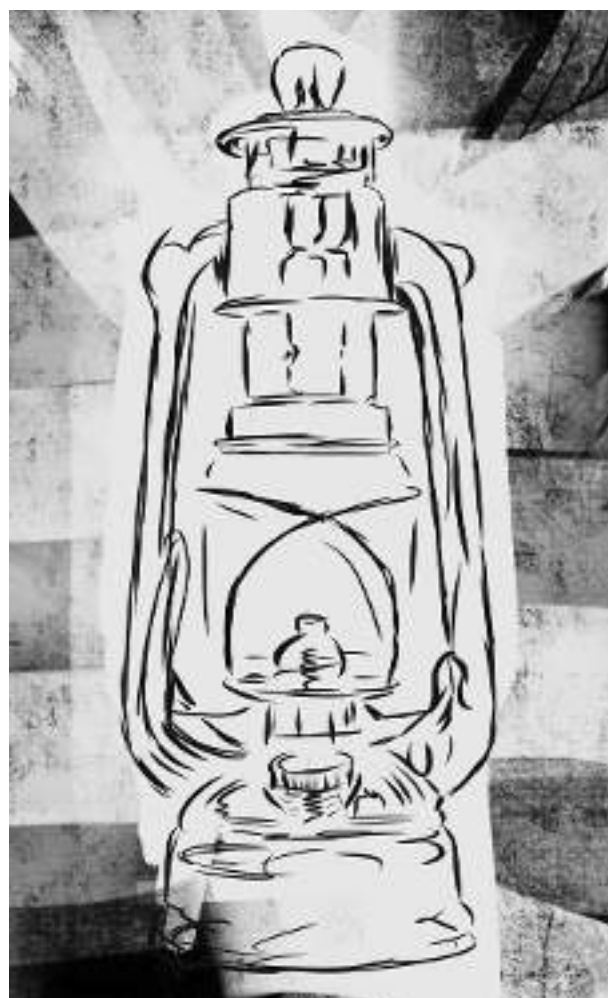




Lumière

MASSBAY'S LITERARY MAGAZINE
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lumière



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lumière is the spotlight on the literary and artistic world at MassBay. Our mission is to reveal the wonder of your expression and bring light to your creativity. Help us showcase your passion. Please submit your work to litmag@massbay.edu. We accept submissions year-round from students, faculty, staff, and the general public. Our editorial team reviews and selects work for publication blindly. In the spring, we usually celebrate the launch of *lumière* with printed copies of the magazine. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we will not be printing copies of *lumière* this spring, but we hope to do so soon. For now, we present to you digitally *lumière* issue #5.

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A REFLECTION ON SOCIAL CONNECTION IN A PANDEMIC

by Catherine Williams

At first, I thought the practice of social distancing would be easy enough. I would be glad to be home with my husband, two teenage children, and our dog. This would give me time to connect with each of my family members at home. I would not be able to go to my teaching job, for now. My college class got an extra week off and then we would be meeting online. Spring ballet rehearsals were halted. After a couple of weeks, it became clear that the production would need to be postponed. My volunteer work would reshape itself. One by one, the happenings of my life and the lives of those around me were moved aside, leaving a space now. I began to imagine a life that is appealing to introverts like myself. My life had a “pause” button pushed. My answer felt clear: hibernation.

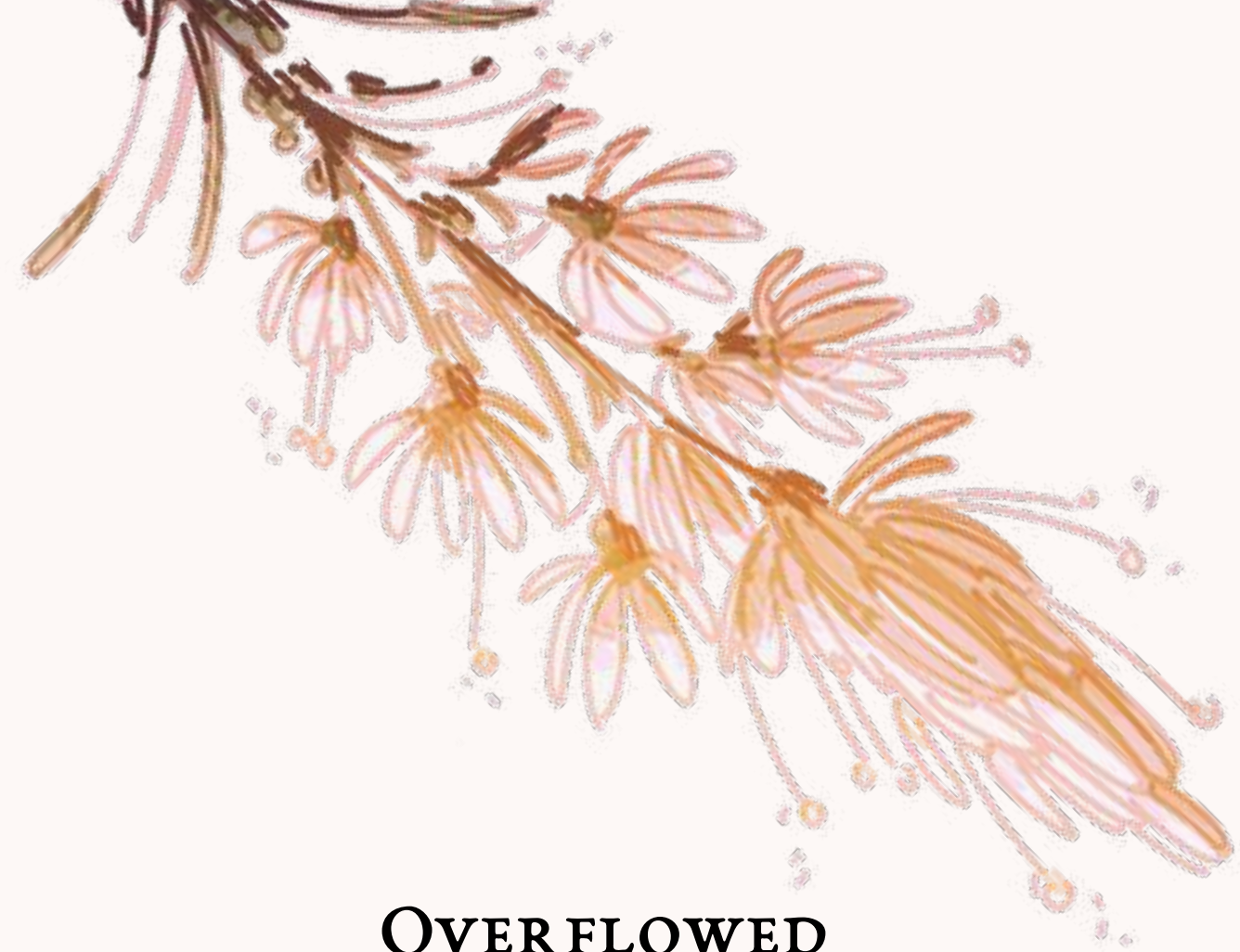
As I prepared to go into hibernation mode, my thoughts filled with a schedule that would now be fully mine. I would make the best of this. I would cut myself off from the outside world. I would get all of the things done on the to-do list that get overlooked or postponed. I would declutter that room that is the repository of random items. I would stay in touch with family and friends by writing letters on paper, with an actual pen.

Then the first opportunities for video conferencing began to emerge. I resisted. I didn’t want to be seen: I was hibernating, thank you very much. I tried to focus on all those things I wanted to get done. Yet the outside world didn’t stay out. A practice video call with a friend, then an online video forum to get answers about changes with SAT and AP exams, and then a staff meeting for work—I had to connect. I would have to come out of hibernation. I could no longer hide.

Coming out of hibernation had its own challenges. Two of these early experiences had technical difficulties: one in which my microphone didn’t work, so I could not be heard, and one in which my camera didn’t work, so I could not be seen. I felt a slight disconnection during both of those times. I was there, but only partly. After these first few events I realized two things: 1. I liked being able to see other people. 2. It was probably good for other people to be able to see me.

But I was still resistant in one area: attending online freestyle dance events. I sit on the board of a community dance, and one of my fellow board members who attended such an event spoke of how uplifting it was to see everyone dancing in her living room. I had a responsibility to not just attend, but actually help make it happen, even if I was reluctant to attend myself. I set about transforming a room into a dancing space. Using disco lights—yes, my son let me borrow his—I set up my room to mimic the space of our actual dance events. I didn’t have copious space to move around, but enough. Most importantly though, I got to see the other dancers. There were people attending from near and far, as far away as Hawaii. We have now held four virtual dances and the talk is how dancing in our homes allows us to feel connected and sane. My friend was right. It brings me joy to know that I have helped make this possible.

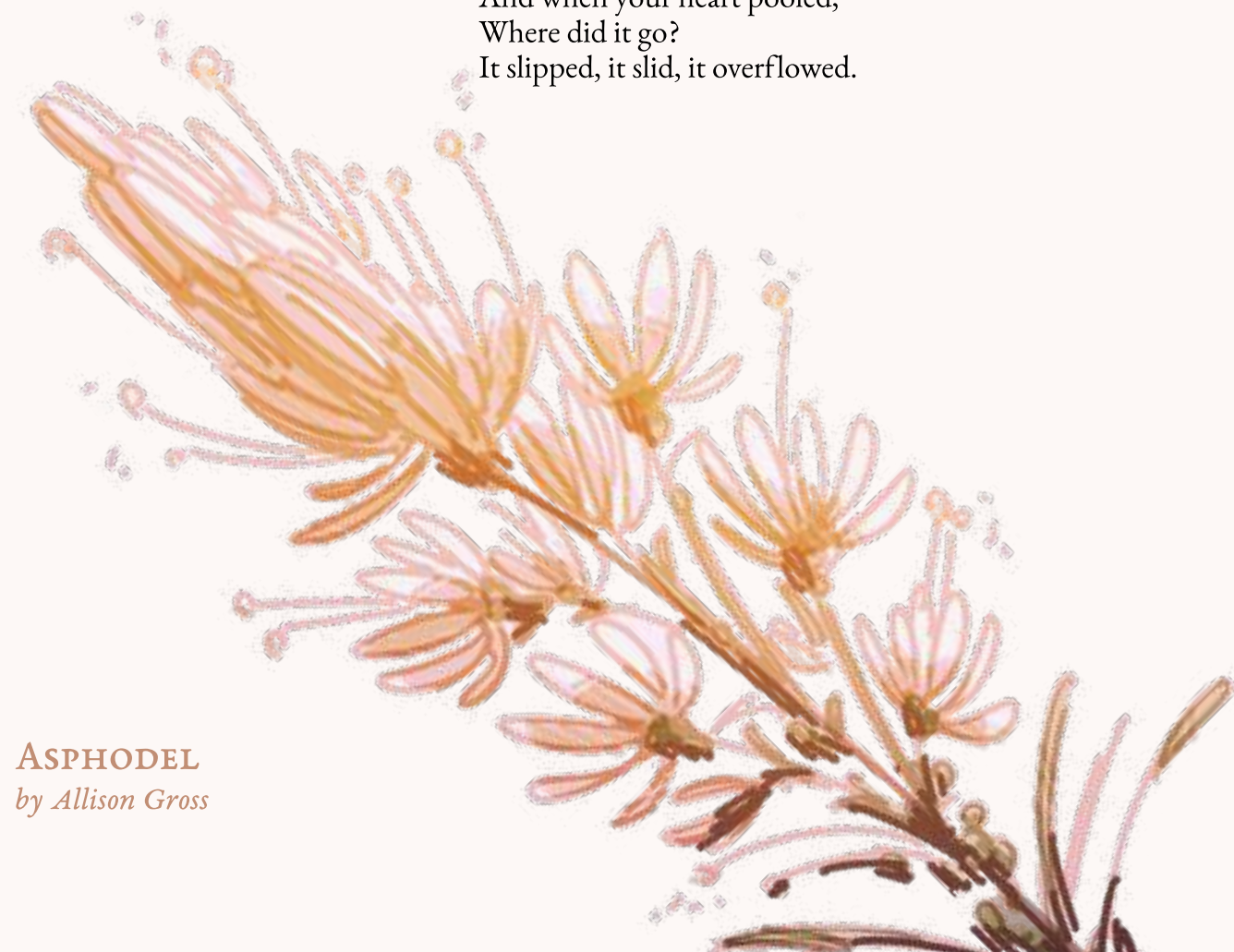
I began to look forward to “seeing” and talking with others. I liked seeing for myself that the people with whom I usually interact are physically ok. That helped me feel that I would be ok, too. It was almost like being there, having them in my home, or going to theirs. While I have physically distanced myself, I have failed to “socially” distance myself from the world. Being able to stay connected to others has been necessary in this time of quarantine. Virtual connection makes physical distancing easier. ♦



OVERFLOWED

by Allison Gross

And when your heart pooled,
Where did it go?
It slipped, it slid, it overflowed.



