

Touchstone



Spring 2015



2015



Kansas State University

Literary & Creative Arts Magazine

Cover Art by Amanda Olinger



WHAT IS TOUCHSTONE?

The American Heritage Dictionary provides two definitions of the word.

1. A hard, black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one of these metals with that of a standard alloy.
2. An excellent quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.

In 1975 *Touchstone*, Kansas State University's literary magazine, was established to serve as a standard of excellence, presenting the best creative writing from our undergraduates. In 1998, competition was opened to graduate students in creative writing programs nationwide. Then in 2011, the magazine expanded to online publication.

Like its namesake, *Touchstone Magazine* selects the "gold" in literary and creative work by graduate and undergraduate students all over the United States. *Touchstone* is Kansas State University's student-edited literary arts magazine, published annually each Spring by the College of Arts and Sciences with assistance from the KSU Creative Writing Faculty, the KSU Fine Arts Council, and the KSU English Department.

Anderson Hall, Kansas State University



Meet the Editors



Carmen Schober Editor-in-Chief

Carmen is a second year graduate student studying English Literature and creative writing, with an emphasis in fiction (though she did briefly try her hand as an essayist and poet before finally committing to her genre). When Carmen isn't reading novels or writing stories, she's probably watching HGTV with her husband Jeff, or playing with her cats, Rory and Henry.



Elizabeth Kraushar Fiction Editor

Elizabeth is a second year graduate student in the creative writing track. She loves reading and writing fiction and hopes to publish some of her own one day. Elizabeth is also known by her fabulous curly mane and was voted "Best Hair" by her English Department colleagues.



Ian Sinnett Poetry Editor

Ian is a second year graduate student studying creative writing, with a focus in poetry. Aside from reading and writing, Mr. Sinnett enjoys playing drums and guitar, and eating copious amounts of pizza (not at the same time, of course).





Non-Fiction Editor **Kristen Selby**

Kristen is a first year graduate student studying English Literature with a specialization in Composition and Rhetoric. In her free time, Kristin enjoys coffee, thinking deep thoughts, and exploring the wild pine forests of Portland, Oregon.



Art Editor **Liz Graham**

Liz is a senior at KSU working towards her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Photography. The lovely Ms. Graham also digs coffee, puppies, traveling and hopes to one day work with Amy Poehler.



Submissions Manager & Copy Editor **Katy Long**

Katy is a second year graduate student studying English Literature and creative writing. Katy spends her free time either playing with her kitties, Mugsie and Micah, or at local coffee houses sipping chai tea lattes.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

It takes a village to produce a quality magazine, and all of the editors sincerely appreciate the people who worked hard to help select the best literature and art from college students across the country.

Assistant Fiction Editors: Heather Etlelamaki, Sierra Hale, Lindsey Hamilton, Dillon Rockrohr, Tom Webb

Assistant Poetry Editors: Zian Butler, Liz Hoyt, Dillon Rockrohr

Assistant Non-Fiction Editors: Charlie King-Hagen, Liz Hoyt, Brandon Schneeberger

Assistant Art Editors: Erica Ruscio, Kelly Service

Copy Editors: Liz Case, Tim Lake, Justin Wheatley

Promotion

Robert Sanders

Design

Jeff & Carmen Schober

KSU Faculty Advisor

Dr. Kim Smith





LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It has been an eventful year for *Touchstone*. With our recent move to being an on-line publication, and our decision to include work from both undergraduate and graduate students from universities across the country, we have been privileged to take on new challenges and present an even more diverse array of literary and visual art. This edition, like those before it, is a representation of the best work submitted by students in the fall of 2014. This year, we looked specifically for work with layers – layers of paint, layers of subtext, layers of meaning – and our writers and artists delivered. I offer my sincere congratulations to the students whose works were selected for this year's issue.

While the quality of work submitted obviously contributes to the success of this publication, *Touchstone* would not have been possible without the skills of its devoted staff, our ever-helpful advisers, and the KSU English department – to all who work tirelessly to make *Touchstone* the highest quality literary and arts publication that it can be, I am exceedingly grateful.

I hope that you enjoy the work presented in this year's edition. We've thoughtfully curated a collection of poems, fiction, non-fiction, interviews and art (lots of art!) for your enjoyment. Thank you again to all who support *Touchstone* and the flourishing of the arts, not only here at K-State but around the world.

Carmen Schober / Editor-in-Chief

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The Color Key

Art
Poetry
Non-Fiction
Fiction



Mojave

by Hannah Martin



Eyes squinting against the tarmac mirage,
we zipped past yet another faded adobe ghost
town populated with rusty Volkswagens and peeling Welcome signs.

Feet against the dash, I fanned
stale air across my shining face with the travel atlas and thanked
the Lord I didn't live in this sweltering sandpit.

But then the rain came, billowing
up in indigo thunderheads that wrestled and rolled
one right over the other, shadowing the burnt orange land.

The storm gave no trickling prelude but opened
wide with a thunderous peal, immediately replacing the stagnant
air with fresh clean life.

We rolled down the windows, our arms sticking
out like two skinny naked wings, and we felt
the rain pour.

Cool and wet, the breeze lifted
my sweaty bangs from my forehead, and we breathed
deep, filling our bodies up, allowing

the rain to tickle
our senses, rinse our dusty
throats and sweeten our blood.

Folding the travel atlas to protect it from the dancing
rain, I wondered to myself what it would be like to live
in this oasis that is beside the water.

Hannah Martin is an undergraduate at
Kansas State University.





Vessel by Darlene Clark

Darlene Clark is an undergraduate student at Kansas State University.

Mothers

by Chelsea Eckert

— FOR M.'S BIRTHDAY 2014.

Behind the plexiglass, a snow
leopard, on his side, knee deep

in hypothermic dreams. He is a
pile of dove feathers, off white

like cremated remains and as
revered. Some of us are animals

and, claws drawn, mouse hearts
cascading, we writhe in the arms

of those who want us — but some
of us are mothers from birth, and

those sorts find a way to love the
panicked, to enshrine the proud and

terrified in gilded monuments so
they emerge as mountain kings. And

so I imagine you climbing into the
snow leopard enclosure. He has no

use for you, but you slide your
fingers into the fur along his

neck, fingering away bits of clay
and stone from his statuesque

entrance into the world.



Wanderings I by Hillary Hendricks

Hillary Hendricks is an undergraduate student
at Kansas State University.



Natural State by Chelsea Eckert

In every poet there is a naturalist but your brick - and -
mortar gaze, alas, holed yours up. The rabbits that tussle
on your aunt and uncle's lawn — you have your theories
about them, about their

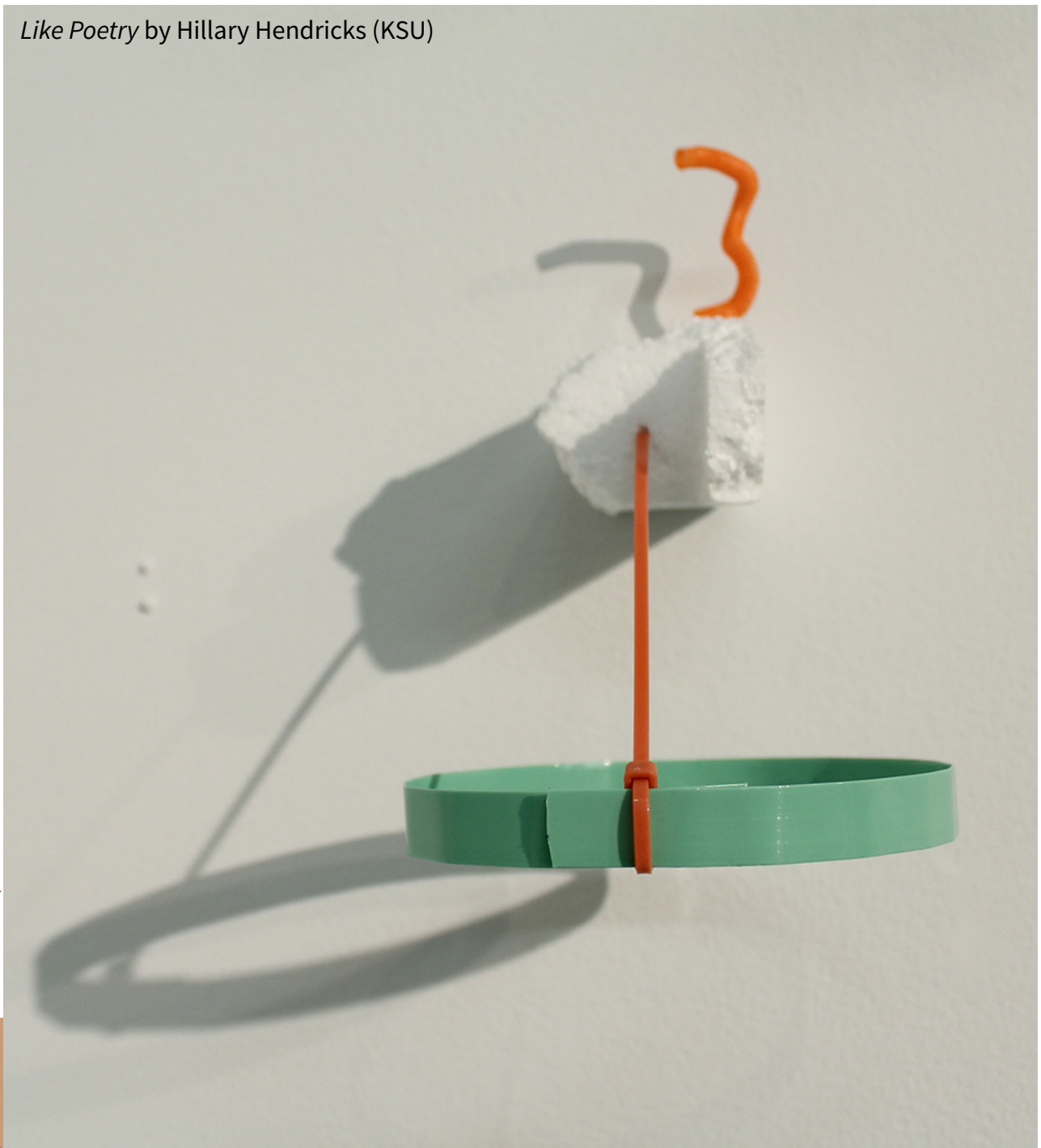
hunger? — lust? — joy?

But these are, in retrospect, all synonyms.

What you can identify is this: you are standing in front of
the street, your jeans drooping from your hips, your scalp
singed with strata of psoriasis scales. A migraine curls
around your spinal chord. You are watching fervent
lagomorphic squirming. And it is there, it is there, the
desire to be those anonymous brown things,
snow-blank with emotion, under-observed.

Chelsea Eckert is an undergraduate student at San Jose State University.

Like Poetry by Hillary Hendricks (KSU)





The Furnace Man Plays

for Tom Waits
by Brennan Bestwick

Both of his arms are trumpets,
but somehow he can still hold
a shovel. He scoops whole accordions
and tumbleweed into the fire.
They turn to ash, they howl and stomp,
but he does not stop, never rests.
This is how song is brewed.

He shares a heart with Tom
though he lives in its basement.
How this came to be, neither
man is certain. But Tom knows
that song don't rise unless
the smoke does first and so
the furnace man plays.

When Tom was a boy he burned
his parents' house to the ground
trying to sing himself a lullaby.
And this is how the man with the brass
elbows came to be, and the furnace,
and when Tom knew how to forgive
the night of its teeth, that he could.

