” her mom asked, confused.

“The chocolate-chip cookies all over the living room floor and the foyer.”

“I didn’t eat cookies today.”

Jessica had just put her foot on the bottom step when the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut. They both jumped.

“It’s okay,” she told her mom. “It must just be the wind—the front door is open.”

“Why on earth would you leave it open?”

“I didn’t; you did!”

“I most certainly did not,” her mother said as they reached the

top. She turned the knob and pushed, but nothing happened.

“Well, that’s odd. There’s no lock on this door; it must be jammed. Richard? Alex? Are you there? We’re stuck in the basement. Richard? Alex?”

“Alex,” Jessica called out, “let me out of here or I’m going to kill you!”

“Jessica Anne Sommers!”

“What? He’s doing this to torture me! I hate him!”

“Be that as it may, you do NOT hate your brother!”

Jessica just rolled her eyes. After a few more attempts at the door, she got quiet. “Mom, shh. I think I hear something.”

They put their ears to the door. It was quiet for a moment, then they heard heavy footsteps, followed by a loud thud against the door.

“Richard? Alex?” Jessica’s mom called out, but again no one answered.

Jessica and her mom stared at each other, not knowing what to do, but both understood that something was wrong. Then they saw it: a stream of dark red flowing under the door. Jessica dropped her stack of laundry, and her mom clasped a hand over Jessica’s mouth and silently shook her head.

Jessica closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded. When her mom was certain that Jessica was calm, she leaned into her. “Jessica.”

But Jessica wasn’t listening. She was focusing on not throwing up by distracting herself with the rainfall of clothing that had covered the staircase and part of the floor below. A smell of meadows wafted through the basement.

“Jessica!” her mother whispered again, urgently this time, forcing her back to reality. “Jessica, go back down stairs and call the police. NOW!”

“But Mommy, my phone is in my room!”

“That phone is like an extra appendage growing out of your hand, and now you decide to leave it in your room?”

Jessica's eyes welled up with tears. "I'm sorry, Mommy."
Her mom wrapped her in a tight embrace. "Don't worry, honey; we're going to get out of this. Come on."
They made their way through the carpet of clothing to the small rectangular window on the back-right wall. They tried to open it but it was jammed. Jessica's mom took her by the shoulders. "Okay, sweetheart, listen to me. We have to break it. It's going to make some noise, so we won't have too much time. The glass is going to hurt—you'll just have to ignore it. Get out and run like hell, okay?"
"What about you?"
"Don't you worry about me." She looked her daughter straight in eyes. "I'll be right behind you."
"Mommy?"
"It's going to be okay, honey. You're going to be okay."
As her mom found a towel and wrapped it around her elbow, Jessica began to cry again.
"Mom! I'm so sorry. I love you!"
Her mom drew her near and kissed her on the forehead.
"Oh, my sweet baby, you have nothing to be sorry about. I love you so much. No matter what happens, always remember that. I love you more than life itself!"
After another kiss, Jessica's mom crouched by the window, her elbow poised.
"Ready?" she asked, looking at Jessica.
Jessica wiped her tears and nodded. Her mom smashed through the window and removed as much glass as she could. She moved out of the way to let Jessica through, but as she did, the door at the top of the stairs slowly creaked open. There was no one there.
"Mom?"
Her mom turned to her, pointed to the window and yelled, "GO! NOW!"
Jessica struggled but made it through. She turned back to help

her mom out, but when she did, she saw her charging up the stairs towards the open door, screaming like a banshee.

—*Edwina Cummins*

Mexican Standoff

The dark-red Volkswagen idled in the unbearable Texas heat. Sarah, its driver, drummed the steering wheel in time with the radio. She checked her watch. Four minutes. Four minutes until the team inside fired rounds into the ceiling, properly kicking off their job. Four minutes until the alarms were triggered and a new timer started. They would have a small window of time to grab the cash, get out to the car, and get the hell out of Dodge before the local police could respond.

There wasn't a better day or time than now, and her team knew it. They had been planning the heist for weeks—casing the bank, looking for vulnerabilities, timing the police response, studying traffic patterns for their escape. It was a small town in southern Texas, but they still stood to make millions, enough to live comfortably until they set up their next heist.

She gazed around, looking for anything out of the ordinary. There was a powder-blue Chevy idling across the street. It had been there when they arrived, and its driver sat at attention, drumming the steering wheel. Sarah had a bad feeling about the car; it was something they hadn't factored into their plan. But the driver looked pedestrian, harmless. Probably waiting for his wife to make a deposit, or something. Sarah hoped his wife wouldn't get hurt when things kicked off. She checked her watch. One minute.

A premature shot echoed down the street. Sarah knew something was wrong; her team wouldn't do anything early. She pulled out the burner phone and dialed the only number saved. No answer. Son of a bitch. She took a silenced Ruger from the glovebox and waited.

Lee had watched the dark-red Volkswagen pull in across the street and hadn't liked the look of the three men that had climbed out. Something about them seemed malicious. He had sent a text to Bonnie, his girl on the inside, before the group had crossed the threshold of the bank.

Bad vibes coming in. Maybe wait. He had gotten a simple response: Fuck 'em.

Lee checked his watch. One minute. He knew that by now, she was setting up near the entrance to behind the counter. They weren't after much, just what was in the drawers, maybe a wallet or two on the way out. Enough to get by until they made it to a secluded diner or gas station to knock over.

They had never hit a bank before, but the town was small and they had done their homework. One guard inside, then snatch as much cash as she could carry and get out before the cops could respond. Lee hated the Volkswagen being across the street, its driver sitting at attention, drumming the wheel. But there wasn't anything he could do.

As the time on his watch ran down to zero, a single shot echoed down the street. Right on time. Lee saw the woman sitting in the Volkswagen make a phone call, lean over, and pull something out of the glovebox. He pulled his snub-nosed revolver from the center console, just in case, and waited.

It had been too long; Sarah was starting to worry. She trusted her team, but it should have been a series of shots from an automatic submachine gun, not a single report. It was unlike them to be early in any stage, and the shot had been fired almost thirty seconds ahead of schedule. And now, as she looked at her watch, they were dangerously close to being out of time before the police arrived.

The thought of running flashed through her mind. After all, that was the plan: should things go south, she was to run before the cops showed up, and the rest of the team would call her and work out an escape. Maybe they had decided that one shot would be enough to control the crowd. But what was taking them so long? Something was definitely wrong, but Sarah waited with her Luger in her lap and focused on her breathing. She would give them one more minute, all she could spare before the cops would

show up.

A clattering of gunfire escaped the bank. Now that was a submachine gun, but it was also a goddamn problem. Why were they still shooting? Sarah wasn't going to wait to find out. She slammed the Volkswagen into drive and floored the accelerator. She looked toward the street ahead in just enough time to see the driver from the powder-blue Chevy across the street and slam her breaks. He was running at the bank with a nasty looking revolver in his hand.

Son of a bitch, Sarah thought, as she threw open her door and pointed her Luger.

"Son of a bitch!" Lee yelled, holding his hands out toward the dark-red Volkswagen, as if that would lessen the impact. The woman behind the wheel got out and pointed a pistol straight at his chest.

"Don't take one more step, or I'll put a hole in ya," she said. "What are you, a cop or something?"

"Do I look like a goddamn cop? I knew you people were bad luck the second you pulled up. I told Bonnie we should wait. She didn't fucking listen." Lee noticed that his arms were still outstretched at the hood of the car. He pointed his own revolver at the woman. "Look, I don't want any trouble with you. I'm just gonna go in there and get Bonnie, and then we're both going to get the hell out of here." Lee started taking steps toward the bank, not taking his eyes off of the woman.

"My boys'll shoot you dead the second you set foot in that bank, kid. And if you don't stop moving, I'll have to shoot you myself." She had the eyes of a killer. A professional. This wasn't her first standoff, and Lee didn't doubt that she would kill him without thinking twice. He had never pulled the trigger of his revolver; he wasn't even sure it worked.

"Okay, can you, like, contact your people in there? Just tell them to send Bonnie out here, and we'll leave. You can have the

money; I don't care. I just want to get out of here." He watched her think about it, the pistol never leaving his chest.

She nodded. "Yea, all right. I'll try to call again. Just . . . don't fucking move, all right?" As she ducked her head into the Volkswagen, never taking the gun off of him, Lee breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe they would make it out of this after all.

Then he heard the sirens.

Officer Burbank flew around the corner and slammed his cruiser's brakes when he saw two people pointing guns at each other in the middle of the street. He had never responded to a bank robbery before, but he had a feeling this was abnormal. He said a prayer and stepped out of his car, keeping its chassis between himself and two armed assailants. He had learned that at the Academy but had never had a chance to use it before. He knew that he'd be the only officer on scene for at least another five minutes. He just had to buy some time and not get shot.

"All right!" He called out. "Everyone put their weapons down and their hands up. I don't know what's going on here, but if everyone cooperates we can all get out of here alive. Sounds pretty good, right?" He pulled his side arm and aimed it at the kid facing him.

