

THE



MOSAIC

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The Cool

Brian Nolan

Second Place, Prose

Anything nature touches is beautiful. Imprisoned by a free spirit, thunderstorms rage outside; windows open to hear it. Water glistens under wind, shimmering as a suspended lake, the vividness of it all. Tranquility persists; less a pebble drops and ripples outward. Surface tension proves its paradox; delicacy. What we feel is witness to a call, God is gifted and relentless. To that suspicion, commend it. Actions are merely his reverence, it's recommended you give to his legend; of ours, of our hours.

Against a fallen tree, autumn astounds the meek. Arms fold at my knees as I watch fire colored leaves reminiscent of a late October feeling, nostalgia reels me. Butterflies find themselves fluttering amongst the buttercups and dew drops; feel as you do. It's a delicate balance. Eloquence effervesces elegance. Although elephants in rooms cause irrelevance, this is a hypnotic junction where words blend with feelings. Frequencies frequently keep me from sleeping. Sounds echo even outside of headphones; who rarely heads home? The essences of adolescence demand attention; to beg us to ask those questions. Good humor enables inspiration. Walk vacant streets half man half amazing, show me who's lonely. What are the lengths you've gone to bring together those moments apart, the space between? A void as tangible as goosebumps on skin, adrenaline courses within. Something has to give.

Prose is our paradox. Describe the indescribable; inscribe your wishes to make them more palpable. Circumvent certainty to discover the bounds of it, what remains around forgotten events?

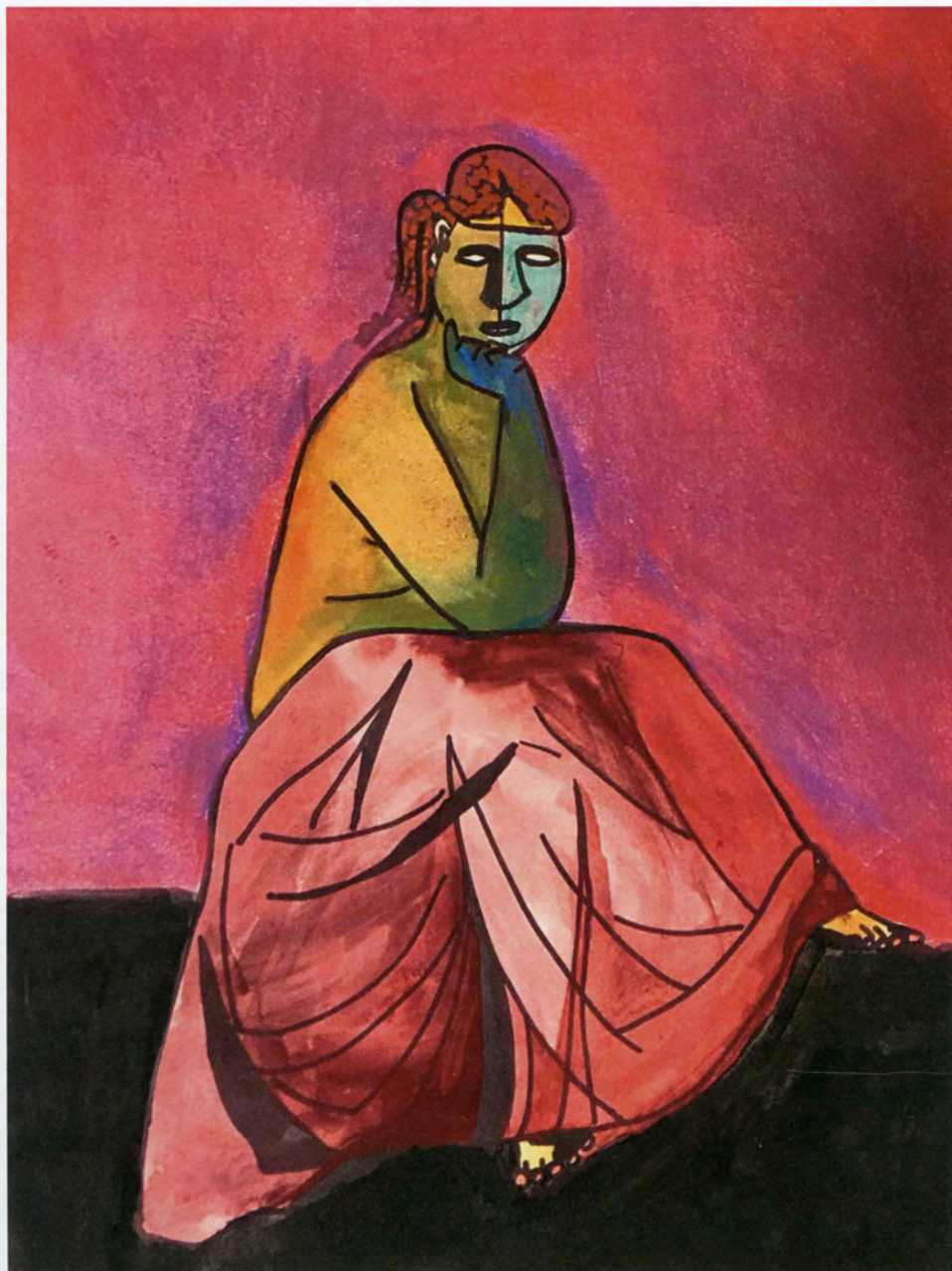
Insomnia.

Tulip

Katharine Yacovone

Second Place, Poetry

Tulip n. 1. the birthing pink blossom of setting spring/ thawing through the ice of frosted grass. The first color poking through a placid, dead winter. The budding of color, the bobbing of a bell shaped head in the breeze. The embellishment of a garden. The petals of various sizes and colors, either left, cared for with a watering can or cut and plucked from the ground in mischievous greed. 2. The bundle of joy, brought home by my father with a peck on my mother's cheek. Red petals bleeding in march. Stems cut like the snap of a pea. Bell petals placed in a simple white vase, with my mom's blushed smile watching over. The smell filling the kitchen far fuller than a simple cake or pie/ the smell of home and happiness/ the smell of innocence and hello/ the smell of thank you and goodbye. The shape of love. 3. The breaking of twigs as I run through the yard, run through the years. The shriveling, painful pitfall of wrinkled fingers grasping at each petal. "She loves me, she loves me not" The bell of churches, the petal of promises. The poison of old age. The breath of beginnings, sweet and pure and peaceful. The exhale of ends.



BRENDEN DAVIS
Third Place, Art

Aletheia

Matthew Hanright

When first we met o'er a rented repass,
Your temper toss'd like the tattered flame,
You spun my life a view of what I miss'd,
 A glimm'r of the joys to be held 'loft.
Through your eyes I saw the colors of love,
Through your lips I tasted the fruit of life,
With your nose I smell'd perfumes o' experience,
With your skin I felt th' embrace of fullness,
And your voice graced my ears with songs true.
 Door after door you opened before me,
Setting strange paths I stutter'd to follow down.
Through you I liv'd; what twisted death waits now?
 And each even' that passes reminds me,
 That you showed me all,
 But what have I kept?
Without your sweet shape to guide me along,
How shall I find such blessed halls again?

In My Mind About You

Ezekiel Eden

Your beauty is so amazing
You're like the sun to my moon, it's blazing
Now you got my heart racing
When I think of you, my heart keeps pacing
Let me keep it real with y'all
I'm not the one to express myself, face to face and all
But I was too scared to even make a call
Blinded by my thoughts and it kept me stalled
Luckily, I came to my senses
Started writing in past tenses
Even though we still had tension
But what else is there to mention
Ok chill, Let me stop second guessin'


The Good Medicine

Kevin Hudson

SNAP! Curackle! Pop, motherfucker!
Hemingway knew nothing
Of the sizzle, the spice of life,
So delicately hoarded from the tower

Yo, Stephen! How do you do it?
Book after book after television interview----
After magazine article after-----
Major film release and-----
How'd you slash up your soul into thirty-seven
Thousand
Texts, like crumbs to the mad flock of braindead pigeons,
Or dismembered limbs to the raven?

I don't hate you, Dr. K. In fact, I
Love you. You figured it out long ago,
That, frankly, no one gives a shit.
It's so fuckin' cold out here,
My hands burn and my gut howls.
(And I know you know the feeling)
Better to shatter, if you ask me, Dr. K.