And now Tom shapes the smoke
into any ghost he wants before
it can choke him. And the man feeds
the furnace, accordions and tumbleweed,
all of Tom's lonesome most, tossed
to the flames, sounding the trumpets
that carry his voice above it.

Brennan Bestwick is a graduate student at
Kansas State University.



Euforia by Vivian Calderon

Vivian Calderon is an undergraduate student at Harrisburg Area Community College.





House Fire

by Domenic J. Scopa

hectic pounding on my bedroom door
clashing with the pointed
beat of windows bursting—

pulling blankets off—
looking out—

my neighbor's house engulfed—
flames scaling
the suddenly flimsy roof—
snapping lumber

fire engine lights bouncing
down the block—
neighbors kneeled on lawn as if to heed
some holy proclamation
from their burning home—

their baby girl pretends
to bottle-feed
her threadbare teddy —
cotton stuffing spilling
from its crippled stumps—

She only wants to play.

Domenic J. Scopa is a graduate student at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.





Ghost Stories

by Jake Sauls

Mike signed for the package and then carried it into the kitchen. He set it on the counter between a cold casserole and a potted plant he'd found sitting in his backseat when he left the service. He hadn't read the card. The day was cold and he hoped that that would keep her friends—they were all her friends, even the woman he'd been seeing since August—in their own houses. That fireplaces would be stoked and slippers put on and that he'd be forgotten, at least for the night. He poured two bourbons and carried them into the den, set them on the table between their chairs, and turned on the television. It was Tuesday night; there was a show they liked to watch. Once, when they were still new—a lifetime ago, she always said—she'd turned to him in the darkness of some movie theatre and kissed him deeply. I'll bet we can put on a better show than this, she'd whispered, and they gathered their coats, held their breath as they pushed past the endless row of legs, collapsed into giggles in the lobby. It was early morning before they disentwined their bodies, and she held her own throat in her hands. You're killing me, she said. They didn't want to move, the sun rose to meet the window above their heads. So parched, she said. Who forgot to grab the sodas?

Now he stands in the kitchen again, refilling their glasses. He considers just bringing the bottle along, but then thinks, no. To keep walking will be best. The package is a surprise, still sitting there, and he tells it so, and then he makes a sound like a laugh. He makes it louder, and then again under his breath, and then he shakes off the feeling that there's an audience waiting just outside the kitchen door.

This isn't a new sensation. His wife collects—collected—miniatures. Miniature homes and cars and people, and he imagines now the tiny people coming home to their tiny houses and telling their tiny wives about the stupid man who lives in the armchair in the big room. Critiquing the way his shirt hangs untucked in the back, the swelling he noticed this morning, around his eyes, while he shaved. At the funeral the woman he's been seeing, Erica, his wife's friend, sat between several other women in the pew just behind him, and he didn't cry. He put his face down into his hands once, and he felt her hand

on his shoulder, just a pat, a little squeeze.

Funny thing was, Erica wasn't really Jessica's friend, but an ex-lover. Someone his wife slept with in college, who never left the area. Someone still living in a downtown loft when he and Jess moved back. The prodigal son returns! Erica had cried, folding Jess into her arms, and they'd laughed when he said, daughter? and then spoke of Jess' new position at the university for just a moment. The rest of his night was spent between the two of them, who laughed and told old tales to one another. They went out as a threesome for a few weeks, early on, and then sort of drifted apart. It happens, sometimes those things don't take. He couldn't remember who'd called who, the night they finally met up again for drinks, but after the bar closed Mike drove them all home, to his and Jess' home, and while his wife nodded off in her chair he pulled Erica to him and kissed her. She followed him upstairs for quick sex in the guest room. She bit his shoulder through his shirt. She had a scar across her stomach, a set of scars that looked like an old cat scratch, deep. She placed her fingertips there and ran them down it, and then he did so, too, regretting the thought that now he'd begin putting off golf and Friday afternoon beers with the guys from work in order to gain moments alone with her free from his wife.

She arrives at his house around ten to-night, carrying burritos from a place he knows. The first time he visited her apartment he sat on the couch waiting and a handful of cockroaches scurried from a forgotten wrapper on the coffee table in front of him. She glances at the package sitting in his wife's chair and then settles into the loveseat across the room. She kicks off her shoes and stretches in a way that he knows he should be watching, but he keeps his eyes focused on the television. He wonders when the guilt will set in. They don't speak for several minutes and then, abrupt, he reaches for the remote, shuts off the television. Still, he doesn't look at her.

Fourteen, she finally says, and he looks up. She's smiling, and he realizes that she was referring to the commercial that was playing when he killed the television. Fourteen is the year of poltergeists, for girls. Is it the same for boys?

Fourteen is the year of girls, for boys, he



says.

She seems pleased with herself, and repeats the line, slowly. Fourteen is the year of poltergeists—of too-short shorts and responsibility. When I was a little girl—she starts.

She's about to tell a story so he holds up one finger and walks past his wife's miniatures into the kitchen. He pours three more drinks and then walks back carefully, the way he came. He hands her one before returning to his chair.

She begins again. When I was a little girl, I grew up in a town where a minefire burned underground for decades before I was even born. Did Jess ever tell you that?

She did, he says, looking into his glass. We saw a special once, something while we were vacationing down in Florida, stuck inside from the rain. They never found out how it started. It still burns today.

She nods. There was a boy who fell in, it was Valentine's Day. He was playing in his grandparents' backyard and the ground just opened up beneath him. He caught hold of a root or something. I don't know how long he hung on before they got to him. He was a couple of years behind me at school. I've always wondered where they went. The government paid out and nearly everyone moved away. She lifts her glass in a toast and then drinks before waiting for him to reciprocate.

I was seeing a boy at the time, she continues. He walked me home every day, just a few steps ahead like it was an accident that we happened to be going the same way, even though I'd grown up with him and knew for a fact that he lived clear on the other side of town.

She laughs then, and he remembers what had been so attractive about her the night they first fucked. It was the way her mouth opened like that, life just pouring out like dozens of songbirds. Jess had wanted birds at their wedding and he'd objected.

Did you sleep with him? he asks. The young James Bond?

She shakes her head. No. My father paid me two dollars an hour to read the Brontës to blind Mrs. Cain from down the street, so I sat all spring beneath the picture window I'd helped him install the fall before when a baseball leapt—precocious!—from my hands while we played. I would adjust my cadence to Mrs. Cain's breathing, and when she would fall asleep I watched the new family haul their things into Prissy Jordan's old place. She was strange, the new girl, and

I was strange. For the first time in my life I had a friend.

He tries to imagine her as the strange girl in school, and guesses he can, in a certain light.

It was nice, she continues. All of the other girls had mothers—well, Monica did, too, but she was different. The other girls were sometimes generous with me—sharing makeup tips and stolen cigarettes, trying to do something with my hair—and for about a second I hung around with a group of them outside the old sandlot, complaining that yes, my thighs were also disgusting. She laughs again. Junie Ransome, that was the leader of their little pack. God, she was a bitch. Monica was soft, though. She had short hair.

Ah. I see. I suppose that for some girls, fourteen is the year of girls, as well.

She shrugs. She's impervious now, an institution. My birthday came along and all of the girls suddenly wanted to come—Junie and her girls. They wanted to know what was up with Monica. Junie couldn't stand it that Monica didn't care about being her friend. I had a sleepover. We had a sleepover. My father sat at the kitchen chain smoking. Junie flirted with him every time she went to refill our root beers.

Very sexy.

She continues and he understands that she's no longer even in this room with him, that she's much too far to reach. We did the witch in the mirror thing, she says—do boys do that?—Monica and I went to the bathroom in the dark and chanted the witch's name three times, and then waited for her to appear in the mirror and kill us.

I can't say I ever played that lovely little game. Let me guess, it was Junie's idea?

No, she says. Nothing like that. It was strange, though. Something happened.

What happened?

You've seen it. You know. My scars. And then later that year, just before we moved, I was sitting in my room and the windows exploded. Just, shattered everywhere.

Wait, I've seen what? The whiskey is working, of course, and he's grown only a little hard. Where is Jess? How long has she been gone? The package is still in her chair and he wonders, for the first time, what she'd been expecting. What have I seen? he asks again. He looks hard at her, willing his eyes to focus. And she sits up, then.

She removes her blouse.

You got that, there? he asks, She scratched you?

She shrugs. My blouse was torn, too. It was my favorite—navy blue with tiny roses printed all along. I never told my father, he never noticed it missing. Men are like that, I suppose. Junie helped me bandage the wound and none of us slept that night. She never spoke to us again.

She stands, then, and walks over to his chair. She kneels there near his feet and puts her head in his lap. I'm so sorry she's gone, she says. I know she loved you.

Jessica found a cockroach in his hamper once, and screamed for him to come help. She buried her face in his back while he killed it and then they laughed. They showered together and he traced the outline of her thigh beneath the old jersey she wore to bed, something that had belonged to the first boy she ever loved. She jerked back and then apologized—it feels like they're crawling on me, she said. We're clean people. Where would it have come from?

He asks Erica if she's been back to the place, the town where she grew up, and she nods.

It was winter, she says. It had snowed. I wanted to show the person I loved the house where I grew up, but nothing was the same. Nearly everything's been razed. We walked around and around before I realized that we'd already passed it several times. I finally recognized the tree where my father had carved our initials once, when I was a very little girl and still thought I'd grow up to marry him someday. I traced them with my finger, and then noticed my lover poking around on the ground. I asked what she was looking for and she told me to come look. It was our own footprints, from an earlier pass down the old street. They had filled with snow melted from being too near the hot ground, just frozen over on top. She poked one with her finger to shatter the icy caul. She splashed some of the water up into my face—I baptize thee, my heathen child, she joked. It was painfully cold. I didn't speak to her for hours.

She shakes her head. I was sitting alone reading Judy Blume when my bedroom windows exploded, she says. This was later, months after the party. My father's boots crunched snow and glass in the hedges. He wrinkled his eyes into my bedroom, and I was afraid. I reached for him, from my bed. He looked down at my carpet—careful, now!—but the only glass we found inside was

from the shattered pink sweetheart frame that sat on my bedside table. My mother had sat in that photo—smiling, holding me—for as long as I could remember.

They make love on the floor near the fireplace. Finished, she rolls off of him, falls asleep satisfied, sensing that he won't. The package is still in Jess' chair, and he wonders what else he'd never know about his wife's life. How many questions he didn't ask her because he didn't care, or didn't know how.

He extracts his arm from beneath Erica's head and stands, presses his hand to the place on his own where the ache has begun. He picks up the package and carries it into the kitchen, places it next to the potted plant, and opens it tenderly, unfolding its cardboard creases with all the attention that as a younger man he could have given a lover, or a child who'd fallen and hurt herself. Why was she even on that road? he thinks, picturing the accident for the hundredth time—her hands flown up, her face frozen and unattractive in its shock.

It takes him a moment to place it, but there it is, the White City all done up in miniature, the pride still, all of these years later, of his city; their city. Had he and Jess really met all those years ago—just happened to sit down next to one another in a cold, dead bar that night? Who would have thought that such a life could be born into that? He inspects the piece. Compared to some of her others it looks unfinished, lacking in the painted detail that so delighted her.

He holds the miniature up to peer into its tiny windows. He recalls his fourth grade teacher, Miss Muil (Miss Mule, he taunted, deeply in love with her) giving a six-week's lesson on the Columbian Exposition, the Chicago World's Fair. Can you just imagine? she'd asked, the image projected onto the blackboard above their heads.