At the sound of the officer's voice, the woman turned and pointed her pistol him. He wanted to say something about a Mexican standoff, but he thought it might be too cliché. Instead, he settled for, "Look, we all have a lot to lose here, I'm sure. Let's just talk this out."

The kid shifted uncomfortably; Officer Burbank thought he looked over his head. But this woman with her weapon trained on his chest was a different story. All he had to do was convince the kid to turn on her, put her in the middle of two firearms, and he might be able to turn the situation around. Then, with these two dealt with, he could focus on what was happening in the bank.

Chaotic gun fire from inside interrupted his planning. The glass from the front doors shattered, and a woman about the same

age as the kid in the street careened through the wreckage, bullets flying all around her. With a spray of crimson, one found its mark, and the woman collapsed.

“Bonnie!” Lee shouted and ran to her on the pavement. He heard a bullet whiz overhead, from either the cop or the woman, it no longer mattered. Gunfire blazed around him, but none of it seemed to be directed at him. Bonnie was still breathing; the bullet had hit her in the shoulder. She was in pain, but it looked like she’d live. He knelt and rolled her onto her back just as two of the goons that had arrived with the woman in the Volkswagen emerged from the bank. He dropped his revolver, scooped her off the street, and carrying her in his arms, turned and ran as fast as he could toward his car. He heard more sirens and more gun fire but kept running. All he had to do was get her in the car and get the hell away.

Sarah dropped to the ground as one of the rounds from the officer connected with her shoulder. Last she had seen, the kid had dropped his revolver and was picking up the girl. She felt reassured by the cacophony of automatic fire that shredded the cop car in front of her. The reassurance was short lived, however, when more cars with sirens peeled around the corner and armed police officers poured from every door.

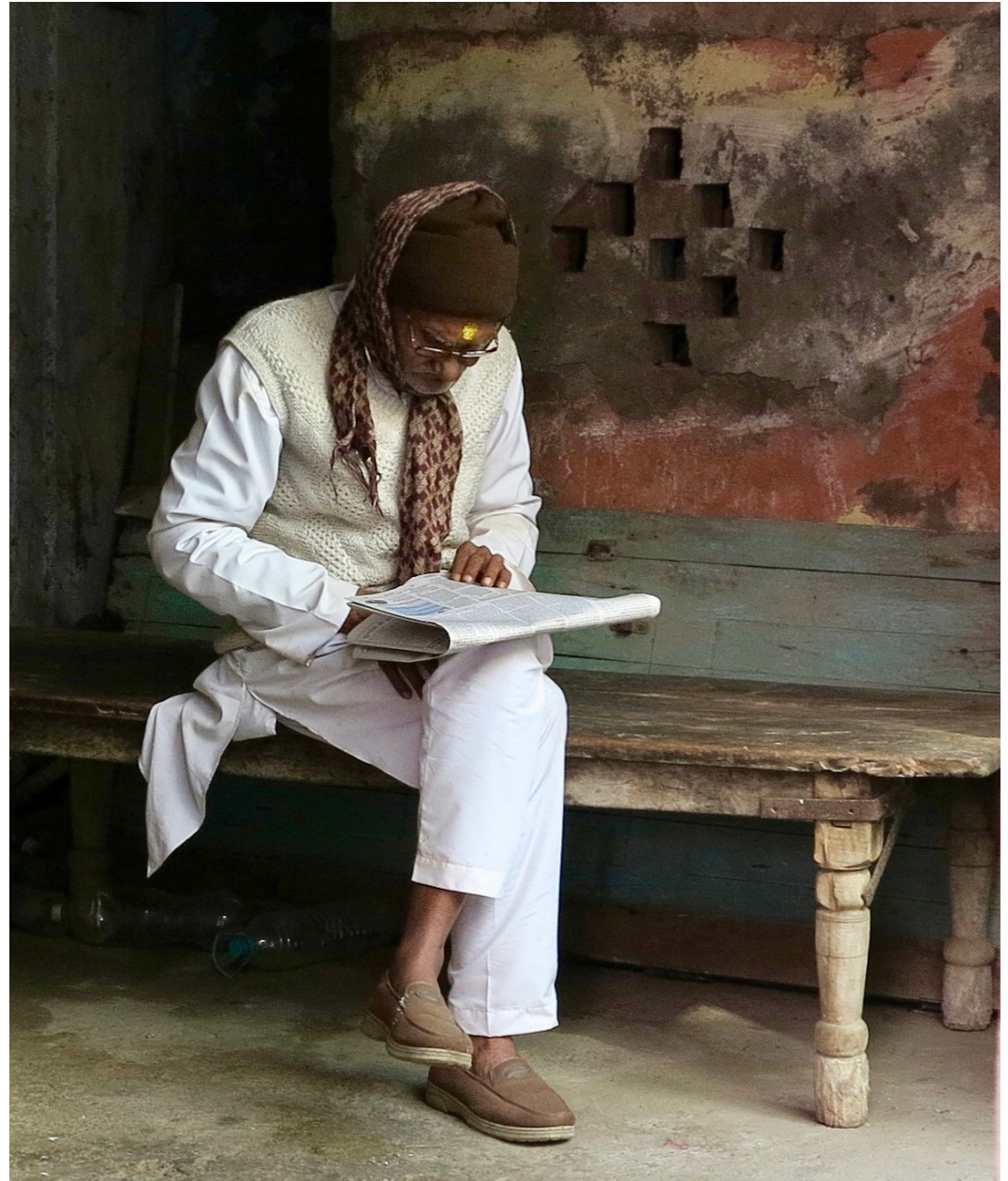
She aimed her Luger the best she could and started shooting. Her team was shooting from the bank’s entrance, and the police fired back, bullets flying overhead and cratering the pavement.

Sarah had always known that this would be how it would end. You could rob banks for only so long before it caught up to you. Another round hit her, this time in the leg. She couldn’t see her team, but the gunfire from that direction had slowed down to almost nothing. She was losing consciousness. As the police converged on her and the gunfire ceased and it all faded to black, Sarah couldn’t help but smile at the sound of tires peeling out.

