

BRIGHTPOINT COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Currents

ART & LITERARY REVIEW 2024

THIS INSTITUTION has been dedicated to publishing the creative work of our students since 1968, and when you turn these pages, you'll see that the tradition continues. In our second issue of *Currents*, you will find their visions expressed in art, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. We are grateful to every student who submitted this year — *Currents* could not exist without their interests and efforts. As always, this journal is for them!

Mike Gray, Editor

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Hannah Rouse

wash satin finish stains from your face the water
so scalding so scathing it boils you alive while
brewing in the breathlessness of obsession you realize
somehow you're eager to grow up but afraid
to age
expiration haunts you yet you're willing to die
wishing for the space
provided with maturity because
he'll want you only if you're
old enough to love but
young enough to be desired fresh
forgiving

in this bathroom you watch yourself barren exposed
speckled scarlet cheeks staring back at you
within the blaze without the pleasure of him in past tense
 you are unable to breathe articulate
 your thoughts or your fingers
 your skin the texture of clementines
you tell yourself
maybe it's just the smell tangy tangerine-crust
 something akin to smoke
making you believe you're made of plastic
 you hope he sees you shimmering on display
 body charred scorching your skin
to prove yourself wrong

III. toner

every night you search in all the blue blurry glass bottles
of products with names you can't pronounce for proof that
 the beauty broadcasted on your phone screen is real
that sugar scrubs body butter beauty blenders
 don't only work on reflections
you hunt for evidence of something lov-
able living between your limbs
 you look for signs
of glamor worthiness
 and there's so much
 cheap toner aching
 in your eyes
the mirror drips embers

IV. hyaluronic acid

to say he groomed you would be to admit that
 he &
 all your glass bottles lied
you're not special
 sexy
 starstruck sunkissed
nothing about you reeks of radiance
 the meteor shower of a married man
was not love clandestine & fated
 you were burned boiled
 you were led one frightful footstep
 after another
into the forest fire of his arms

V. aloe facial spray

sometimes when you think about him talking
to your reflection in the foggy mirror as if he's standing
in front of you your chest tightens
so sharp you think your ribs will scrape
against one another & you keep loving
living addicted to the smell of his apologies
his touch one fabled
finger at a time seeing you

VI. eye cream

you picture him on his deathbed: body long
having betrayed him memory lost
to music madness marriage
eyes sunken in
skin hanging loose loveless
labyrinthian veins lit by longing
stories sketched
in the palms of his hollow hands
all the girls
the ghosts the glass the gasoline &
the grime of gentleness
beating breaking like his bones

VII. moisturizer

in moments like these skin dewy dusk-soaked
you wonder how much longer you have
until you are no longer limitless
until you are singing to the burning leaves
wrapping yourself in the wreckage for comfort
your expiration date is not plastered on your breasts
the way you often think it is but buried between
your thighs a whisper on your dripping lips: this body
will break down & how
will you be beautiful then?

VIII. hydrating lip mask

you know teenage dream has to end
one day
you know you will grow
out of glitter lip gloss giggles
removed from the glow of girlhood
you know you'll learn to live without the luxury of protection
& you think
you know the scent taste earnestness
of melting glass but the heat
only lingers long enough to sting
& he will not be around to mourn
the youth he stole from you

Lukewarm Visions of Domestic Bliss

Alex Waitkus

I saw a dead fawn on the side
of the road while
waiting at the red light.

Its legs pointed up
to the blue nothing sky,
its back rested
in the grass median.

The grass was tall enough to
leave some grace behind.
There wasn't any
blood
on the asphalt.

I couldn't see the fawn's
fresh dead face.

So fresh
it had barely learned to walk;
so fresh
the flies hadn't gotten to it yet.

The dead fawn whispered
in my ear
while its soft stomach went hard.

Dead things still talk.

It insisted
that you are going to leave.

You were crying on the driveway
while it dry stormed around you.
You were crying on the driveway and
a group of deer
on the hill
watched you
from their perch at the edge of the woods,
they dare not touch the asphalt.