Constructed so quickly that it would have been like a miracle, she'd said—and all that beauty erected, with no thought at all given to how long it might last. He sets the white palace on the windowsill above the sink. The sun is on its rise, and he watches their city's shadows crawl across his pale, unmoving hands. ◆

Jake Sauls is an MFA candidate at the University of Arkansas, Monticello.



The Playwrights and Actors of America and Other Countries

By Michael Garrett Ashby II

Drinks, they all drink, every single one of them is an uncontrollable drunk. The roads down by the Alaskan border are more dangerous than anything I've ever seen, and the contrast is immediate. Cars going to Alaska are straight and beautiful, and anything coming out is swerving. They're all drunks. I was born in Pennsylvania, but I was always an Alaskan. I didn't know this when I was younger. All I knew when I was younger was that I drank like a fish and that I threw-up half of my own stomach on the lap of the man sitting next to me during my sister's first play. She's an actor now. I'm an Alaskan. We're close.

I have a brother as well. He's a playwright. He also lives in Alaska, though he always struck me as more of a Pennsylvanian. He didn't drink. Rather he would write plays about sodomites and killers and drug addicts until he ran out of plotlines. Even after that point he wouldn't drink. He used to come over to my home and rant and rave about the problems drinking could cause in the human body.

"These drunks, they're all inhuman. They're wandering through life numb and senseless, trying to ignore the sky and the emotions. I want to feel all of it," he said.

"All of it?" I asked.

"All of it."

"That hardly sounds healthy." At this point I had been drinking since noon, and began to pour myself another drink. It was starting to get dark outside.

"Unhealthy? But drinking, drinking is healthy?" he asked.

"Physically, no, drinking probably isn't too healthy. I mean I don't know much about the repercussions of these types of things, but I'm sure it's not all that bad."

"They're killing their livers and hearts.

You can't just ignore life."

"Maybe, but I mean if it works for them, why stop them?"

"You've seen the streets. They're swerving all over the damn road, that's why," he said.

"Well if you were drunk, you'd swerve with them. We could all make a large swerving line out of state and into Canada together, like a road trip."

Heath always was a bit uptight. To his credit, he had always had a bit of a rough childhood. We were separated at birth, given up to an orphanage until years later our parents called asking for us back. Our new parents, our three separate families, all happily obliged. We stayed in our original parents' home until Heath turned twenty. I was nineteen. Heather, our sister, was twenty-one. She stayed home until she turned thirty, and by then her acting career was failing, as was our parents' health. She felt she needed to get away. Those are her words, not mine.

Heath and I moved to Alaska, because I had seen a clipping from a National Geographic magazine. Heather continued as an actress.

"Why didn't you ever act in any of the plays I wrote?" Heath asked Heather.

Heather sat in her chair. The smoke from her cigarette seemed to cling to her face for a few moments. "I never really liked any of them," she said. "They all seemed so... Well, they seemed so raunchy. I always thought it was weird that you wanted me to star in them," she said.

"Well, it's nothing like that. I mean, don't make it weird. You're a good actor is all

I'm trying to say. You used to do plays, and I write plays. It just seems weird that we never did anything together."

"You've done okay for yourself," Heather said.

"I've done okay, but I'm not living in mansions," Heath said. His eyes made a quick shift over to me.

Even from the kitchen I could feel what he was saying. He was angry, like I was the reason he was held back. Though there aren't very many plays or theatres in Alaska, just movie theatres and bars. Heather put out another cigarette.

"Do you have any projects lined up?" Heath asked Heather.

"I haven't had a project since I left mother's."

"Since you left mother's for the mansion, you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Mom died before dad. Dad no longer called after he called to tell us about her. Heather was at the funeral, she said it was beautiful. Mom requested everyone wear white rather than black. All of our adopted parents came to pay homage, and Father hymned a few bars of "The Cry of the Wild Goose."

Of course I heard all this second hand from Heather. She likes to embellish stories so I don't know how honest that version of the funeral really is. She always was a good liar. It's why she made such a great actor. It's why Heath wanted her so badly. Heather was right though, his work was dirty. The word "playwright" has a classy and meaningful connotation, and Heath wasn't much of either. I can say that; he is, after all, my brother.

The only play of his that I had ever seen performed starred a young girl. She was blonde, with short hair and freckles that spread over her arms and face. The play was about her life in a circus for adult entertainers, and her father, who ran the whole thing. He called it *The Big Tent* and said it spoke to the heart of "the dirt in the soles of our shoes." He was always making up phrases like these, trying to live up to the aspects that came

expected with the name "playwright." The play was very Alaskan to me.

"How do you even live like this?" Heather asked this as she sat looking up at the Alaskan sky. It was a sky that I had grown fond of over the years.

"Like what?" I asked.

"I can't even sleep; this whole so-many-days-of-light, so-many-days-of-dark thing is horrible. How do you even live like this?"

"I don't notice it so much, if we're being honest. I guess you get used to it," I said.

"I hate it. I don't think I could ever get used to it. But I'm also used to home, you know?"

"We get stuck in habits; of course you're used to home," I said. I could feel the smoke leave her mouth and grab a hold of my face. It was trying to get my attention.

"We're not all creatures of habit," Heather said.

"You are."

"Well yes, but we all aren't."

"I guess. Heath never really developed many habits, other than maybe his writing."

"And look where that got him," she said.

Heath had hanged himself from a high beam in our Alaskan cabin. When Heather called a few weeks after and I informed her that I had found him, she decided she should immediately visit. She wanted to see where he had been living, where we had been living, and where he had died. For the most part she chalked the incident up to improper environment. She also suggested he was the kind of man who needed a lover. Hence the suicide, hence the plays, hence the refusal to drink, hence his clinging to his brother. His brother, of course, being me.

Heather and I wore black to the funeral. There were a few other Alaskans there. None of our parents came. Our father said a few words over the coffin, I hymned a few bars of "Sister", and Heather performed a small excerpt from one of the plays Heath had written in his last



years. The play was titled *The Pauper and the Doxy*.

“What kind of girl do you think I am that I would go home with a man, a stranger, like you?”

Heather sat in silence pretending the other actor was speaking. No one else had volunteered to act out the second character in the scene, though the opportunity was also never offered.

“A little convincing is an understatement; I’m not a simple lady of the night. I don’t go to and fro with strangers, just touring beds for the thrill of it all,” she said. She waited for him to finish his line.

“No, please, don’t show me anything. There is nothing a man like you could show me that would make me change any aspect of my mind, and as for why not, well I feel like I don’t need to explain myself at all. I think it’s rather obvious that I’m above that kind of living.”

The silence waited, while Heather reacted in shock.

“Sell? I’m leaving—I’m far above your nonsense and proposals.” Heather held up her hand as if it were being grabbed, stopping silently in her tracks. Her face suddenly turned towards the floor. She looked like she was about to cry.

“Please, just let me leave. Let me go,” she said. Tears welled up in her eyes while Father still hymned in the background of it all. Under her breath Heather whispered the other actor’s line before taking a bow.

“I love the way you make me feel.”

The audience clapped in recognition of the end of the act. Heather had performed beautifully, and the audience was crying. Heather was crying too. I couldn’t hear Father’s hymning anymore, my thoughts had grown too loud. I was thinking a lot. I still think a lot. I think about the Alaskans and the drivers and my parents and my father and Heather and Heath. Heath and Heather would have had great lives in Pennsylvania. ◆

Michael Garrett Ashby II is an undergraduate student at Florida Atlantic University.

Collect and Find by Mary Gordon

Mary Gordon is an undergraduate student at Kansas State University.





And a Song Played on like Nothing was Wrong

by Lacey Brummer

I noticed the text from my cousin Michelle a few minutes before class was about to start. It was one of those strict, no cell phone policy classes, but I so rarely talked to Michelle anymore that I couldn't resist my curiosity.

"Did you hear about Zach Tharnish?" she asked.

"Hearing about" someone generally refers to a scandal, and I wondered if he'd gotten some unfortunate girl knocked up, perhaps even some unfortunate girl I knew. Now that would be something to talk about. As much as I hate the small town gossip, and as much as I loved getting away from it when I got to college, I admit it's addicting. It comes with a certain high, a strange sense of excitement that something dramatic or awful or scandalous is happening to someone else. That's what I felt then. I gave an internal eye roll, but I was squirming to know the scoop.

Zach Tharnish was my ex-boyfriend. My first boyfriend; he asked me out a few days before I turned 16 and was officially allowed to date. I had met him a few years before when I played softball for St. Ed, one small Nebraska town over from where we went to school. Michelle and I spent most of our early adolescent summer days at the swimming pool there, a few blocks away from his house. Lindsay, our hometown, doesn't have a swimming pool—a fact that we often lamented as kids. Years ago the town had opted for a pond instead, so that people could both fish and swim. But then, as story has it, a boy drowned, and swimming in the pond was banned.

Michelle's older sister Karla lifeguarded at St. Ed, so we hitched rides whenever we could. My mom never liked me going to St. Ed—it wasn't Catholic enough, and underage drinking was more obvious of a thing there. She didn't like Zach much, either, by association. That, and the fact that he was too "handsy."


"No," I typed back to Michelle. "What about him?"

"He was in a bad car accident on Saturday," she replied. "They think he's brain dead."

I had only spoken to Zach once, maybe twice (if you can count a Facebook conversation as speaking) since we broke up five years ago. It's not that it was a bad breakup—there was no yelling, no accusations, no hatred. I wouldn't even say that I disliked him. We had a summer fling, and for no discernible reason, we stopped bothering to talk to each other when summer ended. After a month of almost no communication, we formally broke up when our schools came together for a football game. I cried a little bit at the time, mostly because I thought a person was supposed to cry after their first breakup. Or, at the very least, feel some strong emotion about it. Avril Lavigne told me so. We just didn't cross paths much after the romance (if you can call it that), and I didn't see any reason to reconnect. We broke up because we had nothing in common, and that wasn't likely to change.

Yet the news of his car accident shook me. Not in the same way the world shakes and sends you scabbling down a steep slope toward some emptiness when someone you love passes away. But it shook me, primarily because I didn't know how to react. I was sad, I suppose, but I also didn't have any particular claim to sadness. I didn't know the Zach who got in a car accident. I can't say I even loved the Zach I did know. I wouldn't miss him. And yet, he was a part of me. An important part. He was my first intimate relationship. My first kiss. The only other boy I've kissed, aside from the boyfriend who was soon to become my fiancé and then my husband. It had to mean something that the only other lips I knew intimately were no longer connected to a brain and, barring some miracle, would soon be kissing the embalmer's fingers.

We used to listen to the radio / And sing along with every song we know / We said some day we'd find out how it feels / to sing to more than just a steering wheel



I recently stumbled upon an article online by Mark Joseph Stern that explained why we will always feel attached to the music we loved as adolescents. Why those will always be our favorite songs. “The nostalgia that accompanies our favorite songs,” Stern explains, “isn’t just a fleeting recollection of earlier times; it’s a neurological wormhole that gives us a glimpse into the years when our brains leapt with joy at the music that’s come to define us.” He informs us that our brains will always have an interesting relationship with music—it stimulates a lot of cortexes, triggers a lot of pleasurable chemical reactions. During our teenage years, that relationship is amplified. Stern says pubertal growth hormones increase our neurological connection to music during this period by telling “our brains that everything is incredibly important—especially the songs that form the soundtrack to our teenage dreams.” Or there’s the theory that we simply retain more memories from our teens and early twenties than any other period in our lives.