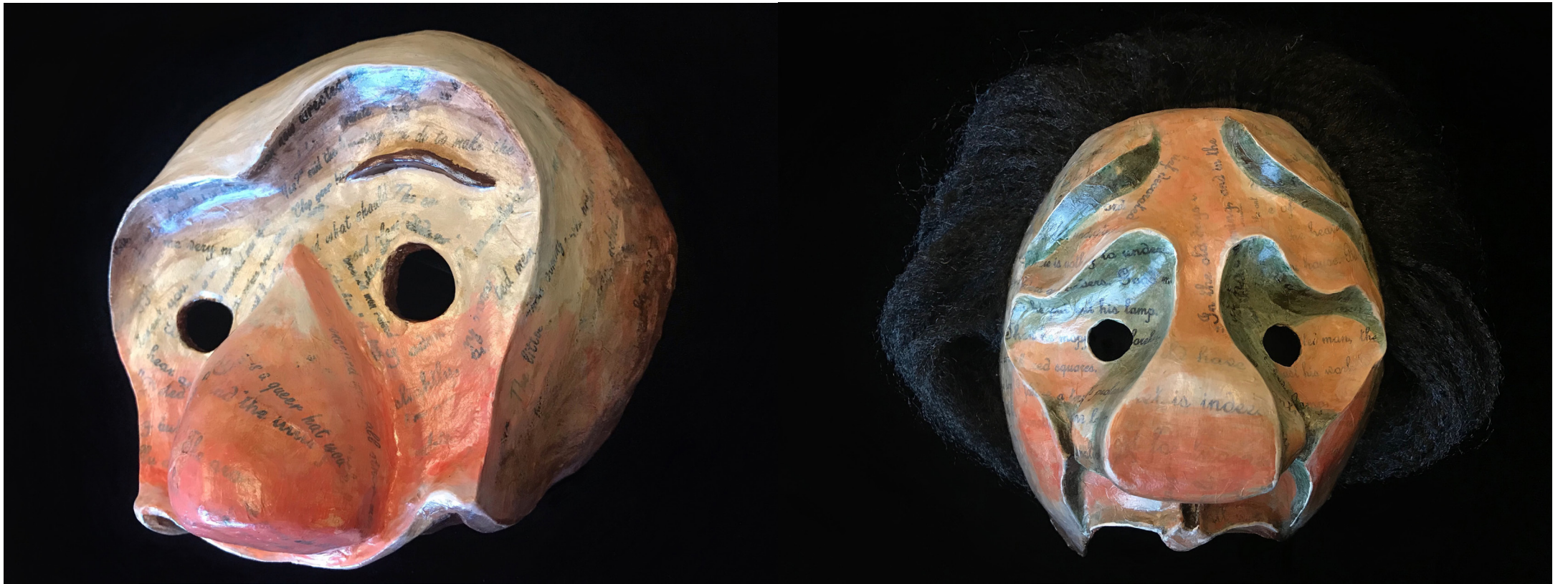
—Travis Ziegler









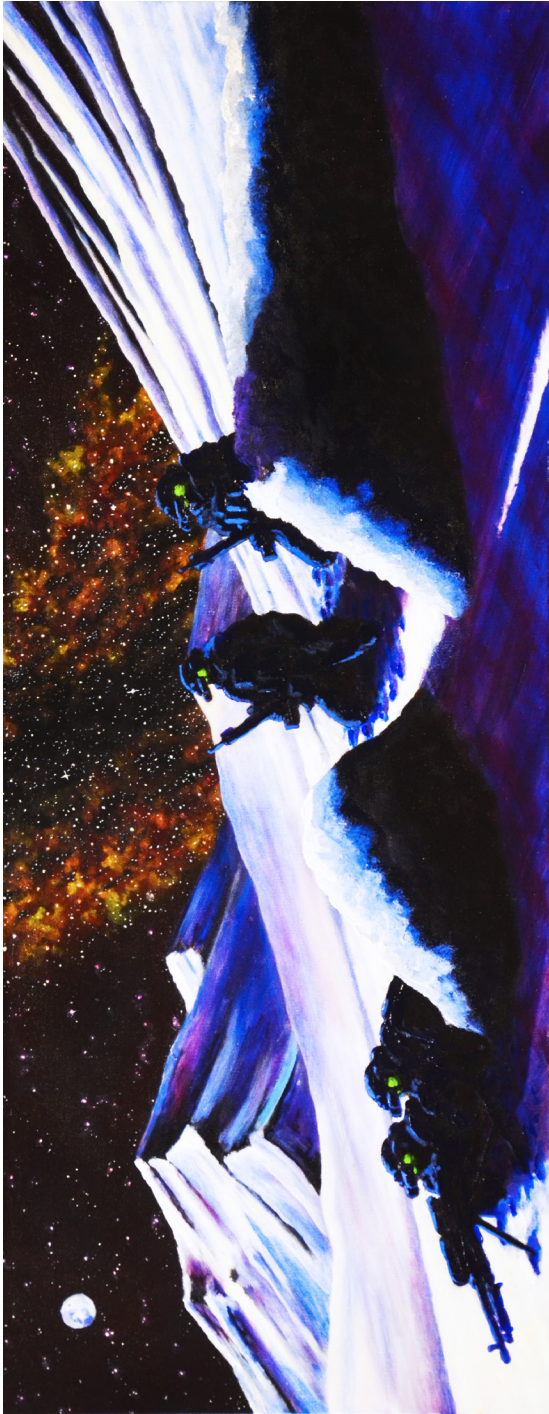


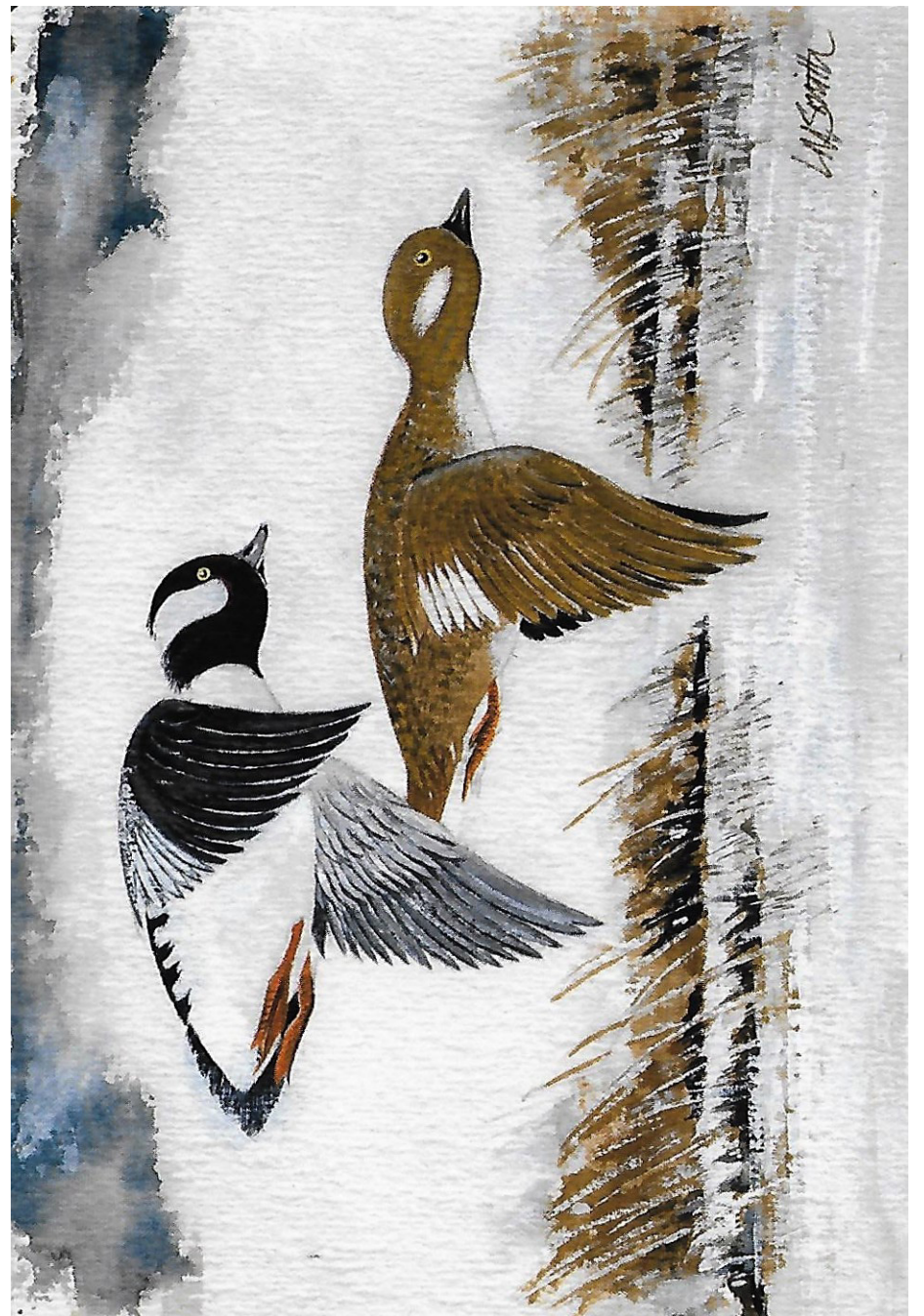




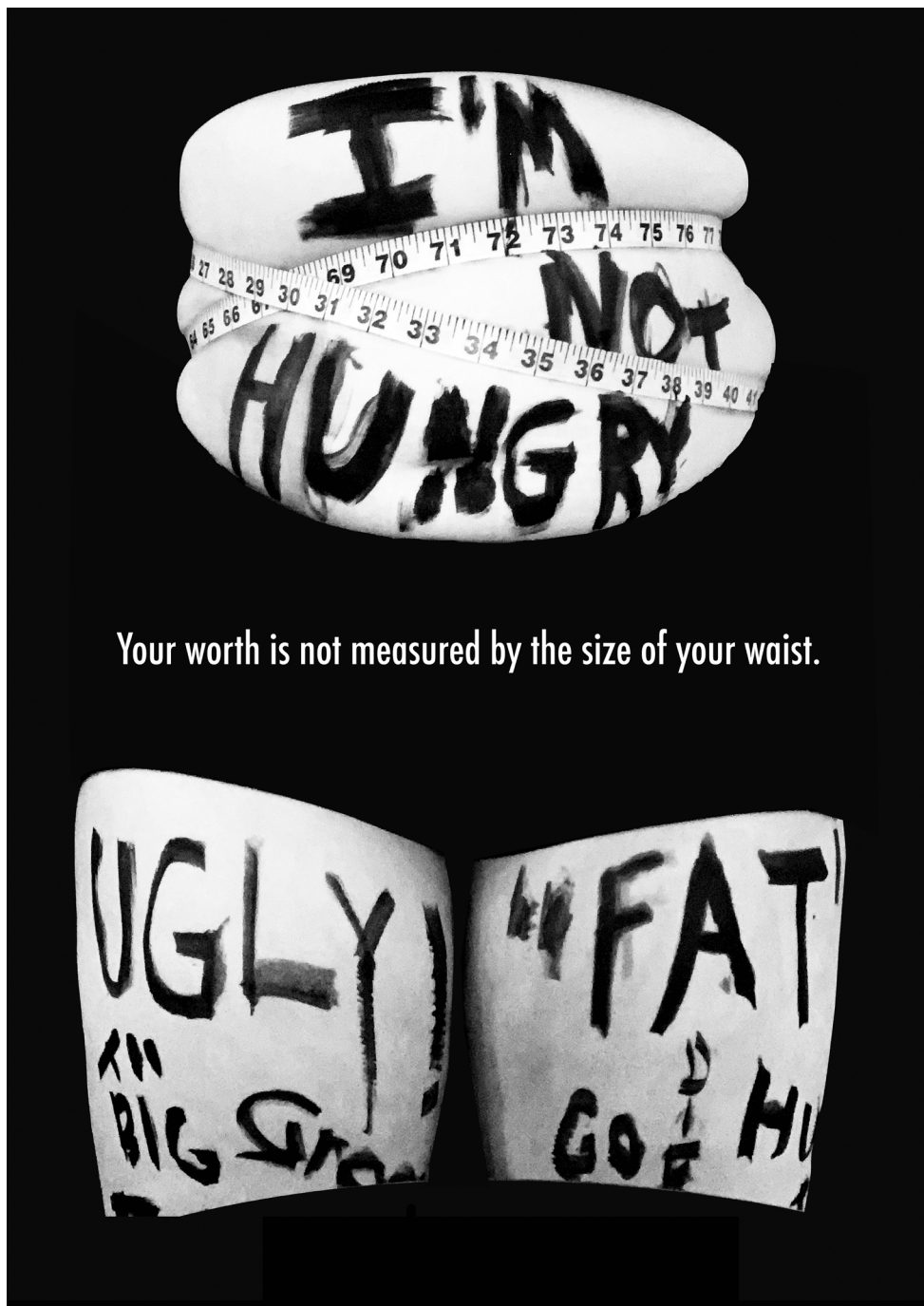












Your worth is not measured by the size of your waist.

