

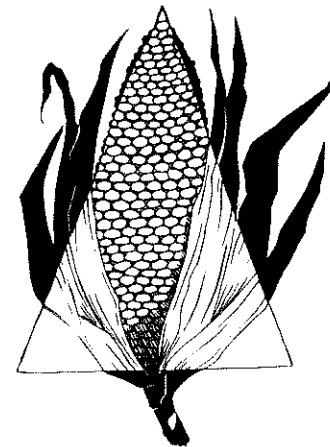
THE CORN CREEK REVIEW

2018 - 2019



THANK YOU

We would like to acknowledge Jo Bearse for her generous funding
in honor of Danny Bearse, a member of the class of 1979.



CORN CREEK REVIEW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

COVER DESIGN BY ANNA DYER

| | |
|---------|--|
| 1..... | "Icaro del Mar" by Alejandro Lemus-Gomez |
| 2..... | "To the Man Who May or May Not Be My Father" by Lewis Crawford |
| 6..... | "A Land Surveyor's Sonnet" by Bill Bennett |
| 6..... | "Untitled" by Madison Rannals |
| 7..... | "Flowers In the Frost" by Ashlyn Brisley |
| 9..... | "Untitled" by Sam Pham |
| 10..... | "Starr Carter" by Khalid Johnson |
| 10..... | "Fall" by Xavier Jacobs |
| 11..... | "A Study In Blue" by Josanna Rowe |
| 12..... | "Reflections" by Alejandro Lemus-Gomez |
| 13..... | "MLK" by Elizabeth English |
| 14..... | "Because the Pews Are Still Here" by Paxton Spessard |
| 15..... | "Red Wine" by April Land |
| 21..... | "Smoke" by Leigh Anne Turner |
| 21..... | "Smoke" Elizabeth Walters |
| 22..... | "The Indian Princess" by Victoria Beck |
| 22..... | "Vintage" by Anna Dyer |
| 23..... | "Untitled" by Sam Pham |
| 23..... | "Walking Past..." by Lewis Crawford |
| 24..... | "Ain't That Just The Way" by Cayla Highfield |
| 25..... | "My Summer As A Raft Guide" by Devin Filicicchia |
| 33..... | "Bighorn Sheep Skull" by Mark Williford |
| 33..... | "The Head of Orpheus" by Jarrett Whitener |
| 35..... | "How I Met My Roommate" by Elizabeth English |
| 49..... | "Come Down" by Cayla Highfield |
| 50..... | "Ode to the Chicks and Quail Sign" by Jarrett Whitener |
| 51..... | "Para Berta, Mi Segunda Madre" by Bill Bennett |
| 52..... | "We Will Blink" by Paxton Spessard |

ICARO DEL MAR

Alejandro Lemus-Gomez

Admit it, you hate it when your mother sings
"Jumping the waves on a hot summer's day
at the Beach Flower." The old song
you two made when you were six, your hair still soft
like her blouse on the lawn chair on the shore
watching you both, alone, wading on waves
of Key West—stained glass teal—dancing
around you both, "*El agua se mueve*
because of the mermaids you read about,
and Poseidon is happy you are here."
She was your storyteller, showing you
how your ringlets are like hermit crab shells
hiding crustaceans and secrets, spirits
and ancestors. She told you guppies turn
into dragons when they eat their "veggies"
and you—you ate it up. That's why you hate it.
Because you believed it. The myths, legends.
Because sea salt always got in your eyes
when you swam out to find sirens, away
from her. And the salt always made you cry
and those tears always reminded you of why
she took you there. To forget what you said
about him, your blood father—a bearded
blur.

He visited when you were just three.
You remember the movie theater
he took you to, but not the movie.
You remember the airport, MIA,
how he said he'd call, but who got you
the toy plane from the stall next to his gate?
You assumed it was his gift, to make up
for past and future birthdays. And what was it

you said that made you cry? "*No hables de el,
that liar.*" You don't remember that either.
Your mother remembers and told you that
when you were sixteen and he finally
messed you on the internet. No call
though. She also remembers the toy plane
and how she bought it to keep you from crying.
Crying like you did when the wave crashed
onto your face like a horse's gallop,
slamming you into the water, Ícaro
del mar, for swimming too far. You need it.
The song. To remind you how you both swam.

TO THE MAN WHO MAY OR MAY NOT BE MY FATHER

Lewis Crawford

I was twenty-one when we first spoke;
not first met—

spoke.

No, not because I didn't try. I remember
being fourteen and watching my grandmother's hands shuffle
through a stack of old polaroids;
sun-bleached and yellow from nicotine.

As we fumbled from picture to picture, I noticed
a face, your face, and I asked her who it was.

Your father, she said. *Your real one*.

Can you even imagine

me standing in her kitchen, middle of the night,
being stared at by cheap porcelain roosters,
stumbling through a Coweta County phone book
for a name that I should own by right?
Can you imagine finding that name,
your face red with heat? No, not anger, not yet,
maybe love, but you don't know what love is, but you think you do,
as a woman picks up the phone, asks your name, then hangs up.
It takes you a couple times to catch the hint but you learn.
So you do what everyone else does to get rid of a problem:
you bury it, hoping that the soil will break it down
to the insignificant nothing that you want it to be
and there you are, twenty-one, standing on a car lot
in the middle of July, the time of year that heat hits
the asphalt so hard that if you stand in one place too long,
the soles of your Goodwill penny loafers stick to the ground
like a rat, half-submerged, in a glue trap.

Your boss says *You don't take orders*.

If you wanna take orders, get a job at Long Horns.

So you do what got you the job in the first place: you talk.

Yeah, the trunk has 14.8 cubic-feet of space.

In English: Groceries. Lots of groceries.

Yeah, this baby has 580 horsepower.

In English: Women. Lots of women.

And maybe you sell one, maybe you don't,
but one thing's for sure, the night comes down
and there you are, sitting in your office,
with a Coweta County phone book, calling
people who just got done spending their day
busting their ass to make copper wire, or whatever,
and they're sitting down to dinner with their kids
who don't appreciate them, and their wives
who don't cheat on them but think about it,
and it's meatloaf night, and there they sit,
utensils clutched in their hands and brought down
like spears on the night's kill, and here you come
to ask if they've thought about trading
their piece of shit Chevy for something they can't afford.
And when one says *No*, in the nicest way he can,
you ask again. The answer is still *No*,
but, this time, with a *Fuck* in front of it
before he says *Don't call back* and hangs up.
But *You don't take orders*. So you write
a note beside the number: Call back in a month.
Then you trace your finger down the page
and see a name. One you should know
better than you do and you remember
your grandmother's hand, resting between your shoulder blades,
saying *You don't need him*. Yes,
you remember that hand
even though you never paid attention
to the nails coated in chipped red lacquer,
the knotted nub where she lost her pinky
to the hydraulic press of a Toyota plant,
or the blue-veins that wrapped around her wrist and knuckles,
tying it all together like the belts of some mortal engine.

And you see that name and *You don't need him*
 but you want him to know that.
 So you pick up the phone and, as you dial,
 something familiar comes over you. Heat
 but, this time, anger— definitely anger
 as he picks up and the only thing that stumbles
 out of your mouth is a name. Your name.
 Then he curses as he walks into another room,
 swearing to a woman that it's *Nothing, damnit. Nothing.*
 Then silence.

Listen,
I got a wife and two kids.
I'm not gonna badmouth your mama
but she got around.
You could be anybody's. Anybody's.
Good luck. I mean it.

Then you're twenty-seven, leaning on the railing
 of a bridge, watching two people, maybe lovers,
 casting rocks across a frozen pond and, for a moment,
 you'd give anything absolutely anything
 to be the stone rolling off their fingertips. Their hands
 holding, guiding, letting loose. Then air, the rush
 of coolness, the ice cracking beneath you, falling,
 sinking as the water ripples like waves of light on crystal,
 deeper into that which shaped you, darker, darker.
 Then earth. Stillness. Rest.
 Oh, God. Can you imagine?

A LAND SURVEYOR'S SONNET – FOR DAD

Bill Bennett

I see you seated at the kitchen table
 in the spot where you ate all of your meals,
 in the spot where you tried to teach me math;
 time and time again you tried to reach me
 and make me understand all those postulates,
 Y-intercepts, things hanging over my head
 like the oblique edge of a guillotine's blade.
 We always went 'round and 'round, didn't we?
 We were two spheres in different orbits.
 You drafted your course, but I never could.
 I drifted, unable to put two and two together.
 You the rational one, and me the opposite.
 I'd have you back, even if only to argue
 over limits and values on unequal terms.



UNTITLED

Madison Rannals

FLOWERS IN THE FROST

Ashlyn Brisley

That winter was a thief slinking in his shadow that mugged him of the long days and firefly nights. The ground got stiff along with his arthritic joints and killed the flowers that a few days earlier were in bloom out in the yard. He couldn't forgive the winter for all that it took from him, even if it left a promise of seeing all that life and warmth again in later months. It was too late. The damage was done and done well, leaving nothing but shriveled corpses behind.

Samuel Dyess cleared a spot on the frosty ground with the church shoes he wore freshly polished. He felt ridiculous when he knelt on the brown grass and both his knees popped from disuse—his ankles from distress. Liver-spotted hands rubbed together one last time in the hope of extra heat, before they dove into the bone-chilling earth. Fingers dug tunnels until palms cradled roots. One by one, he dug up the flowers, not the dead but the dying; those with their stems drooping and their petals falling got new homes in clay pots. There was nothing decorative about them or anything to make them special, but, Samuel thought, maybe these three-dollar pots will bring the flowers back.

The upset yard became a crutch for his trembling arms until he gained his footing once more. Dirt and grass fell off of his black suit pants as he walked the plants into the house, but the fabric retained the water it had picked up from the frost, making a long-wet stain from his knees to the trim. He set the pots on windowsills around the house and pulled the blinds up as he passed them, throwing the curtains wide to welcome in what sun the winter would allow. He would give these geraniums and marigolds the time God couldn't spare.