I cannot speak to the accuracy or plausibility of those theories. I know nothing about neuroscience, and I’m generally skeptical of people who claim to know how our minds work. But I have to agree that there’s definitely something going on. When “The Reason” by Hoobastank came on the radio when I was driving the other day, I cranked the volume up and sang along, sang so loud and hard my throat hurt. A similar thing occurred not too long ago when I was with my husband, and we had a conversation about how tragic it would be if a generation ever came along that didn’t know “Mr. Brightside.” The majority of my iTunes playlist consists of songs released prior to 2010—the year I turned twenty. The theory that makes the most sense to me says that our social identities and burgeoning sense of self that form during our teen years intertwine with the music we hear (Stern). The music, in other words, helps define our identities. The emotional attachment we felt to

the songs of our adolescence lingers, even when the memories themselves fade.

What day is it? / And in what month? / This clock never seemed so alive.

I cannot separate memories of Zach from memories of the St. Ed swimming pool. The important thing about St. Ed is that it was not Lindsay, and Lindsay people, in general, did not go there. At sixteen, I yearned to be free from that town, the only town in Nebraska that had only a Catholic school, where I had only six other girls in my class to choose from as friends, and on any given day for any arbitrary reason, they might like me or hate me, and then my day would be either fine or really shitty. The important thing about St. Ed, in other words, was that I chose it. I chose it at a time when I was choosing who to be.

When I think of Zach, I smell chlorine and freshly mown grass. I feel the heat of the rough, sun-soaked cement I sat on to watch Zach do flips off the diving board—that was a beautiful thing, his skinny six foot something body arcing, spinning through the air, sometimes with wild abandon, sometimes with a slow sense of purpose, always with no apparent effort. And I hear Kelly Clarkson, The Fray, Green Day, Fall Out Boy playing over the tinny swimming pool speakers.

“You and Me” by Lifehouse was one of my favorites of the time. I made a point to listen to that one, sometimes even tuning out the conversations around me to hear it. Couples were supposed to have “songs,” and I thought of that one as ours, though I never shared that thought with Zach, who liked hard rock. The lyrics were not perfect. Like some of Henry Van Dyke’s genteel poetry, the song never seems to say anything real. The random switch between second person (“Something about you now / I can’t quite figure out”) and third person (“Everything she does is beautiful / Everything she does is right”), always bothered me, too, like he was singing about two different people. I liked the sound of it though, the swaying rhythm, the understated passion, the tenderness in the singer’s voice. Even now when I hear the song, I can close my eyes and lis-

ten and feel loved.

I think of Zach now, sometimes. When I hear “You and Me,” or when I tune the radio to 103.1, the hard rock station he liked (it’s a pop station now). Sometimes when I drive through St. Ed and see the swimming pool or look down the street toward his house. I still have a stuffed animal he won for me at the Boone County fair; my nieces play with it when they’re at my parents’ house, and that strikes me as strange, though I don’t know what to do with the thought. Is it strange because they’re playing with something my ex-boyfriend got me, or strange because it’s a neglected memento of someone dead? Other times I think of him for no reason at all. He’ll just be there suddenly, or rather, the absence of him will be there. I have to wonder if I would think of him like this if he was still alive, or if his presence in my memory, his lingering hold on my emotions, have been amplified through his death.

Our cracking voices became part of the music. The car pressed on faster through the night. As our voices lowered, the cadence again overtook the air. Up ahead there was a curve approaching. She made no indications of slowing.

Geno, Zach’s best friend, was the one who killed him. Or at least, that’s probably how Geno saw it. It’s definitely how the police saw it: he was arrested for motor vehicle homicide, willful reckless driving, driving under the influence—with a blood-alcohol content of .151. Zach’s family didn’t see it that way; they didn’t blame Geno. They spoke in his defense at the trial: Zach would not have wanted his best friend in jail.

There were two girls with them in the car, too, eighteen and nineteen, and one of them died on impact. I’ve wondered which girl was dating Zach—the survivor or the one who died.

I bet they had the music turned up loud as they were driving, loud enough that they had to shout at each other. Fast cars and loud music always seem to go together. They might have been listening to LMFAO’s “Party Rock Anthem” or Cee Lo Green’s “Forget You,” though if they’d been singing along, they would have shouted out the unedited version, drunken middle fingers in the air.

A witness reported that “the car flipped six or seven times before landing on a bush.” A bush. I’d

like to know what was so important about the bush that the witness felt the need to mention it. As if the bush was the victim.

They pulled the plug on Zach the day after I heard about the accident. Pulled the plug—that seems like such an inhuman phrase. Pulled the plug. As if he was a toaster or a portable radio. How else could you say it, though, without feeling guilty? They let him die. They separated him from the machines that were keeping his body alive.

Michelle asked me if I would go to the funeral, and for a moment I wondered if I should. He did mean something to me. You’re supposed to go to the funerals of people who meant something to you—to grieve, or to offer support to the people who are grieving more. But I could do neither. I had no ties to Zach’s family, his friends, his St. Ed people anymore—my presence would offer no comfort. And as for grieving. . .are you allowed to grieve for people in death if you spared so few thoughts for them in life?

I remember riding with Zach once on a gravel road, a road he was not yet familiar with. It ended in a T intersection, a yellow sign marking the boundary between road and steep, drop-off ditch. The intersection sneaks up on you, hidden by a benign little hill, a speed bump, a slight swell in the earth. Zach was driving too fast; he always drove too fast. I should have told him to slow down, but I hated to be that person, that passenger seat driver, and I was shy, painfully so, and I thought he would see the sign. I finally said something when we got to the base of the hill, but he didn’t know what I meant by “Watch out,” didn’t hit the brakes until we topped the hill and the stop sign appeared. We were going too fast, we couldn’t stop. Tires slid against loose gravel and the sign, the steep drop, was right there. Then Zach turned the wheel. The back end of the car kept sliding toward the edge, but then the front tires gripped solid ground and we were going straight again. A hard rock song played on the radio, kept playing like nothing was wrong. I couldn’t even guess what song it was. I couldn’t sing along to that genre; it didn’t stimulate as many of my cortexes, I guess. I always found it hard to hold on to. ◆

Lacey Brummer is a graduate student at Kansas State University.



Good Brew by Mary Gordon (KSU)



Reading

by Elizabeth Culpepper

You have been TDY at Fort Hood for two weeks. A former friend once asked if the nights are hard for me when you are gone.

“Isn’t it difficult, sleeping alone?”

I told her no and imagined the debris field that collects on the other half of the bed while you’re away: Glasses. Crumpled tissues. Textbooks. Library books. I read as late as I want, unworried about whether the lamplight is bothering you. Then I lie awake, peacefully following my unspooling thoughts, making connections into the dark. Letting each word become singular and whole. No. Yes. Listen. Within the silence, galaxies.

I miss you when you go away. I miss you when you come back. But I never feel alone at night.

For the first time last Wednesday I referred to you as my partner rather than my husband. For the rest of the morning I felt a slight humming under my skin. A positive disturbance. A fullness. That afternoon I showed my I.D. card at the Ogden gate and the soldier on duty said, “Welcome to Fort Riley, ma’am. Duty first!”

The humming stopped.

You text me while I’m waiting for the kids to come out of school. “Gonna be a late one tonight. Miss you. What’s up?” In other words, we will not talk today.

I text back: “Being subjected to DUTY FIRST each time I drive toward my home on post is a hegemonic moment.”

By the time the kids and I make it down the hill to our house, you’ve written back. “I love it when you talk like that.”

The space you leave when you go away is not positive or negative. It’s simply a space. I used to think it was my responsibility to hold your place for you when you go away. To speak of you to the kids. To present a united, two-parent front when only one of us is really here. What do I owe you? Or anyone? What is my duty? Duty first? I say no. NO. I am not in the military. And yet.

I live on a military base. I must show an I.D.

card each time I drive through the gate. Your rank is printed on the front. Remember how this all began? Two recently-minted English undergrads ready to take on the world. Bored with our corporate jobs. A need for something more. A visit to the Navy recruiter. You always loved the water. But a yearning for the sea didn’t impress the recruiter. Nor did your college summer spent salmon fishing on the Cook Inlet. You needed a math degree. The Army recruiter was just next door, next to a pizza place that sold two slices and a soda for four bucks. And just like that, the plot shifted.

“I can pay off my student loans,” you said. “We can do this. Just for a few years. Think of the opportunities afterward.”


That was fifteen years ago.

The funny thing is, part of the allure of military service was getting you into a job you couldn’t leave. Restless, that’s what you were. You were restless and I was naïve. We barely knew one another. Between us we had two English degrees, mounting bills and an overwhelming need for adventure. That is how some war stories begin.

Love and restlessness give way to service and duty gives way to distance and doubt. We were young once and hummed with what we did not know. We cannot change the past. I’m up late after the kids are in bed, thinking about decisions made and unspooling across years and continents. Our decisions. Our life. Before I can talk myself out of it, I type a message to you on my phone.

“I love you. I don’t believe in this anymore. And if I’m honest, I haven’t believed in it for a long time. We should have walked away years ago. This is bullshit. Don’t try to make me feel better.”

I imagine you reading the message inside a tent on a range somewhere within the empty scrubland of Fort Hood. I remember being told during your first deployment, “Don’t bother your husband



with negative words or worries when he calls. He is under enough pressure.” I press SEND.

An hour later, my phone chimes from underneath the covers. It’s a message from you. I think, fleetingly, that your response will be shaped by lack of personal time and lack of sleep. Expectation management. The message starts the way most of your emails do.

“Hey, babe.”

You’ve had similar thoughts, you say, and we will talk when you get home. Relief and something like attraction glow in the dark alongside me. You and I, trading words in almost real time. I don’t expect us to have the same perspectives or opinions. But sometimes it scares me to think about what we’ve agreed to in order for you to “serve your country”. Now you’re five years away from a pension check. Hush money is what it feels like.

I had dinner with Annie on Saturday night. Her house is one of the brand new ones up on Custer Hill. Not a tree in sight. She told me she feels out of step with her neighbors because she’s Jewish and has a 9-to-5 job. You mentioned months ago that her husband has never deployed. I expected it to alter my perception of her in some way, and it hasn’t. I feel jaded and tired no matter whom I talk to inside the gates. Annie asked how much time you have left before you are eligible for retirement benefits.

“Five years and he can hang it up,” I say. “Hang up that fucking uniform and come back to me,” is what I think.

She smiles and says, “Oh, it’d be stupid to walk away now.”

Maybe it would. Maybe.

In her book, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*, Cynthia Enloe asks, “If a woman is married to the military, who is the husband?” What kind of deal did I agree to when you took an oath? What does it mean for our relationship when I am distancing myself from the organization you work for? I

mention to you that I’m reading the book. When you ask about it, I feel the humming again. “I don’t want to unpack it now. We’ll talk about it on Friday when you get home.”

I have been thinking about militarization for years. Before I even heard the term. Maybe some feminists and even Enloe herself would say I’m married to the military. But I’m not so sure. I think that living outside the U.S. (and in civilian communities in the States) has opened my eyes to the messages we are asked to believe. I am no longer an idealist and neither are you. But there has to be a way to move forward. Reading and talking must be a part of that, don’t you think?


On Friday night, there’s a poetry reading in town. You might not make it back in time to go. I tell you that I’ll go with the kids whether you can make it or not. It sounds harsh but I’m just being honest. I can’t decide whether I want you to hear me read or not. Or, rather, it’s that my work is finally being seen and heard. Words that can be held close, shared with classmates, strangers in a gallery. And I have the option of inviting you in or not. Reunions are always a delicate business. Making room for you, emotionally and physically. Integrating the reality of life together again with the unspooling memories and questions that trail behind me. You are home. There is no handbook for this.