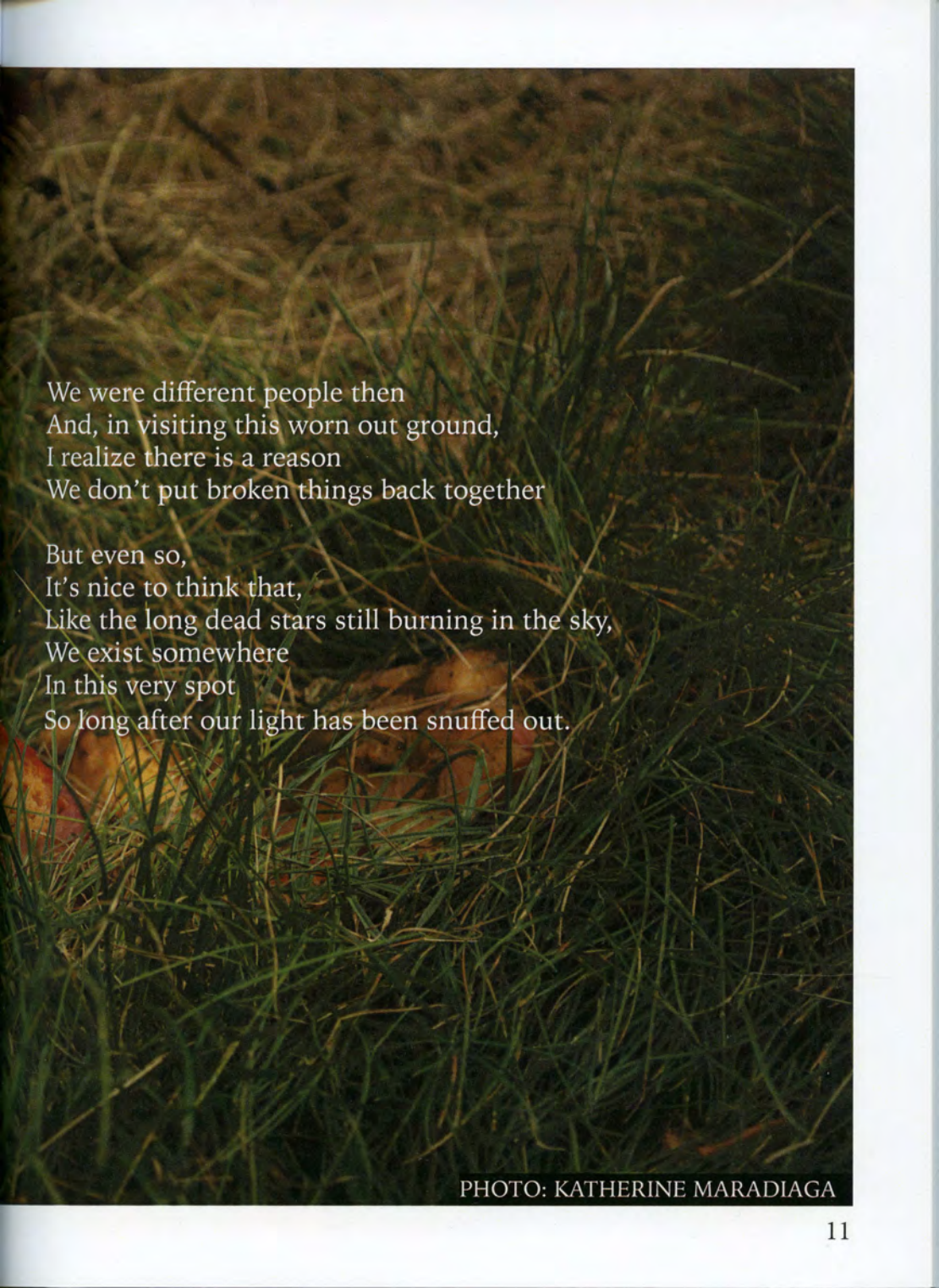
THIS IS ME LETTING YOU GO

CAITLIN GAUDIO

It's quiet
And that's strange
Because this place was made for noise
For blowing whistles
Cheers rippling through a crowd
And the thud of bodies colliding
Two goliaths battling

Uninhabited
This place feels like something else
A sacred place
Where I am finally understood
By the silence of the night

This is my favorite place
I feel the rhythm of heart beats that are not mine
And while I am in an empty stadium
I am more than just one
A pinpoint of light in a faraway constellation
Memories of an earlier time flood my mind
The first of November 4 full years ago
When the world around us blurred out of focus
And the only thing still standing was you



We were different people then
And, in visiting this worn out ground,
I realize there is a reason
We don't put broken things back together

But even so,
It's nice to think that,
Like the long dead stars still burning in the sky,
We exist somewhere
In this very spot
So long after our light has been snuffed out.

PHOTO: KATHERINE MARADIAGA

Kites and Filament

Adriana Duffy

[.... .-.. .-.. ---]

Hello. If you are listening, if anyone is listening, hello. It's funny. I can barely remember what that means anymore. It feels like it must be either a prayer or a sacrilege, just to say it and to think that maybe, someone is out there and they are listening. I don't even know if this recorder is working, honestly -- I just feel less crazy if I can tell myself that someone will listen to this someday.

Anyway. Hello. It's day... forty-five, since the city went down. I don't know how many people are sick, I haven't left the bunker since day fifteen. It would probably be easier to count the people who aren't sick.

Well there's me. For one. And you too, hopefully.

Names hardly seem to matter, when it comes to these sorts of introductions, so instead, I will offer you memories.

My first memory is of a kite. It was red, like blood, and the sky looked the way hon-

ey in a glass bottle looks, you know, when you hold it up to the light? The kind of sky that comes right when something is about to end. Someone was holding my hand, I don't remember who. In my head, no one is flying it -- it's just flying, all by itself. The person holding my hand was laughing.

Lately, I've found myself categorizing my life into neat little segments, tidy-edged before and afters. Right now we're in what I like to call the After All. What happens after the happily ever afters -- you know, like when Cinderella marries the prince and then finds out that he's banging the kitchen maid. Or something. But that's the Right Now, and I'm doing my best to spend as little time in that as possible.

Because in the Right Now, I'm alone. In the Right Now, the After All, I am watching lights click off above my head and sending out a desperate, SOS-style friend request into that darkness. But in the Before All (the fondly nicknamed Happy Years), I step off an airplane in America wearing a scarf knit by my mother and

carrying my father's old suitcase. In the Before All, I sit on a blanket in the grass and watch fireflies, for hours.

In the Next Bit, the part where everything tilts back onto its axis, I rally my troops of apocalyptic survivors, rebuild society, reclaim the earth, and never eat canned beans again in my life. In the Right Now, I'll double my ration and eat a full can, making a gallant effort to pretend that it's a Porterhouse steak and onion rings.

It's getting late. Which just means I'm tired -- the ability to tell time is a luxury I don't have anymore. Like running water. And microwave popcorn.

God, I miss microwave popcorn.

My mood today: now trust me on this one -- optimistic. I know it's hard to believe. But last night, I dreamed about a red kite kept aloft by a young woman's laughter.

I'm doing good, folks.

[-.. --- ... -]

Hello, folks. Day fifty-one.

Today, I've been thinking a lot about families. Specifically,

mine.

Unfortunately, there's some baggage there that I'm not quite prepared to deal with. So let's start somewhere else -- picture this, okay? So I'm out of the bunker, on day, I don't know, thirteen, looking for supplies. The streets are full of shit -- garbage and dying people and soon-to-be-dying people who are just trying to stretch that soon as long as humanly possible. And I'm just trying to get out of there as fast as possible before I got shanked by someone who wanted my shoes, but then I see this kid. This little girl, all by herself, picking half-dead flowers from a window box. And she starts singing this song --

Little bird

Golden bird

Little golden song be heard

Watch him fly

Across the sky

The hunter's watching too.

For a second, she looked like my daughter, Thea, and for a second, I would have done anything to protect her. But then she started coughing, and I turned and ran back to my bunker.

Thea had eyes like a thunderstorm. She loved ducks. She loved ham sandwiches, and she loved feeding the ducks that lived behind our house ham sandwiches. When we moved to the city, she decided that barring access to ducks, pigeons would do.

That's how I choose to remember my daughter. Crouched in the street, trying to persuade pigeons that they were really ducks.

My mood today: lonely. I have to believe someone is out there, that someone is hearing this, or... I don't know. I don't know.

I don't know.

[... .. -- --- .- .- ...]

Holy -- fireworks! Someone is setting off fireworks.

Hello, folks. It's day fifty-eight. I suppose I should have said that first. But: fireworks! The last time I saw fireworks was... god, a year ago? When they set off the flares to distract the rioters? Does that even count?