After his arms were empty, he stopped at a framed picture of a sailboat on the Mississippi on his way out the door. Samuel's white button-up was a muddy mess and dirt had become lodged under every fingernail, so he buttoned his blazer and straightened his tie. Just like that, he was as presentable as he had always been, certain he had the same amount of dirt on him at his wedding.

When he got to the funeral home, a light smile had softened his otherwise rugged features. His steps had more spring to them than they had before in anticipation of seeing her, having her near again. The door that was impossible to open a week ago was now thrown against the wall. I hope I didn't keep her waiting, he thought as he approached the front desk.

"Mr. Dyess, it's nice to see you. How can I help you?" The receptionist was a fresh presence in an otherwise melancholy place.

"I'm here to pick up Ellie."

Her blue eyes crinkled at the corners when her head tilted slightly to the right. "Pick her up?"

"Yes, they said she would be ready to take home today. It's been a week."

Samuel watched the young girl's mouth open and close in silence, until she hurried off around a corner. He breathed deeply the overpowering scent of death and perfume, drawing up his sleeve to check his watch. It was a habit. He had forgotten when he put it on that morning that the battery in it was dead and had been since a few weeks prior.

"Mr. Dyess?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm here for Elizabeth Dyess. My wife. Is she ready?"

Harold Berdon was the owner of the funeral home, but just as plump and alive as one could be in that profession. A thick hand landed on Samuel's frail arm, leading him away from the desk. "There was a um... accident, per se, with your order, Mr. Dyess. You see, Elizabeth didn't get cremated."

"But it's been a week. How much longer?"

The plump man's cheeks got a harsher shade of red as they got closer to his office. "There was a mix-up between her and another Elizabeth Dyess. Your Elizabeth Dyess was... buried a few days ago."

Samuel stopped short of the doorway. "You buried Ellie?"

"The problem can be solved, Mr. Dyess! We can have her dug up and cremated. You should feel lucky. The same can't be done for the other Elizabeth. Put back together, I mean."

"Where?" He mumbled, "Where have you left her?"

None of it was hers—the headstone, the grave, or the casket—even though "Elizabeth Anne Dyess" was engraved on the granite and claimed the plot in her name. He could imagine her down there with her blue lips pressed shut and ice crusted on her eyelashes, waiting on him to take her home. His breath made an exasperated cloud in the chilly afternoon air when he sat on a bench and waited for the sun to come out. For warmth. He was waiting for her.



UNTITLED

Sam Phai

STARR CARTER

Khalid Johnson



FALL

Xavier Jacobs

Maybe God made us in the wrong shade of brown. It's the same brown that you see on a paper bag wrapped around an amber malt liquor on the porch. The same brown that you can find on a sun-melted tootsie roll's edges during a sweltering Georgia summer that makes children cry "Yuck!" as they trample it under their feet. It's that same brown as the young bodies that hung from Mississippi magnolias on those warm restless summer nights. That attracted little white boys and girls shouting morning cries of "Poor Niggers!" as they passed the grim wind chimes. What if God had made a mistake? Why don't we share the same brown of the crisp leaves in the fall air that attract those same white boys and girls to come outside in the cool morning and see how beautiful they are in the sunlight.



A Study In Blue
Josanna Rowe

REFLECTIONS

- In Memory Of Tio Lelito

Alejandro Lemus-Gomez

On the dining room table,
Mother lays out a bouquet of herbs
in a salvaged mason jar. Overgrown

lemon balm and basil, their flowers
fingers pointing toward the roof.
The jar reflects our white plates

and for a moment, Tio Lelito, I remember
your lenses filled in by ceiling fan's
pale light, at Abuela's dinner table,

where as a child I bent my forefinger
to match your left hand's leathery nub—
cut from playing with a Soviet fan

as a child—and as an adult I asked you,
“Will you visit me in the mountains?”
You said, “*Cuando te cortes la melena,*

mijo.” My hair is cut, and I planted pines,
hemlocks, and hollies around my house
so you'd forget your concrete apartment

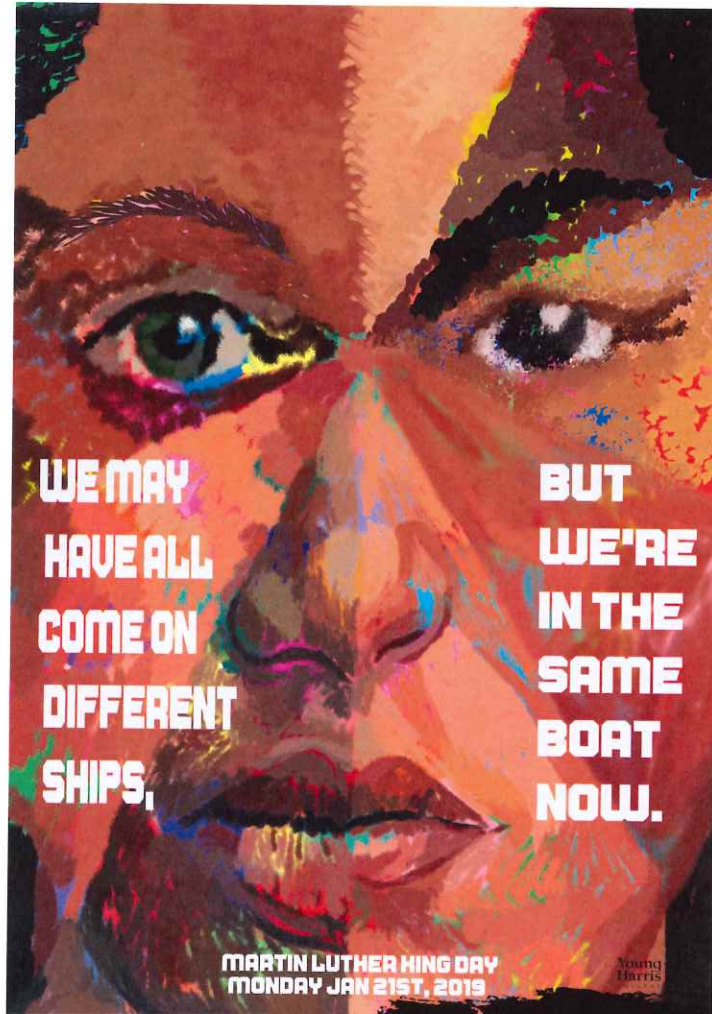
in downtown Miami. My hair is cut,
and you are buried under a tree
in Memorial Park Cemetery

with your name spray-painted in teary blue
because Abuela couldn't pay for a plaque.
My hair is cut and I'm imagining

how your glasses would've reflected the sunlight
to my eyes as you look at the canopies I planted
for you. Mom lays silverware. Her ring's shine

reflects off the jar. As she lays cutlery
next to our plates, I wonder if we bent
and put our fingers together, if we'd feel

your hand again.



MLK

Elizabeth English

BECAUSE THE PEWS ARE STILL HERE

Paxton Spessard

I feel like praying as I listen to *The Wilson Family Band*,
a bluegrass quintet whose harmonies fill the inside
of this used-to-be Baptist church, now converted

to rickety local music venue. The lead singer, the father—
his mouth framed by a grey goatee, his voice clean and predictable
like a freshly ironed Sunday shirt—belts out Appalachian ballads

with ease, but he's frustrated by the wails of the mandolinist's baby.
And remember, this is a bound-by-blood band—the mandolinist,
his daughter, the baby, his grandchild. So it's fitting when the patriarch's

piercing glare carries the aftertaste of fatherly discipline and seems to say,
do something about your baby. Mid-song, the young mother responds
and places her instrument on the carpeted stage just to the left

of where the pulpit would have been, and approaching the front row
where Grandma is hushing the infant whose tantrum has the entire
congregation groaning alongside the patriarch, the daughter slings on

one of those hands-free baby carriers. Grandma loads in baby,
and our savior hops back on stage, tossing the mandolin strap
over her head just in time for the bridge. And while the sheer efficiency

of this baby-to-backpack transition already has me planning a poem,
just picture my excitement when the child, entering the midst of the music,
quiets instantly. So now I'm thinking about the miracle of the calmed storm,

and the gasping crowds, and the pleased father, and as I sink deeper
into the creakiness of the pew—metaphors and banjo twangs pin-balling
wildly around my skull—I feel like I'm born again, or I'm saved,

or something. But at the very least, I find myself thanking God
for the bubbling giggles of the baby whose holy drool
is now sliding down the shoulder of the mandolinist.

Natalie pulls in the driveway to their house and notices the absence of Will's truck. Wondering where he is and why he did not beat her home, she opens the car door, grabs her deep wine-red leather briefcase and gets out of her car. She walks across the pathway, past the pink rose bushes, the white wooden rocking chairs, and up to the bright red door. As the door opens she is greeted by Jake, their black cat, and Bella, their Border Collie. She sits her stuff down by the door, rubs Bella's side, lets her out into the fenced in yard, and scratches Jake's head, to which he responds with loud purring. Natalie walks back to her purse, grabs her cell phone, and calls Will.

"Hey babe," he answers.

"Hey, where are you? You know we have dinner with my boss and his wife tonight" Natalie asks.

"On my way, I stopped to get a few bottles of wine to take with us to the Taffers' house. I will be there in five minutes," he responds.

"Um, a few? Are you sure that is a good idea? You know how important this is to me and how you get when you drink..." she trails off.

"I know, but I will be on my best behavior."

"Promise that you will not blow this for me."

"I promise. I'm about to pull in the drive. See you in a minute. I love you."

"Okay, I love you too," she replies.

While waiting she thinks back to earlier that week.

"Hey, Natalie, my wife and I would love for you and your husband to join us for dinner Thursday night," said Mr. Taffer.

"Sure. What time?"

"Seven?"

"Okay, we will be there."

"Great."

Mr. Taffer walked down the hallway. Suddenly Natalie heard him berate another employee. Maybe it's Jack. She wondered if he found out.