wasteland, baby

as a son tugs on the sleeve of his father
there is a sun that burns inside of my gut.

a
young woman sits in front of the vanity
and applies her make-up.

a
business man barks into his phone
while catching the subway.

a
janitor mops the floors
with nowhere to go.

in and out
of candle-lit dinners,
to and from work
booking vacations with the money from work
looking for somewhere.

an old man
in a motel room with a photograph of marilyn monroe,
many men at home
with their wives,
bottles,
and
smoke,
but there is nowhere to go.

—Daniel Daley

The Face of Even

Chosen one,
if the burning daylight
is not yet felt,
a veil of faded visions
eclipsing the night
is still worn like a black sash
around my cheeks
and, unaligned from waking
the past quiets,
stilled not by whisper
nor sniffing sneeze
nor nightlight shadows.

Standing in your profile
at the nursery door
I inhale a long-lost prayer
and whip up a thin-lipped
but enchanted soul
from a saffron robe of time.
Why for Grace would I say
you never were? Pitched penny
shining, a scratch of blood,
regal nose tipped up
against an immense first step.
Such a perfect birth—all from
a mariner's misbegotten seed
swaddling a vast light
that held you spread thin
as my chipped dreams
skimmed across a distant sea.

The face of even
this wandering child
has always existed somewhere,

has always gummed my tummy
asking to touch clouds,
climbing the trellis
of my golden hair,
scampering underfoot
between strings of dust,
likely attached in print
to an embroidered diary,
extending forever into
the distances we keep, or peeked
over the ear of a dead aunt
faded against a creased Polaroid.

Kin to the callused hands,
I was born with you, the survivor,
in the wet month of April,
our month the thread
the needle knitted
and where we clung
to an oft-contested lullaby
with Mother's crumb magnets,
more common than breath
and just as warm, blood to marrow
to bone to dust, always forgetting
to hem the cloths of birth.

In death's first early step
how could I imagine
you never were
without imagining me?

—*Chuck Blair* ('76)

Travel Prayer

How terrible these slaps,
from concrete airstrips
to each overflowing gutter
in our sunken city.

How lightning pink
from heaven scares me just
as fourth-grade scoldings once.

O Sun, you who fade
the machines abandoned
in the dying summer grass,
please

surface—to brighten
her road home. Hold her
in your harbor of light

as straight through darkness I sail.

—Jeremy Thomas Burke ('99)

Overheard in Moonlight

Look: this period-
red sky retreats into dark;
out sulks eventide.

An expert on sedge
and rush when faced with a heart
attack on a stroll.
Rise, moon. Spill that hand-me-down
fulgor on your disciples.

What you drop on us
may we never share with D.
A. Powell, Lucille Clifton,
Jorie Graham, and all.

But poetry is
our heirloom—an ownerless
bouquet of grasses
to be passed on in the dark
corner of need.

My point exactly—
when you get something for free
aren't you the product?

Airplanes are poems
made hundreds of years over
by children, thousands
of women's, who did not know
how else to spend a lifetime.

You ought to spend more
days in shadow.

where such souls forget their afterlives shoes clonk along the moonlit walk

—Jeremy Thomas Burke ('99)



Whenever I told her 'I love you' she would say
THANK YOU...

-I love you too, honey.

The pause between thank you and I love you
rings in me a genuine, sincere, gratitude.

-HER being grateful for my LITTLE BIT of love
makes me feel SMALL...

nestled in her shadow, sheltered from the wind

Last Lecture on Disruptive Innovation

after W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

Well, as the secretary of the Founder's Club
has instructed, I shall place myself upon
a multi-ordinal matrix before I begin: imagine
a map of the stars. Not one that details each
mass between holes in our night sky,
rather, you know, one that shows us
exactly where Sam Jackson resides
in relation to Scarlett Johansson,
their hand-drawn faces hovering
over a technicolor city.

Now, instead of something flat,
visualize a holographic sphere.

Do you see it?

Then I will point

right . . . there,

a position per-pen-
dicular to the more established
value networks and say, yes.

There.

Okay, I can commence.

Only in recent years,
since entrepreneurs lassoed their guiding star
and executives slammed well-lotioned
hands upon their cherry tables
in fits of laggard cheer,
do we have the requisite verve
to disrupt . . . sorry, I simply must
take this—what? yes. no. I'm leaving
now—so sorry. I am afraid I must
move along. A personal matter
requires my attention elsewhere.
There shall be nothing

further. Enjoy the rest
of your evenings, but don't
forget: what you cannot
corrupt, disrupt—yes.
I'm on my way—

—*Jeremy Thomas Burke ('99)*

she catches

she catches fireflies with
her translucent open mouth
betrays the bright-brightness of her soul
welcomes the night
lets the moths in
they eat her sacred body from the inside out
& she blesses them

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

the words break

the words break in my palms—bread , bones in
pieces , open fluttering hearts , glass hitting
the dark wood floor

one day i sew them shut , seams sealed with scales
gathered from the wings of dead bumblebees
i offer them to my mother—patchwork
of healing—she asks me why it's not prettier

my voice is stitched into the hope at her feet , desperate & shaking
& ugly
i leave it all behind—the breaking & the lies & the
love—the leaving-screach never stops , & i wonder if she knows
this endless ache

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

you and your girl-body

you & your girl-body
soft curves & sharp edges
always on the road between lost & found the definition of
liminality

your girl-body is dirty with false hope
shining with joyous anger

your girl-body with its chest
beating , screaming power
waits for you
you will find it

& when you do
when you do
you will destroy everything you knew
with shockwaves like ripples in lakes
where the children hurl rocks at fish

you & your girl-body will become
never-ending lightning & desperate
wailing & thundering , burning revenge

you will set the world on
fire , only the ghosts will
withstand the blistering heat

while the earth smolders
you & your girl-body will learn despair
& become god

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

i roll rosary beads

i roll rosary beads between my fingers feel
the round weight the chain embedded through the middle think
siblings think tight throat think lungs that don't want to expand
lose
my place & start over & start over

let words fall out of my mouth, baby's
breath turned hailstones, before i can remember
myself we are sitting in church & i am wearing
an uncomfortable dress & the priest is talking about submitting
to your parents to god-given authority to imagined persecution

the only thing keeping me from exploding into holy
fury or despair like the flood of Noah is the rosary cheap
plastic carved into octagons
cross & medal & beads chained together some
kind of reminder that everything is temporary that i
will be able to breathe again, that i won't always be choking
on blood or expectations or the body
of christ, that someday i will throw open the windows, let my
hair down or cut it all off, step into a field of wildflowers, throw
my arms out & spin like freedom & my body will live in all
its unholy glory, let the wind whip away my sanctity

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

hey, i'm sorry

hey, i'm sorry for texting so late, but you never sleep
anyway & i can't seem to relax enough to shut my eyes

tonight i'm thinking about kissing you in the beehive
again, looking to make sure no one is coming to order

coffee & following you to the back room, kissing
you, remembering to take my glasses off, leaning

against the industrial sink—you in your shirt that smells
like espresso & vegetable soup, me sweating from my

winter coat, from telling you i couldn't be with you if
you wanted to be with him—i saw a text you sent me after

the reading where i read a poem about you—you said something
about not wanting me to live in the past & god why do people
keep saying that, keep

telling me the present is so much better when i can
canonize the past, edit halos onto our heads & sainthood

into our history? your mouth becomes heaven & i am
holy against all odds & you do not post snapchat

stories in bed with him—you post them of me instead &
i wake up cranky & confused & kiss you back to sleep or

you kiss me back to life or we never stop kissing in the back
room of the campus starbucks. i know it's late & i know you

want to live in the present, but i'm sitting here in the
past & our ghosts are visiting & i can't stop thinking about

your body in my arms, your tongue in my mouth, us—
the ark of the covenant in a knockoff starbucks

golden & holy & eternal

—*Mary Roche* ('18)

we grew up

we grew up with the loudest silence
following us with yellow & red lights
warning us against sharing too much
winding between the women
spreading rumors & truths like dandelion seeds
like cobwebs in attics
like worm-eaten apples in november

i don't know how we lived
in all that quiet, all that death
even when we spoke
we couldn't say anything
no matter how hard we tried

some of us break out
tear through the soundproofing
voice our shame pain anger power
with screams that sound
like music
like freedom
like some terrifying crack in the sky
jagged & dirty & honest

some of us stay out
find hands to hold
that aren't our own
cough the dirt out of our lungs

some of us spit out
blood & broken teeth &
storm back for our mothers & our sisters
armed with holy fury
with war cries that rip
through the cobwebs & return life to the dead

& with the knives that
we found in our throats

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

Reasons

The thing they never tell you is how tired you get. And it's not something you should get tired of. You went through a terrible loss, people feel bad for you, they want you to know that they're thinking of you. They express themselves through cards, food, that kind of thing—but what they really love is talking to you. Maybe they went through something like this themselves and they're fine now, and they think that because it happened to them, it's universal and you'll be okay, too; never mind that every experience is different. It might be that they haven't been through anything like what you've been through, but they've been thinking of you, and they've prepared their words of wisdom with the intent that you'll feel better—because of their words. But even the most well-intentioned words get repetitive. And sometimes people botch it altogether. Would you believe that a woman came up to me and my wife while we were out walking just after it happened, and said, "You're young—you can try again!" As if that was the answer, like she was something that could be replaced by a different model.