Back when we lived on the farm, my husband used to set off fireworks all the time: on

my birthday, on Christmas, our anniversary. Every occasion other than Fourth of July because he thought that was too mainstream.

He died six years ago. One of the first batch to get sick. We tried moving back to the country to get away from it, but there are some things you can't run away from. The day he died, it was beautiful and sunny, and he had finally stopped coughing. We sat together on the porch, hand in hand, and watched the wind blow the tall grass, watched Thea braid the few half-wilted flowers in our garden into a crown.

That night, he died in his sleep, and everything changed.

Nothing looked the same, nothing felt the same. Every happy memory seemed marred. When I thought about coming to America, I could only remember the loneliness that sucked at my soul like leeches, the spinning terror of stepping off the plane. I couldn't look my daughter in the eye without seeing all the ways she was like him. I wouldn't leave the house, because I couldn't stand to face the new world I lived in, the one

without him in it.

Thea was the one to drag me outside, finally. She was thirteen. She sat me down in the grass and set off old fireworks for an hour, standing triumphant like her father, hand poised over her eyes to watch the full ascent.

It wasn't exactly happiness, but it was light. And sometimes that is enough.

I don't know who's setting off fireworks off of a roof on 42nd Street, but thanks for the light. I needed that today.

Current mood: let's try not to define it. Let's just... let it be.

[- .-. .-.- / - --- / .-. .- .. --.]

There's this joke my Thea used to tell all of the time -- I have no idea where she heard it the first time, but she would tell it to everyone we knew and die laughing every time. It goes like this -- so there's this religious man, and he's trapped on a roof because of this massive flood, and the water is still rising. Some time passes, and a boat comes by. "Do you need help?" the captain asks. "No thank you," the man says, "God will

save me." So the boat moves on.

So the guy just sits there praying while the boat drives by. Soon enough another boat comes, and the man says again, "No thanks, God will save me."

Soon enough, the guy drowns, obviously, and he ends up in heaven. He goes to God, pissed as all hell, and he's like, "What the hell, man? Why didn't you save me?"

And God's like, "I tried you idiot. I sent you two boats, for God's sake."

It's a good joke. Everybody always laughs.

It's day seventy. No boats in sight. But maybe I'm just looking in the wrong place.

[.-. . -- . -- -... .-. .. -. --.]

Hello. I can't sleep. My brain won't shut up. Day seventy-nine.

I started coughing yesterday.

So much for the Next Bit and my world without canned beans. It doesn't look as if I'll be that fortunate.

I've been thinking a lot, because that's all I have left to do around here, and all I can think about is how scared I am

which is fucking ridiculous because I've seen so many people die why does it still scare me so much? And I've decided that I don't think it's the death I think it's the forgetting. It's not the ceasing to be it's the ceasing to exist. If a person dies and no one is there to remember them, have they even made a sound?

I'm afraid that I'm holding a lot of people's legacies inside my head and when I die they'll rise from my body like smoke and disappear just the same and I'm afraid that if I'm one of the few left then when I die we'll all just stop.

Everyone I've ever loved or lost or loathed.

All of us -- soundless.

But I'm here. I'm here and I'm screaming. You have to hear me. Someone has to listen.

My parents saved money for years to send me to America, to send me to school, to give me what they thought would be my best chance. My mom sent me a three page, handwritten letter every two months, and a new scarf or hat every six. She was a creature of habit and superstition. When he could afford it, my father would send me books

that he liked and leave notes in the margins. I haven't seen them in person in almost ten years.

The day I married Christopher, he paid to have my parents flown in to surprise me. He would leave my favorite flowers in paper cups around the house when he knew I was having a bad day. He could speak six languages fluently but couldn't figure out fractions for the life of him. His last words: "Goodnight, my love."

Thea was beautiful and she loved animals and she wanted to be either a princess or President of the United States, whichever was available at the time. She cried for a week when her goldfish died and when I tried to buy her a new one she told me she wasn't ready to move on yet. She was eighteen when she died and she fought so hard that I almost thought she was going to grab Death by his collar and scold him until he apologized. Her last words were "I can hear them singing. I'm not afraid." She was never afraid.

I am afraid. I'm alone and I'm afraid.

Maybe the world ends tomorrow. Maybe none of us survive and no one can hear me and I'm just another corpse on a dead planet and that's it. But, historically, we are very good at surviving. And if someone survives, if the Next Bit goes on without me, I'm terrified that all of us will just become another number in your mind.

I'm not a statistic. I'm a red kite in a golden sky, I'm the way it feels to step off a plane with nothing but a scarf and a battered suitcase, I'm fireworks in an open field, I'm a jar full of fireflies, caught by a little girl with thunderstorm eyes. I'm a voice screaming out into the darkness. I am light, I am trying to be light, I am trying to find. *The. Light.*

Remember us. Bring our memories back into the light.

I do not have enough time to tell you everything. So I will tell you everything that I can.

[.-. . -- . -- -... . -. . -..]

[A flashlight beam cuts through the darkness -- flickers up up up to the ceiling, underneath the desk, off the bright edges of empty

cans. Heavy boots kick up bits of dust that drift in the light like lazy snowflakes, spinning in a sleepy waltz.]

Empty -- safe. *[A voice confirms, a second flashlight joins the first. Their sweeping lights tangle together and separate and stray close again. Close.]*

Hey, *[says one of the lights.] Hey check this out. [The light has found something. Something has found the light.]* Old recorder.

[In shadows and covered in dust.]

This button still lights up if you mess with it. You think there's something on it?

[Lights touch the buttons again, fingers out of the darkness. It is a gentle darkness, but there's something kinetic about it. The light is gentler: It calms it.]

I don't know. Try it.

[It speaks. It has been waiting.]

"Hello. If you are listening, if anyone is listening, hello."

You There, Mephisto?

Kevin Hudson

Look man, I ain't no Faust.
I wouldn't waste your gift on shit like
Knowledge, the divine truth, love.
Hell, I don't even know if I'd ever put your powers to work,
But I know I ain't stupid enough to trade my soul for garbage



Faust got it wrong, see?
He asked for fruit; you want to be remembered?
Aim small, under expectation.
What good is an apple when you got this here gum?
A pebble would make a bigger ripple,
But I doubt the fools on the other side would see it

A soul for change,
What more could you ask for?



Mephisto, Mephistopheles
My main man Beezlebub
You want a soul? Trade mine—
For a nickel. Promise. Just a
Nickel. Surely you got the spare change?

It's about all the thing's worth, really
Nickel's a lot, really
Five pennies, before Generation A fucked
Generation B, I could buy some nice things.
The paper, a cake, a big ol' stick of Bazooka.



KATHERINE MARADIAGA
First Place, Art

You Are A Fire

Caitlin Gaudio

It was summer
And as the sun smiled brightly on the world
I felt myself being chased by a darkness that I would never outrun
No matter how much I wanted to deny it
We were living on borrowed time
And I destroyed myself bracing for an impact that I could only
imagine abstractly

We were happy at the beach
Both fully committed to living in this fantasy we constructed
around ourselves
I fully submerged myself in the ocean of your eyes
And continued to pick myself up every time a rough wave took my
legs out from under me

I spent endless days in the sand
Reading stories that were not ours
And trying to escape reality
If only for a fleeting moment

When August came
A certain darkness cast over me
Like clouds of thick smoke
Forging dizzy paths into the sky
As they curled off of charred logs

The smell of the campfire gave me a false sense of security
A reminder of fall
When things were easy and we didn't have impending separation
on our minds
When cool nights were an excuse for close contact
And marshmallows over the fire were intoxicatingly sweet

But now, the marshmallows are me
And you
Are a fire
Blazing ruthlessly
Searing your mark into the places you've been
Blackening everything your carelessness touches

The more I bristle on the outside
The sooner I find myself collapsing internally
Behind my finely constructed shell are liquid vulnerabilities
That I'm trying so hard to keep hidden

Even so,
I can't keep them from oozing through the cracks
And neither of us know how to fix this mess we've created

So the fire continues to burn until we blacken beyond recognition
Crumbling into ash and blowing away
Like dust





ELIZABETH BOUYEA
Second Place, Art

Judgement

Matthew Hanright

The darkness lifts slowly from his eyes. First it is total, and complete. Then follows the hazy eigengrau of open eyes in closed night. Finally his aching head turns, almost of its own accord, and the darkness breaks in waves around a sputtering torch farther down the hall. A lone chorus of "Christ be our Light" drifts by, though he knows there is no chorus at its source.