ASPHODEL

by Allison Gross

SOMEWHERE UNDER MILAN
by Calvin Hernandez

PASSENGER *by David Earl*

I woke up, listless under the sheets, to a coughing under my bunk. Uncle Hiro was up and packing, getting ready for the last day of our weekend trip. We'd been staying at a budget hotel in this tiny room, twelve foot square with a bathroom the size of a closet. I got up and pulled back the blinds. The sky was brightening to the east, though dawn still lurked behind the mountains. Snow covered the city and fields, imbued with the blue morning. The streets were still, but morning trains were already trundling in. Our bags light, we walked downstairs to the breakfast buffet. A few people were up and eating: businessmen, an old couple, a younger man with a ratty tee. I tried to read their faces, though they were strangers I'd never see again, all of them just passing through.

We left the hotel into a freezing wind drifting through downtown Matsumoto, a small city sprung up in the middle of nowhere. When we arrived, the evening was comfortably quiet, but now, silence hung dead in the air. Face stinging, fingers stiff, we walked to the train station, the snow squeaking under our shoes. We passed the small noodle shop from last night. I remembered the lone waitress scurrying around a dozen tourists, Hiro starting a friendly chat with her when she came to our table. Their windows were dark now, the sills puffy white. Of course it was closed this early, but I couldn't stop looking back till it disappeared around the corner.

At the edge of the city was the station, an island of concrete and steel. Rice paddies, covered in snow, stretched out for miles, blue like the ocean, washing up against the mountains. Steel rails carved through the snowy fields, glaring in the faint light. We waited on the platform, wind flaying our skins. Salarymen stood with us, looking down at their phones, wrapped in black coats, briefcases at their feet. I glanced at them, wondering where they were going, wondering if they wanted to go, though they were strangers I'd never see again, all of them just passing through.

Soon, a two-car train rolled up, round-faced, with a chrome-steel body and orange trim. With a chime, the doors opened to warm lights, cream-colored walls, and a brown linoleum floor. The cars had forward-facing seats, not the subway-style benches from the ride in. Everyone piled in, relieved to be out of the cold; Hiro dozed off as soon as his head hit the backrest. I pressed my temple against the frosty window as we began to move, electric motor whirring. Dawn still lurked behind the mountains, the lines of rice paddies flickered by, the mountains grew closer. Sinking into my seat, submerged in blue twilight, I could forget I was headed anywhere.

Suddenly, a whoosh of air engulfed the train—we'd entered a tunnel. Pressed against the window, all I saw was a void, but when I leaned back I could see my reflection, the face of someone who didn't belong. I was returning to the States soon. I could count the days left on my hands. As the wind howled past, I wished the tunnel would stretch on forever. If it didn't, I'd just become another salaryman, wrapped in my coat, returning to my stacks of paper, a crumbling chair in a dusty cubicle. Soon I'd be a face they'd never see again, a stranger just passing through.

Just as suddenly, we exited, and I was blinded; light gleamed against the window. My eyes adjusted, and the world outside had transformed. Dawn had come, the sun breaking over a small peak, rays streaking through the clouds. The landscape glowed orange; blues retreated into shadow. The tracks meandered through a valley, pines dotting the hillside, the sun stretching their shadows like patterns on cloth. To our left, a terrace farm frosted with snow, layered like a cake. Houses were perched on the layers, roofs white. A farmer and his Kei truck buzzed down a country road. Another farmer shoveled his driveway, plumes of snow glittering in the sunlight.

Transfixed, I stared out. I just wanted to leap out the window and into the world, but I was just a passenger on a ride. All I'd get were snapshots, fleeting glimpses. Though the window was still freezing, the dawn pierced through it, leaving a piece with me. I clung to it, burying it deep with every piece of my being before finally making my peace. I turned away, back to Hiro, and nudged him awake, and the two of us gazed at the scenery as the world burst into being. I leaned back, and let the dawn give way. Let the train ferry me off, filled with strangers I'd never see again, all of us just passing through. ♦

HIKER, BIKER, HORSE

by Jonny Keen

A rare atmosphere hangs around American small towns. The sense of communal homeliness embodied in the pancakes and coffee in mom-and-pop-diners, the chipper loveliness of the whitewashed houses, the chocolate box library, post office and movie theater.

But this quiet beauty carries with it a sense of claustrophobia. Without a car, these places are almost inescapable. Small towns far from the big cities seldom enjoy the luxury of a train station or bus route. Perhaps more importantly the roads between towns lack sidewalks. To leave without aid of the internal combustion engine, the adventurous soul needs to traverse the vast routes where old timers in pickups and college grads in convertibles shoot by, heedless to the traveler walking inches away, or the remains of some nameless animal plastered onto the asphalt, roadkill paste.

These journeys can be made with a little determination. It's only necessary for a walker to put their trust in whatever benevolent spirits may watch over these forgotten corners of the country, along with the occasional signs imploring drivers to watch out for "HIKER, BIKER, HORSE."

The rewards for those willing to endure the minor peril are manifold. The brave ones always unearth a trove of delicate majesty hidden in the forgotten places, the in-between haunts by the sides of the routes. Sprays of lichen hanging like gems from the branches of a tree. A rusting license plate fraction, relic of a long-ago car accident. A cluster of cherry-red nightshade berries, dripping deadly allure.

Long ago, departed folks wrote their stories here, carving their legacies into the countryside. Like Ozymandias, they call out to all comers to look upon their works. Ordinary people buried in forgotten cemeteries, their deeds commemorated by white stone monuments, crumbling angels, weathered crosses, the tattered remnants of flags.

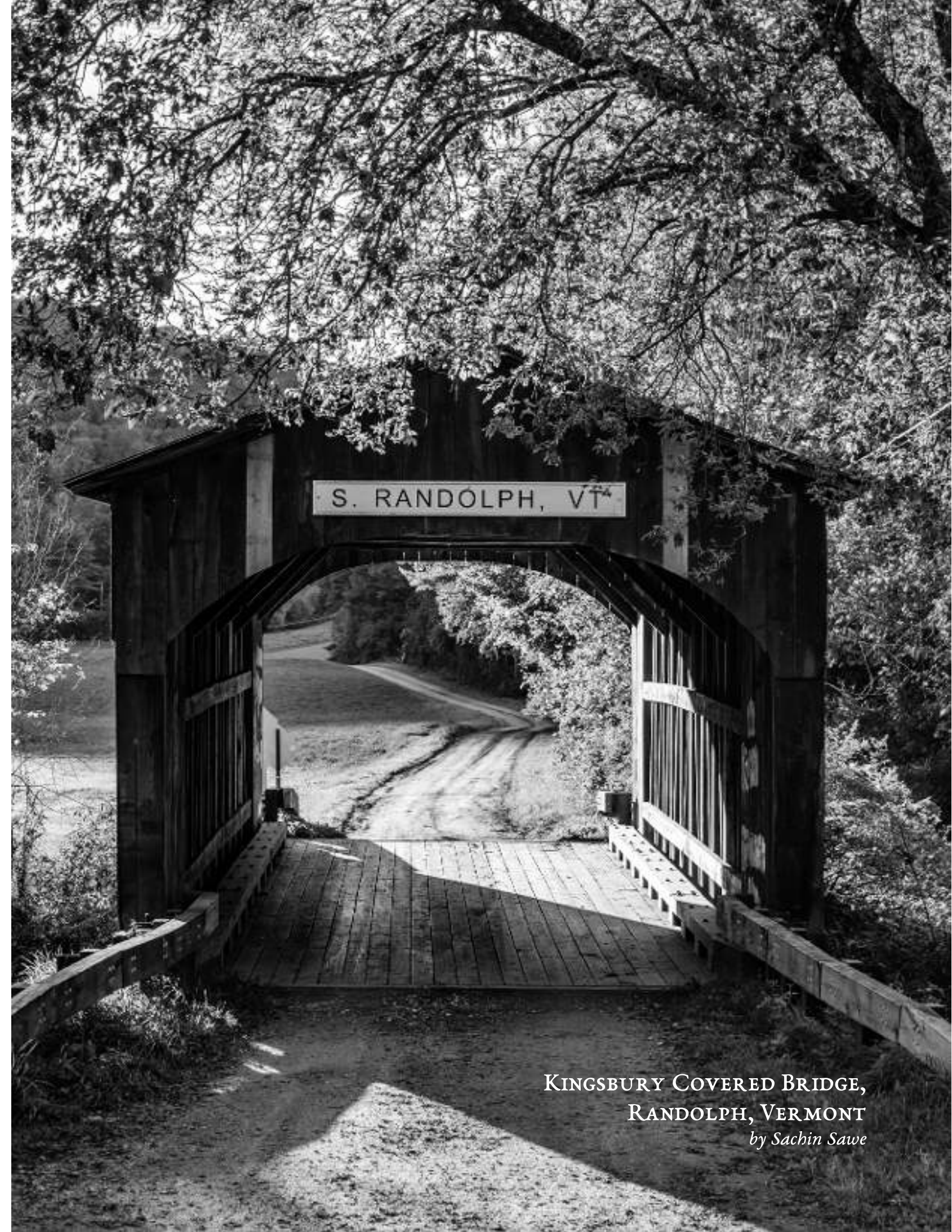
The key event for any route Rambler is a meeting with another of their kind. Two strangers in the roadside hinterland always strike up conversation; to walk by a fellow traveler without a friendly word would be a social sin like no other. The folk out here have their own special etiquette. They start with a pleasantry or two. First, they remark on the weather. Next, they exchange some vague warning about the path they have taken: "Watch out for that bend up ahead. Folk drive around it mighty fast" or "Keep clear of the woods if you're going that way. The turkeys out there are in breeding season and they'll chase you if you get too close."

These warnings aren't strictly necessary. Rather, they serve as a ritualistic greeting, a way of identifying oneself as an adept of the road, a fellow traveler.