And you can't do anything. You have to just smile and nod and say thank you for your concern or sympathy or understanding, or whatever the emotion is that they're trying to express, and then go about your day. You likely won't think about it again—unless it's something that sticks with you, like saying your loss can be replaced. Or unless they really mess up.

Which is what Lee did. It was kind of the last straw, and now I don't know how I can make it better.

See, my wife and I were out on a walk. We walk a lot now. It gets us out of the house, gives us an excuse to get the dog and ourselves some exercise, and means we don't have to just sit and look at each other anymore. It's not that we don't want to see each other; it's just that sometimes we need a change of pace. Actually, we need a change of pace a few times a day. If we're in the house, there's only so much time we can spend not talking

about it. You can't talk about what happened when you're outside—it wouldn't be polite. What if someone were to come by and hear you talking about the checkup, the concern, the lack of a heartbeat, the delivery, your wife's fever, the ice beds, and then, finally, the end? No one wants to hear you talking about that while you're out—oh, they want to talk about it, but they don't want to hear you talk about it.

So we walk a lot, even though it's hot. You can stay inside the air conditioning for only so long. And sometimes we walk past the park in town that has a playground. We don't talk about it—we just walk there. And we look. I know what I'm thinking, and I know what she is, too, but we don't talk about it.

Lee lives next to the park. He's in his sixties. I went to high school with his kids. I've known him and his family a long time. When I think back on it, it's kind of funny that it took so long for him to say anything. We'd walked past that park dozens of times since it happened—it had been at least a couple of months since we'd gone to the hospital, and we were talking about getting ready to go back to school when Lee stopped mowing his lawn to talk to us.

By then we knew what to expect—or at least we thought we did. We were seen. The person who wanted to talk to us stopped whatever they were doing and ran over to us, waving. We stopped. They came over and said whatever they needed to say. We said thank you and went on our way. They had done their duty, and we could get back to walking around town to not talk about it, or trying to talk about it at home.

Things were going about the way they did when Lee said something that I'd never heard before—or maybe I had, I don't know. All the platitudes and pearls of wisdom just run together after awhile and turn into one big sympathy white-noise machine, so it might be that someone had said the phrase that Lee chose to leave us with and I'd just forgotten or blocked it out, but this time it hit me.

“Just remember—everything happens for a reason.”

I couldn't take it anymore.

Lee, who felt that his duty had been done, turned to get back to his lawn—he'd left in the middle of a row, and the mower was sitting slightly crooked on the lawn. He'd pushed it off course to come over and talk to us. He was just bending over to get it started when I called out to him.

“What was that?”

He turned and looked at me, surprised—this wasn't the way things were supposed to go. He'd done what he should, and now everyone was supposed to get back to their lives. No more conversation required. And here I was, getting things all out of order.

“What was that?” I asked again as I walked over to him, now standing by his mower.

“I said . . .”

“Because it sounded like you said that everything happens for a reason.”

“I did.”

“Okay, so what was the reason?”

“I don't know—maybe someday you'll know, though.”

He was so sure of himself. So secure that he'd done what was needed to make me and my wife feel better.

“Lee, I don't think you know what you just said.”

“Yes, I—”

“No, you don't. Our daughter's dead—she died before she could even be born. What's the reason?” I wasn't yelling, at least not yet, but my wife told me that I started yelling not too long after that. I don't remember starting to yell or what I was saying. When I asked her what exactly it was that I'd said, there wasn't much she could remember. It was something about being able to draw a straight line from our daughter's death to curing cancer and AIDS all in one shot. She didn't drag me away, just touched me on the arm, and I walked away with her.

Lee never yelled back or gave much of a response at all. He

just sat there and took it—I think it shocked him more than anything. That wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. He tried to give us comfort as best he could, and I wound up yelling at him while he tried to mow his lawn.

Lee died a few months after that. He was never in great health, and the day that he talked to us while he was mowing his lawn he looked red and sweaty. I suppose it was only a matter of time before he had a heart attack.

We live in a small town. I went to high school with Lee's kids. I have to go to the visitation. What do I say to his wife? What do I say to his kids?

And that's why I'm at this bar, a beer in one hand and a package of breath mints in my pocket, so I don't smell like booze at the visitation. I'm trying to think of what to say. How to let them know that Lee was a good man and that I feel bad about what I said. I know he didn't think about me yelling at him as much as I have, but that's because I'm the one who lost it. I'm sure there were lots of other things that happened to him between then and now.

I guess I'll just tell them I'm sorry. That's the thing to do at visitations. Just tell them you're sorry—you're sorry the person who's dead died. You're sorry they're going through a loss. You go in and you do your duty—you try to give comfort. They can say whatever they want back to me, but I'm guessing they won't. It just doesn't happen in situations like this. You give someone comfort and sympathy. They nod and smile. It's the way these things happen. Breaking out of that routine would cause problems, especially in a small town. It wouldn't look right. I just hope they accept my sympathy and then I can go on my way. We can pretend like nothing happened at the park—like Lee said what he said and I just smiled and nodded and thanked him for his words and my wife and I went back on our way.

Maybe I'll tell them a different story that I remember, one of him telling me a joke when I ran into him at the grocery store or

the gas station. Or I'll tell them that I know this is hard; they've lost a family member—he died before it was really his time to go—and I can't imagine what they're going through, but they'll get through it. After all, things like this happen for a reason. As I get into the receiving line, that's the only thing I can think of to say.

So, I'm planning on telling them that. And then moving through to let them talk to the next person. I don't want to take up too much of their time. I know how tiring it can be to accept the sympathy of others.

—*Rusty K. Koll ('05)*

The Bypass

She stands up and tells me it's time I leave, and before I can ask why, she raises her hand and says, "You know how he is. He wouldn't understand."

I know. Don's not smart. He has trouble understanding things, and details confuse him. But why must I go? Explaining why I'm here is simple, I tell her. "A fuse blew. You had no power. You needed help. You had no one else to call. I wouldn't take money, so you gave me a beer."

Grace is a good liar, so I'm confused why she wants me gone. I consider reminding her about what we did in the empty isles of Hobby Lobby, Walmart, even last week in the storage room of the Gas & Get, the convenience store where I work.

"He's got things on his mind," she says. "You know that."

I wait for her to tell me what things, but she doesn't. Forthrightness is not one of her virtues. She takes my hands and pulls me off the couch. On my feet, I button my shirt. She's nervous. Says she's not sleeping well. She's always been moody—one minute ready for anything, the next unpredictable. I wonder if she's been back to the doctor, but I don't ask. Instead I say, "Is this about work?" She flinches.

"We don't know what's going to happen. You know how your brother can be."

"Stepbrother," I say. Second marriages play havoc with relationships. I don't need a lecture about Don's feelings. Bad things happen. Mom spent her last week in hospice care. I was twelve and Dad wouldn't let me see her, telling me to hold on to the good memories. It's tough for a kid to lose a mom.

Grace says, "Don't you think you owe him at least that much?"

"For what?" I say, but the argument's lost. I understand how it would be for him to get off his swing shift early and find me with his wife of four months. But I resent it.

"I told you Personnel called him in," she says. "He saw his file on her desk."

"So? He's way past his probationary review. He's a model employee. Never sick and always on time."

"She asked if he liked his job, if the swing shift makes life hard for him."

"They probably want to keep him happy. Maybe they're ready to give him a better shift."

"Come on, Jake. She asked about me. How I'm doing, if I'm better. Better? Why would she ask that?"

"They want their employees happy," I say, but she's not convinced. "Don seemed fine when I last saw him. Never said a thing."

"She had his application open. He saw red circles and sticky notes. You helped him with it, didn't you? He said you did."

"I gave him a few suggestions, but that was long before he got his six-month raise."