His body is still. But he knows, somehow, that that will pass, just as he knows that the pain from his right temple will remain. Though he lays in the ruins of Saint Barnaby's Cathedral, the torch is far, and he is safe. What is he doing here?, he begins to think, but decides that it doesn't matter. Here he is, now.

Something is wrong though. He should be safe anywhere in the cathedral by now, so why doesn't he feel that he is? A spatter of rushed footsteps echoes from far away. They pause—*perhaps the person is deciding which way to go?*—and

then resume. Right. He needs to stop... someone, from doing... something. Oh well, the what doesn't matter now, only the who.

The floor recedes and now he is on his feet. His left ankle burns, but he knows that that will pass, too. He limps closer to the torch, knowing that is the right way to go, it must be. There is a neat line on the floor where the light begins and the darkness retreats, vanquished. He tests his foot. It is almost recovered. A cautious right foot crosses the line, bridges the light and dark. A left swings forward and descends firmly into the light. Pressing his back to the far wall he sneaks along the hall.

Just as he nears the next blessed pocket of darkness, his eyes lock on the torch. Another pair of eyes meet his. They stretch from the flame, two pure white crystals reaching forth. A golden protrusion emerges beneath them. Together they form a beak and feathered face. A gurgle escapes as his gasp catches in his throat. Wings spread from the sides of the torch and a shriek builds in the

hall from everywhere at once. A call of death, normally echoing from the heavens as a predator sweeps to catch its prey.

He tries to jump out of the light, but his ankle fails him. This is why he survives. The golden beak pierces the stone wall just where his head would have been. He throws himself forward, free from the light, and tries to gather his legs underneath him. The shriek is gone when he stands, as is the bird of light. He blinks, and there are the unblinking eyes locked to his. He turns his back to the light and continues on his way. This is new, but changes should be expected. Especially with the work unfinished.

The halls twist and jerk in ridiculous, almost heretical directions. Doors and other halls split from his own, but his way is sure. Suddenly, it is not. Another torch divides the hall. Surely, if he focuses his eyes on this torch, another pair of burning white eyes will peer to meet his. His eyes snap about him. There is nothing but locked doors to either side. He has passed no furniture.

His way is made clear

once more. The door to his right clunks as the lock is turned and it is pulled open. What are surely fingers curl around the door, one at a time, and grip the edge. They are deep black, deeper than the eingenrau, deeper than the complete, total night which greeted him before. They appear sharp, and yet the flesh seems ready to drip from the bones. The door snaps fully open with a crash and the hand is gone.

The door is embedded into the stones of the wall. Beyond the now empty portal is a small bedroom. The bed's sheets are stained a cracked brown in a menacing splatter though the desk immediately adjacent is pristine. Hanging over the desk is a large mirror edged in brass. His hands clasp each side and begin to raise it.

Inky black fingers intertwine over his own and push his fingers harder against the trim. His fingers ache and protest the pressure, but the burning is much worse. His flesh burns and cracks immediately, his blood comes to a boil and his bones begin to crack.

The fingers disappear

and he is left holding the mirror which is now free from the wall. His hands are whole and undamaged, if a bit numb, though there remains an ashy mark where the demonic fingers gripped him. He turns the mirror in his hands and steps back into the hall, to the too-clear edge of the torchlight. Surely, so long as the light can't actually touch him, he will be safe.

He holds the mirror over the line which, rather than become obscure, bends around the shape of the mirror. Moving the mirror closer to the ground, the bend become more definite. He drops to his knees behind it and shuffles forward. When his whole body is past where the line once marked, he waits. After a minute of silence he resumes his trek across the torchlight.

Halfway to the other side, a thought strikes him still. His fingers, wrapped about the trim, are exposed. In the still silence, bile rises in his throat as anxiety nearly crushes it. His eyes lock on his right fingers which seem bathed in their own shadow. The mark from the hellish fingers from behind the

mirror have shaded them. He feels that he should smile, but the muscles in his face are still.

He finishes his crossing and rests the mirror on the floor while he stares at his fingers. They appear ashy now, but in the direct light they had looked so much darker? Unsure of exactly why, he weaves his fingers together into a single fist. He rests his head against his chest, and, unbidden, a prayer to his God passes his lips. When that is done, he picks back up the mirror and continues, swifter than before.

Soon the hall splits in three directions. He turns to the leftmost paths and begins to pump his arms. Dashing down the hall, nervous footsteps once again grace his ears. He remarks, though only for a moment, that he cannot hear his own. The path veers to the right and there, around that final corner, stands the black-clad figure of Father Thomas. He lets out an angry bark-like sound, which the Father turns to.

A torch is lofted high in Thomas' right hand and the light reflects from his offen-

sively bright collar. When his bespectacled eyes meet the man racing toward him, the torch jumps from his hand. The surprise is quick and Thomas ducks to grab at the falling light. Even so, the top bounces against the flagstones before his fingers latch back onto the shaft. A cloud of smoky shadow reaches out from the wall and consumes the flame, banishing the room back into full night. Father Thomas throws the unlit torch when he sees the shadow.

The Father was distracted too long, long enough for the charging man to reach his target. The pair flies through the air and lands in bloody moonlight thrown through a tall window. The job is soon to be done, but only if he does not hesitate, as he did before. He raises his hand and there is the inky black arm once more, offering a burnt and worn hammer to him. He reaches and grabs it: an old forge hammer, worn from crafting hundreds of blades for war. His yellowed eyes twinkle. The hammer swings behind him as he readies for the killing blow when Thomas speaks.

“Alastor, it is not yet too

late.” The hammer stops.

“You are not yet lost.” Fury blossoms in his chest. He hesitates, yet again.

“You can be forgiven.” His shadow casts over the Father, giving him hazy wings.

“You can only lose at what you attempt.”

Now it is too late. He did not pay close enough attention. From the Father’s left hand shines a golden cross. Red moonlight beams from its angles as it smashes into the side of his head. His vision swims, but this is not the welcoming dark of before.

“But I cannot find it in myself to forgive you. I am too weak a man.” Thomas crashes the cross into his temple again and he rolls onto the ground.

“What you did to cause all this,” *smash*, “How you turned on those who loved you,” *smash*, “What you did to your son!” *SMASH!* “Only God can forgive you now.”

He can feel the cross breaking through the air on its deadly path. But first a vision clouds his eyes. He knows why he is here, what is wrong with the cathedral, what his mission

is and why he tried to complete it.

He sees a baptismal fountain, surrounded by freshly lit candles. A dark blade slashes across his palm which drips into the water. The blood of the sinner. His past self's head turns and, though he closes his eyes, he still sees too clearly. There lies his infant son, sleeping in peace. He lifts him and his son's eyes open. He smiles at his father. Then the smile vanishes beneath the bloody water. The life of the unbaptised. His son thrashes beneath his hands, and though there are tears flowing into the fountain, his grip is stern.

Then he is thrown across the room. He crashes against a pew and his breath vanishes. There before the font stands Father Thomas. Golden wings stretch behind him, but surely that is a trick of the candles. Thomas looks to the fountain, but he is too late. He gently lifts the little body from the water and places it on the ground before it. Bloody water

drips from the boy's still limbs. Thomas looks up and catches him in a gaze that could burn through a mountain.

But he is too late. The building shakes as it is tossed by an earthquake. Shadows rush from every corner and the once bright room becomes dim. Where once the church felt safe, it now feels like a graveyard with the reaper treading between the rows of headstones.

He pushes away from the pew he was thrown on and dashes for the doorway. A candle stand falls across the path and he trips, twisting his left ankle. He glances a final time into the room he just left only to see Father Thomas rushing to catch a falling crucifix.

The wall to his right begins to glow golden, but that didn't happen then, did it? The wall reaches to him, but he turns his head away. For some reason, he knows that it's not a wall; it's a cross rushing to meet him. He feels it tap his right temple and is blinded by a white light. He is still. But that will pass.



KALIYAH GARDNER

AMANDA DETTMANN

POETRY FEATURE

“**E**very single written work of mine contains alliteration, sound, and rhythm because I am obsessed with the way a poem sounds when spoken out loud. My process varies every single time. I keep a list of random words that have unique sounds or syllables, and the list contains an inspiration page — lines from famous poems that have hit me in the gut. Sometimes I read a poem in a book and someone else’s line will push me in my own direction. I am always conscious with the way a poem looks on the page, and how other poets strive to create shape from a visual standpoint will always drive me to keep pushing boundaries.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANDA DETTMANN

5 Years After an Eating Disorder

Amanda Dettman

Like a dying braided bunch of sunflowers stepping into
a vase of fresh water,
She is here.