Yesterday, when I turned down her request for an after-school playdate at our house, a classmate of Maddie’s can’t believe I have homework to do.

“It’s true,” Maddie says. “She is going to school and reading and learning and writing.”

Her friend looks confused, unable to reconcile “mother” with “learning,” and asks, “Are you her sister?”

I don’t know which way the wind is blowing. I do know that large swaths of our marriage have revolved around systems, surviving and recovering from conflict. External conflict. Time. Distance. Acts of Terror. Acts of violence. Duty rendered. To what end? Is language enough to see us through?



I'm not sure what to share at Friday's reading. Maybe the poem "Rough Guide," with its reminder that "resistance is not futile," clove cigarettes and coughing up blood in the shower. Cross-dressing, Angelina Jolie and a reference to bones in the basement. *Love those bones*. Or something from even earlier. When I still used words like "cleave" and "pyroclastic episode" in my writing. Those were the early deployment poems. They hinted at distance and weighty love but never came out and said anything definitive about how war never ends once it overtakes you. Later poem choices might be awkward for the children to hear, although to be honest most of what I've written outside of their lunchbox love notes would probably make the oldest one blush. So another option would be to go with flash fiction: "For My Children, at the Reading." A story made of one word, and no one knows how it ends: RUN.

Maybe the real issue here is that I want my kids to see that my work is as real as what their father does. I'd like to think that we've moved on from this incident in May 2012: Our son Jack was four at the time and described a movie plot about our family.

"And I would built LEGO things. And Ben would run fast. And Maddie would draw pictures. And Dad would fight bad guys. And Mom would wash dishes."

I shared this with my writing group at the time as a grounding detail in an essay before moving on to mention the vodka bottle in the freezer and the way the cold Absolut sounded as it rolled down the kitchen drain. This is what nighttime sounds like. An empty room, a quiet space.

Ray Bradbury said "You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you." I think about this when I see bumper stickers on post and around town.

"I love my soldier husband."

"Half my heart's in Afghanistan."

"Get behind our troops or get in front of them!"

And the one in the parking lot of the commissary at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey on a beat-up Dodge pickup: "Join the Army. Travel to exotic places. Meet interesting people. Kill them."

Maybe that's the bottom line. The self-implica-

tion I feel when I drive through the post gates or endure the thanks of a store clerk who sees my military ID as I pay at the register.

"Thank your husband for protecting us."

I don't know, babe. Something in the exchange seems lacking, on both sides. Complicity. In something I never agreed to. But I never said no.

Once upon a time we were two college students in an English seminar called Pope and Friends. Once upon a time we thought we'd travel the world and teach English. Why didn't we do that?

Most of the poems I write are about choices I don't make. A possible yes becomes a no. I have a family. I love you. I don't want to feel the guilt. But mostly I want to feel freedom. Be audacious. To feel like the unspooling and the letting go is something we pursue together. To leave duty behind. In this way, in the daylight, I choose you. I choose yes. Yes to one and no to the other. I'm not sure what that means. Where that leaves us.

Last night before we hung up, I made a joke.

"Well, I'll let you go now. I need to head off and continue dismantling the patriarchal military-industrial constructs in my life." You laughed at that. My academic banter still tastes new, subversive. To both of us, I think. A pause between us stretches thin. Like all the silences we've ever held together, apart.

"Go ahead with that," you said. "Just don't dismantle me in the process."

This was something new. It never occurred to me that you felt this setting-aside of ideas might translate into a setting-aside of you.

"I wouldn't do that. You're my partner and my best friend," I said. The words of reassurance feel unfamiliar. But I'll keep tasting them. Maybe you'll make it back for the reading. Maybe I'll read a love poem. An unfinished one, about words and what lies underneath them. About distance. Gates open and closing. Where do we go from here? ◆

Elizabeth Culpepper is a graduate student at Kansas State University.



Public School by Samantha Peterson

Samantha Peterson is an undergraduate student at Utah State University.

Featured Artist Amanda Olinger

Local artist Amanda Olinger was gracious enough to sit down with *Touchstone's* Editor-in-Chief Carmen Schober and answer a few tough questions.

Schober: Tell me a little about your artistic background. Are you self-taught, or did you study art for any length of time?

Olinger: I view a person's creative development much like her literary development. That is, it's a skill that needs to be learned, rigorously practiced and nurtured. From a young age, creativity was encouraged in my household. My mom, a second generation clown – no joke – would bring me along with her to do clowning gigs. Clowning is a lot about facial expression, drama and exaggeration, so it felt very natural for me to become a makeup designer for many of my high school productions. This led to me to study painting and art history at Emporia State University with an emphasis on the human figure. Since then I've continued to grow and develop as a painter through pushing myself to try things outside of my comfort zone, practicing creative play, and receiving encouragement from friends and family.

Schober: Wow. How many people can say their mom was a clown and that inspired them to study art? Not many. Very cool. What's your preferred medium?

Olinger: During my time at Emporia State I studied in oils, but since then have taught myself in acrylics. At first it wasn't necessarily my preference because of the fast drying time and I missed the richness that oils provided, but I've learned to really appreciate the qualities attributed to acrylics.

Schober: Do you have a favorite artist?

Olinger: Honestly, I love the artists I went to school with. There is something really magical about being in a program alongside such wonderfully talented peers and professors as we discover our voices together. One of my favorites is a dear friend and fabulous photographer, Samantha Miller Gott who studied under the talented Larry Schwarm. I also am very fond of the work of Geninne D. Zlatkis, Ann Piper, and Gwenn Seemel among others.

Schober: I think the work of our peers is so influential since we actually get to be part of their creative process – we see things change and resolve. Can you remember one of the first things you painted? What makes it memorable?

Olinger: I sure do. It was a dried pomegranate in burnt sienna. Nothing truly memorable other than the fact that it was the very first thing I painted.

Schober: Fair enough. Where do you gather most of the inspiration for your works?



Olinger: I find my inspiration from everyday life, the figure, holy texts and writings, and my peers. My work is primarily connected to the human form and its reflection of spirituality. I enjoy painting faces in particular. In a recent series titled *Wholly Holy*, I played with the idea of holiness emanating as a unique halo from each portrait I painted. In my most recent series, human hands were the central image and how they reflect the idea of hope.

Schober: I've seen those around Bluestem Bistro. There are a lot of really incredible portraits of local Manhattan people. *Frank the Fromaster* is my favorite, I think. All of your work is really bold. You use a lot of color – but have you ever stepped out of your comfort zone and discovered a whole new genre of art?

Olinger: I've ventured out into textiles and have greatly enjoyed the challenge and possibilities it presents. I sew and knit primarily and the thing I love about it is how much problem solving is required and also the rich female history attached to the medium.

Schober: What do you think is the hardest step in creating your art?

Olinger: I have found that one of the hardest steps is to continuing to make even when life gets hectic, my internal dialogue tells me there's nothing that hasn't been done or I'm in a creative "rut." Pushing past all that and just making.

Schober: So true. It's almost the exact same way with writing, I think. You just have to com-



“I view a person’s creative development much like her literary development. That is it’s a skill that needs to be learned, rigorously practiced and nurtured.”

Amanda Olinger

a native Kansas who studied painting at Emporia State University. When she's not having dance parties with her husband and her two awesome kids, Amanda enjoys being creative and being an advocate for the arts. Like the philosophy of Gusteau from *Ratatouille* who believes “anyone can cook,” Amanda believes anyone can be creative. Whether it's through theatre, dance, gardening, cooking, design, or painting, people are constantly creative – whether they realize it or not. In her own work, Amanda focuses on the figure and the portrait. She's also drawn to playfulness and the unexpected and tries to incorporate that into all of her pieces.



Layers in Art

Schober: Last question, Amanda – what are your thoughts on layers in art? What do you think makes a piece have depth or richness?

Olinger: Layers in art doesn't necessarily have to be taken literally – where you're layering the paint or whatever – but art can be layered conceptually, where the ideas are rich. Nothing is more boring than lazy art. You can have one brush stroke and it can be very powerful if it's attached to a strong idea. In every discipline or field it's good to try many ways of solving a particular problem or looking at a situation from many different angles. Art is no different. Art with depth is thoughtful. ♦





Carrie the Wordsmith - Acrylic on Wood (above)
Hope Given - Acrylic on Canvas





Art in the Making

The pieces featured in this edition of *Touchstone* are from two collections by Amanda Olinger - *Wholly Holy* & *A Study in Hope*.



Frank the Fromaster - Acrylic on Canvas (left)
Evan the Humble - Acrylic on Wood (next page)
Hidden Hope - Acrylic on Wood (next page)





Neon Dreaming

by J. Tanner Rush

Late in the evening, Amber Wain opened the door to her Kansas City apartment and found a pale machine with a face like hers standing in the entryway. Its skin was foggy like semen, half way concealing vines of circuitry beneath. Its hair was a solid plastic curtain in the shape of a bob. Black lines traced the various joints and other moving parts on its naked body. It had a wide, sharp jaw, one you could crack open a skull with. Two small, soft orange lights sat in its eye sockets, like the candle-glow of a jack-o-lantern.

“What in the fuck?” Amber said with a jump in her chest and a buzz in her knees.

“Mrs. Wain,” it said in two voices. One like a young woman’s, speaking normally; the second voice was like a man’s whisper, deep but so distant it could have come from the other room. It took a step forward, a faint mechanical whrrr sounded out from its joints. “I am your new-”

“Amber,” her husband Ethan said as he rounded the corner of the hallway, box of Cheez-Its in hand. “This is the HOMi. Stan had it sent over earlier.”

“What?” Amber asked as she took her eyes off the machine clone in front of her for the first time since she came inside. “Oh.” How could she forget? She was just surprised, surely. Stan had approached them about trying out the HOMi a few months ago.

“Consumer testing,” he called it.

Ethan bit down on a handful of Cheez-Its and the crumbs fell like dust. The machine looked at Amber and nodded.

“Sweet Amber,” Stan had said when they spoke on the phone months earlier.

The first time he called her that was some twenty years ago, when they met in college. She was dating Ethan at the time, and she made that very clear to Stan, but he never called her by anything else. She always wondered if that bothered Ethan.

“Artificial intelligences run almost all of our devices,” Stan said. “They’re there with the public, but not in the public. We want to give them

legs. We want to truly let them in our homes.”

“That sound’s exciting,” she had said to him. “But what does that have to do with me?”

“You oversee four hotels in this city. Like me, you want to give people what they want. We’ve tested the hell out of these things internally, and now we want to start trying them out in the world. A sort of ‘friends and family’ field test, you could say. You’ll know if the HOMi doesn’t live up to true service standards.” He went on in his sing-song voice, explaining how the HOMi’s only desire is to please. They only want to please. They sounded perfect. She didn’t care about having one in her home, but at the hotels? It was damn near impossible to hire staff that didn’t act like shithead teenagers. Polite. Respectful. Did their fucking jobs. Amber needed something that could do that. Yet now, looking the HOMi in its glacial eyes, her enthusiasm waned. It wasn’t right. Something wasn’t right. It looked like her. Why did it look like her?

Amber blindly opened the refrigerator, knocking over bottles of condiments looking for a Diet Pepsi without turning her head from the machine. She found a can, popped the tab and brought it to her mouth, though her hand shook so much some of the soda went into her nose, burning high behind her eyes. “Shit. Dammit.”