She's still not convinced. Grace is cagey, but I can read her. She's debating whether to send me away or to hold me. I feel her ambivalence. She steps closer. On tiptoes, she puts her hands around my neck and starts swaying side to side as if dancing to a tune only she hears. I put my arms around her, close my eyes following the sway, and for a moment I too hear that melody. If this is all I have now with Grace, I never want it to end.

"You're getting worked up over nothing," I tell her. We met almost a year ago at GED prep. She attended the other high school in town, so I didn't know her. It's not true what they say about lost time. It can be made up, and we did, starting the next afternoon. Did that not mean something?

She stops our dance and says, "Ah, honey, you got to go." When I start to protest, her fingers lightly tease my neck and I close my eyes again and hold on tighter. Her hands move to my arms. I let her push me away. "It's hard, I know, but I can't keep doing this. Not now."

Grace has never said that. "What do you mean can't keep doing this?"

“Personnel’s got him spooked. He needs to keep that job.”

“Why did you ever marry him?” As soon as I say it, I know I shouldn’t have. But I’m mad and frustrated, and I repeat, “Why?”

“That’s it. You have to leave now.”

I know by her tone that I’ve pushed too far and that if I stay longer something bad will happen. So, like always, when she opens the door I do the thing she wants. The door closes. I stand on the balcony and look out across old Highway 85. In the distance I see the headlights from cars on the bypass speeding around our town. When I hear the security chain slide into place, I walk down the rusty metal stairs to my car. Instead of going home, I pull in behind the dumpster. I have crazy thoughts, like Don will die at work, or that Grace will catch me hiding and realize how much I care. I close my eyes and see her running down the stairs with a suitcase and we get on the bypass and leave. I think all of it is possible until Don pulls into his parking space. He’s slow to get out, and he stands bent over like he’s just pulled the worst shift of his life. He climbs the stairs holding onto the rail in one hand and his lunch box in the other. Once Grace unlocks the door and he’s inside, I leave.

They live in what used to be a motel. The old sign doesn’t work anymore, but in the daylight if you look close you can make out Rest Easy Motor Lodge in the neon tubing. People tell me that before the bypass, old Highway 85 had a purpose. What remains now is a drive-in burger joint, an army-surplus store, a consignment shop, and two used-car lots. One motel still tries to attract customers. The others have been abandoned, torn down, turned into by-the-hour getaways, or else, like the Rest Easy, converted to apartments. The motel’s old pool, safe inside a rusted chain-link fence, holds the collected water from past thunderstorms. Grace calls the crabgrass growing through the cracked asphalt her lawn.

I don’t hate Don. It’s just that after his mom and my dad married, Dad made me take him everywhere. My friends didn’t want him around, which meant they didn’t want me around.

What made it worse was that in high school when I still had friends, we’d make fun of Don’s parents. They lived in the unincorporated part of the county and would come to ball games to watch him. Don played only when the score was too lopsided to matter. His dad cursed the refs while his mom tried to keep his cursing to a minimum. Then one game his mom sat by herself—the next game too—and we heard that his dad had run off. I guess my dad being alone and Don’s mom being left alone gave them enough in common. It wasn’t Dad’s fault Mom died, but he seemed desperate.

I blamed Don for almost everything bad that happened to me after that. Had it not been for him, I would’ve graduated. I’m no brain, but I’m wily, or so I’ve been told. But having him around made school unbearable. I stopped going and warned Don to keep his mouth shut. Dad found out anyway when the guidance counselor called. Being eighteen, I refused to return. Don finished, though, and they made me go to his graduation.

For someone who wanted nothing to do with him, Don owes me a lot. He had no idea how to complete a job application. I’d seen enough of them dropped off where I work to spot a good one. What my boss cared most about was job history, and because Don didn’t have much, I showed him how to stretch what he had to make it look better. We stretched it just far enough for Foster’s to hire him. Then one night I introduced him to Grace.

When in a good mood, Grace would visit me at work. We’d talk and laugh, and I’d let her have whatever she wanted. One night Don came in grinning as if having won the Powerball. Grace knew what I thought about my stepbrother, so in her teasing, smirking way, she said, “I want whatever you just swallowed, big guy. Something spiked your pleasure center.”

I had to introduce them. He turned red and shuffled around, unsure how to answer. I asked if he wanted his usual fountain drink, flavor shot, and a pizza slice. He nodded, and after more shuffling told us that his six-month probationary period had just ended and he’d be getting a fifty-cents-an-hour raise. He paused,

expecting perhaps for us to back slap him. When we didn't, he looked down and stammered something about benefits, but that meant a payroll deduction.

"So, you'll be bringing home less money," I said, laughing. His mug went blank, so I explained. "Listen, your check will be reduced to pay for those benefits, right? So even with the raise, your take-home will be smaller than it is now." He did that deer-headlights thing until it dawned on him. I had to laugh, and gave Grace a look to say, Well, here he is. My stepbrother. But she wanted to know about the benefits.

Don glanced at me as if asking permission to answer. "Well? Tell us," I said.

He shuffled, smiled, said, "She went over it so fast I can't remember everything. But I signed a lot of forms."

"Tell us what you do remember," I said, still thinking Grace and I were working him.

"Retirement, I guess. Some of my check will go to that."

"See, there's a reduction right there," I said. "And for something you won't see for forty years."

"More sick days, maybe," he said.

"At least that shouldn't cost you much," I said.

Grace asked, "Paid vacations?"

"Yeah, I think so."

She said, "That looks like a good deal to me."

"I thought getting fifty cents an hour was pretty good," Don said. "In three months it goes up another quarter."

Grace asked me, "You get anything like that here?"

She knew I didn't, and I didn't like her needling me, especially in front of Don. I said, "Sure, if I went full time, but life's too important to spend it working."

She asked Don, "Anything else? A health plan, maybe?"

Don's head dropped as his good mood went into freefall. "Yeah," he said. "I got," and he held up his thumb and index finger with an inch of space between, "all this stuff to read. I have five days to decide. Guess I'll look at it later."

"I know something about it," Grace said. "Maybe I can help."

Don's head bounced back, relieved. He said, "That's great."

Grace knew because she had once tried to get on KanCare. She fussed for days when they denied her, not understanding how someone worth so little couldn't enroll. She knew about deductibles, co-pays, pre-existing conditions, all of it. At the time I told Grace to stop worrying, that she didn't need it anyway, and besides what were they going to do if we showed up at the emergency room? Let us die at the entrance?

A customer walked in, and while I got him smokes and lotto tickets, Grace had Don's ear, probably trying to explain something he'd never understand. They took off soon after the customer tossed his losing tickets into the trash. Leaving, Grace waved and blew a kiss. Two days later, she told me she'd be visiting her aunt in Americus for the week. I laughed and said a week seemed a long time, not realizing it would be forever. When I next saw her, she lived at the Rest Easy Motor Lodge and was married to my stepbrother.

I open my room's one window and pretend the sound of the traffic bypassing town is the ocean at the end of the continent. Before Mom died, before I even knew she was sick, she drove the two of us to California. She wanted me to see the Rockies, the Mojave Desert, and the ocean. She added Disneyland to entice me. What I remember now is the ocean, the waves, and the sun so far away but the way it grew larger as it disappeared, and the world seemed huge and exciting and I wanted to see all of it. We took off our shoes and walked the beach. I have a cigar box of shells, a pine cone from the Rockies, a vial of desert sand, my Disneyland ticket, and the last birthday card Mom ever gave me. I don't remember much about Disneyland.

I think about Grace and Don. I wonder how she greets him. Do they talk about their day? Do they laugh, share stories, or does she do what she tells me she does—that she goes to bed and pretends to be asleep. And because he's trusting and knows she needs rest, he never wakes her, never bothers her, never asks for

anything. I'll never know, of course, for when I leave and hear the door latch behind me, their apartment becomes a dark, unknowable space. Sitting here, I hurt in a way that has no remedy.

Don stops in as I'm selling a kid who I know is under eighteen a pack of smokes and a six of Milwaukee's Best. I'm in my don't-give-a-crap attitude, and seeing Don doesn't help. He's dirty and smells, and I know he's just come off his shift. He waits for the kid to leave.

"Hey," he says, and I give him a head nod.

I point to the pizza warmer. "Pepperoni's the freshest," I tell him. "You're a sausage guy, I know, but trust me on this."

He fidgets, shifting his weight, and I know he's about to say something. I want to scream, 'Will you just spit it out?' At last he says, "Can I ask you a question?"

He wound up for that, I think. "Sure, just don't believe the answer." I'm teasing him, I know, but I enjoy doing it.

"It's Grace," he says.

"What about her?" I've not seen her since she sent me away.

He nods, tries to smile, and I wait, offering no help. She's probably making his life miserable in a way that only she can. "I know you two are friends."

I'm not sure where this is going. "You do remember I introduced you?"

"And you see each other when I'm at work."

Is he here to confront me? Ready to defend what he believes is his? "She tell you that?"

He shakes his head, no, and smiles. He's not angry but I'm no less suspicious. "She doesn't have to," he says. "I see things, that's all. Wrappers in the trash. Food in the refrigerator from here. You left a sweatshirt once."