She is, and She stands

releasing Herself

like a monarch's glow
after winter.

She is here and She knows it.

She can feel the inner burble bubbling
of Her sound again. Her voice
dancing
across accordions and wild orchid orchards

Her voice
that was meant to reek & rattle, one that shoots
overalls off clotheslines
and sends them flying somewhere around the mid-Atlantic.

A voice of noisy claps
clap a snapping sound in

half

Her throat's guttered
utterances leaving even the kitchen's feathers ruffled in all yellow
& yolked everything
after hitting
every pot
every pan
with Her speech palms.

She never wants to stop ringing.

So many winking wind chimes now
She messes everything into radiance,
tingling junk drawers into treasure troves
where angels live in thimbles tangled by rubber bands.
They are still there. Lighting
the junk drawer candles
every anniversary
of her birth-death.

She breaks chairs
and rebuilds them into dazzling synecdoches
so She is not alone.

She can sit on wood in company now
She tells her story, many times
with open hands.

5 Years After an Eating Disorder

She is flustered and sincere now,
sincerely flustered
by Her body's ability
to crack back together, to finally expand
Her tight lips into full teeth. She grows
Her commotion into

motion

like a sweep of cinnamon dusting,
an unstoppably
twirling
skirt, a face

in your window kind of awakening.
She did not know she could feel so full.

I did not know
life could fit so beautifully tight
around my hips.

Give & Take

Amanda Dettmann

Third Place, Poetry

Insert my voice.
Take my left heel and twist.
Pull my real hair.
Cup my knee and pour honey.
Swallow.

Screw in two AA batteries
in my eardrum. Yell.
Say everything I never let you and
more.

Locate the silence.
Slice in two.
Gulp. Repeat. Gulp. Repeat.
We are stronger in pairs.

Before you roll over on your side of
the sheets,
unwind my fingers
and spread into sweet spit.

I am the snapping percussion
stunned and spinning.
You can shut me up if you want.

Crumple my skin in accordion sheets
and make music of the softness
you have given us.

Communion

Amanda Dettman

If you told me that our bodies were made of
dirt or
honey or
acrylics set in motion

I would cut myself open
with the x-ray of your hand.

You have to pierce deeper
than my gut of footprints in snow
to know that we share the DNA of thunder
without the muted lightning.

Stone Shoes

Amanda Dettman

When ten feet
from the scuffed stone wall,
where hundreds of rocks sleep,
I cannot help
but to think of the little girl's feet
and her worn-down shoes,
the little Jewish girl from Auschwitz
whose grey leather soles with straps
are now stacked like a wall of rocks
in a museum in D.C.

I cannot scratch the stone.

For feeling young skin stacked
is a sin.

Feathered

Amanda Dettmann

A man at my dad's work slathered
glue over his entire hairy body.

This is true. My dad's a psychiatrist.

The man undressed outside, at midnight,
planting himself in the vegetable garden
as a human scarecrow.

He was the birdseed, and they came,
all twenty birds came
to rest
on his naked
sticky body.

He had company.
At midnight.
The glow of twenty birds
covering his tremors
and twitching chin.

He stayed there until morning.
Stripped

but blanketed in feathers.

And they came,
all twenty doctors with restraints
and baggy pants and a blue hospital gown
belts buttons velcro
zippers for his mouth
they came like biting crows
and not like the birds
they came.

For they came to suffocate, not cloak.
For they came to smother, not shower in plumage.

The twenty came because they had always
been taught to come.

The nurses,
head specialists,
medical advisors.

Ones still in training were even there.

They thought they were gluing
the man back together.

All they did was deny
his new wings.

Sam's Table

Amanda Dettmann

Third Place, Prose

If you want Sam to make you a dinner table, you will need to wait longer than a year. I've ordered many tables from Sam for my kitchen, for my family. He's never finished any of them. I've even met him at his barn, to ensure he would keep his promise.

I need a dark mahogany table, one with the sides extra sanded. Cynthia and Peter always rest their little elbows while eating. I practiced it over and over in my head, the exact words I would say to Sam. Straight-forward. Direct. No emotion.

I climbed out of my navy truck and shut the door. I walked along his dirt path with the scattered white pebbles, the wind hitting my white cotton t-shirt and making the bottom fly upwards in my face. I quickly pulled it down, stuffing it into my jeans. I had made this walk many times. I had tried ordering tables many times. Go over the lines in my head. Get out of the truck. Shut the door. Walk. Feel the crunch of gravel under my

toes. Relive his presence.

I stepped in through the front door to our home, setting Peter's baby car seat on the ground. I stopped myself. "Why is there a bra on the couch, Sam? Wait . . . That's not mine. That is not my bra, Sam."

"Just relax. You're tired, you're exhausted, and you need to shower. You don't look like yourself."

"I just had a baby, Sam! You need to tell me why there's a bra on our sofa. Answer me."

"Marie, just put Peter into his crib, and I'll explain the whole thing."

"Is this why you weren't at the hospital? Is this why you missed all your calls when I needed you?"

"What are you talking about? You're jumping to conclusions, Marie."

"No, I'm not. You . . . You were at home, here, with that, with that . . . With that girl! That girl who used to babysit for Cynthia after she was born! I remember. Annalisa was her name. You always liked her. You . . . That's not my bra, Sam. Stop making excuses. That's hers and you know it."

"Can you prove it? Maybe I just got you a new bra as a pres-

ent because you've gained so much weight from being pregnant. Maybe I was being thoughtful and wanted to get you something nice."

"Excuse me? I just gave birth to our child! I told you, Sam, and I'm not repeating myself after this. That is not my bra. You're lying. You . . . You were sleeping with her all this time while I was in the hospital. Even my friends visited me more than you did when the doctor said I had early complications. You're disgusting."

"I mean—"

"Get out." He didn't leave until after he hit me. Pushed me up against the wall. Called me a stupid, worthless mother. Pressed against me with all his weight until my body slouched down to the floor, crumpled. I glanced at his blue eyes. And then he left.

I slipped my hands in my pockets nervously, rubbing them up and down against the inner denim to create friction. It was colder than I thought. The leaves were changing and the air hit my neck fast and hard. I crossed my arms quickly from the next whip of wind but then decided to put them back into

my pockets. I couldn't look defiant, or Sam wouldn't like it.

I had come to his barn a couple times since the day he left. Each time wasn't any easier. He needed to make this table in under a year. I would convince him. My mother would be visiting soon, and I had to have a house that was ready. It was still unfinished inside. We had to have furniture. Cynthia and Peter needed somewhere to sit, something to lie down on instead of building a blanket fort every night in front of the staticky black and white TV that would drown them to sleep. *You're a stupid, worthless mother.* We needed color. We needed a table to look like a family.

"Hello?" My feet rocked on the gravel as I knocked on the outside of his barn. It was red and splotchy, almost pink, like the cheeks of a newborn that had laughed once and then given up. There were holes. So many holes. Big, wide, and elongated with thatches of straw sticking out from the hens' nests up top. I always heard them inside, laughing at me.

Nobody answered. Only

one wooden door was slid across to the side—open, but not really. Maybe big enough for me to squeeze through, but I wasn't sure. There was a rusted nail right where the handle should have been. One of the lightbulbs had gone out in the glass lantern fixture on the barn. The other one flickered as if it was shivering more than me.

"Hello?" No answer. I twisted the back of my stud earring anxiously. A large German Shepherd came bounding around the corner of the barn, making me back up quickly. "Whoa, there. Easy, boy. It's okay, I'm, I'm . . . I'm just visiting your friend Sam. Slow down, whoa . . . It's alright, boy." He was homely looking with hair sprouting in different directions, in all different shades of brown. One ear was slightly bent while the other stood at peak height. His teeth were yellowed, and he had a chin that jutted out. A couple of his ribs peeked through his dark skin. He walked with his back arched and his head low. I turned my body away. He started barking

nonstop, jumping up and down around me. "Get off! Just . . . just, go away!" I used my leg to try and push him to the side.

A sharp whir of metal sounded and made my head jerk back. The dog stopped jumping and stood there with drool dripping like rain. I could hear the yellow saw machine rev to life just inside those doors. I knew Sam's hands on the saw would be a little off the perfect angle, positioned to cut the wood for his tables. Hands off center. Sam said he never made his tables perfectly square, or rounded at the corners. *Crooked*, he would say. *That's what family is.*

I had to yell. "Sam! I'm here to talk to you about a new table! It's for Cynthia and Peter! And my mother! It's a real project and it counts! It's important!" Nothing. Just saw.

"Sam, I can't wait any longer! It's freezing out here and I don't have a jacket!" Then silence. Even the dog was quiet.