There are other companions in these places. Though they don't speak directly to the walker, their distant company is welcome. The crickets chirp encouragement from the grass and the red cardinals flit from tree to tree, their feathers like a banner waving in honor of passers-by.

When the cacophony reaches its peak, the value of these journeys down awkward roadside paths becomes obvious. Even if the walker did not reach anywhere in particular, found no great monument or breath-taking viewpoint, the atmosphere is embedded in their soul to be carried forever.

It is enough to know one's feet have taken them somewhere a car never could. Into a place known only by that fraternity of outside people who walk the routes where the cars go by, and the shining eyes of deer, coyote, possums lie hidden in the shadows, watching the intruders with wary eyes. Here, by the side of the road, is a taste of peace and freedom, the true essence of that wild feeling that can never be discovered in the suburban world of houses, convenience stores, backyard pools. Perhaps if there were sidewalk here, the joy would evaporate. ♦



KINGSBURY COVERED BRIDGE,
RANDOLPH, VERMONT
by Sachin Sawe

THE STORIES OF FOOTPRINTS

by Faisal Murad

It was midnight, so hummed the smiling stars.
I walked the lonely beach, her arm in my arm.
Like kerosene on smoldering fire, the kisses of the midnight breeze burned the water,
flamed it up into waves.
The full moon shone blue, on the waves even bluer.
The waves in turn carried the light to her face.
Majestic, heavenly, like an angel she looked.
Her tresses, every shade of night, released by the wind, danced on her face,
like a chukar will dance near the moon.
I stretched my arm to tuck them behind her ear,
but she scattered in the wind, like sand out of my hand.
Frozen solid, I stood at the lonely beach with nothing but empty hands.

I stood alone, among hundreds of footprints in the sand,
footprints of people who were there not long ago.
Every footprint told me they had a story to tell.
I tried to snatch it away from them, to find comfort in shared misery.
Their stories were far away, locked, ungetatable.
But I knew—
Some footprints began a story, and some were there to end one.
Some were there because the story was there.
Some were mourning the end of theirs.

The shining blue moon,
the noise-making waves,
the love-making breeze,
the beauty of that night—
they all broke my heart into tiny, scattering pieces.
I turned around to begin my journey back to life.
I had to make peace. I had to move on.
Though not a happy one, my odyssey was at its end.
What story would my footprints tell?
What reason would they give to be there on that beach?
To begin a story or to end one?
To rejoice the beginning or to mourn the end?
I suppose, all of them at once.



DOWNPOUR
by David Earl

ORIGIN OF A LEGEND

by Rachel Zakuta

“This has gotta be the biggest tree in N’awlins,” Sara said, placing her foot carefully. She was walking a contorted balance beam—a branch that swooped down and ran parallel to the ground for several yards. The branch twisted back and forth haphazardly, like a chain of S’s, each written in a different handwriting.

“You don’t know that,” countered Keisha, because that’s how Keisha was. She sat on the farthest edge of the branch from the giant oak with her feet in the long grass, keeping a wary eye out for fire ants. “But this is the Dueling Tree. Stupid boys who thought they were grown up used to come shoot each other here over stupid stuff. A lot of them died. They tell ghost stories on the Haunted Tour, but that’s just stupid.”

Sara was in love with the Dueling Tree, whatever its name and sordid history, because that’s how Sara was. The twisted trunk of the ancient oak was so wide it would take several children, hand in hand, to make a ring around it. There were plenty of leafy branches on the top, making the bushy hair of a sinewy giant, but also these branches that started high and dove down and out, like elongated arms with elbows at the same level as the giant’s ankles. There was a new world within the arms: a place of filtered sunlight. Sarah was walking towards this world with every step, and when she reached the upward bend in the branch and hopped down into the dome of perpetual twilight, who knew where she’d be.

“It’s magic,” she told Keisha.

“Doesn’t exist,” Keisha said.

Sara turned, her arms out for balance, and scooped up a bit of Spanish moss with the toe of her sneaker, as if weighing the possibility of flinging it at Keisha.

“Hey!” Keisha slithered off the branch. “There’s bugs in that! You get bugs in my hair, I’m gonna pull you right off of there!”

Keisha had beautiful hair, masses of tight, glossy braids pulled back into a ponytail. Sara was jealous when she thought of it, which wasn’t often. Sara had chin-length, straight, light-brown hair she left swinging free and never bothered to do

anything with. Keisha was jealous when she thought of it, which wasn’t often either.

Sara let the Spanish moss slide to the ground and turned carefully back towards the trunk of the tree. A few steps, and she was there—she was there! She stood on the last few inches of the branch that ran parallel to the ground, rested a hand on the sturdy pole of gnarled bark that rose sharply in front of her, soaring upward after the bend of the giant’s elbow, and gazed into the new world.

The grass grew thick and untamed there as well, but the sunlight was peculiar: shifting, darting, restless as the river in the rain. It was impossible for Sara to fix her eyes on any one point, she noted with glee, as the moving light made the grass seem to wave and swell like an unquiet ocean.

Sara lowered her eyes to the grass right in front of her, the area just within the tree’s arms where she would land when she jumped. She hesitated. Looked again. Prepared to jump. Didn’t.

“I think there’s someone there,” she said doubtfully to Keisha. Because there was someone there, lying in the grass: a very pale young man in a bizarre costume straight from *Beauty and the Beast*, with a fancy cloth tied round his neck, an open jacket trimmed with ribbon and big metal buttons, and a dark spreading stain on the left side of his white shirt underneath. And also there was the untouched and un-crumpled grass coming up behind him—through him—as if he were made entirely of light.

“Don’t you know?” asked Keisha, busy choosing three perfect strands of grass to be braided into a bracelet.

“Not really. Come see,” said Sara. The young man’s head turned towards her as she spoke, his eyes wide and scared. Wisps of his long hair had escaped his ponytail and were plastered with sweat to the sides of his face. One hand fluttered ineffectually over his wound, while the other rose to point at Sara.

“*Là. Dans l’arbre.* An angel come for my soul. I hover betwixt life and death—” he said in antique French, dazed, but correct in this at least, after a disastrous week of foolish mistakes: the wounded

man, if he could be called that at barely seventeen, did indeed balance between two worlds, and in doing so inadvertently created a bridge of sorts, an improbable, but not impossible, confluence.

“What?” Sara asked. She didn’t speak French.

Louis—the young man—ignored her. His second and closest friend, Jean-François, was rushing to his side. Just the sight of him produced a spurt of hope, and vitality; from Sara’s perspective, Louis faded almost out of view, as a stain on a shirt will lighten, lighten, lighten when scrubbed, until it is a mere shadow, only visible to one who knows it is there.

“Are you really talking to someone, or just pretending?” Keisha asked, tying her perfect strands together. Her feet ached from so much walking. Or maybe she’d grown, and needed new sneakers. ”I’m not coming over there for pretend.”

Sara didn’t move her eyes from the vague shadow of the young man, and now she saw it brighten again, like the dining room light that had a dimmer, more and more and more until the vague haze had become sharp and clear, though still translucent, and she could see the young man’s slack mouth and the folds of the wadded cloth he now pressed to his wound. He was looking right at her, though he seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes fully open. Louis felt only lightly tethered to his body, suspended between time and timelessness, accidentally inhabiting two times, and neither.

“Do you know English?” Sara asked.

“An angel, like the priests tell us,” Louis said in highly accented English, glancing again to the friend at his side. Sara now saw light there, too: a vague suggestion of a kneeling figure, a small but oddly long-barreled gun dropped in the grass, nothing like the guns Sara had seen in the movies.

“A child neither male nor female, hatless but so pale, untouched by the sun....”

“Well, I use sunblock, because I burn in the sun,” said Sara absently, staring down from her perch, straining after the details of the young man’s world, this sliver of the past brought to the present by an unfixed soul.

And then, fully processing, “Who are you calling male?” She was wearing jean shorts with her soccer T-shirt, and boys never wore jean shorts.

Louis’s eyes were wide. “It says...it cannot abide the touch of the sun,” he whispered, and then, panic overtaking him as his situation became real all at once, “I don’t want to die! Why don’t you help me!” This to his Jean-François, who was doing nothing except hovering anxiously.

“The doctor is coming. Try to be still, to be calm,” said Jean-François in comforting French, placing a hand on Louis’s shoulder. To Sara, the second was much less present than the wounded man, and she shivered at the sound of his hollow voice.

“Are you ghosts?” she asked, enjoying a true thrill of fear.

The men made of light ignored her, for there was commotion in their time: the doctor with his black bag forcing Jean-François to shift towards Louis’s head, unbuttoning Louis’s vest, ignoring his cries of pain. Louis drifted closer to life, to his own physical reality, and so faded from Sara’s view, taking his own sliver of time with him.

Keisha stood up, abandoning her braided grass. Enough was enough. She obviously needed to rescue Sara from some drunk—or smack her for ruining a perfectly good bracelet. She marched alongside the branch, stopping at the upward bend, her head level with Sara’s knees. Sara pointed into the shade, face solemn.

Keisha looked into the world of the spreading tree, to the shifting patches of shade cast by the rustling leaves: morphing, breaking, reforming, taking on shapes and losing them, becoming anything and then nothing, like reverse clouds moving at impossibly high speeds.

“Nothing there,” she pronounced.

“Look. He’s coming back,” said Sara.

And there was something there, and there wasn’t.

Keisha looked down at the sprawled and bleeding young man, his wound now fully exposed. “Huh,” she said. “That’s a lot of blood.”

“Blood everywhere,” said Sara. She couldn’t look away from the dark edges of the bullet hole, the smears across his belly, down his side, and matting his clothes.

“I don’t think this is appropriate for fifth graders,” said Keisha. But she didn’t look away either.

“Now there are two and they want my blood. Vampires!” Louis shrilled to his friend.

“*Je ne les vois pas*,” his friend whispered, belief stark in his tremulous voice. For Louis, this was dread proof: only he could see the monsters, because only he was about to die. He began to shake uncontrollably.

“One pale as milk, the other black as night,” he described for his friend.

“Is he bein’ racist, or just historical?” asked Keisha, hands on her hips. She didn’t know how exactly like her mother she looked.

Sara shrugged. “Should we call 911?”

“But he’s not really *here*, is he?” Keisha said, waving a hand towards the whole shimmering scene. The doctor was retrieving a long and pointed instrument from his bag.

“Could we give him blood? A transfusion or something?” Sara wondered.

With a deep breath to steel herself, Keisha took a step forward, putting her foot right through the young man’s ankle. Sara gasped at Keisha’s bravery. Keisha noticed for the first time that the man’s pants ended below the knee, and he wore long tights below that, though he was dressed real old-timey, not for ballet or anything. She shook her head, her experiment complete, her hypothesis proven.

“We’re not really *there*, either,” she told Sara. It was like one of those disasters on the news: sad, but you couldn’t do anything—it was happening too far away. Keisha didn’t need physics to understand that time and space are one; that the past is a distant kingdom; that the route is unknown, a great mystery—hence, far away.

But she had a startling new thought, as she looked up and took in Sara’s easy delight: that the number of possible things is uncounted, a great mystery itself, and a new one could be encountered any day.

Louis was trying to squirm away from the demons only he could see, though he barely made it two inches deeper into the embrace of the tree. “They will feed me their own blood! They will make me like themselves!”

The doctor shook his head, sure he was raving, but Jean-François trusted him, Jean-François believed. Louis clutched his friend’s hand, as the doctor angled a truly wicked-looking instrument towards his wound.