“Allow me,” the HOMi said, tearing off a paper towel from the roll on the counter. Its movements were slow but smooth. As it neared her, Amber shrunk back and down into herself, like a tarantula was running toward her.

“Relax,” Ethan said. “Honey, it’s not going to hurt you. It’s going to keep the place together, you know? Take some of the stress away, like Stan said. You’ll be happier.” Ethan had been telling her she was unhappy for almost a year. What he meant was that he was unhappy about something, though Christ would return before he ever actually said what was bothering him. She thought after sixteen years of marriage he’d communicate a little better.

Amber popped her hand into the box of snacks and pulled a few out. Ethan’s nos-

tril twitched. He seemed nearly as excited for the HOMi as she initially was after he spoke with Stan. He always did like his toys.

“Why does it look like me?” Amber asked. The strong jaw, the sideways water drop eyes: All the same. Though the lines weren’t there. The age was missing. It was her, twenty years younger and perfect.

“What? No, I think it kinda looks like Yvonne Strahovsky.” The Australian actress Ethan was in love with when they were kids. Blonde. Perfect. He had told Amber that she looked like her once, when she was eighteen and feeling ugly.

“I thought / looked like Strahovsky...” She needed to look into a mirror.

“Hm? Oh, well, sure. Look, it’s not like I told Stan to give us the robot that looks like you or whoever. That was just what the girl one looked like. I thought a man-bot would be...weird.”

“And why does it have see-through skin? And glowing eyes? And...boobs...?”

“Stan said something about the ‘uncanny valley.’ If it looks too much like the real thing, people freak out. And boobs sell, I guess.”

“It’s freaking me out right now,” Amber said as some old part of her made her reach out and grab Ethan’s arm.

“Well, that’s part of what they’re testing right now, right?” Ethan pulled his arm free to push more snacks into his mouth. “And why are you freaked out? You wanted one of these. Is it just ‘cause it looks like you?”

“So it does look like me?” Amber asked. And was that why he wanted the HOMi? To see a younger her clean the apartment? To play maid? Housewife? No, Ethan was better than that. He respected her. Never expected anything from her... Well, not a lot. Ethan cocked his head toward her, but he wasn’t actually looking at her. Wasn’t listening. She could feel his eyes on the machine as it bent down to soak up the small pool of soda that spilled. She wanted to slap him. She wanted to be his wife. Have him look at her with those eyes. She wanted to feel something for him other than the sour cyclone spinning in her gut. There was an aura there between the two of them, a shield to keep someone out. She wondered which one of

them was putting it up. What was happening to them?

“Is there anything you need?” The machine asked in its soothingly menacing double-voice.

“No,” Amber said. She looked at Ethan.

“What?” he asked. He loosened his grip on a fistful of crackers; a few of them fell back into the box. “Something I need? No.”

“Ethan...” She took his hand.

“Well,” he started, “I was hoping this thing might free up your hands. Maybe we’d finally be able to swing a kid or two?” He gripped her hand, locking it down between their legs.

“Ethan, come on.”

“You know I’ve always wanted a family.” He hadn’t brought up kids in years.

“We’re both forty years-old. We’re too old for kids.”

“Well, whose fault is that?”

“Whose fault is it that we’re forty years-old?”

“That we’ve gone this long without kids. Before we got married, you said you weren’t sure. When we were married, you said we needed money first. When we had money, you said we still had to focus on our careers,” Ethan said

“Yeah, and at no point did I say, ‘One day I definitely want children’. I haven’t been teasing you.”

To the side, the robot picked up an old framed picture of Ethan and Amber at their high school reunion. Amber’s hand rocketed out and snagged the picture from the machine’s fingers. Its grip was much weaker than Amber would have thought, like yanking scissors out of the hands of a frightened child.

“I’m sorry,” the machine said in a whisper, a growl. “It looked like the frame had collected some dust and I-”

“Just,” Amber started to say, but she stopped speaking when she looked at the machine. Its head was tilted down. Its eyes seemed dim. It only wanted to please, she

knew. “Just don’t break anything.”

“Oh,” it said as its whole body lit up. “I would never dream of it.”

“I’m tired,” Amber said. “Let’s go to bed. Turn it off? I don’t know if I want it walking around when we’re asleep.”

“You can’t turn them off, honey.”

“That is true,” the HOMi said. “I am always on so I can best serve your-”

“Go to sleep without me,” Ethan said.

Amber took a soft step toward him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I need to do some emails. Goodnight.”

Amber popped up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. She could almost forget how frustrating he could be when she felt his stubble on her lips.

Alone in her room, Amber turned on her TV and flipped through the channels with distracted paranoia. The info blurb on one channel said “Godzilla vs...” and Amber felt a small spike of comfort. She adored Godzilla movies when she was a child. Her older sister once told her Godzilla was for nerds and nerds didn’t get boyfriends. The cheesy shambling of MechaGodzilla appeared on screen and Amber turned the TV off and threw the remote into a chair in the corner. Too much. Not now. She had to sleep. She sat her phone on the nightstand. Before they were married, Ethan would text her a “goodnight, love” before he went to sleep. His goodnight that night didn’t feel half as meaningful.

In the middle of the night, Amber heard laughter from the family room. She walked out into hall, stepping on the carpet as if it was a cloud she might burst through. Peering around the corner, she saw Ethan taking pictures of the machine, chuckling to himself. The machine stood there holding a bottle of beer up in one hand and gave a thumb’s up with the other. It was looking at her.

Amber turned back, slammed the bedroom door, and threw herself onto the bed in one spasm of movement. She fell asleep imagining she was a naked giant crushing Kansas City—half-rotten and half-neon nightmare—beneath her feet to the sounds of cheering children. Thousands of skeletons began to

climb her legs and tear her skin.

In the morning, Amber sat at her bed, staring at her phone. She was going to call Stan. Tell him to get that fucking *thing* out of her house. Put one in the hotels, in the service industry. Not in someone’s home. How can anyone get decent sleep with something like that in the house? The phone sat on the nightstand with a strange gravity, dark and heavy. Stan and Ethan both majored in marketing in college. Stan thought getting people to buy things seemed like fun. Ethan just thought he might be good at it. They were friends—sort of—throughout college. He seemed to like spending time with her and Ethan more than they with him. He insisted on staying in touch through the years. She sent him a text saying she was coming to his office. She would miss some work, but those idiots could survive for a few hours without her.

Amber slid down the hallway with an arm stretched out to catch the front door knob as soon as possible. Ethan had to have been gone already. The machine? Amber allowed one glance into the family room to see the white wisp standing between the dark, purple walls. It started to walk towards her, as slow and imminent as starlight. Amber found the doorknob and hopped across the threshold.

“Have a good day, Mrs. Wain,” the machine whispered. The door closed.

A few blocks south, Amber found her way into the city’s New Business District. It had been a suburb nestled in trees outside the city when she was a kid. Now it was several rows of white buildings. Sleek, like artificial bones. At the end of one row she found the corporate offices of Enlivn, where Stan worked. The front of the building was comprised entirely of screens projecting titanic advertisements. One moment the building teased a “Coming in 2040,” the next a baby wrapped tightly in a white blanket, held close to a feminine torso without a face. A robotic hand was holding a bottle to the sleeping infant’s mouth. It made Amber feel like her mouth was full of dirt.

When Amber walked inside, a small, bored security guard sitting behind a seamless white desk of indiscernible material greeted her. He stood there, head turned in her direction, eyes looking without acknowledgement. She’d never let that kind of shit fly in the hotels.

"I'm good," she said as loud as she could without yelling. "How are you?" The man remained silent. "I'm here to see Mr. Stan Hardy."

"Ms. Wain?" he asked, looking down at a screen embedded in the table's surface.

"Mrs. Wain, yes."

"Fourth floor. I'll show you to the elevator."

As Amber followed the slow shit in uniform, she heard the deep, cardiac booms of a bass. It was a strange sound, distant and full of echoes. It made her think of the first school dance she had gone to with Ethan. She wanted to follow it, but clicked along in her high heels after the security guard instead. He pushed a button to call the elevator down. When the door opened, he stepped inside with her, pushed the button for the fourth floor, and walked out. A bony secretary with jerked skin and lips like dehydrated orange peels was waiting for Amber when the elevator opened. She shook Amber's hand and led her down a curved hallway to Stan's office.

"Sweet Amber," Stan said, standing behind his desk. His eyes were grey, like snow on the street. His blonde hair had some white and grey to it, making it look like weathered gold.

"Stan," Amber said, taking a seat and smiling with only her mouth.

"You're tired, I can tell." He smiled back. It wasn't a handsome smile. Not like Ethan's used to be.

"I didn't sleep too well. I have to say, Stan, that HOMi is kind of terrifying."

"No," he said with a wounded voice. "How so?"

"It *looks* like me." She could almost hear the sinew tightening over her knuckles.

"We did give it a *pretty* face, but I don't see any similarities beyond that." Something danced behind his eyes, like he knew something she didn't.

"Well, it's creepy and...and I don't feel safe with it." It was true, sort of. It was uncomfortable. Uncomfortable to think about it with Ethan, doing whatever it is they were doing.

"I thought I made it perfectly clear that they were completely safe." He rose from his desk and smoothed out his tie. "Let me show you something."

Stan led her back down the hallway, down the elevator and through a locked door. The whole way there, Amber could once more hear the

thumps of the bass, growing louder and louder with each thud. They entered a wide and busy room. Artificial limbs dangled from rigs along one of the walls. Fingers flexed and released, arms rotating back and forth like they were passing invisible things from one to the other. Another machine in her likeness rested on its knees, the back of the head missing. Large sockets without eyes sat in its face. The head tilted up toward Amber and she saw a cable extending out of its head to a computer where a man tapped away at the keys, teeth grinding.

"How can I help you?" the machine asked, its voice hoarse and hollow. "How can I help you?"

The man at the computer shook his head and punched a key. The machine lost its voice, but its head still followed Amber with eyes that weren't there, mouthing words no one could hear.

"Do it again with the lights," someone called out from deep inside the room. It all went black like death. The bass beat out again; each ump now illuminated the room in a low, red glow.

"A demonstration we're preparing," Stan said so suddenly Amber nearly jerked out of her heels. "But, as you can see, everything these machines do is dictated by code and engineering. These boys make sure everything does what it's supposed to. They make sure they are safe. And why wouldn't they be? I told you they only want to fulfill your needs. Around the house. Physically..."

"What do you mean 'physically'?" Amber asked. Her brow furrowed so tightly she could feel a vein pulsing in her forehead.

"Sexually, I mean. Though, I didn't want to sound crass."

"You mean..." Amber felt hollowness in her knees. Congestion in her head. "They can do that... shit?" What did Ethan do with that machine last night?

"They can do almost anything you would want, within legal boundaries. I have the same model as yours at my home and I am quite satisfied. Though I might be biased." He laughed.

"I, um, need to leave. I need to talk to Ethan. Or, no. I need to get back to work. I need to go."

Amber turned to find a security guard waiting to escort her out. Stan called out after her, though she didn't know what he said. She wasn't listening.

As she walked home she rubbed her temple, over and over, pressing hard. It was bad enough imagining Stan groping an electric version of her, but

Ethan? And there'd be more. Hundreds of men across the country would push themselves into hundreds of Ambers. And she brought one into her home. She dug her fingers harder into her head. If she was lucky she would rupture something and she wouldn't have to deal with today, tomorrow, Ethan, children, metal nightmares... She wanted it all to go blank. An off switch, like a machine...

You can turn anything off, Amber knew. Pull the plug, rip out the batteries, press every button. That thing in her apartment had to have a shut-off. She wasn't afraid of the machine anymore. She couldn't be. Stan even said they were harmless. She believed him. For a man so full of shit, he somehow always told the truth.