It sounded like something went flying across the room. She looked around and everyone continued doing what they are doing. How were they not shocked by this? She went back to her desk and continued reviewing listings.

She anxiously paces by the front door, then hears the sound of his truck pulling up in the drive, feeling the blood rushing through her body, reacting to him being near, as he walks up the porch steps and opens the door. Automatically, she wraps her arms around him, taking in his warm spicy cedar fragrance, and greets him with a kiss.

Natalie stands in the foyer staring at three bottles of wine while Will lets Bella back into the house. Jake rubs his body across her ankles catching her red high heels. She glances up at the mirror making sure every piece of thick auburn hair is in place, eyeliner perfectly outlining her large blue eyes. She grabs the lip gloss from her bag and begins to apply it but her hands are shaking so she stops and adjusts her black blazer.

Okay, Natalie keep it together. This is a big deal. Mr. Taffer hasn't ever asked any employees to dinner unless they were getting promoted. Breathe. You can do this. You are a great real estate agent. You got this. Get the promotion, then you can tell Will about the baby. Ugh, how do I tell Will about the baby?

Suddenly Will appears in the mirror; she feels the warmth of his embrace from behind, his hands meeting her at the waist.

"You look beautiful," he reassures her.

She turns to meet his gaze, staring deep into his brown eyes, rubbing her hand through the back of his short brown hair.

"I'm nervous."

"Don't be, you got this. We'd better go, don't want to be late."

"Do you really think we need three bottles of wine? I don't think that is normal," she laughs.

"Normal? I'm being considerate. We don't know what kind they like," he insists.

"Don't most people just take a nice red?"

"Inconsiderate people," he remarks and smiles at her.

Taking her by the hand, he leads her toward the car, carefully cradling the bottles of wine with the other. They begin to drive down the street heading to her boss' for dinner. As the houses increase in size, the sun begins to disappear. They are getting closer and closer to the Taffers' home. They pull up and see spotlights, ornate columns, a large extravagant chandelier.

Before they get out of the car, Natalie looks at Will and says, "You know this is a big deal for me. My promotion depends on this dinner...please don't drink too much. I need this night to be perfect."

Will assures her, "Relax. Don't worry, Babe," and kisses her hand.

A man that looks like he could be a real-life version of a Ken doll opens the door. Mr. Taffer warmly welcomes them in. Natalie nervously introduces Will to Mr. Taffer.

"Hello, Mr. Taffer, this is my husband, Will. Um, we brought wine...several bottles of wine." She hesitates then tries to recover.

"We were not sure what kind you liked."

"Please call me Jeff, and this beauty is my wife, Barbara." Jeff beams with pride.

As Natalie locks eyes with Barbara, she gets this sickening feeling in her stomach. *OH NO! It's her! Ugh! Why does it have to be her?* Barbara seems unaware that she has made the connection.

"Oh...nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting us to dinner. It smells great, and your home is beautiful!" Natalie blurts out as she tries to compose herself, she fidgets with her ring attempting to settle her nerves.

"Barbara is an amazing cook!" Jeff gloats as he wraps his hand around her waist and looks into her eyes, "You guys are in for a treat."

Dinner is going off without a hitch until Natalie realizes that there are three empty bottles on the hutch. *Please tell me that just the two of them drank all the wine.* Looking back at her glass, it's still full because she has not touched it. Barbara's glass only has a sip left, but she hasn't refilled it. *Dammit!* She has fidgeted with her ring so much that her finger is red and sore. She then notices the laughter and voices have increased in volume. The men have

loosened up. She notices the glare of Barbara. *Oh no! Has she figured it was me?!* She has not loosened up and doesn't appear to be amused by the conversations that the men are partaking in. Natalie leans into Will and whispers, "Remember. You promised." Barbara begins to clear dishes and Natalie volunteers to help. Natalie walks out of the room with dishes in hand.

Barbara turns to her and says, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Excuse me?" she tries to play dumb.

"I know it was you. Please keep your mouth shut." Barbara begs.

"Okay."

Suddenly, from the other room, Natalie hears Will say,

"Two men were walking down the street. They see a dog with its leg lifted, licking his balls. One man said, 'I wish I could do that.' The other man looks at him and says, 'That dog will bite you.'" Both men burst out in laughter. The jokes get more vulgar as the rest of the bottle of wine disappears.

"You know if Jack worked for me I would have fired him..."

Natalie cringes because she has told him not to mention this.

"...after that shit, he pulled with that client last week. Natalie walked in on him having sex in a model home. I heard that he was really pounding her hard. I thought that was...." Will glances up and catches Natalie's scowl.

"...inappropriate," he finishes.

Puzzled Jeff looks at Will, "What?!"

Natalie feels the blood leave her face. Will immediately realizes Jeff did not know. He knows he really just screwed up.

"Who else knows?" Jeff demands.

Natalie responds, "Just me...I walked in on him and...just some girl."

"...and who?!...Jessica?" Jeff asks.

"Uh...I'd rather not say" Natalie murmurs as she sees the fear on Barbara's face. The tension builds in the room. It is wound so tight like a rubber band about to snap. Natalie can feel Jeff's rage building up.

"Me," Barbara confesses. Natalie immediately meets her gaze.

The room is silent. Natalie can hear her heart racing. The heat radiating from her body causes her cheeks to flush to a deep red.

"It's okay, Natalie," Barbara comforts her, "he needs to know."
Natalie feels Jeff's anger shift from her toward Barbara.

Jeff takes his glass and slams it against the fireplace. As it shatters, glass and merlot fall like a meteor shower onto an expensive white rug. He turns toward the fireplace and braces his hands against the mantle, his head hanging down. His face is red and he is ready to explode.

He mumbles, "How long?"

Natalie looks at Will who is staring back at her.

"Um...it is getting late so...I think we should go," Natalie says as she and Will stand up.

"Yeah, Jeff and I need to talk," Barbara confirms.

Will walks up to Jeff and apologizes, "Hey man, I'm really sorry."

Natalie agrees, "Jeff, I don't know what to say. Just know that no one else in the office knew but me, and Will did not know that it was Barbara. We are so sorry that you had to find out this way."

"Natalie, we will discuss this tomorrow! Please keep your mouth shut!" he growls.

"I'll walk you out," Barbara insists.

As they arrive at the door, they hear something else shatter. The sound makes them both jump, but Barbara is not phased by it as if it's normal.

"Barbara, I swear I didn't mean to tell your secret. Will just says whatever is on his mind when he drinks."

"Don't worry about it. I was going to tell him, but I didn't know how. So in a weird way you helped me."

"For whatever it's worth, I am truly sorry," Will responds.

They each exchange sorrowful glances and Natalie and Will walk out the door. As they begin to walk past the ornate columns, they hear Jeff shout, "You whore! How could you do this to me?"

The further they walk, the fewer details they hear. Will stumbles to the car. They get in the car and both deeply exhale, trying to process what just happened.

"Babe, I'm so sorry. I really didn't know," he utters.

Annoyed, she responds, "Will, I asked you not to drink until you were drunk! But clearly, I should have asked you to not drink at all! This promotion meant a lot to me. I wanted you to get along with Jeff and have a good time, but you don't know your limit! I just really wish sometimes that you would grow up!"

"I didn't realize that I had drunk that much. We were talking, laughing, and having a great time. I still think you will get the promotion."

"Seriously?! I'll be lucky to have a job in the morning!" she yells.

"Natalie, I don't think you will get fired over this."

"Will, I am scared, we have more to worry about than just me and you now...oh shit."

"Wait, what are you saying?!"

"Well this is not how I wanted to tell you, but you probably won't remember in the morning anyway...you are going to be a father."

"What did you just say?!"

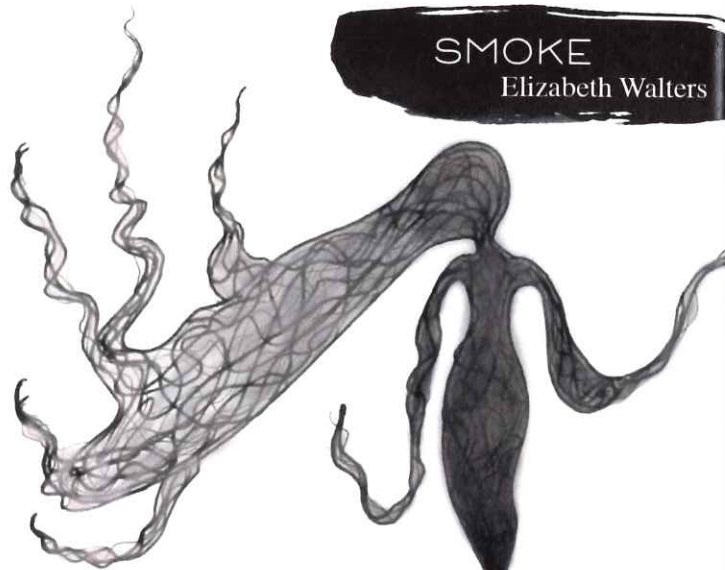
"We are having a baby."

She tears up, as Will takes his hand and pushes up her chin for her eyes to meet his. Both smile as he begins to rub her belly, trying to take in the moment.

He tenderly tells her, "Regardless what happens with this job, everything will be okay. We will all be okay."

SMOKE

Elizabeth Walters



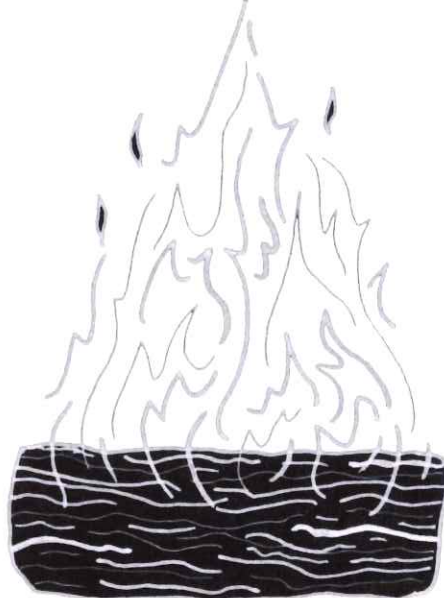
SMOKE

Leigh Anne Turner

If we were things
before we were people,
she would be smoke.
Pulling you in and
pushing you away,
an aimless dance
that leaves you breathless.