“Calm down. We’re not going to hurt you,” Sara said. But the man on the ground just screamed, as the doctor used the humongous pair of tweezers to dig out a bullet from his wound. He was really very upset, and Sara felt very bad for him, but not too sad herself, because you could tell by

his clothes that he died a very long time ago, and also because he was a painting of light, which made him more like a person on a movie screen than a person who was actually there.

“*Délire...tenez-le immobile...*” came echoes from the doctor.

“Warn them...you must warn everyone....

Vampires in New Orleans...” Louis begged Jean-François in his native French. Then he seemed to the girls to fall asleep. Something dark dripped from his mouth.

“Ew,” said Keisha.

“*Je vous promets. Je vous promets. Tout le monde saura des vampires*,” Jean-François repeated inanely, swearing to spread the story of the vampires throughout New Orleans. The girls, of course, understood not a word.

The doctor was finished; he piled bandages on the wound and put the giant tweezers, still bloody, into his bag. Louis began to fade once more. His figure blurred, losing those details of stitchery, buckles, and hose that had so marked him as from another time. The grass behind him became more prominent, almost growing before Sara and Keisha’s eyes, as the present grows up and through the past. Louis was just an outline—just a man in pain—just a boy learning a lesson the hard way and then he was gone.

Time, which had tangled a little as Louis approached timelessness, settled back into its accustomed patterns of past and present, then and now.

“So that’s why they think there’s ghosts here,” said Keisha. “But that was no ghost. Ghosts are dead. He wasn’t dead yet.”

“Is he coming back this time?” asked Sara, looking down at the firm green grass below. She knew the answer, but she liked to ask Keisha questions, just to hear the certainty aloud.

“No,” said Keisha, scouring the ground before her for some sign that this place was special—or not. There were a limited number of possible explanations for what she had just seen, though it was hard to know what was a part of that explanation: the place; herself (definitely not); Sara (possible? if *belief* could be a factor itself, something else Keisha had never considered); the wounded man. Keisha simply didn’t know enough. It was a new and uncomfortable feeling.

“So is he all the way dead, or all the way alive?” Keisha asked, looking up at Sara. “Not *now* now. Then.”

“All the way alive,” Sara said, not even noticing that she was now a source of certainty, too. “At least that’s what I’m going to believe.”

“Then I’ll believe it too,” said Keisha. ♦

ENGAGED/AVAILABLE

by David Earl

It's a simple question, except it's not. But you had to pick one or the other. And I swear, I'd sit here until the mold conquering the shower rotted out the entire room before I'd ever answer that goddamn question.

The reason you answer is always the same, no matter who you ask. Friend, family, bitter old Joe from work, jowly, mush-gripped professor Grendel from economics. "You have to start somewhere." Put yourself out there, like with your resume, or the 90-proof piss you take in an alley at 2 AM. And so here I was, on our campus' stupid little network page for matchmaking, creating a new profile, staring at the drop-down menu. "Engaged or Available." Why the hell were "Engaged" people even on here? As a backup, just in case their engagement breaks up? To lord and laugh over the struggles of "availables?" I checked the admin list—all of them are "engaged." Not even a little representation for the people the damn page was made for.

Anyways, I could've groused until my room rotted, but the tantalizations of a quick date set over faceless profiles smashed whatever tinny objections to class warfare I might've had. Being online had perks: you had a chance to explain yourself, take a breath without having to show it. First impressions are as controlled as a PowerPoint that doubles as your teleprompter. Of course, online also meant you had an astronomically bigger pile of shit to slog through for the diamonds, but there's always people who say it's worth it. I wouldn't know, but they tell me those stories exist, people meeting that special someone online. And I'm sure they looked exactly like they did in their brushed up insta-filter profile pictures, too.

But still, where was the nuance in "Engaged" and "Available"? After typing in your gender and age, that was all you got. "Engaged" or "Available." Whatever happened to something like "hopeful," or "cautiously optimistic," or "it's been 10 days since she last texted and we haven't spoken since, so I'm looking for a holdover." Would help narrow down the field a bit, or did they expect everyone to be so liberal in their choice that they'd pick anyone between Don Jon's Hard-On or Bleach Bob Karen with her 5 skirt-tugging brats?

I still picked "Available." Entered the group. Of course, there's no fanfare or glowing, bursting sunrise to greet my step into a new world, just a cigarette butt's worth of disappointment as the site's chatbot pings you to lay out 2 pages of rules because we can't have nice things. "No harassment," it stated, followed by a laundry list of horror stories that made me flush just skimming it. What a miserable little circus. But then I thought about what it would be like if I had to deal with shit like this in person. Coming face to face with every piece of desperate detritus, face to face with people like yours truly. That must be the hell of all singletons, and this faceless, sterile, impotent game of "guess who" must be purgatory.



BLOOD MUSIC

by Yasser Cudemos

“And I think to myself, what a wonderful world,” sang Louis Daniel Armstrong through my grandmother’s old and dusty sound system. The day was grey, partly because of the overcast weather, partly because it was a day of mourning. July 5th is recognized across the globe as just the day after Independence Day in the US. Years ago, July 5th was known as Independence Day in Venezuela. Now though, now it is known as the day when everyone shows their discomfort with the state of affairs of the nation.

“Central Street seems to be closed today due to traffic concerns near the Cathedral, says mayor Briceño,” reported the news anchor on the small TV in my kitchen.

“Traffic concerns my asshole. The mayor knows full well what happens today and why they can’t show it on TV,” grunted my grandmother. She was still sour about the July 5th of a couple of years ago, when the protests started taking place on Independence Day.

She took a drag from her cigarette and puffed it out the kitchen window while stirring the scrambled eggs I would have for breakfast, the voice of Louis Armstrong sounding low in the background while we both looked at the morning news.

Venezuelan news and journalism are just about the perfect exercise for the mind. Half the fun is deciding on what is truth, what is truth with some little decoration to make it look nice, and what is truth according to the government. An awful lot of truths to be had. The other half of the fun is reading the fine print; it was decoding the words of the news anchor. Knowing that “shortage of bus drivers” really meant “Drivers are not getting paid and the government doesn’t care. Good luck commuting to work.”

And as I was getting ready to leave for school my grandma grabbed me by the ear and with the stone cold tone that only she has, she told me not do anything stupid today of all days. Mothers know best I guess, and she was a wild horse of a mother. Ruthless and stern when it is required, but also caring and tender. One can’t even begin to

fathom the number of national scandals she lived through, from the miserable 40’s, to the scary 50’s, passing by the humiliating 80’s, and all the way till now, the awfully problematic 21st century.

As I walked my way to school I could not stop humming that song by Louis Armstrong and thinking how much I did not want to go history class. And the rude old hag I had as my math teacher. And I didn’t even want to think about the bullies that bothered me all the time in class. As I neared the entrance of my high school I couldn’t stop thinking, *Wonderful world? Fucking horrible more like.* I saw my friend Ren passing by but not going inside. I was climbing the steps to the front door when he made a signal with his hand, waving me to come closer.

He told me that he and some other boys were skipping school and were going to the parade in the center of the city. He said that his brother would come pick him up in ten minutes and that he had another change of clothes in his brother’s car. No one likes to walk around with a school uniform after all.

And so it goes. I hopped in the car, still wearing my brown uniform shirt, but full of thrill. It was a festival! A carnival full of color and cheery people. We were on our way to enjoying our time with song, with drink, with more freedom than school could ever give me. My friend took out a bottle of rum from his backpack, and so we all started the day with a sip of glory.

When we got to the parade we were welcome by a crowd of government sympathizers. The streets were filled to the brim with people, all wearing the distinctive color of the Revolution. It was a sea of red. Banners and posters were flung around, with words like “First God, then The Commander, then my homeland,” “A good capitalist is a dead capitalist,” “Long live Chavez, long live Castro, long live the Revolution.”

The socialist ruling party had been in control for almost 20 years. Time and again the president, Hugo Chavez, had somehow won every poll and vote. Whether it was by playing fair or by using less noble means, one could not say. The nation’s

self-proclaimed Supreme Commander was in a constant struggle against the right wing side of Venezuelan politics. The Opposition was consistently stepping on the Revolution’s toes but never really accomplishing anything worth putting in the history books. It was a perpetual state of stalemate, a back and forth struggle in which the common citizen was caught in the middle of the crossfire.

The parade took place over several blocks of the city. In one street there was a live band performing their own cover of the national anthem. In another there were platoons of the Bolivarian National Guard marching in unison. And in another there were people drinking the first bottles of the day.

We didn’t let the propaganda get us down, though. We were there to have a good time and by God we would have it. We joined in. We danced and we drank. We were just a group of 15-year-old boys, but we were living life to the fullest, as if tomorrow was our last day on this Earth. We had not a care in the world. For all we minded, the sky could fall, the moons could spin, the gods could shit comets with glee and strike us down if they pleased. But we were there to live life. Until there was a loud bang.

People started to run, the Guard started mobilizing. Their new North Korean bulletproof vehicles, the APC, were put into motion for real work other than parading. Aptly named “Armored Personal Carrier,” the APC were beasts that could safely transport a politician through No Man’s Land or wreak havoc with a mounted machine gun. The government had invested a sizable amount of money on military dealings with other socialist countries such as China and Cuba. Why do we need tanks if we haven’t had a war in over two centuries? Well, one could argue that these weapons were not to be used on soldiers, but on civilians.

We ran towards the Guard for protection, heard another booming roar and turned around to run the other way, and when that went sideways after seeing a police officer burning alive, we tried hiding under a couple of cars while the shrieking sound of a man in flames made us cry as the life force escaped his body.

There are a few things that never leave your

memory. The laugh of your child, the warmth of your loved one, the sound of a man burning alive. The image of the scene still haunts my head to this day. The smell of burning flesh along with the shrieks of not a man, but an animal crying in horrible pain, are something you can’t ever shake out of your mind no matter how hard you try to forget it.

We were desperate. We were confused. We didn’t know where to run or who to ask for help. An armored vehicle, an APC, was running down the street when a Molotov cocktail hit the windshield. The light tank stopped for a moment and then we saw them.

A dozen people wearing white shirts and hiding their faces with makeshift masks of cloth hurried to the APC, climbing on top of it and opening the hatch of the roof. A few seconds later they all scrambled and ran away from the vehicle as smoke came from the hatch. They threw a Molotov inside the APC.

“It’s the students! The college students. It’s the Opposition!” I shouted to my friend Ren, who was laying next to me under the car. I looked him up and down to see if he was hurt and noticed a puddle of liquid coming from his pants. “We have to get out of here, you hear me? We gotta make a run for it.” Damn I wished I had listened to my grandma.

He nodded and we crawled out of the car and ran, ran like a bolt, like lighting. Ran as hard and as fast as any human could. Not caring which direction, not even caring whether I was walking into live fire or not. I was a greyhound and all the bets were on me. That is, until I got hit.