I'd become careless. "Okay, sure. Time to time."

He gets quiet, turns, his eyes stopping on the candy bars. "How is she, Jake?"

"Hey, dude, you're the one who married her. How would I

know?"

"I'm worried," he says. "I don't think she's doing well."

Maybe he wants my help, so I say, "Listen, the last time I last saw her she seemed fine." But did she? Was she not more anxious, paranoid, distracted?

He wants to continue. I wait. "Lately when I get home she's sitting in the dark. Just sitting, Jake. Won't even say hello."

"She's moody, Don. You know that. And she's worried about Foster's."

"She said that?"

"Sure, I mean, it's on her mind."

He's thinking. He says, "She stayed up three nights in a row last week, making so much noise I couldn't sleep."

"She probably crashes when you're at work."

"I don't know what she does. The apartment's a mess. I do what I can—dishes, laundry, get the groceries—but . . ." He tails off like it's too hard to talk.

"What does the doctor say?"

"Doctor?"

I know she's seen one, because I took her to the clinic before they snuck off to Americus, and twice since. She never told me why, and I never asked. Grace doesn't like questions. "I've given her rides when she needed them."

He process this, and says, "I saw pills on the kitchen counter."

"We stopped at Walgreens."

"She grabbed them and said they were for allergies." He rubs his face. "She doesn't have allergies, Jake. You should have told me. You're my brother."

I don't correct him and say stepbrother. But I know why I don't. It was our secret, something just for us. And she told me not to. Don has that uncomprehending look I've always hated. "She needed a ride," I say. "I didn't know she kept it from you."

He nods, giving me the benefit of the doubt. "I know things get hard for her. I told her I want to help."

"You are helping," I tell him. "Your insurance." He nods, and I

change the subject. "Grace told me Personnel called you in."

A customer comes in to pay for gas, and while inside he grabs two breaded cheese sticks from the warmer. When he leaves, I again ask about Personnel. "Don't tell me you're getting more benefits." He's quiet, but I know he wants to explain.

At last he says, "It's my application. The one you helped me with. They pull files for random checks. They pulled mine."

"After ten months? You're way beyond probation, and you're a good employee."

"She said lying on an application is serious."

"It was a stretch more than a lie, Don."

"She gave it to the manager. I could be fired, Jake."

"Okay, so you weren't a hundred percent truthful, but you've proved yourself. There's no benefit to letting you go."

He tries to smile, looking for a bright side. "I got all nines and tens at my review."

"That's what's important. She's just doing her job, that's all. The manager probably laughed when she told him. There's nothing to worry about."

"You don't think I should be worried?"

I pat him on the back. "It's all going to work out. Grace, your job. Relax."

Don leaves when a man and his two fat kids come in. He wants a packet of Pyramid Reds and candy bars for the tons-of-fun twins. He tosses a twenty on the counter. People not handing money across man-to-man bothers me. I put the change on the counter and make him pick it up. He pockets it, yells at his kids to stop playing with the merchandise, and leaves. As the door closes, I say, "Have a nice day."

Grace calls and tells me she can't see me tonight. I ask why, but she's vague. When Grace gets in a mood, it's best not to press. I ask if she still needs that ride. She has no time for chit chat, she says, and before I know it I'm holding a dead phone.

Grace is sly and thinks she can't be caught. I've used her sense of invulnerability to my advantage. After we met, I followed her to

see what she did without me. It didn't feel right, but I couldn't help it. She was wild and unpredictable, and you never knew which Grace you'd find or how long that Grace would last before she became something else. We had things in common, too, like both needing a GED, and a dead mom she never talks about. Grace was the first girl I loved, and I feared she would leave me. Dread makes a person do stupid things.

I park in a vacant lot across from the Rest Easy and wait. Soon I see Grace leave her apartment. She is wearing a Jayhawks T-shirt, cut-offs, and oversized sunglasses. She beelines to the tattered chaise lounge near the old pool and settles in, spreading lotion on her legs, arms, and face. She leans back, inserts earbuds, and doesn't move for a long time.

I walk across the once busy highway. Grace hates surprises, and since she hung up on me yesterday I have to be careful. When I get close I kick pebbles and cough to warn her. A pebble hits her foot and she looks up.

"Hey," I say, and pull up a lawn chair. "Sorry about that rock." She pulls out the earbuds. The music is so loud I can hear it. Alan Jackson singing gospel, I believe.

I point to my ears. "You'll go deaf," I say so soft she can't hear me. She doesn't like the joke and she's not glad I'm here. I'm stuck, so I push on. "Why didn't you want to see me yesterday?"

She starts to put the earbuds back in, dismissing me, but stops. Grace says, "I just didn't want to."

"I'm here in case you changed your mind about that ride."

"Nope, no mind change."

"You said you needed your prescription refilled."

"But now I don't."

"You needed a refill two weeks ago."

She gives me her nasty look, the one full of contempt, and says, "I'm better now, Jake." This time the buds go back in. She stretches her legs and sinks down in the chair. Her fingers tap out the song's beat and I consider taking her hand, and I'm tempted to turn down the volume. I don't do either. Her eyes close, and I'm

not sure whether she even remembers I'm here. I stay until the later afternoon breeze picks up and carries enough dust from the vacant lots across the highway to bother my eyes. At last I touch her arm. "You've been out here a long time, Grace. Why not get inside."

I keep my hand on her arm and wait for her to react, to let me know she's still in there. At last she says, "Go away. I'm fine."

"I'll call you," I say, but don't leave. Moments later, I obey. "Take care," I say, and head to my car.

The week without Grace is hard, and I'm at the Gas & Get because the owner made me take Robbie's shift. I don't like Friday's. It's the day losers cause trouble. Before long, some driver gasses up and drives off without paying. I review the security monitor for the plate number and call the police. I don't like calling the police. A bad mood is not what you want when working with degenerates, or as the owner likes to call them, our customers.

I'm ready to yell at the next transgressor, when Grace comes in looking like she needs a hot bath and a good night's sleep. Despite the hours spent in the sun, she's pale. Hollow. I feel the sharp spikes of her dark mood, and I'm cautious.

"Hey," I say.

"I saw your car," she says. "Working a Friday?"

"Call of duty. What's up?"

She pauses to finger the Tic-Tacs. "I want you to stay away from me, Jake."

We've gone through this before, so I grin to let her know that I know she doesn't mean it. "You're just saying that," I say.

"I'm serious," she says

I try to remain calm. "It's been a week, Grace. What's going on?"

She backs away, her lips trembling. "Just do it, okay? And quit spying on me."

Now I'm concerned. "Talk to me, Grace."

She turns to the door and waits. She's thinking, so I give her

time and hope no one comes in. She shoves her hands into her jean pockets, and turns back to me. "You told him to lie on the application. He told me you did."

"No, Grace. I showed him how he could improve his chances. A suggestion, not a command. He's been there almost a year. They like him."

"Just stay away. You're hurting us. You're hurting me."

I say, trying to buy time, "Okay, I'll stay away. But it's not like we haven't been through rough spots. We're good together."

Grace begins pulling merchandise off the shelves. She upends the potato chip display and the cans of mixed nuts, and tries to do the same with the ATM but it's too heavy. I watch but cannot move. "Grace, stop. You must stop."

She tosses into the air the Penny Savers, the USA Today, the National Inquirer, and what passes for our local paper. She yells, "Stay away. Leave me alone."

"I will. I promise you'll never see me again. But please stop."

Grace has never been like this. I'm scared and can't move. She goes to the cooler, and I'm about to dash from my post when the door opens and in walks a customer I know but don't like. "Whoa, now," he says, and I know he's high by his eyes darting about and his laugh.

Grace ignores him and reaches into the cooler and sweeps her arm through the bottles knocking energy drinks, water, beer to the floor.

"Stay away," she yells.

The customer laughs. "Man, she's out of control." I'm afraid he's going to join her in the rampage. I don't want to, but I hit the panic button under the counter. I come out and confront the customer who's looking to see what he can grab. I say, "The police are coming. You want to be here when they arrive?"

His eyes go tilt-a-whirl processing that news. The idea of the police seems to focus him. "No man. Just stopped in for snacks."

"The register's locked down. You better leave."

He's staring at Grace, who's now on the floor bawling, a wail

so piercing I almost can't hear the approaching sirens in the distance. In a move I didn't think him capable of, he grabs the display box of Three Musketeers and takes off. Once he's gone, I lock the door.

The owner arrives after the police have taken Grace away. He finds me sweeping up broken glass. He complains that he was in bed and didn't like being disturbed. I know he's been drinking. He's more worried about the condition of his silly Gas & Get than he is about me or Grace. He tells me I have to complete my shift, that if I want a job I have no other choice.

"It was that girl I've seen here before, wasn't it? Your girlfriend."

"She's a friend," I say. He blames me and making me stay is my punishment. We get things back enough to normal to reopen. He's still mad when he leaves.

Don comes in looking like an extra from Night of the Living Dead. I don't care what the manager thinks. I lock the door and hang the Closed sign.