I took a deep breath. "Can you just . . . let me in? I don't think I can fit through these doors."

The saw revved up again.

You need me. You need me so you can make money. You need me so bad, but you just won't admit it. I came all the way here for you. And this is how you treat me? I came, and I'm here for you. And the table . . . You know what, maybe I could even help you make it. Just cut a square for me and some legs, Sam. I'll do the rest and glue it all together with the good stuff that dries fast. You carve and cut, and I'll piece it into one sturdy thing. I'm back for you, Sam, and you need me. I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud.

He stopped the saw and grunted twice. "Does that mean you won't let me in?" I asked. He said nothing. I peeked into the crack between the one barn door that was closed and the other that was six inches open. He had on overalls and a long white t-shirt with a gray dandelion. The t-shirt covered up the straps. "Wooden Farms," it read. It was like the life was sucked right out of him. He still had the same red hair that curled behind his ears and that dusty appearance. Hard cheeks. Long neck. Forceful arms. Freckles on his nose. Thin body. Thick shoulders. I just needed

him to do this one thing for me. I needed this table or —

"Come in."

He slid the six-inch-open door all the way to the right, and the hens cackled up above in their nesting boxes. The dog followed in, swishing his tale back and forth and looking towards the hens. There were straw bales everywhere, stacked in rows like cartons of eggs. A ladder was propped to climb into the rafters where Sam could check on the hens and get his woodworking supplies. The barn was a mess. Tools were scattered in every direction on the ground: hammers, screws, wrenches, nail guns, doweling jigs, rulers, and chisels. Spiralized pieces of wood littered the dirt floor. There was a clock hooked onto a wooden beam, but the minute hand was stuck. It was plastic and beat-up; it had probably been there for generations, its numbers etched by hand in ink that was now faded. The number four was crooked.

I looked at his eyes. The same blue. Like a river that nobody visits. Like a heavy cloud that wants to open into a

downpour but can't. I wanted to touch his eyes so bad. He was still my husband after all. We had never brought ourselves to officially divorce despite what had happened.

"Sam."

"Marie." He sat on his work stool, took off his gloves, and looked down. I stood standing, biting my lower lip.

"Sam, I haven't gotten those tables I ordered from you. Or the one last year or the one before that. Or the one in the middle at the beginning of the end when we met or the table last month. I haven't received any tables, Sam. I asked you if you could make me one table."

"You came back."

"I came back because I asked you to make me one table. I still haven't gotten it, Sam."

"You came back."

"I didn't want to."

"You came back."

"I had to." I sat down on a gray metal bench. "My mother is coming and we need a wooden table. I know you make tables full of sweat and tears and blood and love. I need your table. My mother needs to see

that Cynthia, Peter, and I are a family. We need to have a table. We need to have a surface to eat dinner on other than the hard floor that makes us numb. I want to be able to sit and eat and eat and sit and talk and sit and eat and laugh without being on the ground. I want to be higher than the ground, Sam."

"I don't understand why you came back again."

"I just told you, Sam. You're not listening."

"You don't need a table."

"I do. I just told you why I need a table. I need this table or —"

"Or what." He kicked the dirt and spit, then walked over to the clock on the wooden beam and punched the plastic frame. The minute hand started spinning. The number four stared back at me. I couldn't meet his eyes. Those eyes. One of the hens cackled. The dog started panting. Sam got up off his stool and stood facing me, weaving his thumbs in and out, in and out.

"Or what," he repeated. I averted my eyes. Anywhere but his eyes. Towards the saw ma-

chine. Towards the one closed door. Towards the white pebbles outside that I could barely see from in here. Anything but his eyes.

“Huh? I’m talking to you, Marie. Meet my eyes, *Sweetie*.” I was shaking. He was towering over me with his gray dandelion t-shirt and his teeth full of fresh spit, his pale and sweaty hands drawn back and ready. I remembered his hands. The callused palms that wouldn’t stop bleeding. My callused back that wouldn’t stop bruising. *You’re a stupid, worthless mother.*

“I think I know, Marie. Or what, huh? You need this table or your own mother will think you’re a failure? That she’ll remember you had kids when you were sixteen years old? That you pushed me away? That we had a fight on the day we brought Peter home? That fight over our stupid babysitter and a bra? That fight in our old house instead of this goddamn barn that’s falling apart? That fight over Cynthia and Peter and who gets to keep who and who is more important than who and who is stronger than who

and who isn’t falling apart more than who and who belongs to who and who loves who and who stays and who leaves?”

He was breathing hard now. I closed my eyes and tried to stop remembering. Not his hands. Not his eyes.

“I remember it so well, *Honey*, and if I’m honest I think your mother will have no problem recalling the circumstances.” He flipped over his stool.

His tall figure followed me as I walked out. As I ran out, bolting towards the truck to get away from his hands. I dug around for my keys as my fingers shook. I revved up my engine and gunned it in reverse while his hands waved back and forth on the other side of the glass. He was yelling. I kept driving in reverse, his head getting smaller and smaller like those white pebbles. He ran back inside of the barn and I winced. He was getting something to hurt me again. He was going to end it once and for all. But I was almost out of there. I could do it. Almost to the mailbox. *Keep going, Marie. You’re worth so much more than this.* He

was in the barn for a long time. I stopped the engine, waiting. I needed to see his eyes again. He ran back outside of the barn, holding something big up. Blue. I saw his eyes. Blue. I revved up my engine and was about to drive forward. I was almost past the mailbox now. I was almost gone.

Out of the corner of my eye as I left his pebble road, he held up my finished table.



BRENDEN DAVIS

Madonna Complex

Kaliyah Gardner

First Place, Poetry

The blacker the berry, the
more bitter I am; his saccharinity
touching tips of alabaster tonguez.
The darker the flesh, the
deeper my grudge
against pale hands
molesting obsidian roots.

You was raised as a ghetto child,
within a whirlwind of brazen brown flesh;
but the black backdrop has cracked, white lies of success
crept in like quicksand sin and wicked white breasts.

Nowadays you gravitate
towards cotton-colored cunts
who let you finger-fuck,
to make their fathers frantic.
Nowadays you paper chase,
running from the soil from which you grew,
hop a boat and ride the wave away from our culture
for a chance to break your back like a pack mule
on 40 acres of land still owned by the white man.
Come on nigga, now look at you.

Shit, I aint mad at cha,
but—aint shit changed,
you're still a cotton-pickin coon,

a slave wearing solid gold chains,
taught to dehumanize and devalue
the women you call sistas and
the same sista who raised you,
and forsake us like strange fruit,
while glorifying the shameless Yt women
who appropriate our attributes.

Recall the tears teeming from
black pupil, brown iris, white sclera,
down my cinnamon chin,
when you laced my mahogany heart with ivory venom.
"I don't like to see black women hurtin,"
you claimed, Marvin Gaye playing in the distance—
Lover, miles away from where you began;
Black was the thing to be
before you took her paper hands.

*"Don't cry,
dry your eyes,
never let up.
Even though it didn't work out with me
there'll be anotha brotha
who's gunna love ya.
We're not all the same. Forgive me.
In five years,
this'll all just be a memory.*

Keep ya head up," you said
to ease your own guilt,
not realizing
after you left,
the future didn't brighten;
blacker than the darkest night, the next men
did the exact same thing
and fell victim to winter sirens.

You were manipulated
to over-value these vapor vipers,
materializing from thin air.
No substance, venomous, ill-intentioned;
they open their mouths and try you on
like "Interracial is the New Black"
and treat the panther in your pants like the hottest new trend.
They bite deeper and deeper,
colonizing the panther in your blood.
Why open your heart and pardon these culture vultures?
Why justify such a love?
Is it even love?