A striking pain came from the back of my head, then another on my lower back, then another on my stomach, then my face, and my chest, and my arms. For a few seconds, I was fully aware. I even got to hear someone comment on my uniform shirt, saying that I was one of the rioting students. I could see that they were Guardsmen wearing anti-riot armor. Not long after that, the world went dark, dark as night, dark as the future of my homeland. And all I could hear was Armstrong, whispering, singing in my ear, “What a wonderful world....” ♦



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GRAFFITI
by Dylan Jacques-Fero



by John Paul Frank

THE PRU AT DUSK
by Calvin Hernandez

ANOTHER MINUTE

by David Earl

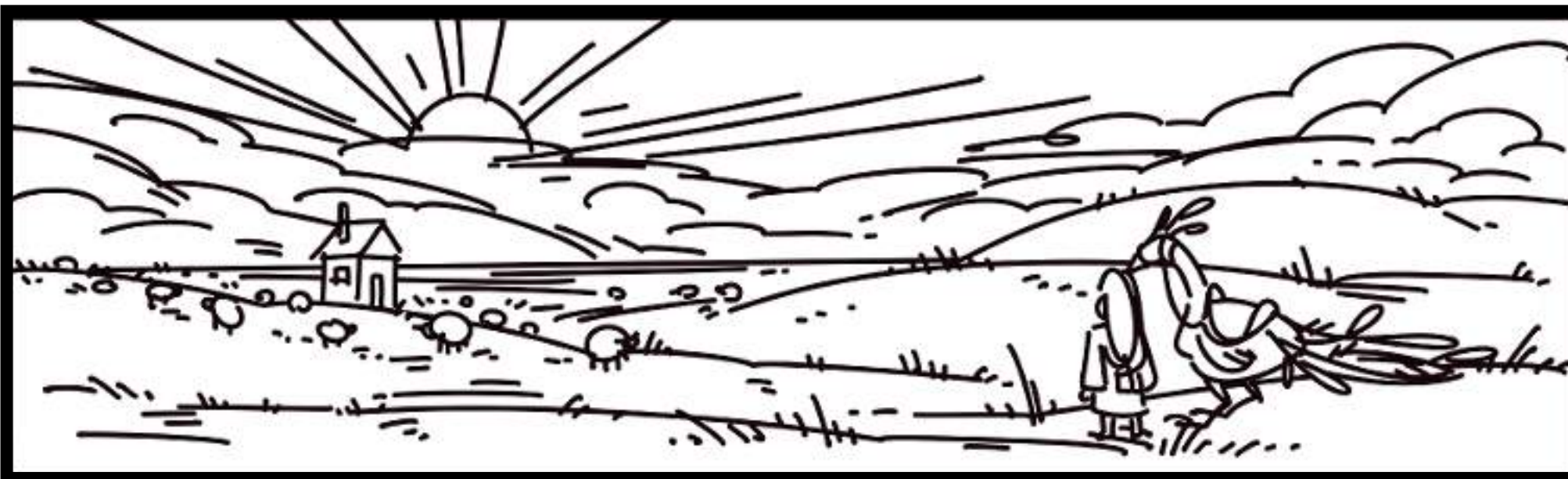
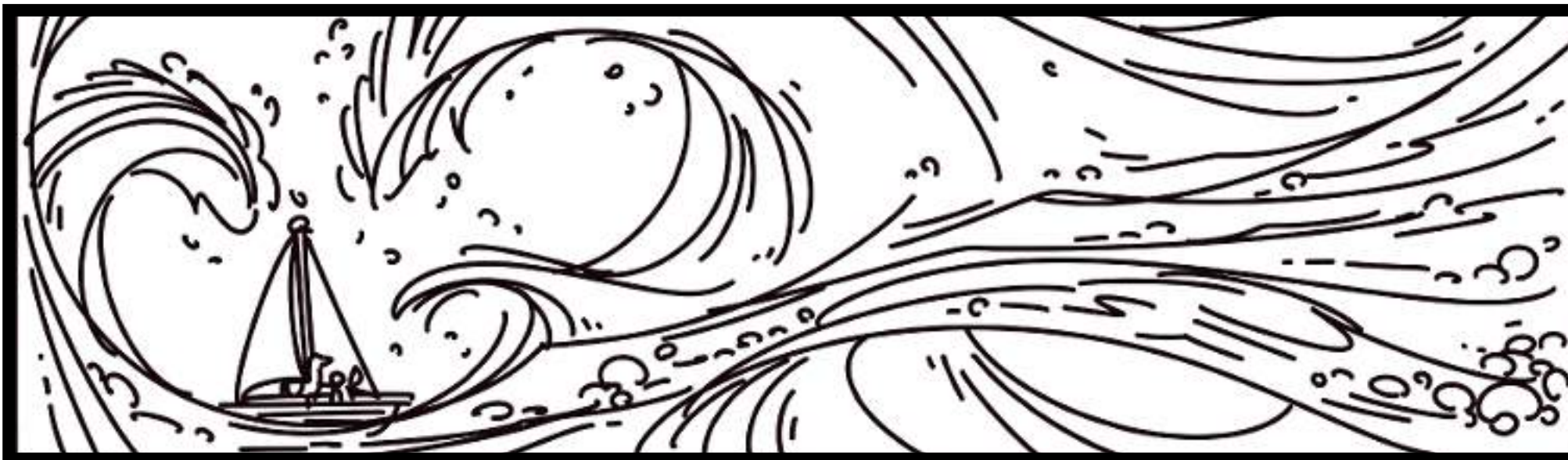
Rocked to sleep on the rails
after a late night with saké,
I missed my stop.
The clock read 13:40. I stepped off the train,
watching its trailing lights as it trundled away
on rapids of gravel and steel
through an ocean of rooftops.
Standing in a station I'd never heard of,
waiting for the inbound at 13:41,
another minute for myself.

An idle chime played from the PA speakers
like a cuckoo's call, curious and lonely,
backed with a choir of crying cicadas
under the glow of an afternoon sun.
I was at the platform's end,
walls painted white, aging to beige,
lined with old benches,
red plastic faded to peach.
I sat down, the seat embraced me,
comforting, warm, empty.

I filled my lungs with summer air,
that sweet perfume, like pine boughs,
hydrangea bushes, the river bank,
taiyaki from a corner booth,
pages ripped from that book I loved.
A breeze glided in, ruffled my hair, caressed my skin,
a gentle hand, familiar and soft.

A man with a dark coat, a grandma with a cane,
two schoolchildren, holding hands,
all stood on the other platform.
But no one stood at this side, on the far end
where I stared out, like an old Jizo,
from an island of concrete and steel.

Another minute with the crying cicadas
Another minute in the bitter breeze.
Another minute thinking of you.



THE NIGHTBIRD'S
PILGRIMAGE
by Allison Gross

SIMON HATED SILENCE

by Mike Kaminsky

Simon hated silence. It was his worst fear in conversation. Silence legitimized his biggest insecurity, that he was boring. Deeply boring. Simon's secondary yearning was to be intelligent, but he was ok not being so, provided he was clever, and ok not being clever provided he was funny. The deeper problem came from the fact that at any given moment, Simon either believed he had all of those traits, or none of them. So when Simon found himself fielding moments of silence, he was coming to terms with the fact that he was a deeply boring person, when mere seconds ago, he considered himself an intelligent, clever, and funny man.

Simon was laying on his bed at the tail end of a weekend-long bender. His brain was buzzing with the last remnants of drunkenness and blurry memories from the weekend. The patternless splatters of his drop ceiling came in and out of focus. His bedroom was small but adequate.

Miscellaneous posters filled the walls. There was one window, which was currently pouring golden hour rays all over Simon's face. He attended the local Massachusetts state school: respectable, but far from prestigious. He grew up a mere 40 minutes from here, opting for predictability when selecting a college. He was 21 and had just finished his junior year. School was fine. He had a summer internship, which was also fine.

Although he had always enjoyed drinking, this was the first time Simon ever felt inclined to stay drunk for so long. He rather liked it. Simon sometimes thought about how his life's entertainment had gone from TV, to viral videos, to Vines. Remaining drunk for such an extended period of time gave Simon the power to strip life down to similar levels of streamlined pleasure. Grinning, Simon felt the same stimulated joy that came from a successful afternoon online. Simon was especially tickled by how much mental focus he needed in order to remember which day it was; the facts of his own life had gained the same elusiveness as the facts he had to memorize for school. What's the equation for photosynthesis again? The weekend blended together so seamlessly that Simon

giggled to himself as he came to the realization that it was, in fact, yesterday, and not today, that he woke up on his friend's couch in Connecticut. Most importantly, Simon was able to cut out the silence. That isn't to say that silence didn't happen, but here in his room, all Simon could remember were the greatest hits of the weekend.

Simon's bender began on a Thursday. It was a sweaty night in the early summer. He and his friends were crammed into one of the shitty dance bars you only put up with in your early 20s. The plan was to not go super hard: they all had work the next day.

"Step. Step again. Step another time. Each time in a different direction. Start moving your arms. Don't look bored. Try and smile. Don't stand in place." Simon repeated this to himself, over and over, desperately hoping that tonight was the night that he would figure out dancing.

Dancing in a circle, his despair grew while watching his friends' much better dancing. There's no irony on the dance floor. Maybe that's why Simon had such a difficult time there. His speech, his entire attitude, was drowned in layers of irony, jokes, and references. References were his biggest crutch, allowing him to steer away from his own personality instead of relying on someone else's jokes or opinions. There is no such luxury while dancing. One can't be kidding about a dance move. You either do it or you don't.

Eye contact is a big fear of Simon's. He has slowly learned the varying degrees of when it is acceptable to skirt the responsibility of eye contact. Meeting a girlfriend's parents: bad time. Long car trip: good time. Simon feels that the absolute worst time to avoid eye contact is when dancing with someone. Having his eyes glued to the floor while dancing makes Simon feel like an autistic kid dancing with the pretty girl at a special education fundraiser.

With this fear in mind, Simon steered his glance around the club, careful to avoid other eyeballs. He didn't want to give anyone the wrong idea. Sweat collected under his arms as he wondered how many

people had noticed his dancing, or lack thereof. Checking his phone, Simon learned that it was only 68 degrees out. He still felt hot. The only way Simon knew to relieve the searing heat of onlookers was a drink. Excusing himself from the group, he trekked through the crowd towards the bar. He didn't mean to drink it as quickly as he did, but he did. Within minutes, he was able to move his body into something resembling dance moves. He smiled a few times. The anxiety began to leave his chest. He breathed a sigh of relief; it had been five days since his last drink. He excused himself again, claiming a quick bathroom trip. He didn't want his less alcohol-dependent friends to know how quickly he was ordering a second drink. Halfway to the bathroom, Simon abruptly cut towards the bar. After what felt like a lifetime holding up two fingers, Simon muttered, "Two Bacardi shots please." He hated this part: desperately hoping that the bartender assumed one shot was for a friend. The shots arrived and promptly slid down Simon's throat. The bartender noticed.

Simon woke up. It was morning. He was on his couch. His neck felt raw from the cheap cushions; his chest burned from anxiety. Feeling physically unable to rise, Simon groggily scanned his surroundings. Eyes landing on an open Coors, he grasped his knuckles around the cylinder and dumped the warm, flat beverage into his mouth. Those trace remains of alcohol were enough to raise Simon's body. He found some cold coffee left behind at the bottom of yesterday's pot. While microwaving it, he patted his pants pockets before finding a crushed box of cigarettes in his butt pocket. Coffee and cigarette in hand, Simon meandered onto his apartment's deck. The bright sun revealed to Simon that it was already 10:30. Somewhere between a squint and a scowl, he looked even uglier than normal as he chain-smoked and Instagram-thirsted. One and a half coffees, six cigarettes, another beer, and 45 minutes later, Simon felt fine. It was time to leave for work.