Was the cracking, bloodless asphalt warm
on your summer legs?

Thunder rattled in and bounced
against
the walls of your chest cavity.

The lightning that came before it fell down
the sky
like blood down a forearm.

The heat of the storm
dried your salty eyes and cheeks,
they didn't shine at all.

We both ached because of it.

Were you quiet so the deer wouldn't hear you?

Dandelions

Bridget Green

Dandelions grew here once,
Small flowers, weeds, seeds blown by the breeze.
Hard to kill and hard to stop, they flourished.
You, fantastic thing you are,
You knelt beside them and showed me the yellow ones,
The young flowers in bloom, yet to spread
their spores across the lawn.

They're edible, you said,
The bulb cradled in your palm,
Every piece, from root to flower.
You stood up, brushing grass from
your knees with a grin,
Brings a new meaning to garden salad, eh?

There was a wonder you took in anything that lived –
In the dandelions in the ditch,
The spiders under cups,
The bat in the bathroom,
The mice in the walls,

Things I knew were there and never paid mind to.

They are living, you said once,
When I asked why you wouldn't lay mousetraps.
I want them to live, just not here.
You lifted the mouse you'd caught, hands in
heavy gloves, and gave me a crooked smile.
Not until they pay rent, at least.

I never put much stock in divinity.
God was distant and uncaring,
Out of reach and out of touch,
While I was out of time, out of patience, out of love.
Watching you point out the dandelions,
Careful never to pull their stems,
I saw it in your fingers, in the care you
took for life, no matter how small.

Gentle and tender,
Reverent.
Like they were more than weeds.

Sundown Town

Terreal Brown

Take a seat.
Let me share
with you
why my willow
weeps.

A cop on his beat,
found ‘em
past dusk
like progress
on his pillow.

Never even asked
the boy
to surrender.
Just sunk his
billy club

like a drummer
keeping time.
Ribs on melody
like a boy
on piano.

Brought ‘em
body dangling
like keys
to the courthouse
jail.

Never knew
if the rope
sunk deep
in his neck
or

the burning
licking his body
with glee
did ‘em in.
But I do know

why my willow
weeps.
Neighbor’s poplar
got to
hang ‘em.

懐かしい

(nostalgia)

Genevieve Fugette

Summer quickly gone

Laughter fades to memories

Calmness of autumn



FIRST PLACE • Art

A Divine Connection

Estefania Rivero

The Cosmic Difference Between Our Night Skies

Fairouz Bsharat

THE VIRGINIA night sky is disappointing at best.

The stars in my backyard are distant. Covered in smoky gray hazes from Marlboro cigarette companies and family fire pits. The moon sulks over the horizon. Then dashes at the opportunity to return to the opposite side of the world. The sun clammers its way through the day. It radiates joy. It brings warm tones to undrying paint. Golden hour glazes the lake in my front yard. I am lucky enough to watch it some days. Geese ducking under the murky green, a chorus of frogs chirping a tune, and the reflection of the sun glittering everywhere. It sprays crystals that hide on grass blades until the morning dew washes them away.

The stars in my village in Palestine from my uncle's backyard glow.

He holds a barbecue for us in his backyard. We have one table, and some folding chairs. A cliff cuts the yard short. Donkeys, goats, and sheep wander the area in search of food, or a good time. The desert sun licks the sand and sends heat to condense around us. Freer than Virginia humidity, but the Sahra spares no one. It lingers on midday. Hanging by some universal thread until it plummets out of sight. The moon arrives perfectly centered. It brings a glimmering breeze

with it. It kisses our cheeks with cool and sprinkles stardust across the rocks. At night our brown shines. We are no longer one shade against the sand. The desert welcomes us home and we cradle it. Hoping that each grain remembers the shape of our sandals.

The universe showed me supernovas at birth.