Amber opened the door to her apartment fast and hard. The silver silhouette was already standing at attention by the balcony door. It cocked its head slightly.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Wain," it said. There was a small click as the mechanics in its face pulled its mouth into a smile. "Is there anything you need? A cup of coffee, perhaps?"

"How do I turn you off?" Amber asked, forcing herself within inches of the fake her.

"It is intended for me to remain on at all times."

"You've said that." Amber scanned the machine's head for some button to press. There was nothing. Staring at its face, it made Amber think of examining her own face in the mirror when she was a teenager: popping zits, getting the lipstick perfect. Then she saw something on the corner of its mouth. An orange smear. Cheez-Its. A sudden exhaustion pulled hard on Amber's eyelids. Or maybe it was resignation. What could she do? This ghost of her twenties had something she didn't. What was it? Her eyes stung like salt in a wound. Ethan wanted kids, didn't he? Or did he just want something more than her? The HOMi looked like her when they first married. Ethan probably wanted the old her back. He wanted her to keep the promise she didn't think she made when they were young. God, she was pretty back then, wasn't she? She wondered what she must have felt like to Ethan then, what she must have tasted like...

Amber leaned forward and put her mouth on the machine's. She wasn't going to

keep it there. Just for a moment. She had to know. Its lips on hers gave her a warm, dry buzz, like licking a battery. Amber pressed harder. This couldn't be everything. She brought a hand up and squeezed the machine's left breast. There was almost no give. Her own chest had started to go soft, but she knew it was never that firm. She dug in with her fingertips. There was a quiet err-rr-err, like a stretching balloon, or a dried out condom. Then the front door opened.

"What the hell are you doing, Amber?" Ethan dropped a Subway sandwich onto the floor. Amber jumped back from the machine. "What is wrong with you?"

"I wasn't," she started. Her heart felt like it was about to beat itself to pieces. She tried to slow it down, to remember why she was even kissing the machine to begin with. "You did!" she yelled. You kissed it. I found Cheez-It stains on its face."

"What?" Ethan said, dropping his eyes down and to the left. "No. That stain came from something else... I was doing something funny to send to my friend. You were the one grabbing its tits just then."

"Oh, it's not like I was about to fuck the thing."

"If you wish," the machine interjected, "I can engage in-"

"Why do you think I would touch it?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know. Why would you? Is it about kids? Were you trying to make me jealous or something?"

"Amber, that doesn't make sense."

"No, it fucking doesn't. Do you want kids? Let's have kids. Let's have a shit ton of kids and then we can die before any of them reach thirty."

"That's not what I want."

"What do you want?" Amber felt her fingers go back to her temples. Pressing. Circling.

"I want to call Stan and see about getting this thing removed. In fact, I think I'm going to call him now. I'll be back later. Much later." Ethan slowly slid his phone from his pocket with a look on his face like he meant no harm, as if she had a gun pointed at him. He turned, dialed a number, and walked outside.

"Jesus, Ethan. Just tell me..." Amber stood still for a minute. She stared at the sandwich on the floor and thought about telling the HOMi to pick it up, but she didn't really care. It could stay there forever. Amber went into her bedroom. Her hands were

vibrating, needing something to break. She felt her shadow follow her in.

“Ethan has left the apartment,” it said. “If you want, I can help pleasure you in private.”

“What?” Amber asked, her mouth as dry as sand. The machine took a smooth stride forward and placed its hands on Amber’s chest. Amber pushed it backwards.

“Would you prefer to use my mouth again?” the machine asked. It moved forward. Amber screamed. She struck its face. Its jaw shifted out of place. She saw her twenty-year-old self standing in front of her, its head falling apart.

She brought her hand back down and this time her skin caught on something sharp. She felt a stretch and then a wet tear as flesh was ripped from her palm. An inch of skin hung from a crack between the machine’s jaw and cheek. Amber screamed again, high and hard. She grabbed the machine and slammed its head into the wall by her bed. The lights in its head flickered. She had to kill it. Its knees gave out. As it slumped down, Amber kept her grip on its head and bashed it continuously on the corner of her nightstand until the parts in its neck cracked and loosened. A brief eruption of silver fluid shot out of the top of the machine’s neck hole. It was so cold on her skin, but in the wound on her hand it burned. There were footsteps behind her.

“What happened?” Ethan asked, eyes shifting from his broken toy to the blood dripping from Amber’s hand. “Are you alright? I need to get you to the emergency room. Jesus Christ...”

“You said you were leaving,” Amber said.

“I was just outside. I heard you scream-”

“What do you want?”

“I want to help you-” Ethan started to explain, his mouth wide open and stupid. Amber threw her bleeding hand forward and caressed his cheek. She rubbed her thumb over his lips.

“What the fuck?” He spat and pushed her hand away from his face, red and silver finger trails ran down his chin. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Amber watched a fat drop of blood fall from her palm and land in the silver lake on the floor. The machine’s nearly severed head sat in its own lap, dangling by an artificial tendon, one eye still illuminated. The middle finger of its right hand curled and released repeatedly, beckoning.

“What do...you want...What...” She couldn’t speak. Her voice wouldn’t leave her mouth. She was

shaking now, though she didn’t feel cold or angry. She tried to ask again, “What do you need?” but her lips moved in silence. Again, she tried. And again. He wasn’t looking, though. Wasn’t listening. ◆

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We Never Traded Better Than Beneath the Boulders

by Peter Williams

I, Kapil Nayar, have delivered dates to the back door of Rakesh's market every Monday now for three years. My price has never risen. At the beginning of this month the earthquake stopped the hearts of 70,000 napping Muslims in Muzaffarabad. The month is almost over and I now possess more Medjool dates than I would have ever thought possible in southern Kashmir. I have in airtight polythene wrappings more dates than any other regional trader. I am confident in this. I have introduced an addiction to Ramban that yesterday's silver dates cannot satisfy. It is only Medjool dates. That is all they will eat. Rakesh now gets my product as all my other clients do, but this morning he has ordered ten additional crates for the wedding of my wife's niece. Never before have dates been customary to a Ramban wedding but here we are with the mother of the bride insisting on the presence of my dates in the wedding as if they were a right of passage.

Ramban thrives on wedding days. The villagers have a sudden interest in purposing every action to more than one task. A routine walk to the market becomes, in addition, an errand for an aunt. One's first meal must compliment one's diet for the rest of the day. You must not spoil yourself on Paneer before the wedding feast. The matchmakers have carved up their perfect union between Avantika Lal, my niece, and Moti Ghatak, a recently returned graduate of the Jammu university system. Both are prominent families but Avantika has waited too long and the Ghatak family should be thankful their oldest son returned home because the youngest boy, Ramu, has shown little promise for marriage or village life.

Joseph will not go to school today. He needs to learn that there is more than one priority in a man's life and his attention must be diverted from one task to the other when the need is apparent. The Nayar Date Trade suddenly requires all available hands. Besides, it is only primary school. He'll go on to finer things.

I ingest the first, and then fill the pouch inside my briefcase with the seventeen dates necessary for keeping daily time. Nature main-

tains the same pressure in the stomach everyday at every hour if a man can be sure his drains are lacquered and maintained with an appropriate and constant lubricant. Dates are my ideal lubricant. Yogurt will do in much more uncomfortable portions. I have not worn a watch for thirteen years.

Ahisma, my wife, irons my Oxford on the table top while Joseph rushes in and out of the kitchen, preparing for the day. I must trust Ahisma with the ironing even though she has let the iron sit too long and scald the fabric on more than one occasion. I have worn the same Brioni suit every third day since the birth of my son. However, I have lost count of the burned Oxfords I have had to discard.

"My sister told me to deliver the cakes," Ahisma says. "Not as if it comes as a surprise. Today, she will get away with it."

"Aren't you supposed to deliver the cakes?" Joseph asks.

Ahisma starched the other side of the shirt. "It doesn't say that anywhere. I bake them," she says. "That doesn't mean I need to carry them up the mountain."

"Will you be here all day?" I ask. "I can take them in the flatbed."

"Those cakes will crumble in your flatbed," she says. "You hit a bump and they'll spill all over."

"Ah, Joseph can steady them."

"I would rather they were carried. How long before you can drop the cakes off at Avantika's house? Hmm? You'll be tossing your crates around and stepping all over them. By the time you arrive they'll be flour again."

"Ahisma," I say. "I doubt anyone has time to carry your cakes."

"It won't be too much trouble. There are still some bored young men." She hands me the shirt from the table. "Even on a wedding day."

I arrived in Ramban last night after a more eventful trip than I had expected. Butros called me a week ago, saying the dates would be waiting for me in the back room of a travel agency in Srinagar. Normally, we would meet in the parking lot of Bakshi Stadium. Butros, always wearing a rather fine corduroy coat and attempting his best Hindi mannerisms, would load the

dates into my flatbed and then I would pay him. I pay him a better price than anyone. If the trade is quick and noiseless, we know that trouble is past. We will sit in the vacant stadium and smoke whatever fine tobacco Butros has in stock or, perhaps, we will walk near the university and have a European meal. Butros, like me, looks forward to a simpler trade between our two people. However, like me, he knows our profits have only increased with the conflict.

But when I arrived at the travel agency, I found neither Butros nor the dates. I sat in the flatbed and waited. He pulled up beside me exactly an hour later and, from his cab, motioned for me to follow. He wore a black cap. His tires were muddy. I followed him west out of the city until we were in the dark of the Gulmarg. Without speaking, we stacked the crates into the flatbed until the canvas would just tie at the four corners. The 70,000 napping Muslims in the north die in their sleep and so the dates that would have broken their fast go to the weddings and the dinner tables of their southern neighbors. Death always means surplus.

However, as soon as I began to question his secrecy, Butros put an end to the partnership. Five years of small trades across a border drawn between gods and nothing threatens our business until an earthquake interrupts Ramadan. Butros said his suppliers had tightened their grip. Butros said the trade had to stop. Business suffocates.

Joseph and I unloaded all but fourteen crates last night. There are thirty-seven crates left, which should sustain the Ramban appetite until I can convince Butros to reopen the trade. He can't ignore the profit. Joseph climbs in the passenger seat and fiddles with the radio. I drive up the mountain road. It is a longer route but this way we will avoid Ramban's one civic bus that fills the width of the central route. In Ramban, delivery trucks can only approach through back alleys.

Joseph rolls up his sleeves. I chew another date. An advertisement for a Jammu optometrist plays on the radio. Ramban has yet to know their need for specialty services. Guarang, Joseph's grandfather, cannot see the food on his plate anymore. Many are like this, yet the wealthy send their children

away and never expect them home. There are human needs in Ramban as anywhere else. They have responsibilities and opportunities. Do they not see the money to be made in Ramban?

"Ramu says that Moti has been married," Joseph says.

"Why haven't I heard this? Is this wife dead?"

"I haven't asked," Joseph says.

"They would not be getting married today if this was a problem," I say.

"What if she is alive and comes back and Avantika is thrown out?"

"Mohtram Lal would not allow it," I say. Joseph cranks down his window.

"Ramu says that Moti is marrying Avantika to please his parents."

"I'm sure that suits everyone very well," I say.

"Why wouldn't Moti want to marry her?" I ask. "She's the most beautiful girl in the village."

A VW squeezes past on the outside lane.

"Ramu says that Moti hates Ramban," Joseph says.

"What does Ramu have against his brother?"