Strolling into work a cool three hours late, Simon realized that nobody was in the office. He racked his brain trying to remember what was going on today. Upon remembering nothing, he shrugged and meandered to his desk. Keurig in hand, Simon lazily scrolled through his Recent

Files trying to remember what he was working on. How was he here just yesterday? An idea popped into his head. He told himself no, although deep down he knew he would cave to its temptation - like a couple teasing each other in bed.

An hour later, Simon was still at his desk. A beer was now in his hand, replenishing the morning's buzz before it slipped away. It became harder and harder to focus on his work while indulging in a single pleasure. He wanted to indulge in all the pleasures. Glancing at the clock, he was shocked it was only noon. A deep exhaustion rippled through his body. Absent-mindedly, Simon brought his phone up to his ear. Suddenly, he was on the phone with Sam.

"Hey."

"Hey man."

Pausing for a second, Simon bounced his knee anxiously. "What's up?"

"Nothing much. You called me."

"That's true." Simon's voice trailed off. "I'm bored." He wondered to himself why he called Sam. "What are you doing right now?"

"Just watching TV. Are we still carpooling to dinner later?"

"Yeah. Let's get together now though." Sam often operated like an improv actor, having no idea what was going to happen, until it did. His inability to trace actions back to a root emotion or reason made it incredibly hard for him to open up to people. How do you have a heart-to-heart when you're motivated by impulse and not heart?

"Don't you have work?"

"I guess so. I can leave." A great relaxation overcame Simon. It all seemed so obvious now. Why would he sit in a chair by himself, doing unimportant work for an unimportant man, when he could instead experience joy and chaos. A grin spread across his face.

Seven hours later, Simon's head protruded out of Sam's car as they flew down the freeway. Liquor and weed, in such large quantities, and so early in the day, overran their blood stream. They greeted their friends at the restaurant. Before the entrees had arrived, Simon was passed out in the bathroom. Sam had brought up his mother's cancer to the waitress.

Slouched forward in the passenger seat of a '98

Lincoln, Simon people-watched at the mall. It was the next morning. Had dinner already happened? His eyelids slid up and down. The morning light was harsh, rudely unaware of his hangover. He realized Sam was talking.

“I just can’t believe they think I have a problem. Sorry, I thought we were going to have fun, not have one craft beer and talk about our jobs. Sorry, I live alone and don’t get to see people that often. Sorry, I wanted to have a legendary night.” Sam was somehow both manic and sluggish. Simon fixated more on his friend’s manner of speaking than the actual content of his rant.

“Yeah. I mean...yeah. That sucks man.” Scrolling through Snapchat, Simon sought to fill in the eight-hour gap in memory. Within five minutes, the two boys’ guffaws drew stares from outside the car.

“I...totally do have...a problem!” shrieked Sam in-between laughs. “I was out of control. A total piece of shit.”

Simon joined in. “A degenerate! An alcoholic!” Their laughs echoed throughout the car. People say, “It’s funny because it’s true,” yet humor is just as likely to obscure the truth. Simon and Sam had likely called each other “degenerates” and “alcoholics” hundreds of times in their years of friendship, but the words never carried any weight. They just laughed it off.

“Play...play Christina’s story again. I was saying literal gibberish,” begged Sam, his laughs finally starting to subside.

After an impromptu hangover cure of massage chairs and food-court Chinese food, the duo returned to the freeway en route to Connecticut. They had plans to visit an old friend of theirs: the kind of friend you always had a good time with. Their conversation meandered. Sports, music, weather, and girls swirled through their heads and out of their mouths. As their hangovers broke, excitement for the night began to grow. When Simon closed his eyes, he saw flashes of ecstasy: imagery pulled from movies, beer commercials, and porn. He was taking shots with strangers, having meaningful life talks on an upperclassman’s roof. He imagined getting incessantly tagged in Facebook pictures. He was going to get with a girl tonight, he was sure of it. It had been so long. No,

much too tame. He would have a threesome tonight. His friends would be so jealous. Maybe he would get a tattoo. Maybe he would try cocaine. He would definitely run the beer pong table; hordes of people would cheer on as he drilled cup after cup. He began practicing his go-to stories in his head, revising the points of emphasis and imagining where he would need to pause for laughter. He wouldn’t get too drunk tonight, he told himself. He then wondered how many times he had told himself that.

Simon, Sam, and seven other guys crowded around a 23” flat-screen, watching a meaningless regular season baseball game in relative silence. Disappointment began to creep through Simon’s body. He had nothing to say to his friend’s roommates, despite being the fifth time meeting them. Negative thoughts flew through his mind. They probably think I’m a complete loser. People have fun at college, yet I can’t even manage basic small talk. Simon was quickly giving up on his excitement, feeling frankly embarrassed for even getting his hopes up in the first place. “Anyone down for a shot?” he offered in a desperate attempt to jump-start the evening.

It was 12:37. Surrounded by people, Simon was slouched over his phone, comfortably placed in the corner of a townhouse. He never ran the beer pong table, or took any pictures, or did much of anything impressive whatsoever. He swallowed rising puke casually, and without much thought. The negative thoughts about being boring went away. Drinking, if nothing else, provided Simon with a level of peaceful synergy. There was no longer such a disparity between his expectations and reality. It allowed himself to give up on his lofty goals for the night, instead just doing what made him immediately happy. However, how much is momentary peace worth if one has no recollection of it—if it’s truly fleeting?

Lying on his back, Simon had no problem lying to himself. He was fully aware that there were things that happened in the last few days that were unsavory, embarrassing, or even downright awful. However, the distinction of knowing versus *knowing* was a crucial one to him. He knew that the weekend was not as good as he remembered it, but he knew he felt good in this moment.

The blurriness of the ceiling’s details, which mere minutes ago amused Simon, were suddenly a source of grave discomfort. The sun’s warm light had retreated beyond the horizon, and the room had become dark. He could feel the entire room spinning, a tasteless blurring at his peripheries. The only thing Simon could properly observe was the nothingness present in his room. Knowing that nothing had actually changed, Simon kept trying to think his way out of the oncoming mood, but all his sputtering brain could produce was vulgar half-sentences.

Fuck this...it’s just so fucking...fuck. Shitty. I hate....

Simon thought of calling Sam. They always laughed and laughed when recapping the weekend. Flipping his phone towards his eyes, he was reminded that it was dead. The mere thought of standing up, looking for his charger, looking for a plug, and waiting for his phone to charge exhausted Simon. He desperately tried to find a distraction. A brief scan of the room could not find the TV remote. The nothingness continued. There was silence around and in Simon. Simon hated silence. ♦



ABANDONED FORT
by Dylan LaVallee



ACRYLIC PAINT I
by Katherine Peck

DREAMS OF MORTAL EYES

by Faisal Murad

Murky shadows cascaded down the living facade of dying bricks. My knees oozed blood when they were pricked by rubble of metal and shards of glass. Tight ropes were painting rings of blood on my wrists as a figure tall, gruesome, Cloaked, and silent, loomed over my head. The cold touch of his scythe drew a half circle around my neck and drove chills down my body. Within that moment, in the darkest depths of my closed eyes, I saw patches of light, like clay-lamps lit in the sea of night. Upon them, scattered, were memories:

Those floral fields and dragonflies
that empty beach, her moon-lit eyes
our love, wet grass, and star-lit skies
our sleepless nights, her head, my shoulder, till sunrise.

The scythe slid in a circular motion, and tears welled up in my eyes. Marbles of sweat slid down my neck and mixed with blood drawn on the blade. “Any last wish?” growled the looming figure. “They are too many to be fulfilled,” I said. They are now but my regrets.

An army of dust upon my books, yawping in glory
a parting sea, an ark full of people, King Solomon and his story
Rumi’s poetry, Chekhov’s gloom, Greek history bloody and gory
Victorian romance, horror of Lovecraft, Plato’s allegory.

The falling towers and dying warriors in my head, turning to dust
my haughty promises to tell their tales will die of rust
tales of wisdom and tales of mystery, of olden kings cruel and just
on my table will lay half-written, stories and poems of love and lust.

My eyes closed, and my sense of sight thus impaired, I heard the streets as if I was in them. Panic, that’s all there was. As if panic had possessed the horror-stricken bodies running around, banishing their souls. Perched on boughs of dying trees, the parliament of owls whoo whoo’d. Dogs were barking, marking territories with better sources of food. All the bazaars were empty, looted by the civilized, and most important, of God’s creation. The scythe tightened around my neck and dragged me back from the panic stricken streets. My eyes shut ever tighter, my neck covered in a viscous mixture of blood, sweat, and tears. Was it a mixture or just one of those ingredients? I know not. The last lit clay-lamp flickered in the depths of my eyes. It told me tranquility is the key—embrace it and you shall prevail. Hush now child, hush!

MY FATHER'S ADVICE

by Steve Waller

Nothing beat the joy of riding on a bus. Sitting all the way in the back was like the throne in a palace—regal and private.

I recall the first time I saw big sky country. It was in '66, after a gig in Omaha, just past 2am on the bus. After the band members fell asleep, my father would pick up the guitar. I remember the ease with which he played songs and made up lyrics.

As I woke from a brief nap, I saw a figure playing guitar. No one sitting nearby seemed to notice, but it sounded like my father. He was singing a song, a hit back in the day. I closed my eyes for an instant. He was gone when I opened them, but I heard the hook (Life on the road/will take its toll/and leave you broken and then some) over and over in my mind.

The bus floated past cornfields while each of us drifted in and out of unscheduled sleeps. There he was again: noodling around the frets, trying different rhymes. I tried to talk to him, but he did not hear me; I reached out to touch him, but he was gone; I wanted to tell him, but it was too late.

The local news carried the accident details. A bus and truck had collided head on. The debris from the accident rambled across the fields. No survivors. A vintage guitar was found in pristine condition.



KEEP 'EM GUESSING
by Calvin Hernandez

A SACK FULL OF FACES

by Faisal Murad

Every atom of the theater rang with clapping and cheers. Performers were standing on stage in a row, holding hands, necks flopped forward, looking at their feet. A few steps in front of the row stood the lead artist, amidst a bow, one hand on his stomach, the other stretched out holding his derby hat. The row behind him straightened up, but the chanting of his name compelled him to remain in that position, like a stone statue of an idol. The audience rose from their seats, some held their arms above their heads, and clapped louder as the curtains began to close. When but a slit remained, cracks appeared, and the statue broke its stance. The artist raised his head, and the applause grew louder.

A thick, gray, worn out, herringbone long coat was being dragged afloat in the hallway. It, however, was not inanimate like a fabric. The sleeves were jumping up to try and free the collars from the giant ringed hand that was dragging it. The torso was not hollow, yet not as full as a living being. Said coat belonged to one Evo Hutchinson. Who, it became clearer soon, wasn't far away from his coat, but was in fact in it when it was being dragged. His feet followed behind, sweeping the hallway. This scene, fused with Evo's scrawny posture, solidified the image of a coat being dragged on a hanger. People plastered themselves to walls on either side of the hallway, and the door of the theater flung open. A swift kick on the bottom sent Evo through it, sprawling face down on the street. The one who had thrown him out came closer and said, "You are as good an actor as a fish is an archer. Do us a favor and don't show up here again."