Long after the fire is gone,
she is there.
In your clothes,
your hair, your skin,
your bones.

But words are not true;
we are not things.
She is not smoke.



THE INDIAN PRINCESS

Victoria Beck

Without direction, the lanky girl careened
through the Appalachian woods,
crushing damp autumn leaves with every footstep.
Imagining herself as an Indian princess,
escaping the white men's clutches,
she soon approached a small stream bed.
She viewed the shallow creek
as a rough, raging river.
Stunned by fear, motionless,
she could hear her enemies
push back the trees' limbs
as they came closer.
"It's time to come home."
If only she had crossed the stream.



VINTAGE

Anna Dyer

UNTITLED
Sam Pham



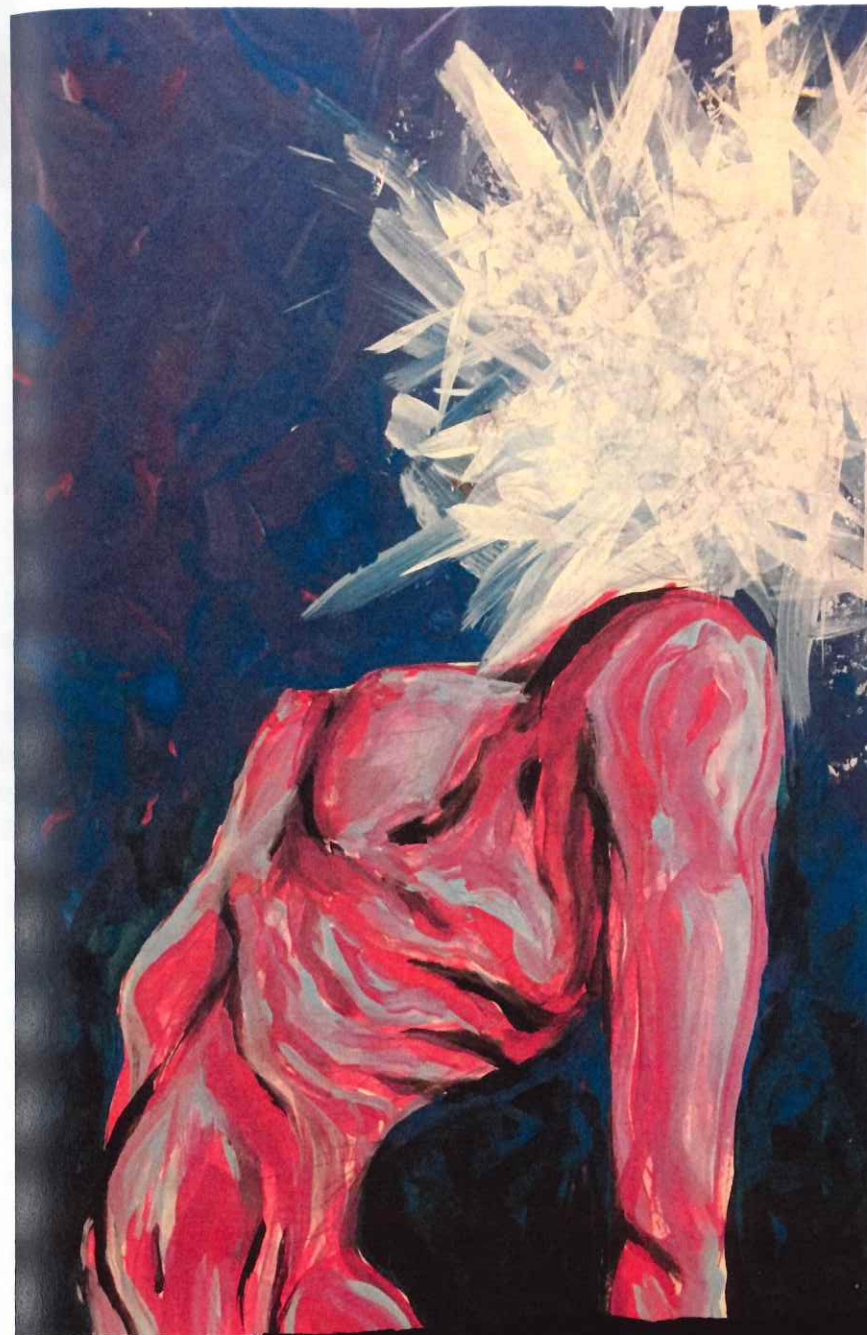
WALKING PAST (WHAT USED TO BE) MAWMAW'S HOUSE

Lewis Crawford

Because the yard is overrun with weeds
(deer tongue, kudzu,
the dreaded wild violet),
I feel like I should be behind a mower, soaked
in sweat, with you, pinching Creeping Charlie
Root and stem!

from your precious begonias,
but the grass has taken back the flower beds,
and the front porch,
and the back porch—
Hell,

it's just a heaping pile of moss
and there's that tree stump
where I spent my youth splitting the firewood
I bitched about having to carry inside.



AIN'T THAT JUST THE WAY
Cayla Highfield

Kaitlyn poked me on Facebook; we hadn't spoken since the fall. Not because we didn't want to speak each other, but because we just didn't have anything to talk about. The last time I had seen her, we were at the Nantahala Outdoor Center, sitting on the top of a picnic table made smooth with mildew. She was wearing an Asian rice hat that she had purchased from the back of a kayaker's beat-to-shit Toyota Camry. Although I was sure this was culturally insensitive, I bought one as well, both for the novelty of it, and to support the man that needed money so badly that he had turned to selling cultural appropriation out of his home.

The wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow over her golden retriever eyebrows and fragile blue eyes. The last time I had stared at her with such a loss for words, she was busy telling me that she had a crush on me, or whatever. But this time, her overalls and Terrapin Station tee were illuminated orange from the security lights in the gravel lot. I do not remember what we said to each other, but I know it was some sort of break up. We spent hours without moving from that table that stained our pants green. We sat quietly, with the silence only interrupted by poor conversation or the sounds of held back tears. Most periods of long silence were preceded by one of us giving "I don't know" for an answer. Although we both knew our relationship was dying like a heroin addict, quiescent from an overdose.

Our relationship was formed out of proximity. I lived twenty or so paces away from her. I found her easy to talk to and beautiful. Our relationship met all of the criteria of a summer romance, without much of the romance. I believe we both knew that we wouldn't last; she was moving to California and I was going back to school. We spent our time alternating who cared about the relationship. We would idealize each other, but as soon as one of us realized it was mutual, we would withdraw. Upon reflection, I know it was far from a healthy relationship, but since we worked alongside coke addicts and depressed divorcees, we were under the impression we were doing alright.

Once we had exhausted one another's patience, we worked our way back, together, to the music being played near the river. It was the local jam band again. They weren't very good. When we got back to the assembly of raft guides, kayak instructors, aerial guides, and other seasonal employees, we went our separate ways. Since we had spent the whole summer together, separate ways meant we struck up conversation with our friends who were standing side by side. After a minute or so, we both gravitated to our closest friend.

His name was Devin, like mine. I spent most evenings that summer with Devin and, or, Kaitlyn. Devin and I became friends quickly, since having the same name is likely the best icebreaker there is. We guided rafts together, and his goofy presence made me gravitate towards him. The best memories I have of Devin follow some central themes: acoustic guitar, bonfires, taco night, and maybe some pot. I jokingly referred to him as "The Other Devin," but I knew he was the better of us. He had a strong jaw line, always coated with a short, thick scruff that encompassed his good-intentioned smile. He had dark, earnest eyes with freckles around them that contrasted the diamond studs in his ears. His personality was one I believe most people yearn for—kind, passionate, outgoing, and hilarious. His extroversion is something I dreamed of having. In his other life, outside of this eclectic river-hippie community, he was a talented thespian and student at Florida State University. He made Kaitlyn and me at ease. We spoke, probably about politics or one of the other commonalities between the three of us, and then headed back to the car once yawns had taken over the conversation. We walked side by side to my 1997 Tacoma with an unnecessarily big Thule rack on top. The faint orange glow from the same flood light that lit Kaitlyn's tears earlier was now illuminating the fact that I needed to dust my dashboard. We sat three across in the bench seat, but unlike the drive there, Devin was in the middle. I didn't ask him to, but I'm sure he noticed something was different. Before turning on the engine, I rolled down the window and put my arm out of it. It was probably too cold to have the window down, but I needed all of the space I could get for my shoulder.

I turned on my truck and immediately killed the engine. I become a significantly worse driver when my car is full of people—I had forgotten it was in first gear. Turning the key again, Devin insisted that he shifted for me. Maybe he enjoyed shifting, or maybe because, you know, hypermasculinity. We lurched backwards, and then on through the poorly graded parking lot. By now the lot was mostly empty and the only car I recognized was owned by the man that sold us the sticky rice hats. He was sitting in his torn lawn chair, looking out at the parking lot. He had a beer on his lap that I assumed was a PBR—probably couldn't afford anything else. His smile was one that I was jealous of. I'm sure it was the culmination of a hearty buzz and making enough money to repeat that drunkenness for a few nights to come, but I couldn't help but feel resentful. I'm sure he is someone that masks his sadness in substance abuse, or maybe I just told myself that story to feel better. Bouncing through the parking lot, Kaitlyn opened my glove box and took out my best, and only, cassette. Benny and Us, a collaboration between Average White Band and Ben E. King. She pushed the cassette into the car's radio, and it took her two tries. She never examined which way the cassette went in before trying it, a personality trait of hers that I disliked most. I imagine Devin would exercise the same carelessness, but I probably wouldn't care.