We just reach the top of the mountain road and the ground shakes. I turn off the engine and Joseph and I place our heads between our knees. This is the fourth aftershock this week. A few bits of rock hit the hood and I can hear them pelt the canvas. The shaking stops.

Joseph spits dirt from his mouth and rolls up his window and we descend the mountain.

I would have opened my own market years ago if I didn't feel I owed something to Rakesh. It is now almost thirty years since Rakesh and I left Ramban to fight for India in the Siachen Glacier. I didn't care for him then either, but it was near impossible to feel human with the creep of frostbite over your ribs so we made conversation, ensuring one another of our impending return home. All of the Kumaon regiment wrapped together in tents at night, each man praying he wouldn't wake up to a frozen-solid soldier wrapped around his chest.

The back of Rakesh's market is still a chipping blue. He painted the front a dizzying red a few years ago. He must have run out of paint or it is just

laziness. Rakesh is not the man to overextend.

Rakesh comes out the back door with a pan of oil that he dumps onto a pile of cardboard.

“Only the four here,” he says, waving the pan at my truck. “They told me to say this: you are to take the ten crates to Mohtram Lal’s.”

I step out of the car and brush dust from my slacks. “Who told you this?” I ask.

“Mohtram Lal. Will you disregard the bride’s father?”

“Only the four?” Joseph asks as he unloads the first crate.

“That is what they said,” Rakesh says.

“Why don’t you deliver the ten?” I ask. “They bought them through you.”

“Listen,” says Rakesh. “It is not my niece who is getting married. I will not be held responsible. We are not in the city, Kapil. Everyone knows they are your dates.”

“This is your business, Rakesh. I am not here to make you money.” I shuffle my feet apart to avoid the approaching oil.

He laughs and then says, “This is your family event. You expect me to make ten trips in my wheelbarrow?”

I turn to Joseph. “Just unload the four,” I say. “Rakesh, have you been dunking your head in the sewer?”

He tosses the pan at the back door, grabs the crate from Joseph, and stomps inside.

Rakesh had been dying his beard with tar-black shoe polish ever since we had gone into business. He was the first merchant to request my product but only because he was the first merchant I talked to. I doubt the value of anything that seems to uncover business acumen in the Ramban trader. People do visit Rakesh’s shop. It is the only one. I doubt the beard was even gray when he decided he should start selling my dates at his market. Every shirt he owns has a smudge stain if you would look under his clump of beard.

Rakesh comes back out.

“Say Rakesh,” Joseph says. “My boots could really use a shine.” Joseph puts his foot on the fender and looks intently at his shoes. “If you could just lend me your beard.”

“Joseph. Keep quiet,” I say, but then even I cannot hold my laughter.

“You’ll run your own supply dry,” I say to the ugly merchant.

“Remind me why I do business with you? Ah yes, you’re the one who bends to the muslá,” he says then retreats into his shop.

I see in the villagers of Ramban a neglect to understand the responsibilities of business. It is false of them but I cannot expect a quick change. I am the respectable trader and will always ensure the delivery of my product.

Joseph and I climb back into the flatbed and start the drive back the way of the mountain road. Halfway there, another flatbed appears over the crest of the hill. It’s as wide as mine and I know we won’t be able to go past. Joseph waves at the driver as the truck pulls up to ours. He says the driver is Ramu but he doesn’t know where the truck is from. I give in and put the flatbed in reverse and Ramu drives his truck a hair in front of my fender all the way back down the mountain. I stop at the mouth of the road, trapping his truck on the mountain.

“Ramu,” I say as I approach his window. “Whose flatbed is this?”

“Moti’s,” he says. “I am in a hurry, Mohtram Nayar. Please let me by.”

I look at the full bed covered in a canvas much like mine. “What’s in the truck, Ramu?”

“It is for the wedding. What do you want?”

“Calm yourself. The whole town is busy. I could help if you need.”

“I can manage on my own.” He slams his palm on the dash. I grab his arm.

“There is something wrong?” I ask. “There is no wedding?”

“No,” Ramu says. “Everything will go as planned.”

I motion to Joseph to pull the truck back and Ramu whips around as soon as there is enough space. I get back in the flatbed.

“Has Ramu told you anything?” I ask Joseph.

“Ah, he is obsessed with Avantika. He needs to forget her,” Joseph says. “Every time he walks past her he turns his head up and squints his eyes at the sun.”

“Dangerous for a new marriage. No one ever asks the siblings but their opinions matter more than the parent’s. Matchmakers always ignore them.”

“Will they ever match Ramu with some-

one?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “They give up on some. But who will he marry if the young people keep moving away?” I swallow another hour from my pouch and we begin, again, the way up the mountain road. It is three quarters light away from midday.

When we arrive there is a crowd of relatives around the house. It is one of the finest structures in Ramban. Mohtram Lal built his house into the side of the mountain away from the grid of row houses along the main road. He always brags that his home will stand strong in the event of a heavy slide while the rest of the village will be flooded down the mountain like a loose tree limb. I fear one of these slides in the coming months as we feel the aftershocks almost daily – the Himalayas inching their way upwards with no regard for their passengers.

I park the flatbed next to a heap of discarded building materials. Joseph gets out and begins to unhook the canvas. I can’t imagine why they would want the dates here. So the people can munch while they wait for the bride to emerge from the decorated door? These are Medjool dates. They are to follow a meal, compliment a conversation, nourish the fatigued dancer. This small flock of idle villagers will not nibble through ten crates of my product before the bride is ready and they must scurry after her down the road to the groom’s home.

Mohtram Lal is leaning over the crack in the door, trying to spy his daughter. The patriarch holds all his weight on one hand propped against a shingle, careful not to disturb the brilliant ribbons and fresh paint on the closed door.

“Where do you want your dates?” I ask. “Rakesh told me you ordered them here. I do not appreciate your messy instructions.”

He doesn’t turn to look me in the eye. “Avantika is with her aunts,” he says.

“Is my wife in there?” I ask.

“Is your wife Ahisma Nayar?” he asks. “Is she an aunt of Avantika?”

“There is business to conduct, Mohtram Lal. Where do you want the dates?”

“They are almost finished.” He speaks in careful notes as if awaiting the birth of his only daughter two decades ago.

Ridiculous man.

“She is wearing her mother’s sari. Let me have this moment, Kapil,” he says.

I pull dates number four and five from my

briefcase and swallow these whole. The villagers in the crowd make their guesses as to the fabric and make of the sari. Deputy Shriram and the restless little boys throw rocks down the steep cliff at the edge of the property. Mohtram Lal is a pitiful sight. If I had a daughter, I would not wish this ritual on her. She would be married in Jammu or Srinagar at a fine hotel. Everyone would know her groom was honest and her father would not embarrass himself. Ramban ignores these possibilities of new traditions. Joseph can do what he wishes when the time comes but I will not have him listen to the gossiping matchmakers, who would set him up with a buffalo herder’s daughter or some other such humbly minded girl.

The door swings open and hits Lal in the head. The crowd tries to hold their laughter. Ahisma stands in the frame and looks down at the bump on the father’s head.

“What are you doing here, Kapil?” she asks.

“They say I am to deliver the dates to Rakesh and so I go and Rakesh commands me to deliver the dates here,” I say. “I am here but I cannot leave my dates. What good would they do here?”

“Take them to Ghatak’s. Yes? Where else would they be eaten?” she says. “And I need more henna. Will you get me more henna?”

“I don’t think we should go back to Rakesh,” Joseph says.

“He’s right,” I say. “I will get your cakes after the delivery.”

“You don’t think I have the cakes in mind?” She looks through the crowd. “Ramu will get them. Where is Ramu?”

Just then, Ramu drives up the road and parks his flatbed behind mine. He now wears a fine blue suit with a bright orange shirt. The ceremony just an hour away.

“Ramu.” Ahisma yells across the crowd. “Go and get more henna for your new sister in law. My sisters have been wasting time. Then you will get my cakes”

I jog to Ramu and stand, again, at the flatbed window. He looks over his shoulder and then he looks at me.

“Are you happy for your brother, Ramu?” I ask.

“Yes, Mohtram Nayar,” he says. “It is a happy occasion.”

“I am glad to see you looking so professional. Your suit? Is it wool?”

"It is my brother's," he says. "It smells like cigarettes and diesel."

"It is generous of you to take the cakes," I say. "You must be careful with them in your flatbed."

"I will be careful," Ramu says.

"We are all waiting to see what great things you do, Ramu. There are many things to be accomplished in Ramban." I feel the collar of his jacket. It is an exquisite fabric. "Wear the right clothing, Ramu, and you could be a successful businessman. If everyone wore clothes such as these, Ramban would be a powerful city."

"I am going to university in Jammu. I will study medicine," he says.

"Ramban already has doctors. We need business. How will you get rid of the stench in your clothing? A dry cleaners, yes? That is the proper way but Ramban has no dry cleaning. I have to travel to Srinagar to clean my Brioni suit."

"You're the only one who wears such good clothing, Mohtram Nayar," he says.

With that, I send him on his way. Nothing will come from ignorant children.

When we arrive at the Ghatak home, the fire is already lit. There are clay pots of Kangesh and troughs of Shufta layed out on a cedar table. The shufta will be edible but it will not be nearly as good as a year ago. Since the earthquake, the nervous water buffalo have given more acid in their milk, making for gritty Paneer. The party will eat my dates instead.

I walk to Moti, who sits in silence at the kitchen table with his father and grandmother.

"Where would you like the dates, Moti?" I ask.

"I am sorry, Mohtram Nayar," he says, "but we do not require your dates."

"You ordered ten crates from Rakesh," I say. "My son and I have been back and forth through Ramban all morning with your dates. Where would you like me to put them?"

He chews at the skin of his thumb, then gets up from the table. "I have refunded Rakesh," he says. "Take it up with him. We will not have your dates."

"Rakesh did not tell me this."

"That is not my business," he says.

"They wanted Medjool dates for this wedding. It is the insistence of Mohtram Lal," I say.

"And Moti has provided them," Mohtram Ghatak says. "It is only right that we should deal with our son in his own wedding."

"You are trading dates, Moti?" I ask. "Why did I not know this?"

"You are my competition, Kapil Nayar. Why would I tell you?"

"Who will sell your dates?" I ask. "There is only one merchant. Will you also steal business from Rakesh?"

"Rakesh will sell my product now," he says.

Rakesh would have the decency to tell me, yes? The Rakesh who has grown up beside me would not turn so fast to a childish businessman. What does Moti know of the trade?

"This is foolish," I say. "What profit comes from this?"

I leave the house and tear a ribbon from the decorated door. Joseph is leaning against the flatbed. He has already undone the canvas. Will Joseph also leave? Or will Joseph, like Moti, come back and take what Ramban already has?

Then the other flatbed appears at the end of the road, the well-dressed Ramu in the driver's seat. The world will not notice him.

The ground shakes. I drop to a prayer and lock my fingers over my head. The shock keeps on and, this time, the mountain moans low. Rocks fall. My body moves away from Joseph with the shifting ground. Everything stops still except for one final crack. Joseph points to the mountain and when I look I see a boulder the size of a bus falling down the mountainside. It cuts through trees, cuts through a section of the row houses, cuts straight into the road and then pulls the sad young Ramu Ghatak, in his brother's fashion, off the mountain road. The boulder, the flatbed, and the boy fall the three hundred feet into the valley.

I pull the next date from my pouch. Joseph runs to the edge. The Ghatak family comes out their front door to know that their second son is dead and the wedding plans have changed and Ramban, with all its villagers just gaining balance in the wake of the aftershock, requires many more boulders before it will grow. ◆

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