Evo picked up his derby hat, which had rolled away from his head when he had fallen, and put it on. Evening had grown old by then, and street lamps were lit. Under one of those lamps an elderly gentleman was playing the accordion. Evo looked up at the neon sign, which read **Masquerade Theater Company**. A lonely snowflake twirled in the air and landed on his face, wiping the wistful expression away with its cold touch. The street was populated by a few couples, a couple of families,

and a few bachelors eyeing each other. A father was holding his four-year-old daughter in his arms, her arms around his neck, and her head on his shoulder. The little girl's lips were quivering, and her eyes wet. Her mother, who was walking by their side, was trying to console her by caressing her face, tucking her hair behind her ear, and talking to her in a voice which sounded as if someone had pressed the fast forward button on a cassette player. Evo was walking behind them, looking at the girl, making silly faces, and slowly shrugging his shoulders with the music of the accordion. He jerked the hat off his head and began to juggle it in his hands with masterful art. Gradually, the dance caught speed, the hat began to wheel on his stretched out left arm, passed over his shoulders, down his right arm, and into his right hand. His feet began to tap harder on the concrete pavement. Then he stopped walking and broke into what seemed like a clown's routine. The little girl had raised her head in excitement, smiling, or rather laughing silently, putting her tiny hand on her mouth. As far as she could, she was craning her neck to look at the crazy stranger dance. The dance performance stopped when the girl disappeared after a turn, and the spectators dispersed on the street.

That night, before falling asleep, all he could do was take off his coat and his hat. The coat he flung on a wrecked piece of wood he liked to call a table, on top of empty peanut shells and a few unopened overdue fee notices for acting classes. The hat went on the shelf behind his bed, on top of a book titled *Putting Reins on the Stage*. His bed, which was nothing more than termite-eaten remains of a once bed, resting on two wooden legs and two towers of bricks, squeaked and trembled under his weight.

The lithe, green boughs of trees were swaying with the wind. He knew they were paying respects to the fish, shark to be exact. It stood on its tail, bowed, one fin on its stomach, the other stretched out holding a bow. Targets were revolving in a levitating circle, like a ritual, having arrows stuck in the bullseye. Throngs of spectators were watching the fish, whistling and clapping. Then they were

silent and ignorant of the champion in a flash. The stiff, barren boughs of trees stayed as if made of stones. The only noise that remained was of the flowing stream behind the shark.

That next day Evo went to The Madhouse, a memento of a once famous theater. The only things it had retained of its old self were the natural acoustics, the sconces instead of modern lights, and a round stage of wooden planks with no curtains, which squeaked when performed on. Two kinds of people were *habitué* of The Madhouse. The first kind were those who were rejected and were full of dreams. The second kind were mostly stoners, drunks, and the homeless, who were rejected but had no dreams, or they did but didn't want to share. The stage of The Madhouse was a place where people, the first kind, for a short while, without the cannons of judgement pointed at them, lived their dreams. For Evo, the whole theater was a sanctuary, an escape, like vodka. It gave him comfort, like dry clothes to the wet body of a rain-beaten traveler. There he watched a few performances, laughed, and delighted in the relief of shared misery. All of course, for a short while.

Towards the end of the evening, on his way back home, by the bar that he passed every day, he foraged his pockets to see if he could afford going in. Through a tear in the right pocket of his coat, his hand slid down to the hem, and felt the strange touch of a crumpled up dollar. He got it out, looked at it, and was about to enter the bar when by the dumpster next to the bar, he saw a man, curled up like a heap of refuse. He was covered in a patched up coat, head resting on a burlap sack. Evo stared at the crumpled up dollar, then at the bar sign, then at the worn out human who lay like a piece of something, and sat down on his toes next to him.

"Take this. It's not a lot, but maybe you can buy something to eat." Evo woke the stranger up and held out the crumpled up dollar towards him. The stranger stared back. His eyes were red, and eyebrows furrowed.

"Another one who thinks me a beggar. Thank you, but I am not," he said.

"I thought no such thing. I just thought you might be hungry."

"Never mind that."

Evo retracted his stretched out arm holding the crumpled up dollar.

"I don't need your money!" said the man.

"Well, alright. Forgive me."

"If you really want to help me Sir--" he grabbed the burlap sack which until a moment before was his pillow, and slid it towards Evo. "Take this," he said.

"What is this?"

"Don't worry, it's not dirty." He looked left, then right, then inched a little closer and said almost in a whisper, "It can fulfill your deepest desires."

"It seems to me Sir that you've had too much to drink."

"You don't believe me, why should you? No one does."

"You do realize Sir that you are claiming to be a genie."

"Genies are not real."

"Assume I indulge your foolishness. What do you mean by desires?"

"Anything. Your imagination is the only limit."

"Forgive my bluntness, but how is it that you have nowhere to go then?"

"Desires come in many shapes my good Sir."

Evo stood up, brushed his hair with both hands, then tied both hands at the back of his head, sighed, and sat down. "Alright Sir," he said, as he pulled the sack closer and started rubbing its side.

"You are still thinking about the lamp," said the stranger. "The sack works differently. Just hold on to it and you will know."

"Alright stranger. Whether you are a fool or not, I am one either way."

It felt light, as if rocks made of cotton were occupying all the space in it. Evo soon forgot that he even had the sack, not until he went home, and had to fling it to a corner.

The next morning his eyes opened when he was lying on his stomach. His head was turned to the right, and the burlap sack was staring at him from the corner. The cotton rocks had spilled out of it on the floor. Evo lifted his head to have a better look at the mess, and they seemed to him like... masks. He went closer and lifted one in his hand. It was almost like a human face, made of skin, and fleshy. It rested on his palm face up -- he flipped it over and stared at it, horrified. His hand, as if it had a will of its own, raised gradually, until he had put the mask on. It fit like...well, like a face, and began to dissolve on Evo's skin, disappearing like water in sand. Though

his face soon looked like him, he felt different, as if something was forcing him to act differently. Evo spent the next hour trying to get it off but couldn't. "It must be to clean one's face. Sure! That's what it must be," Evo said, looking in the mirror. Soon, he forgot that he had another face on his old one, and went about his day as if nothing strange had happened. That evening he went to The Madhouse again. He passed his usual seat and went straight up on stage.

"I...I...I have this urge...to...to act out something tonight," he said, looking at the audience. For a while silence had enshrouded The Madhouse. Then it was broken when the act began. Evo did not recognize himself when he was performing. It was as if he was possessed and someone was acting through him. The homeless, jobless, stoners, mental, all had their eyes stitched to the stage lest they miss a single scene performed by this maestro whom they had never seen before.

Later that night when he stood in front of the small mirror in his room, Amazed at what had happened, Evo saw a piece of his skin sticking out at the top of his forehead where his hairline began. He tried to peel it off, but it felt sticky when he did so. With a deep breath and a little struggle he peeled it off. His whole face came off, slowly, like gum from the sole of a shoe, and took the shape of a mask in his hand. A mere few seconds and he threw it on the ground and ran to the bathroom, throwing up all over the bathroom floor. He vowed to never look inside the sack again, and to get rid of it early in the morning.

Lights dead, he slithered inside his blanket. The darkness of the room had birthed screeching silence. He turned on his right side, "Evo! Evo!" he heard someone chanting in a whisper. He sprang up and sat flat on his bed. Looked around when his sight adjusted to the dark, and slithered back in when he was convinced no one was there. This time on his left side, he heard claps and whistles. He tossed and turned, sat up, lied down, and the voices and sounds grew louder. He buried his head under his pillow but the torment was incessant. He sprang from his bed and like a reflex grabbed the mask and put it on his face again. Just like before, it dissolved, and disappeared on his face. The noise calmed down, and Evo closed his eyes for the night.

Strong winds were blowing, silent, unfelt, yet

known. Trees had yielded their movement, and copious quantities of dead leaves were raining from them. As far as the eyes could, barren land was beheld. A shark stood on its tail, holding up a bow with a knocked arrow. He knew he was the target. Behind the shark the sound of a flowing stream was silent. Behind the shark was a streambed quaffed dry.

Evo became a local celebrity. With every character he acted, he resurrected a piece of The Madhouse's former glory. All the sconces were always lit, the streets nearby alive with processions. Debates about the acts were duked out in the fashion of ancient philosophers, and when the seating area failed to accommodate the fans, the roofless walls were conquered to witness the maestro. Among the audience were scouts from different theaters, every one of whom wanted to contract Evo.

Fame, wealth, and the love he craved had rolled into Evo's life as if a wizard had waved a wand in his favor. The giant with the ringed hand, who had kicked him out once, used that hand to open doors for him. Time went by, Evo lived his dream, and the burlap sack was never empty. All he had to do was dig in, the right face came out, and he acted as the stage demanded. To look at, his face could have fitted in da Vinci's golden ratio, but he started to walk stooping, as if invisible anvils were dangling from his face and neck. It had no wrinkles, but Evo felt it wrinkled every time he touched it. "It's just age," he would think, looking in the mirror, hand inspecting his imaginary wrinkles. With time, his head flopped forward, and his neck dropped between his shoulders. The sound of music went unnoticed now when he walked the streets of town. If a little girl felt sad, he just walked by with a drooped neck and bent back. On stage he was a God of acting, but off stage he was a statue, not knowing how to act. Whenever people saw him off stage, a crowd gathered quicker than fire in the woods. Girls screamed and tore their dresses just looking at him, people fainted left and right screaming his name. Evo, with a flopped neck, would just walk away without saying a word. His doctor had prescribed him neck exercises. Twisting his neck left and right, pulling it back, dropping it down, and stretching it up, rolling it on a wooden pin, things like that. Every time on stage, just before

the curtains opened, he did those exercises. After the curtains were raised, Evo was the God of acting. The pain was gone, and he was showered in love.

Through the remaining slit in the curtains, Evo saw the fanatic crowd as he raised his head and heard the applause growing louder. After the curtains had fully closed, he swapped his strong, upright posture for his normal drooping one and dragged himself to his green room. The noise, faded in the distance, was loud enough to reach his ears as he stood in front of the tall mirror moving his hand over his face. The door opened, the noise got louder, and the sound of the audience chanting his name was clearer.

"Sir! They want you to make an appearance on stage. Just a quick bow, and a wave. Your fans are asking to see you," said the crew member who had just entered.

Evo straightened his back, dusted his coat, put on his derby hat, and just before he stepped out, checked himself in the mirror one last time.

Something was odd. He squinted his eyes, and his face changed color at the sight of the person staring back. From a bright he went to a pale. His hand went up to his face and began pulling the skin off. One hand was not enough, so he used both, and bloodied his face.

"Sir?" said the terrified crew member. "They are asking for you," he continued.

"For me?"

"Yes....Sir? Are you alright?"

The crowd went fanatic. They chanted Evo's name as if they were in his temple, cheering ever louder. His legs trembled, his hands still pulling his face. The crew member, terrified, left the door ajar, and went away with hurried steps. Evo began to exhale bursts of muffled sobs, as regulated as a clock. Tears rolled down his perfectly chiseled face like raindrops on the face of a stone statue. The crowd kept chanting his name, and he stood there, in front of the mirror, sobbing, and pulling the skin off his face. ♦



TOY ELEPHANTS
by Yana Zolonitskaya

AZALEAS AND COLD TEA

by J.M. Grenier

Mother always liked her tea too cool for Margaret's taste. Margaret had been having tea with Mother since she was five. Even as a child, she'd known it wasn't warm enough. The problem was not one of cooling too soon, but that it had never gotten to the right temperature in the first place. This made the tea tasteless and weak.

Then again, much of Mother's life had been that way, at least from Margaret's viewpoint: tasteless and weak.