My battered truck lurched to a stop once again as I attempted to pull onto the highway; he had given me third gear instead of first. A combination of the muffled funk coming from the speakers and the charisma in the car made this poor driving fun for me. I drove uncomfortably through the winding darkness of this strip of U.S. 19. My non-dominant hand held the steering wheel so that I could utilize the extra space the open window provided me. My friend's foot competed with mine for the gas pedal. The discomfort made the cassette seem to play slower than usual. We passed the familiar sights along the road—the occasional pull off for slow cars, abandoned boiled p-nut stands, and the run-down cabins that, at one time, were for rent. The heat from the air conditioning along with the crisp summer night made the temperature in the cab perfect, helping me escape the weird mood that Kaitlyn and my separation caused: a testament to how little I was invested in us. I asked Devin

to downshift into third gear for me, we were passing Paddle Inn rafting company and the speed limit was about to increase. He didn't give me third, he just said wait a minute.

"Did you see that?" he asked. Kaitlyn or I hadn't. "There was something there, in the parking lot," he shared with an uneasy tone. We didn't say anything for a minute. It was either Kaitlyn or I that asked him if we should turn around. We all guessed we should, although we felt confident it was likely a drunken stargazer: a culmination of our negative perspectives of the company's employees. I turned into the dirt lot that functioned as their bus parking area. There was a car behind me as I pulled in, so I didn't slow down as much as I should have. Devin's head hit the window that was behind his head as I pulled off the pavement. He looked at me, said "fuck you," and we laughed together. Without getting out of the car, we scanned the lot for the person Devin had thought he saw—the person he had seen. Still under the assumption that the figure had too much to drink and decided to search for summer constellations, we unbuckled to have a quick conversation with this person. I left the keys in the ignition so I could continue to enjoy one of the songs that I knew every word to. Without saying anything, we elected Devin as our liaison to confront the stranger, a role he was comfortable to assume.

I can't remember what he said, but I'm sure it was something that would have made the stargazer want to invite us over. The figure arranged on the ground did not respond. One flood light shone on the person, allowing me to assume the body was a him. This light had daylight qualities, but just amounted to a glare that made the scene feel obtrusive. We walked toward the man with Devin leading Kaitlyn and me. Likely out of passiveness, we walked as if we were on a sidewalk with a two-person-wide capacity. I assumed our initial intention to be to wake the man, but as we got closer, Devin was hesitant. I think it was because of the way the body looked. He was greasy. He didn't have the male figure that I was used to seeing around the river. He did not have the common long extremities, or fit physique that was plagued by too much beer. He was wearing formerly-white socks without anything over them, dark gym shorts covered his plump knees that were buckled

outwards; shorts that should be baggy, but his dimensions didn't allow them to be. A partially pulled-up white t-shirt covered his massive torso, exposing his belly button. A scrappy, unflattering beard covered his face. Threads of his thinning hair stuck to his forehead from the sweat that coated his entire body.

He wasn't responding to any of Devin's questions, whatever they were. I would guess Kaitlyn and I stopped about ten feet away from him, but Devin kept walking forward and knelt beside the man. He proceeded to tap his shoulder, then to push him. Probably just a deep sleeper—I know I am. He grabbed the limp man's moist arm and gestured like he was trying to sit him up. When he let go of the arm, it bounced off of the bare stomach and landed on the dirt. Devin turned to us but didn't say anything. He repositioned himself so that he was now kneeling by the man's head, staring at his upside down, clammy face. He pressed his fingers against the neck of the body, waiting to feel the gush of blood circulating within the carotid artery. He kept taking his hand off of the man's neck and putting it back on. Sometimes he would switch sides, but most of the time he would put his fingertips in the same spot as before. He looked at us, with his face seemingly just as full of life as the man before him. He asked us to come check. I went over, and without kneeling down, I noncommittally searched for a pulse that I couldn't find.

Still in the role that Kaitlyn and I had unconsciously given him, Devin told Kaitlyn to find someone. Differing from the training I knew he had, the training I laughed through, he didn't point at one of us and say "You! Call 911," but I knew I had to. I don't remember what I said on the call, I just remember hearing some song off Benny and Us playing in the background of the conversation, demanding my attention. Once I put my phone back in my pocket, I went back to turn off my car. For some reason I found a dead battery a more pressing issue than the situation at hand. When I glanced back up at Devin, he was doing CPR. Something the Red Cross card in my wallet claimed I was certified in. I watched him attempt to simulate a heart on top of this man's lifeless body. I remember thinking that I wanted to help, but imagining I was unable to. How many compressions in between breaths? How many breaths? How deep should the compressions be? And at what rate? No fucking clue.

This wasn't the open-mouthed dummy with the artificially rising chest cavity. It was this man, maybe in his thirties, lying, probably dead, in a parking lot.

I stood at a considerable distance, as if death was contagious, watching Devin replace this person's autonomic bodily functions. By the time he went in for what I remember being his second set of breaths, he had become sweatier than the man he was towering over. It didn't occur to me that I could help him, all I did was stare. Devin tilted the man's head back, so his thick neck was fully elongated. They shared one breath of air, then a second. The lifeless man sputtered, and I felt relieved. Relieved he was going to wake up. He didn't. He still had no pulse, and he had vomited in my friend's mouth. Devin stammered to his feet and puked a few feet above the man's head. Without cursing, or any sort of thought or hesitation, he knelt down on the other side of the man—to escape his own vomit—and continued to press down on his chest.

After a few moments, Kaitlyn emerged with a man running behind her. If you were to see this person out the window of the restaurant, you would want to guess his story with someone sitting near you, followed by mutual laughter. His shoulder-length, curled hair look liked it hadn't been washed for a while, yet it still appeared unhealthily dry. He wore a yellowed wife-beater that was stretched at the bottom hem. The bottom of his frail, long frame was covered in faded, holed jeans. The man was barefooted.

Having someone else there made me feel like everything was going to be fine, as if having another panicked person would help fix this lifeless body. This person, who I perceived to be our savior, ran straight to the lifeless body and stood on the side opposite from Devin's kneeling. He kicked him in the ribs repeatedly. I'm not sure if I learned it then, or later, but this man was kicking his brother. He was mad that his brother had become unresponsive again. In my memory, I tell myself that I pulled him away, but I think I just walked up to him and he left the motionless body alone. He was yelling a lot, mostly unintelligible things about his brother, who was maybe named Bobby. I can't remember his name, but it seems to fit well in my memory.

Before the angry brother got tired of yelling to himself, a car pulled into the lot beside mine. It was one of our co-workers, Joe. Big Joe, as the work schedule called him, was one of the kindest and least-stable people I knew. I would guess 6'7, and well over 300 pounds. I don't know much about his past, other than he was born in Franklin, and he had been to prison a few times before he found Christ. Once he stopped doing things that put him behind bars, he became an EMT, wilderness survival instructor, and raft guide. He had been working for the Nantahala Outdoor Center for longer than most could remember. Most of my interactions with him were at staff housing, where he would be mostly done with a double bottle of wine, with his wife Leanne, or talking about her. If you didn't hear him talking about Leanne, his often-visible tattoo of her name on his chest would remind you. This man, who terrified me at first, could love as big as his fist.

He ran out of his car, that he left on, to Devin's side. He pushed him out of the way and forcefully took over the compressions. Joe knew this man, and his angry brother as well. In between his own breaths, Joe would mutter encouraging and loving words in a harsh tone. He gave rescue breaths, then yelled to the angry brother, demanding Narcan. At the time, I thought Narcan was a person. Regardless of how the living brother responded, I was able to assume that Narcan, whoever they were, was not there. Joe pushed Devin back into the role of compressions and ran to his car. I watched as his large body sprinted with little coordination. He opened the hatchback and grabbed something out of the case he left on the hood of the car. I could see Leanne watching him raptly from the passenger seat of the still-running Ford. Joe arrived back with the object he had retrieved. He knelt on the unconscious man's arm, which made me uneasy. He administered what appeared to be nasal spray, as Devin sat near, and the brother stood over in a threatening way. Nothing happened. Joe did some more compressions and breaths and gave him more Narcan; still nothing.

Once the Volunteer Firefighters and the Ambulance had arrived, Joe had administered a third dose and was giving sloppy CPR, yet he refused for Devin to take back over. In a collected manner I hadn't seen since Joe arrived, the medical professionals examined

the still motionless, still wet, still vomit-covered man. They spoke to Joe, then to Devin, and they did not continue chest compressions. I'm not sure how long we had been there, but however long it was, it was long enough for them to deem this person dead. Joe took Kaitlyn, Devin and me by our necks and circled us in front of his car. In tears, he told us that he had to leave, it was his daughter's birthday. Wherever she lived, it was not with him, and he needed to spend as much time with her as he could. Joe went to his car, pulled out a small, plastic Bible, like one that would be handed out on the other side of a school's crosswalk. He recited a Bible verse, that wasn't comforting on its own, but his voice was. We hugged him individually, and he drove away.

Devin, Kaitlyn, and I shared some small talk about what we should do. We agreed, there was nothing to do except to go home. I backed out of the lot and turned off the stereo. Devin said, "I love you both," and we agreed. The short drive back was filled with silence, and I wasn't sure what to think about.

I didn't come to a realization about life, or about the opioid crisis that plagued our community. This man we watched die, or rather, watched be dead, had gotten out of jail that day. He was in jail for some reason pertaining to his heroin habit. I assume he was made forcibly sober in jail and wanted to get his old life back once he was out—doing so likely killed him. I wish this was a cry for a reformation of the prison-industrial-complex, or something like that, but it is not. It's a story about things I do not, and likely will not, understand.

BIGHORN SHEEP SKULL

Mark Williford



THE HEAD OF ORPHEUS

Jarrett Whitener

In the painting by Waterhouse,
The head of Orpheus floats in water.
His lyre rests just beside him,
As two nymphs gaze at him,
Not in horror, or complete shock.
They seem to pity the decapitated.