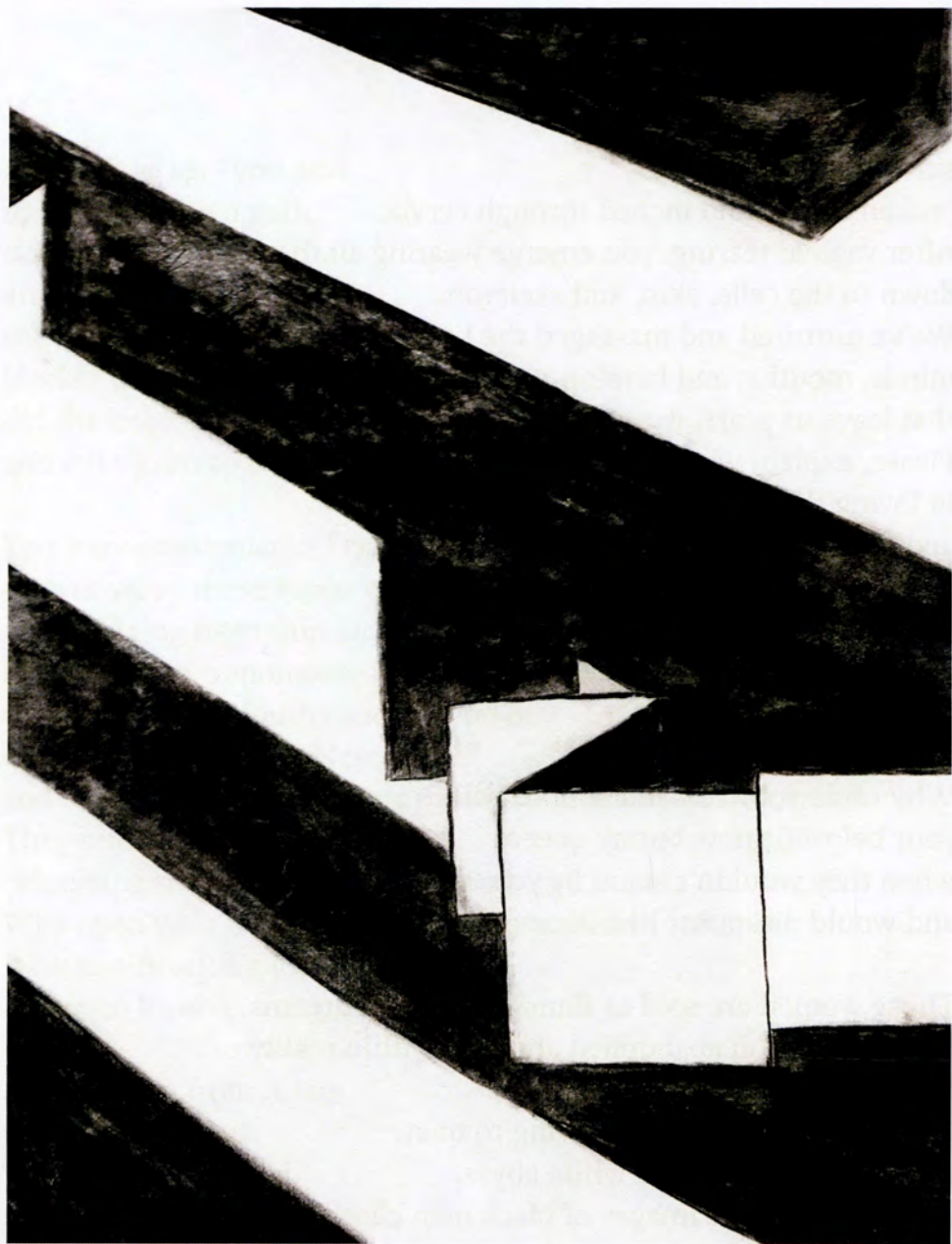
As Eve came from Adam,
you come from us.
We've been with you
since fleshy-pink fetal tissue,

since you've left uterus,
broken bones, and inched through cervix.
After vaginal tearing, you emerge wearing all that is us:
down to the cells, skin, and skeleton.
We've nurtured and massaged the limbs,
minds, mouths, and hands
that leave us scars, wounds, and bruises.
Please, explain what the issue is
in loving the women who've never left
and by default, loving that which you reflect?

The closest person to understanding
the experience of the Black man,
besides the Black man,
is the Black woman.

Why trade your soil and soul to hail
your beloved snow bunny queen,
when they wouldn't stand by your side in trying times
and would disappear like dope fiends?

Those women are sold as flimsy snowflake dreams.
The women you abandoned are bliss within reality.
But I say all this and you resist;
the truth in my pleas dissolving to mist.
After you, before me is white abyss.
Nowadays I chase images of black men chasing emptiness.



BRENDEN DAVIS

The Circus Man

Anonymous
First Place, Prose

When I decided to become a circus man, my wife called after me as I walked out the door, “Be home by 6:45pm for your Zoloft and your 7pm trauma session with Dr. Johnson!” But I was already gone.

I am a military man, or was one I should say—the word “order” following every other syllable of my life. My wife Beth calls it the “perfect hero,” my being orderly, but I’d begun to hate order once I got home from Vietnam. It was the worst at night; when the air outside was silent, as still as a crouching tiger about to pounce out of the shadows. Silence meant something bad was about to happen; stillness meant you were dead.

Yet, despite my fears, my wife continued to have everything orderly for me—us—should I forget to say it—just as she’d always done. She relished in being a military wife. She’d

even joined a military wives club that met twice a week at the Baptist Church basement, which I thought was stupid and degrading, and she continued to attend those meetings, even when I got back from tour, like a cult. She spent three months making her dress for the military ball one year. And she demanded that I wear my uniform on an almost daily basis, even though I’d been six years since I’d last been on duty and had been working as an accountant for a small-time laundry business in town since then. At places like the grocery store, where she’d run into some old friends, “How are you?” Beth would say, “Have you met my military husband? He just got back from tour,” with a smile so grand, I knew she practiced it for those Baptist Church basement meetings.

I’d been sitting at the tacky suburban kitchen table one morning skimming through the newspaper, the smell of eggs and maple syrup choking the air,

I saw the circus was coming to town.

That night, I'd sat down with her as I did every Saturday night, me in my ragged HONOR THE BRAVE shirt and she in her lacy white night gown as she switched on the T.V. for us to watch some mind-numbing show. After a couple of minutes, I couldn't watch anymore, and as usual I found myself looking about the room. This night, I found myself studying my wife and much to my disappointment but not surprise, I realized how dull she had become. Her hair, which used to loose and fair, was now worn back, dim and wiry. Her smile had grown fake, pressing pre-mature wrinkles into the corners of her mouth. She complained about traffic and elderly people and the neighbor's dog. She had an avalanche of reminders, none of which she ever removed from the fridge. She wore loafers. Her wardrobe had become relentlessly unimaginative. My wife's words to me, even at night,

were obedient but untrusting, creating an iceberg between the sheets.

In an attempt to make light of the fact that this was how I felt about my wife, I said, "Why don't we take that trip out to the west coast? The one your sister was talking about. We'll drive up from Malibu to San Francisco."

Without looking up from the television, the glow of the screen ricocheting off of her features, "Oh no, we couldn't. We have too much to do here. I couldn't leave now..."

The TV had switched from the ending credits of Apocalypse Now to the intro of the Brady Bunch, and Beth's eyes glazed over the screen as though the transition had been seamless.

"You used to love to go to the beach. We ought to go next weekend."

Mrs. Brady had just entered the kitchen and Mr. Brady sat at the table reading his newspaper. Marcia burst in,

complaining about school. My wife semi-smiled at the entrance of Marcia, her favorite character, then her face went blank again.

"Why don't we go to the beach next weekend?" I said.

"No."

"Why not?"

A shrug. For some reason, this indifference shot through my body like a vase tipping over in me and shattering. "Why not?" I asked again, an underlying forcefulness beginning to rise in my throat.

"I can't leave my Baptist Basement meetings. Suzanne McKay is bringing in her husband. He's just back from Nam. He has a purple heart award."

My mind boggled, her words wobbled in my head. Sometimes I thought of her meetings as nothing less than show-and-tells for the wives to "pageant-ize" one's spouse. Sharp phrases gathered at the tip of my mouth, ready to fly at her, but I held back. "You can miss one or two meetings. They're all a bunch of phonies

anyway."

She didn't even look up. The Brady family was all around the kitchen table now, laughing belly-gutted at a joke Alice told, my wife's eyes dully sparkling with lackluster amusement.

In a desperate attempt to reel in my wife's attention, "We could go. Do something different for once. Go some place where I don't have to wear—this," I tugged at my uniform to show her. Why did I even still wear it? "I could learn to be a pilot, something exciting."

"You don't even know how to fly a plane."

"I could learn."

"Darling," she turned toward me now, her eyes heavy with condescension. "Just stay where you are, I love where you're at now, don't you? It's convenient." She turned back to the TV, the glow of the screen jabbing at her features again, hooking her back under its veil. "Besides," she said, not even looking up at me, but now the slightest hint of disappoint-

ment in her voice. "You're just an ordinary man."

Mike Brady had gotten up from the kitchen table and, in the oblivion of reading his newspaper and not paying attention to where he was going, slipped on the wet floor Alice had been mopping in front of him, hitting the ground with a compounding smash. Beth let out an instant cackling roar, so hollow in depth and shallow in her stomach, it was startling. In that moment, I wanted badly to say something cruel, truth-filled to smack her out of *her* reality.