"How is she?" I say.

He does his best I'm-lost-and-have-no-idea shrug. "The nurse said I couldn't see her." He asks what happened.

I give him the quick version, and add, "She blames me for getting you in trouble."

Don's struggling to keep it together. I forget how sensitive he is. "Personnel wants me back tomorrow," he says. "Before my shift."

Going back can't be good, I think. I'm not sure what to say, so I resort to, "You've worked hard. They like you." He nods but he's not listening. I say, "I shouldn't have suggested to fudge the dates."

"You helped me get the job. Anyway, I know it wasn't my work. My work was good."

"Then what can it be?" I say.

He shrugs. "I don't know. Must be something Foster's doesn't like." Right now Grace is most on his mind. He says, "The nurse said I can talk to the doctor tomorrow."

"You'll know more after that, Don."

He shakes his head. "It's just too much for me. The doctor in the morning and then Personnel." All of a sudden he perks up. "Come to the hospital with me, Jake. You'd know what to ask. You could help me."

I break the news that I can't. "The owner's mad. He's giving me extra shifts."

"About what Grace did?" He's sorry, like it's his fault.

"I can help with questions, but you'll have to go alone."

Another customer bangs on the door. I ignore him and say, "Write everything down." But he still has more to say. "What is it, Don?"

"Just wondering if Grace was right about her mother. She ever tell you about her?"

"Just that, like mine, she's dead."

"You know Grace lived a lot with her aunt because her mom was pretty messed up. She'd hear voices and talk to herself. She'd run off and be gone for weeks. They found her on a street in Kansas City, Jake. The cold killed her. Grace never told you?" I shake my head no. "She thought the same was happening to her. It scared her, Jake. I wanted to help, and because of Foster's, I could."

The next day I'm drinking bad coffee at Denny's waiting for Don. For his sake I remain positive. If my boss taught me anything it's that you keep your good workers, even if they piss you off. Just showing up keeps someone on the payroll. Showing up on time's a bonus. Foster's has to be going through the motions of adhering to a policy for the sake of appearance.

Don arrives and slow walks to the entrance. He slides in across from me and looks out the window. I wait. He says, "Well, they let me go, Jake." He tells me this without emotion, as if describing a piece of junk mail.

I say, "The application?"

He nods. "She said I could apply again in thirty days." The waitress sets a coffee cup in front of him and waits. He signals for her to pour.

“That’s good. They’re telling you they want you back. They just have their stupid rules to follow.”

“If I go back, it’s another six-month probation.”

“You’ve done it once. It will go fast. What about Grace?”

Don unfolds the paper from his pocket and reads, “Tests, observation, therapy, both group and individual. Potential harm to self. Diagnosis pending. Hospitalization recommended.” He looks up. I see that same uncomprehending look I remember as kids. I didn’t want to help him then; I don’t know how to help him now. He continues: “Insurance claim denied for ongoing tier 1 through four medications, and for future inpatient or outpatient care. Thirty days to appeal.” He stops and looks at me. “The doctor said she hadn’t refilled her pills for months. I knew they weren’t for allergies.” He folds and returns the sheet to his pocket. “They sent me to Accounting for financing.”

“You have time to appeal,” I say. He laughs. “Well, at least Foster’s wants you back.”

I see his half smile. “When that woman told me I could reapply, she said benefits had changed. Spouses of new employees wouldn’t be covered anymore.”

His mind is now elsewhere. I touch his arm and say, “They can’t do that.”

“Yes, they can,” he says. “She said it’s legal.”

At the Gas & Get I still find evidence of the damage Grace caused—a glass shard under a shelf or a Twizzler nib in a corner. The manager stops in to check on me and finds me with Windex and a rag shining the front door.

“Business good?” he asks.

I tell him the usual. Gas, beer, lottery tickets, then add, “The Powerball’s tempting now. A record high.” But I don’t have to explain. He knows.

“About the other night,” he says, but I interrupt him before he can lambast me again.

I say, “I know. Totally out of the blue. Sorry about that.”

“No, I mean how is she?”

His concern surprises me. “Still under observation,” I tell him.

“Her husband’s your brother, right? How’s he doing?”

“Stepbrother,” I say, reverting to my need to explain. “Right now he’s looking for work. Foster’s let him go.”

He goes to the register and runs a tape of the transactions, something he does every time he comes in. “They probably don’t want to pick up the cost of treating her. Now, if it was their kid, they’d have to. But a spouse?” He shakes his head.

“They can do that?”

He looks at me like my father used to. Half amazed I could be so stupid, and half pitying that I am. He says, “It’s about reducing their premiums.” He looks over the tape. I feel guilty every time he does this. “A big difference between owning a business and working for one. Me? I decided to cover spouses. It’s worth it to me to keep good full time employees around. I have so few, anyway. But I don’t have to, and I can change it at any time. I set the rules.”

As he continues inspecting his store, I go to the bathrooms to scope out the paper supply. When I return he says, “You like her, don’t you?”

I start to say, Yes, very much, but don’t. Instead I fall back to, “She’s a friend I care about,” then add, “and I care about him, too.”

He’s wearing work clothes, and I figure he’s going next to his rental properties to either make minor repairs or collect late rent from his deadbeat tenants. He says, “Barb can’t come in today. I need you to take her shift.”

I wonder if this is a test, or maybe he thinks I have more payback for what Grace did. I don’t have plans, but I also don’t like being asked at the last minute. “Can’t Robbie do it?”

“He’s out of town at his aunt’s funeral.”

I want to ask if this is the same aunt who died two months ago. Maybe I do owe more payback. I don’t want to, but say, “Sure, I can do it.”

“Thanks,” he says. Then he looks at me all serious. He can’t

be about to reprimand me again, not after I just volunteered. "Jake," he begins, and I think this could be unpleasant, after all. "I don't tell you this enough, but you do good work here." He has my attention. "I need a new manager, someone I can trust."

"What happened to Dixie?"

"They're moving. Husband's got a job in North Dakota. You'd be full time. You'd set the schedule, adjust hours, place orders. Of course, I'll double check everything at first."

"Why me?" The question comes out like a condemned man begging for his life.

"You've shown me something lately." He pats my shoulder. "There's a big raise in it for you. You can use the money, right?"

When I don't answer, he says, "At least think about it. Let me know in a day or two. There might be room to negotiate."

It's been six months now since I took the job. In that time I've had to hire three people and fire two. Neither task did I like doing. I also got the owner to put in new gas pumps, a new outdoor sign, and a deli counter. Business picked up enough to cover the initial outlays. Next I plan to talk him into serving made-to-order burritos.

As manager I must fill in when no one else can. I know now why the owner couldn't keep a manager. So, I'm working the late shift, the one I hate, when out of nowhere Don walks in. I hadn't seen or heard from him since I became manager and I had no idea what happened to him. "Don," I say. I'm surprised I'm so glad to see him.

He smiles, shuffles. "Hey, Jake."

I convince him to take a sausage slice and a fountain drink with a flavor shot. "Come on, man, my treat," I say.

We catch up. He tells me he couldn't return to Foster's after what they did to him, so he went somewhere else. He says, "I remember you talking about the trip you and your mom took."

"So you went west. I should have figured," I say, "given your tan."

"Yeah, California." He smiles like he's embarrassed. "Got a

construction job carrying boards from one place to another, doing whatever they told me. Then they started me framing."

He did look good. "So, you got on the bypass," I say, feeling envious.

"You talked about it so much." He pauses, looks around, then says, "Feels strange being here. Not much has changed."

I guess he didn't notice the new pumps and signs. Too dark, I suppose. "No, not much."

He gets to what's on his mind. "How is she, Jake?"

Don, the open book. This has to be hard for him. "She's doing better," I say. "And thankful you made it easy for her. For us. You have to come over. She'd love to see you."

"I don't know, Jake."

"She talks about you," I say and laugh. "Too much, really."

He smiles. "I know you never thought I was smart." I begin to jump in, but he stops me. "It's okay, Jake. I knew why she married me. And I knew you two were close. It was nice to have someone, you know, for a little while. Someone to help."

"She's a survivor," I say. "You knew how scared she was more than I did."

"Her mom, you know. Or maybe just something with her. Something she couldn't control. You got this job at a good time."

"Sometimes things actually work out."

"He won't fire you, will he?"

"You mean like what they did to you at Foster's? I don't think so. But nothing's for sure. The owner once told me the big difference between him and me is that he gets to set the rules. We're workers, Don, you and me, doing what we're told. I stock shelves, you pound nails. Two schmoes trying to survive." He smiles, nods. He understands.

"Ever think about leaving, Jake?"

"You mean getting on the bypass?" I laugh. "Every day."

"You and Grace could do well out there." We come to a pause and have nothing more to say. He smiles, and we hug. "Tell her I'm glad she's better, Jake. Tell her I'm doing well."

“Hold on, Don. I want to give you something.” I grab him another slice and a flavor shot for the road, but when I turn back I see in the halo from the new outdoor signs he’s driving away. I watch him leave and know he’s heading for the shortcut to the bypass for his journey home.

—*James O’Gorman*