Orpheus, the grand poet,
To Hell and back he went
All in the name of love.
A failed task,
Only led to a life of heartbreak.
There it floats, his head

With lips that once charmed the gods,
But no hands to string the lyre.
What is he but words now?
What is he but legend?

The greatest poet,
Who knew only love and heartbreak,
Now a severed head, looked upon by nymphs.
There, in that pool of water, lies poetry,
Mocked by those we wrote it for.
Is this how we got out? As severed heads?
Surely Orpheus sang one last song
Before being baptized into Hell.

I'm sitting in an interrogation room at 6AM—freezing my *ass off* because all I'm wearing is an adult diaper—waiting for a police officer to bring me a blanket. I've got to watch some security footage to prove that I *didn't* vandalize a parking lot full of cars, and it's all my goddamn roommate's fault.

I met Brian online last month, late December, through craigslist. I should have known that he was weird from the moment I saw his advertisement had a p.s. that said "must love animals," but it was listed as a no-pets allowed townhouse. What can I say? I was desperate for a cheap place to live. About a month before the lease to my old apartment was up, I lost my job as an assistant accountant at a PEMCO, an insurance company based in Seattle, Washington. They were in the process of going bankrupt, and I was one of the first to get the axe. I had gone around for days after I was fired, passing out my resume and trying to call in favors, but all I could get was a managerial position at a Starbucks. I didn't have anything in savings, because I was still paying as much as I could on all my student loans. He was only asking for \$300 in rent, furniture and utilities included, and the pictures of the place were nice. Like, a too good to be true kind of nice. The bedroom was huge. It had a fireplace with two chairs in front of it, like a sitting area, and lots of cool graphic art all over the walls. There was also a fancy-looking bathroom connected to the bedroom that had a black and white tile floor, and a sunken tub with jets. I didn't even take baths, but I decided right then that I would start as soon as I moved in to that house.

I'm not an idiot. I know that people lie all the time on sites like that, but the pictures had been verified by the new security thing craigslist implemented to prevent users from getting murdered, so I just assumed he had a pet in there illegally. Whatever. For \$300 a month, I could deal with shoving Fido in the closet if the landlord came sniffing around or something. I'm not a snitch, and I do happen to like dogs. But Brian wasn't talking about a dog. We emailed back and forth for a few days before deciding that I would come by on a Tuesday afternoon, at around three o'clock, to see if I wanted the room. I took the train and got there twenty minutes early.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the neighborhood was really upscale. There were a few trendy restaurants on the block with weird specialties. Señor Cluck was a Mexican chicken place, and on the handwritten chalkboard sign standing in front of their door, it said "Chicken, cheese, and chipotle peppers, the perfect combination. Come try our hot chicken tamales today." I was tempted, but I didn't want to make Brian hate me the first time I met him, so I kept walking. There were lots of boutiques, some for people, others for dogs. Clothes, toys, weed candy, you name it, everything was available. One store called Lucy's was specifically for special needs animals. There was even a fresh produce farmer's market on the corner. For some reason, seeing how nice everything was made me really nervous—I guess because in my mind I had already moved in—so, after making sure I knew exactly which townhouse was mine, I went to use the bathroom in a café across the street to make sure I looked as clean and trustworthy as possible.

I knocked at exactly 3:00.

I heard a shuffle, then a slam, then the sound of quick footsteps before the door swung open and a skinny, pale, sweaty-faced guy in a blue hoodie, with curly, red hair sticking up in all directions stood in front of me.

"Hey," he said, a little out of breath. "I'm Brian."

He held out his hand for me to shake.

I shook it.

It was moist.

"Hey," I said, trying to casually wipe my hand on the back of my jeans. "I'm Shane."

"Come on in," he backed out of the doorway, gesturing me inside. "I've got everything all ready for you."

I stepped inside the foyer, and I was sold. The floors were a shiny, light wood that reflected the light coming through the windows so that the open living and dining area looked even bigger than it already was. The bulky leather sofa and recliners in front of the high-top dining table didn't even take up half the space. I wasn't used to having daylight or space, and I barely had any furniture—my nightstand was a milk crate—so I was ready to sign a lease on that alone. But then, he took me to my bedroom.

"Oh my god. Is that a king size bed?"

"Yeah," he said with a laugh "It's got one of those down-top mattresses too. It's really comfortable."

I sat down on the bed. It felt like my butt was being hugged by a cloud.

"Holy shit, man. This is insane."

"Yeah, and the bathroom has a shower, plus one of those jet-tubs." He leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms, smiling a little. "My setup is upstairs, so this is all yours." He showed me the closet and how to work the shower. It was one of those rain showers that poured water directly from the ceiling, and it had a touchscreen.

I had to spend the next ten minutes pretending that every house I had ever lived in had a shower with a touchscreen, then we went back to the living room to talk.

"Hey, want a sandwich?" he asked, heading toward the kitchen as I sat down in a recliner. A massage-recliner. "I've got a lot of roast beef in here that I'm never going to eat by myself."

"Um, yeah, sure." I pushed the vibration up to level five, and reached nirvana. "So, what do you think?" He asked. I vaguely heard him clinking some dishes as he moved around in the kitchen for a few minutes before heading back into the living room.

"About what?"

"The house. Renting from me." He paused by my chair, sandwiches in hand. "Unlimited use of the recliner." He chuckled to himself as he walked to the other recliner and set the plates on the end table between us.

I opened my eyes a little, squinting to taking him and his tiny mansion in.

"Why do you want me to rent from you? And why is the price so low?"

He took a bite of his sandwich, chewing for a long time before he answered.

"Honestly, I'm just tired of living alone."

"Oh," I said, "okay," and closed my eyes again.

Looking back on it now, I think that he took one look at me, practically in a coma, drooling away my stress onto the brown leather, and knew he had me. The bastard.

I signed my lease the next day, and moved in on the following Friday. Everything was great—better than great, actually—for two weeks. Then one day I came home a couple of hours early from work to find him focusing very hard on doing a martial arts dance routine to "Eye of the Tiger" in the middle of the living room, wearing a black animal costume—complete with fluffy tail—and swinging a sword around. He didn't look like he knew what he was doing—with the sword or the dancing. He was swinging around like a wobbly weather vane in high wind.

"What the hell, Brian?" I said, grabbing the remote off of the coffee table and turning the music off.

He stopped mid-swing and stood very still for a few seconds, then reluctantly waved a shaggy paw at me in greeting.

"What's going on here?"

"I'm practicing for Rain-Furthest, Shane." He said. His voice was muffled because of the animal head. "I have to get this routine down by next Friday, or I won't be ready to enter the talent show."

"Brian, put the sword down."

"Oh. Sorry." He lowered it towards the ground.

"What the hell is Rain-Furthest? And what the hell are you wearing?"

He sighed through his nose impatiently.

"This is my fursona, Blackfox Silverfang. And RainFurthest is the biggest furry convention of the year." He raised his sword towards the wall in a samurai-like pose, his tail twitching behind him.

"Now get out, I have to practice."

"No." I stood in front of him, looked into his huge, green, fox eyes, trying not to stare at the size of the ears on that creepy head, and crossed my arms. "You're going to sit down and explain."

He lowered the sword again, slowly. Then he turned and plopped down on the sofa.

"Fine. I guess I could use a break anyway. I keep getting turned around in the middle of my routine."

He laid the sword beside him and took his fox head off. He leaned back, looking sweatier than the first day I met him. I stayed standing, not sure whether I should start packing immediately, or not. I didn't need this, dirt-cheap or not. I already had a shit job at a Starbucks where I had to deal with hipster assholes and long-haired freaks all day, I didn't need anything weird happening at home too.

I had gone to college for four goddamn years, majoring in math, so that I could land a job in a high-paying field and not have to worry about dealing with shit like coming home to a dude who believes he is really a dancing, sword-swinging canine. I had a good job before the world went to hell. I was going places. I should be the one with the sick-ass townhouse, renting one of my rooms to a loser. God, I was *better* than this.

"So, this is what you do all day when I'm gone? You dress up like a dog and play with swords? I thought you had a job."

"Fox!" He sat up straight, and his face got even redder. "I am a fox, Shane."

I shrugged, staring him down.

"Look," he sighed "I'm a furry, okay? That's all. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to get freaked out—which was clearly a smart decision."

"A what?" I shook my head. "What about your actual job?"

"A furry. I am a man who has the fursona of a fox. I am the fox. The fox is me. A fox named Blackfox Silverfang. I wear the suit, and I live a fun life with other people who also have fursonas." He fiddled with his fox nose. "And I do computer work for some big companies from home."

I sighed, looking around at the townhouse, preparing myself to say goodbye.

God, I was tired.

"That's ridiculous, Brian. You think that dressing up like a freak and dancing around with a sword is normal? News flash, it's not, asshole." I could hear my voice raising and feel my face turning red, but I didn't care. "There are people out in the world with real problems, like worrying about the economy and how they're going to make it from day to day, not just prancing around with make believe social anxiety that they need a fur suit crutch for."

I stood there, in the middle of the living room, breathing heavily in the silence.

"Why is the way I choose to live my life ridiculous?" He said quietly. "I'm not hurting anyone."

"Because grown, sane, adults don't play dress-up, Brian. They have normal lives, with other people. Real people, not strangers

from the internet. Family, friends, girlfriends." I sat down and scrubbed my hands over my face. "God, did you think I wouldn't find out?"

He sighed, his shoulders drooping.

"I mean, yeah, kind of. You always work until six. How was I supposed to know you'd come home early?" He gave me a mean look. "You should have called. What if I had a guest over or something?"

I laughed.

"Brian, you never have people over."

Actually, come to think of it, I had never seen him go outside, which was worrying.

"Do you even leave the house, ever?"

He sulked back into the couch.

"No. But, I will have a reason to if I can get ready in time for this talent show. All of my friends are going to Rain-Furthest, and it will be the first time we're all meeting in person." He sat up straight again, looking at me intently.

"You should come with me."

My jaw hit the floor.

"Absolutely not."

"Why not? Come on, Shane, it will be fun."