Mother spent her life doing what was expected of her and being polite to all the right people (which did not include Margaret). She'd been a good debutante as a teenager, a society event coordinator once married and a stately matron in middle age. Mother made it a point to go to all the best luncheons but made precious little time for the daughter she never wanted, but who so desperately wanted her love.

"It's too hot," Mother says, a frown blooming on her face. She set the cup down.

"No, it's not, Mother. It's barely lukewarm," Margaret says.

Mother keeps her frown firm, turning it on Margaret. She folds her arms.

"Is," she says. As if that were that. And for her, it is.

The sun shines down on the garden around them. The nursing home's green spaces are clipped perfectly neat and trim.

It's such an orderly place, Margaret thinks. Just the sort of place she'd have chosen herself, if one chose these kinds of things.

She looks past the grassy lawn beyond the pavilion, at the azaleas. They grow tall and perfect white in the late May sun.

She remembers them as one of Mother's favorite flowers, growing against the weather-beaten shingles of the Cape home they summered in. Margaret can picture it all so clearly, and it hurts all the more to know that Mother can, too. Alzheimer's steals the clarion moments of today, leaving only the echo of old memories. Margaret blinks back tears for the third time since they have come to sit outside and reminds herself

not to cry.

"Well?" Mother says.

"Well what, Mother?" says Margaret.

"Are you going to tell me about the baby or am I supposed to guess?"

"What baby?" Margaret asks. She's fifty-four years old and is not about to have another one. She has two daughters of her own. Heidi just started her MFA at Dartmouth and Sarah is in her senior year at Phillips Academy. She and the girls have been close over the years. Margaret saw to that. She made sure she was there for them, listened to them. She wasn't going to let her own mother's ambivalence ruin their relationship.

But Margaret had labored hard with Sarah. It had almost cost them both their lives. Sarah was an "oops baby," arriving while Margaret and her husband, Ted, were later in life. Sarah was delivered by an emergency c-section that left Margaret's tubes tied.

This shouldn't hurt, she thinks. But it does.

Margaret fiddles with the tea pot and small dish of blueberry muffins next to it, trying not to think about that. Mother speaks again, and lost in unpleasant thoughts, Margaret has to ask her to repeat herself.

"Don't play games with me, Sally. I know you're pregnant."

Now Margaret understands. Mother has slipped into the past again. She thinks that Margaret is her Aunt Sally, Mother's younger sister. There's some resemblance between them, but not so much that they would be mistaken for one another. This is life with Alzheimer's, for the victim and for the caregiver. Knowing that intellectually doesn't make it any easier.

Margaret knows about the pregnancy. That her aunt fled to California with the boy who'd gotten her that way. She also knows that the boy himself ran off a year later, leaving Aunt Sally and her new baby alone.

"I'm not Sally, Mother," she says. "It's me, Margaret."

Mother licks her lips and looks at her, considering, then picks up the tea again.

She sips the cold tincture and says, "You're going to have to get rid of it, or go somewhere, Sally."

She sounds completely matter of fact, as if she doesn't personally care one way or another. It's a tone Margaret remembers well.

Margaret knows the history but didn't know what Mother's attitude was toward the situation at the time. This lack of empathy toward her own sister is surprising. Maybe it shouldn't be, considering Mother's relationship with her own daughter, but it is.

"Don't say that," is all she can say.

Mother sips the tea again, then looks right at Margaret and says, "You're a fool."

She doesn't mean it, Margaret thinks. Still, the stinging barb makes her wince. Why does she still care what Mother thinks? Will it ever not matter? Mother looks off into space for what seems like a long time. A health aid comes by and asks if they need anything. Margaret thanks her, no. The aid nods and walks back inside.

Margaret can't bring herself to eat any of the muffins. They are another of Mother's favorite things, but she seems to have forgotten that, too. Instead Margaret picks up her teacup and sips. It's cold. She swallows and sighs. These visits are never easy. Maybe she'll stop coming. Maybe.

Mother turns back and says, "Hello. I'm sorry, but have we met?"

"Yes, I'm Margaret," she says.

Mother continues to smile. It's polite enough, but her eyes never change.

Polite, Margaret thinks, not kind. Her eyes were never kind. Not to me.

"I'm your daughter," she says. Suddenly the day is too warm, and she wants to run away. To go somewhere else, anywhere else, and be far from this.

Mother nods, as if Margaret had said it's Tuesday, then turns away again.

"Those are azaleas," Mother says, pointing toward the delicately blooming pink bushes nearby. "They are my favorites."

Margaret can't bring herself to say anything this time. She's five again, while Mother gives her too-cold tea then goes out to tend to her precious Azaleas. She's left in the kitchen of the old Cape, feeling powerless and wanting honey in her cup, but there isn't any, so she starts to cry. ♦

ACRYLIC PAINT 2

by Katherine Peck



BLUE SALVIA
by Sachin Sawe

DAILY CONVERGENCE

by Sofia Newman-Stier

loons cry out over Little Hosmer
and we laugh at their mournful mating song
delighting under the lacy clouds of smoke drifting overhead
beneath constellations I still can't name but that you told me, once
on another night so like this one but where we
lay on a worn quilt over tickling grass
instead of the rough planks of the back porch, our
bodies overlapping, feet on the steps
still under the moonlight

reflected in the still depths (not that deep – you
jumped off the canoe that one time and hit the bottom; you came up spluttering
muck between your toes even after swimming back to the dock
ahead of me as I rowed) waterlilies
just visible in the porchlight
the loons beyond just silhouettes
slender necks and beaks the same as your father's
duck decoys, spilling from their crate in the garage

we keep finding more – scattered around the property half buried in fields
washed up along the shore hidden under replanted trees
paint protecting carved wood – and each
one you cradle as you bring home
until the one that crumbles between your palms
which you shake
clean
wiping away on your jeans the dust of rotting wood
and the mites I imagine were within

that day you glanced at the roll-up door, the antlers your father hung above
we shut the dogs behind the latched gate in front of the house
and you spent hours in the kitchen while I chain smoked on the back porch
until the air was full of berries and cardamom
stronger than the stink of spliffs as the sun set
over bare top hills, crowned with turbines

PROGRESS

by Steve Waller

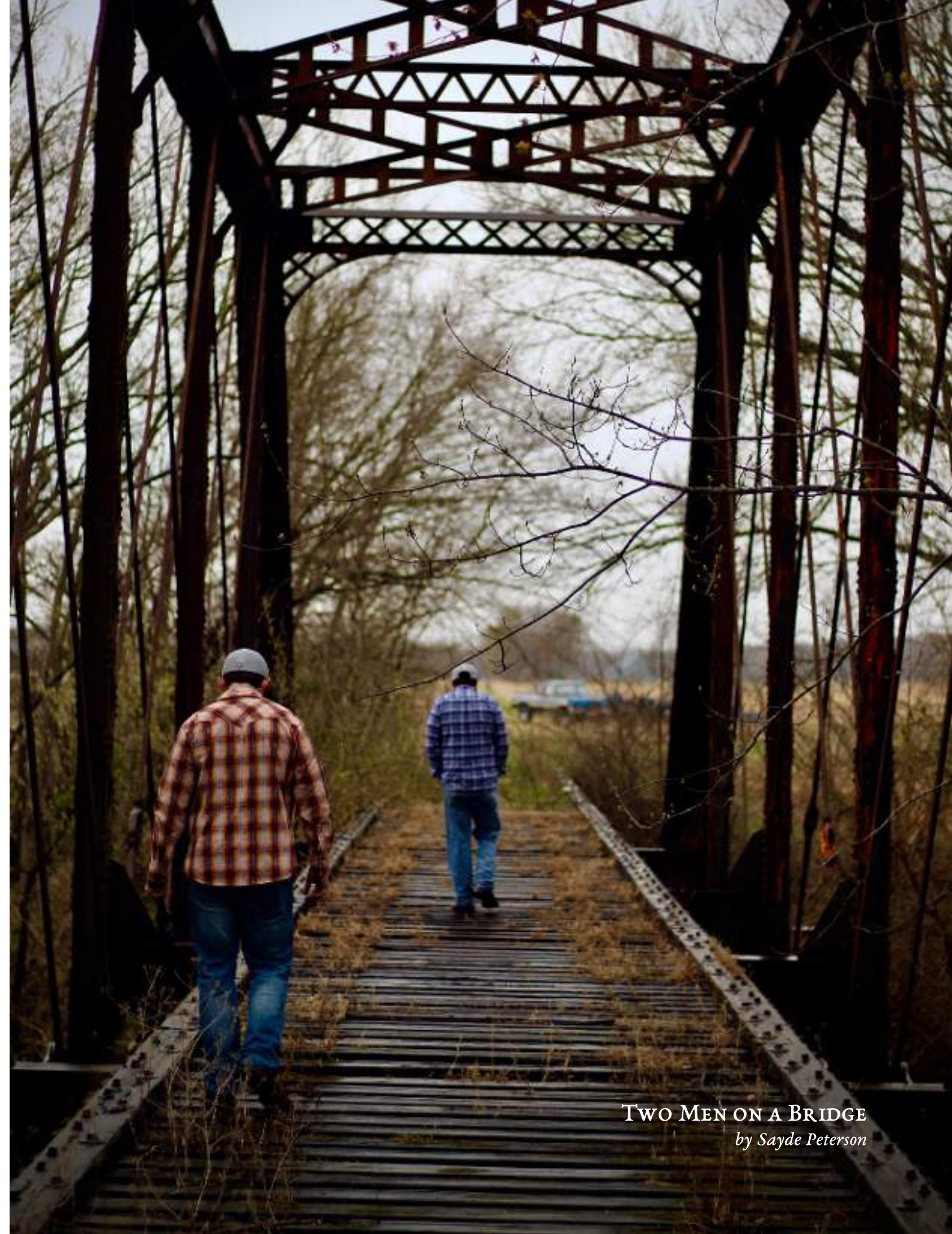
Brilliantine slick, the road ended by a truculent oak. My thoughts elsewhere, paying no attention, a long smoke. Held near a cracked window, rain spitting down. Then a loud silence became the raging sound.

Whisked away by wailing sirens, across waters to a house of care. The frequent family trips, night after day, to be there. A long haul, to a person, agreed. They cauterized a life and a bleed.

But time passed with little temperance, to find a new life encased in itself. From hospital to discharge and back full circle to another shelf. A meds and beds routine that spiraled nowhere fast. I feel like a pinball, lost in the gates, that could not solve the past.

Listening to a voice that screams, where decisions are banned. "I don't belong here with these others, they're not part of my plan". A classy cover from the Valley, that circled the drain for years. Incremental improvements, deluded beliefs, public sneers.

A subject of the courts, a long-gone sheriff's favorite pet. Later is the view I see, so much cleaner, filled with regret. The Presbyterian by the water, a Pilgrim's progress, bid adieu. My years, dark and lonely, I have much work to do.



TWO MEN ON A BRIDGE
by Sayde Peterson



BATTLE FATIGUE

by Jon Ribeiro

I stared out at that water with you
And after everything we did
just to stay together, just to get here
maybe I was expecting some finale
some sort of happily ever after
a warmth in my heart telling me
that we made it
the war is won

Instead,
I just felt spent

CHess IN CHINATOWN
by Calvin Hernandez

Boring Legal Stuff

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ANNISQUAM LIGHTHOUSE
by Sachin Sawe



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