I set down the plate of mash potatoes and peas I'd been simply forking on my plate for the past half hour. "Thanks for dinner," I said, my sarcasm shot straight at her.

The twinkle went out of her eyes. The roar of laughter abandoned her. "When you wash and dry and clean every single—" She stopped herself. A moment. Then another. Then an over-compensated smile transformed across her features

as though it'd never abandoned her at all. "We're just going to watch some TV tonight. Dear."

I got up and left. Even as I looked down from the railing, the couch and her back turned away from me, behind the red-stained lips, I knew her teeth were gritted so tightly they could crack a nut.

...

On my first trip to the circus I met her—Tasmina—so exotic and smolderingly beautiful, like a wild animal caught and untamed—that I thought my heart was going to explode. She'd stepped out into the belly of the tent that first night, her legs hugged by the fishing net material that clung to her like fish scales and her torso squeezed by a leopard print leotard. The jewels lining her eyes glittered a celestial green and her black eyeshadow swept up into her temples. Her hair, bold and frayed, the color of fiery copper, stood vibrant against the backdrop of the tent. A little fiendish flick of her tongue and

when she snapped her leather bound whip into the circus floor dirt, I nearly fell down the row.

Things went fast from the beginning, and after four months of sneaking out of the house to see her, I would've thought that I would've gotten bored or Beth would've caught on, but to my amusement, neither did. I would've thought Beth would wonder where I went every weekend, which was sometimes halfway across the state to small scrappy towns, but as long as I got back in time to do the bi-weekly grocery run with her, and my "Soldier's Anonymous" meetings (I'd stopped going to my trauma sessions, but I didn't tell her that), she didn't even bat an eye.

Tasmina on the other hand, became my life. Her body, pressed against mine, like a snake slithering up to me in the night, was thrilling and many evenings, after her act, we'd grapple for each other in her tent, in the dark, until we be-

came quite unsettled and began knocking things over. For the first time in six years, I didn't mind staying up all night.

On this particular night, I waited for her in the little tent some of the circus hands put up for her as long as they performed in a town. The thought of waiting for her saturated my mouth with saliva. Her tent was cheaply lavish, almost Spanish Moorish: tattered Turkish carpets torn from town to town, drapes, animal skins where we usually had sex, mysterious trinkets on her vanity, bottles of sultry smelling liquids. Japanese ink scrolls hung on the tent walls and strings of beads trickled down from the ceiling.

From the other side of the tent walls, I heard the audience go up in applause and a few minutes later, she appeared, thighs and all, her hair was wild as if she'd been running through the jungle, and her makeup, shadowy and sphinxlike, made my inner thighs tingle.

She removed the bedaz-

zled headdress from her head (I always wondered how much it weighed) and set it on the floor. Then she drew the tent curtain closed, and stared at me, the backlight hitting her figure so ethereally, I thought she might be an angel. Then my eyes adjusted, drowned with darkness. "This isn't going to work anymore."

Her words, so cool and detached, they hung in the air tiny and fragile like the dust particles floating around her, vanishing as they dissolved into the dark. Still, in the sliver of light lancing between her thighs, I could see the flesh of her silhouette, illuminated in the opening of the tent, and I knew I wanted touch it more than ever. I waited for her words to hit me, but they circled around me, so vague and strangely airy that they left me dazed. The only thing I was truly aware of still was the tingling feeling running rabid, crazed, in my thighs. I was about to reach out to her and catch her, but in

that stunned-euphoric moment when she said, "You're just an ordinary man."

I stayed still, limp in the aftermath of her words, which fell upon me like an elephant snapping my ribs, crushing my lungs and heart beneath it. The heat in my body ran cold. The tingling feeling between my thighs evaporated and her words, sharp and acidic, stabbed and wrangled at my thoughts—my heart, writhed like a rabid animal in my chest. A panic of cold sweat broke out all over my head. "I love you."

"No, you love the circus," she said, not picking her head up to look at me even.

"No, no I love you." The words fumbled from my mouth. But to my horror, they tasted dry, ill of concern. Oh God, no, this couldn't be happening.

"You love the idea of me." She went to her vanity, a mirror framed by faded marquee light bulbs, took two cotton balls in circular motions to her face, and began to remove her

makeup. "But it's not me who you actually love." She peeled the fake eyelashes from her lids, spidery feathered things, and I realized I'd never seen her without them. Still speechless though, I grappled at what she meant by all these things, and hopelessly tried to think of things to tell her to prove my love for her, my worth as participant in her world, but just then someone called through the tent walls out to her.

"I'll get it," she said.
"Stay here, don't move."

I stayed there—as if I could've left, my organs having been ripped out. I waited an eternal several minutes. When she returned, I'd made up my mind. "For God's sake, you can't do this. You've always been insane like this."

"You didn't even know me four months ago."

"I knew you," I said, gesturing to the space in front of me, as if she'd been there all my life. "I knew you from the papers. You were all over town.

Posters, billboards—I saw you—*your face*—as I walked down to the pharmacy. I'd pick up my Zoloft and there you'd be. It was the highlight of my day."

"It's all a sham."

"What do you mean?"

"None of this is real."

"What are you talking about?"

She'd taken off her hair extensions and had laid them flat on her vanity. They reminded me of horse tails. Her hair, so wild and bold before, seemed flatter, shorter now, and although I didn't understand it, my heart gave out a little to that. But I'd still made up my mind.

"What are you talking about?" I said again, only this time I got up, as if that signaled my authority.

She continued to remove her makeup, not taking her face away from the mirror. Earrings came off. Heels came off. And when she was ready, she ordered me to stay where I was as she changed behind the divider

screen. "Don't look," were her words to me before she slipped behind the canvas folds. We'd never been together where I'd been so far away from her, our bodies, usually in the flesh, hot and smoldering next to one another on the davenport, on the animal skin rugs—now it felt like I was on another planet.

When she came out from again, I quickly grabbed her wrist, taking both of us by surprise I think, for it came so instinctive, I could only attribute it to my military training. "Why?" was the only thing that uttered from my breath, now so shallow and weak.

She lifted her head and looked up into me, and I was taken aback. It's as if I'd never laid eyes on her before. She wore a white collared top, button-down and all, and a plaid skirt. Socks up to her knees. The song "Sunday Girl," forced itself into my head.

"I'm engaged," she said, her voice flat.

"You're engaged."

"Yes."

"Why not me?" It came out my mouth before I realized I had no control over myself anymore.

"You're married and I'm young."

Perhaps for the first time, I realized then, just how slim and bare she was without her costume on. Healthy, strong, clean—her hair was brushed back into a slightly disheveled bun on the top of her head and her eyes, usually so hungry and cutting, were now flat, a detergent-blue, outlined by thick, feathered lashes. Without the makeup, her cheeks were oval and girlish, and her mouth was thin and sensitive. She might've been all but sixteen, I guessed.

"I'm..." the words faded on my tongue. I'd not been young in quite some time. It hit me then, just how out of shape I'd gotten over the past six years: unshaven, sweat profusely beading at my temples, the beginning stages of a beer belly starting to reveal its ugly self

under my shirt.

“Besides.” She moved past me, as though I was never there, and stood by the tent opening, arms crossed over her stomach. “You’re too disillusioned. You think this is reality, coming in here and being with me. But it’s not.”

I left her words fall on top of me. I didn’t try to fight them.

“Goodbye, John.”

And with that she left. I was too paralyzed to move. For minutes, maybe hours, I stayed there, still, unable to feel anything but my heart pounding against the cavity of my chest.

As I walked out into the opening again, I felt the cloudless autumn air whisk by me. I made my way across the field, past the giant tent, and cotton-candy/peanut vendors. But when I entered the parking lot I stopped cold.

There Tasmina stood, arm and arm with someone else. She caught my eye and came over in a school-girl stride.

“John, this is David, my fiancée.”

I was too speechless to respond. It was nervous and unsmiling, as bland as a bowl of peas.

“He’s a middle-school English teacher.” It offered its hand, a flimsy if not weak grip, like a floppy fish trying to squirm away. I clutched it, wishing I hadn’t.

They left, but I stayed standing there. The night drew its shade over me. I stood there for the longest time. But when I did move again, for the first time in all of those six years, that’s when I realized I hadn’t left my reality at all. I was just a plain, ordinary man.

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Dedicated
to the gods who created these worlds,
to the adventurers who journey therein,
thank you.