He stood up, eyeing me.

"I mean, you're a little bigger than me, but we're about the same height. Wait here."

He walked up the stairs, his tail dragging along behind him.

"You're crazy if you think I'm going to this thing." I called.

He was crazy, period.

"No, you're going. Look."

He came back down, carrying what looked like the skin of a very large, black bear.

"It's my old suit. It's not as cool as the one I have now, but it will work." He smiled, bouncing a little on his toes.

"You should try it on."

"Brian, you could not pay me to try that on."

I turned, heading to my room to start looking online for a new place to live. Craigslist was definitely out.

"What if I took one hundred dollars off your rent?"

I froze.

"What, like permanently?"

"Yeah. If you come with me to the convention, I'll permanently take \$100 off your rent. I can write up a new lease tomorrow."

Damn him, he knew I couldn't turn that down. I had just gotten a new letter yesterday saying that because I had missed a payment on my student loans, the interest was going up. I was looking into a second job. Saving that rent money would help a lot.

"Fine." I turned, reached out and grabbed the suit. "I'll do it." I went to my room and tried the thing on. It fit, mostly. It was definitely a fox suit, not a bear like I had originally thought, and I felt like an idiot in it. I looked like bigfoot, if bigfoot had a snout and hated himself. The head had big, yellow eyes that stayed trained on my image in the mirror when I turned from side to side, and huge pointy ears that were useless. The fur was long and shaggy, and the paws were really uncomfortable because it felt like my hands were in roomy, padded mittens. I couldn't grab hold of anything, I tried. My tail was annoying too, because it swished back and forth when I walked. Sometimes it got caught between my legs and made me trip. I hated everything about wearing it. As soon as I made sure it wasn't going to cut off my circulation I took it off, shoved it deep into my closet, and didn't think about it again.

The next two weeks were pretty much back to normal, routine-wise. I came home from work at six, and Brian was his usual, human self. Things were weird though, because now that the secret was out, he talked about his furry life all the time. He told me all about his online friends, and their fursonas. He moved a calendar onto the fridge and marked off the days until we were supposed to leave with a huge red marker. He was like a kid, excited for Christmas, waiting for Santa to arrive. I felt sorry for him, honestly, because it seemed like this was kind of all he had going for him.

Finally, the big day rolled around. We got to the SeaTac Hilton at exactly 12PM, which was the earliest we were allowed to check in. The lobby was light and open, with red borders all along the floor, and a completely unnecessary table in the middle of the room whose sole purpose seemed to be supporting an oversized succulent in a red

pot. Generic watercolors of the same sunset lake scene were displayed prominently all around the place. I couldn't help thinking that, as rich as the Hiltons are, they could afford more than one painting. But whatever. I was just there because I was bribed to be. As Brian was giving his credit card information to the woman at the desk, a bored-looking bellhop took our bags. As soon as we had our room keys, Brian dragged me towards a fat, smiling man sitting behind the convention registration desk.

"Blackfox Silverfang and Onyx Darkwing, checking in." He said. He had chosen my name the week before, and he practically sang it to the poor man at the table. "Welcome, gentlemen." Mr. Fatman said, "My name is Andrew, and I am your event coordinator this weekend. Please feel free to sign up for as many activities as you'd like."

He gestured to a row of clipboards, and Brian practically tripped over his own two feet in the rush to sign his name on the talent show sheet.

I smiled awkwardly at Andrew, then quickly walked to the elevator and pressed the button for level three, leaving Brian to his furry friends, determined to hide in the room for as long as possible.

I was on my computer—alternating between applying to job postings on different company websites and watching Netflix—until, a little after 2AM, Brian came back to the room and told me to get ready to go to a party one of his new friends was throwing in the suite three doors down from ours. It was fursona only, so I was forced to wear the stupid suit. While I was putting it on, I just kept chanting *one hundred dollars, one hundred dollars, one hundred dollars* to myself like a mantra.

He knocked on the door.

"You ready?" His voice was squeaky with excitement.

I sighed, staring at my face in the mirror for a long couple of seconds. I looked rough. My eyes, usually a golden-brown, looked black. My hair, usually a carefully styled, curly-brown wave, was sticking up in all directions like an untamed afro. My skin was pale and clammy. I had dark, bruise-purple circles under my eyes. My lips were cracked and dry. I looked like either I was on drugs or I was severely dehydrated. I hated this version of myself. I used to

be a kind of sexy guy, according to the girls I've dated. I used to be a lot of things. I turned away from my reflection, and put my head on.

The second we stepped out the door, we were surrounded by a huge crowd of people in fur-suits and deep, bass-heavy music that was so loud it made the floor shake. The crush of drinking, dancing bodies was so thick that I almost couldn't breathe. I lost Brian in the mayhem, but I just assumed that I'd catch him at the party, so I kept moving forward until I bumped into a grown-ass man wearing a saggy, yellow-ish diaper and nothing else. I definitely smelled poop coming from his direction, which was saying something because my suit was *thick*.

"Watch it, freak," he said.

I'm the freak? I wanted to say, but I just nodded and walked away, trying not to gag. What kind of people was Brian friends with?

I kept shoving my way through the crowd, passing a girl dancing off-beat in the middle of the hallway, wearing nothing but a unicorn head and a bikini; a grey-furred wolf-man holding a Cosmo, dressed in wizard clothes, complete with a wooden staff and a pointy blue hat, who was shouting over the music to a tusky wild boar in a top hat about the dangers of global warming; a man in what looked like a polar bear bodysuit, but with no head to go with it, which just made him seem like he had a huge furry body and a tiny, pea-sized head, which for some reason made me laugh so hard that I couldn't stop. Maybe I was in shock, I don't know. I kept stumbling my way deeper into the crowd, searching for Brian to tell him that the rent discount wasn't worth it, when suddenly the music cut off and a loud voice filled the hallway.

"Good evening."

Everyone stopped. I stood on my tiptoes, catching a glimpse of a disheveled Andrew, who was standing in front of the elevator in his button-down, blue-striped pajamas, holding a megaphone and a clipboard, looking very nervous.

"I'm glad to see everyone is having a good time, but the hotel staff has received multiple noise complaints from non-convention guests throughout the night, so we have been told to quiet down."

He looked down at his clipboard and flipped a page over.

"Also, it seems that we have had some more serious complaints made against us. Earlier this evening, the lobby bathroom was flooded with two and a half inches of water, which has leaked into the offices underneath. Upon further investigation, it appears that someone in a fur-suit was responsible."

He cleared his throat, keeping his eyes on his clipboard, his fat chin wobbling.

"The police were called to investigate allegations of illegal drugs on the premises, at another party in the second floor. A few arrests have been made, and a few guests have been hospitalized for overdoses. We will keep you informed of their progress as we receive more information."

Gasps of shock echoed throughout the crowd.

"Lastly, the hot tub is out of order because someone stuffed the hose with towels."

There was a quiet, mean-sounding laugh behind me. I turned to see who it was, but I couldn't tell because I couldn't see anyone's real face.

"Please remember that we are guests here," Andrew said. "The staff is threatening to evict us if this kind of behavior continues."

"For tonight, the party is over. Everyone please return to your assigned room. Thank you."

He hurried off into the elevator, and the crowd began to disperse.

I turned to head back to the room, giving up on Brian, when I smelled the very unwelcome scent of diaper-man close by.

"Hey, fox-freak," he said, waddling his way over to me. "Want to have some real fun tonight?"

I didn't know what to say, and honestly the smell was so bad that I could taste it, so I just shook my head no, praying that he wasn't propositioning me.

"You sure? Me and my friends could use some help with a prank. I got an extra diaper you could use."

Oh, thank god. I shook my head no again.

"All right," he shrugged, his beer gut jiggling with the up and down motion of his shoulders, "suit yourself," and he waddled off

down the hall.

I practically ran to our room and slammed the door behind me.

"Hey, where have you been," Brian said, walking out of his room, tying a hotel robe around his waist.

"Wh—where have I been?" I yelled, but the effect was kind of lame because it was muffled by the stupid, giant fox head.

I tore it off and ran at him, knocking him onto the floor.

"You have left me out here *alone*, with all of *your* creepy friends, asshole! Do you even know what's going on?"

I stood over him and told him everything Andrew had said, practically yelling it the whole time.

"Wow. I had no idea." He sat up, winced, and rubbed the back of his head. "I got caught up with my friends. I couldn't find you after they went to bed, so I just came back here and took a shower. I assumed you'd made some friends too, and that you'd come back eventually."

I was so angry, I couldn't answer. I turned and walked out onto the balcony, trying to give myself some space so that I wouldn't completely lose it.

I was pacing back and forth, trying to calm down, when I heard a familiar mean-sounding laugh and a sticky, wet *plop*.

"Hey, get that one too!" said a voice from below.

I walked to the edge and saw diaper guy in the parking lot, holding a heavy-looking trash bag, walking toward two other guys in diapers.

"Turn it around a little, really get it in there."

They were throwing full diapers onto the cars. Rubbing them around like car wax.

"Come on, Jerry, give me another one."

"Brian," I whispered, backing towards the balcony doors.

"Brian! Get your ass out here."

He shuffled toward the door slowly, probably worried I was going to hit him.

"What?"

"Look out there." I pointed at the parking lot.

I heard more laughter, and the smell had begun to reach our floor. Clearly, those things were fresh.

"Holy—" He trailed off, staring.

"Yeah."

He whirled around, striding toward the doors with a purpose.

"Come on," he said, "We have to stop them."

"What do you mean, we have to stop them? What we have to do is call hotel security."

"You heard what Andrew said. One more mistake, and we're all getting kicked out."

He sighed, pausing on his way to his room to put on some clothes.

"Shane, I have never felt more myself than I do when I am a fox. I know you think it's weird, but it's my life." He looked at me with a determined expression, tears in his eyes. "I can't lose this."

I hated myself in that moment for being dumb enough to accept a low-rent offer on craigslist, and sort of making friends with a pitiful guy that clearly needed therapy.

"Fine. We can go, but if things get out of hand, we are calling security."

"Deal."

He went to his room to throw on some clothes. I headed to my room too, but after I changed out of my suit I dialed the front desk to ask for security, but there was no answer, so I dialed 911 and quietly told the dispatcher what was going on. No way was I getting caught up in some fight with dudes wearing used diapers. It just wasn't worth it.

Five minutes later, we were rushing down the stairs, then towards the lobby exit.

"What are we going to do when we get out there?" I asked.

"We're going to stop them."

"Okay, sure, but how?"

"I don't know. We'll figure it out," he said as he rushed out of the doors, right into the path of a big, hairy man with no clothes on, who was holding a smelly white bundle in his meaty hand.

"Well, look what I found, Jerry!" he called. "We got some volunteers over here!"

He looked back and forth between us and smiled a slow, gap-toothed smile, before dropping the nasty bundle and rushing at Brian,

tackling him on the ground. His diaper slipped, and I almost threw up, because he had very clearly used it recently.

I started to run for help, when a hand grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked me to the ground too, keeping me in a headlock.

"Now, boys, thanks for volunteering," Jerry said, right by my ear.

"We were hoping someone would come along and do the job."

"What job?" Brian asked, going limp, giving up on trying to break free.

"You'll see," Jerry said, nodding at his accomplice.

Then there was pain, and I knew nothing, until a blinding light woke me up and I heard a far-away voice calling me son and telling me that I had the right to remain silent.

Damn, I was cold.

I didn't want to open my eyes, because my head hurt like a bitch, but I did. Standing above me was a frowning police officer with a thick, brown mustache, shining his flashlight in my face.

"Son, you all right?" He said, kicking an empty beer bottle away from my leg. My *hare* leg.

I sat up too fast. I almost passed out, but I was aware enough to realize that I was very naked, wearing only a diaper. Thankfully, it had not been used.

I opened my eyes a little more, looking for Brian, who was being efficiently handcuffed by the officer's partner, but still out cold beside me. He was also wearing a diaper, and *only* a diaper.

"Officer, uh. . ." he steadied me before I fell back onto the pavement.

"Hughes."

"Uh, Officer Hughes, what's going on?"

"Well, that's what I would like to know." He glanced around the parking lot.

"Looks like you boys had a little too much fun last night and decided to deface a lot of private property."

He pulled out his cuffs and told me to put my hands behind my back.

"No! That's not what happened. We got ambushed."

"Sure you did, son. Tell me all about it, down at the station. But first, let's get you up." He grabbed my arm and hauled me up onto

my bare feet, helping me into the blessedly heated cab of the car.

"Scoot over, we have to get the other guy in here."

I did, and he buckled me in before walking back to his partner.

I sat there, defrosting on the back seat, watching as they lifted Brian and carried him towards me.

Looking at his unconscious face, all bruised and scratched, I don't think I have ever felt such intense, all-consuming hatred.

"You all right back there?" Hughes asked, settling in to the driver's seat.

"Can you crank up the heat any-more?"

He did, and then I spent the rest of the drive telling him my story.

He seemed skeptical.

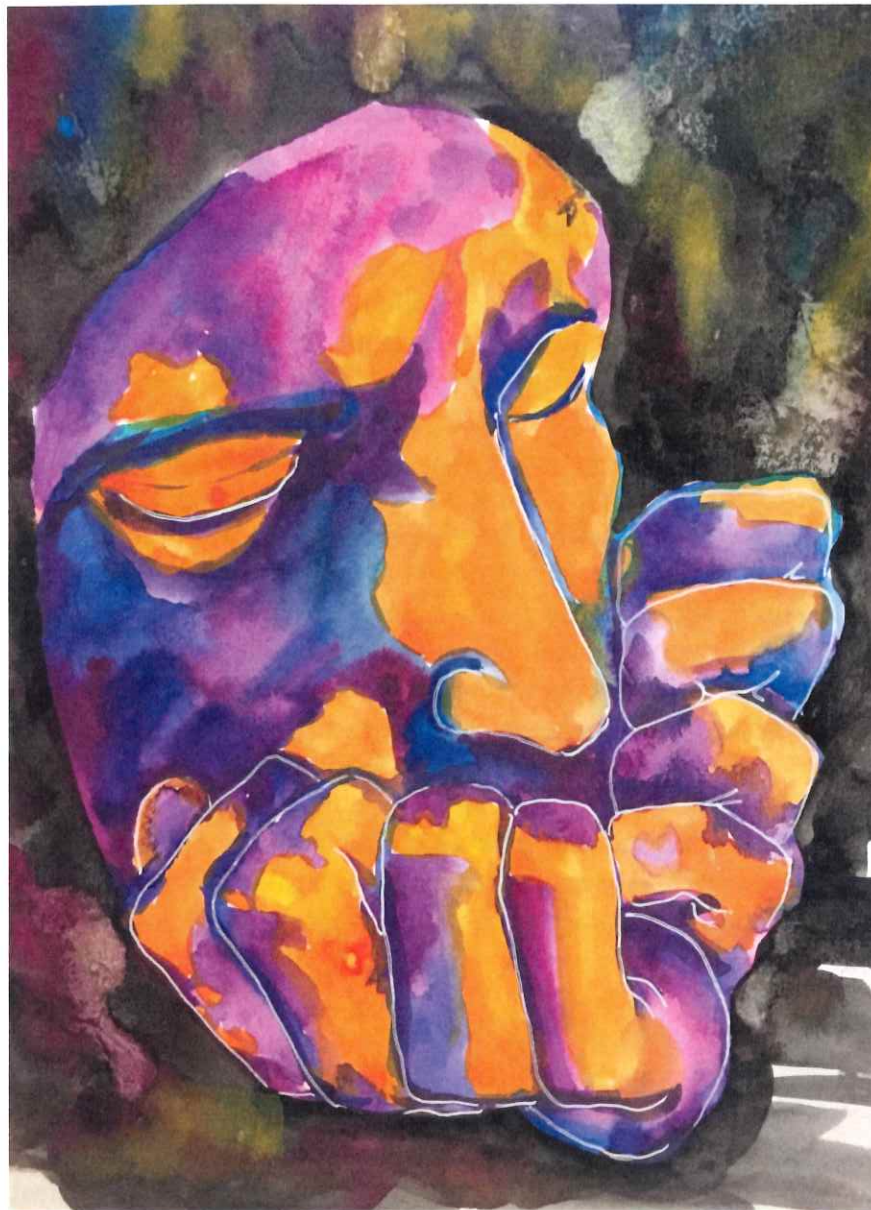
I will never forget the looks on everyone's faces when we walked into the station.

There were a couple of little old ladies in the waiting room whose hair turned an entirely new shade of white. It would have been funny, if the situation wasn't so awful.

Officer Hughes walked me into an interrogation room labeled 'Room One,' and told me that he would be back soon with a blanket, and some security footage.

It's been two hours now. There is no sign of Hughes, and I'm pretty sure my ass is permanently frozen to this metal chair.

I don't know where Brian is, but as soon as I get out of here, I'm punching him square in the face, and moving out of his fucking house. I hope I break his nose and he never stops bleeding.



COMEDOWN

Cayla Highfield

ODE TO THE CHICKS AND QUAIL SIGN

Jarrett Whitener

I have passed you every day for a few years now.
You sit off the side of the highway,
And you have never moved, never changed.
The bold black lettering written in spray paint
Contrasts that bleached wooden background,
Which has, over time, deteriorated into beige.

I pass many newer signs on the road to you,
But I have seen them break and go missing.
You have resilience, weather does not punish you,
And people refuse to steal you, but why would they?
You are the most simplistic of things
One basic message promising
The good people that heed your offering
An abundance of food and bird.

For it must be an abundance though.
The chicks have never turned into hens
And you never get replaced, so I praise you,
I praise you for your endless supply of chicks,
And the magnitude of quail that must reside
There to this day, because nobody reads you,
And nobody goes down that road you point to.
But I take heed, dear sign. I read your lines.
Years of chicks and quail waiting to be dined,
Let us have a feast.

PARA BERTA, MI SEGUNDA MADRE

Bill Bennett

We had crowded around you in your small bedroom.
We who held you dear had come to say our goodbyes.
Last rites were offered in a tongue not understood
by me. Offered up by a priest not known to me.
Unlike the others, I did not know what to say;
or when, or how; too Protestant—too gringo—to try:

En el nombre del Padre,

En el nombre del Hijo

En el nombre del Espíritu Santo.

All signed the cross in the Catholic way, save me.
Remind me, was it the left they used, or the right?
I held my wife's hand and with everyone else
I cried—that is a thing I know how to do, too well.
The priest walked, he stopped, turned, looked me in the eye
and in my mongrel tongue said, *God bless you, my son.*
As the others, on cue, began to rap their chests.
They were knocking on the very doors to their souls
and they along with the priest repeated en masse:

Mea culpa, mea culpa,

mea máxima culpa.

WE WILL BLINK

Paxon Spessard

when we come to watch their soccer game,
and they turn to watch us,
the mzungus.

Spilling out of the bus, we are a bleached blur
of flannel-clad millennials,
a huddled mass

of wannabe Nat Geo interns, on assignment
to discover not a 'lost' tribe,
or a 'new' world, or

an elusive crash of black rhinos tumbling
through the thicketed underbrush
of the Maasai Mara, but rather,

our 'most authentic' selves. We are on
assignment to be trigger-happy
with the Canons

and Nikons and Sonys that are slung
around our necks like the rifles
of the colonists;

on assignment to capture pockets
of exotic East African time
that will inevitably

become sentenced to a digitized life,
hung on the Smithsonian walls
of our Facebooks; on

assignment to watch the Kenyans,
who are now watching us,
the mzungus. Everyone

is frozen, deadlocked in a staring contest
until a cacophony of cockerels shoots
across the dusty soccer field,

and we blink.



Young
Harris
COLLEGE

EST. 1886