The sun rose with my first breath and we both cried. Oxygen spiked its way down my throat and I mourned the comfort of motherly blood. Heavenly bodies had constantly watched the creation of life. They watched souls float down. I am sure that even then, my soul was sparked with the spirit of Palestine. Maybe I would ask Pluto what it thought of freedom and Saturn what it thought of imprisonment, trapped in rocks and dust. I look at them now and feel a distant connection with the red speckles. Spectacles to behold. I wonder if the cosmos ever had a favorite and how they picked one. I wonder if the same stars that occasionally dot my sky in Virginia ever cross paths with the galaxies of Palestine. Or maybe the Blue Ridge mountains encapsulate them before they get there. ■

The Myth

Hannah Rouse

MERMAIDS, much like humans, have fingers they can thread through seaweed. The only differences are their shimmery, scaly tails and magical lungs or gills or whatever they use to breathe underwater. Maybe their skin is seafoam green, and their fins like stained glass with the texture of damp leaves.

In my head, they look just like in the stories and the movies. They're out there somewhere singing ships to sleep. Perfect and perched on jagged rocks. Dancing in waves that collapse into nothing. They fall in love with sailors and revel in the wreckage of storms. They're not afraid of sharks, or the vast, aqua emptiness that is their home.

I always wanted to be a mermaid.

Even when I wouldn't swim in the pool unless my parents checked it for spiders and frogs. I wore Disney Princess floaties on my arms and a small inflatable tube on my stomach. Green and blue goggles to protect my eyes from the sting of salt water. I wouldn't put my head underwater until I was five or six years old, and an older girl asked to play mermaids with me. After that, I finally managed to dip my skull beneath the ripples. My long, brown hair, pulled lovingly into a braid by my mother, once dry, dripped with dreams of my legs merging together and growing gold or green scales.

I used to reenact the giant rock scene from *The Little Mermaid* at the mini-golf course. I sang "Part of Your World" softly to myself. The rough surfaces scratched

at my skin but all I could think about was swimming with Flounder, about having a dinglehopper.

At seven years old, I still wanted a snarfblat more than anything in the world. My new room at my grandparents' beach house was decorated entirely by myths: dolls, ornaments, signs, and miniature statues. With my toes in the sand, I observed the white caps breaking in the distance, wondering when I'd see her for real.

There is a painting I have hanging on my wall. A mermaid sits on a rock, arm outstretched toward a white unicorn—beach waves in her hair, a pale gray seashell bra, and a glittery green tail. The sky behind them swirls, pink and purple around a flaming sun. But their reflections show them as they are. A girl and a horse under a boring blue sky. Fantasizing about a life where they could be something magical.

Until I was thirteen, I wore a full-length pink mermaid tail in the pool. Exhilarated by the sensations of gliding, slicing through the thick water. I took my hair down and let it float behind me in the chlorine, a cloud of thin brown strands with a mind of its own. I pretended that my swimsuit was made from scallop shells. Imagined that I was fearless enough to swim, not in the confinement of a pool, but engulfed in the ocean's cerulean darkness.

"I'll give you a dollar to stand by that shark," Mimi said, pointing to Tommy,

the giant fifty-foot statue of my worst fear, whose gaping mouth was the entrance to Jaws Resort Wear. I didn't look at him but knew all too well what the store and Tommy looked like. Beady black eyes. His sharp teeth pointed at any poor soul who wanted to enter. All the windows next to him were covered in towels with the terrifying creatures printed on the front. Other sharks, Tommy's friends, I presumed, were posed to look like they rose through the concrete, their faces full of hunger.

I shook my head. Just the thought of standing anywhere near the store made me sick.

"Five dollars," she smiled. I did not. "Ten dollars?"

I wouldn't have stood by the door of Jaws Resort Wear for anything. She upped the offer to twenty, thirty, then finally forty. I always refused.

For the rest of the week-long vacation, Mimi tried to make that same deal each time we passed Tommy, the ominous entrance to the store. Not once did I budge. Not once did I even think about actually letting her take the picture of me standing in Tommy's mouth.

On the surface, this is why I cannot live in the ocean.

For him, my bra was not made of seashells, but rather of wires and lace and polyester. I did not have a tail. Instead, my legs were bare, spread. My hair draped across the armrest as if again just released from its braid, free to float. I reveled in the way he looked at me,

half-dressed and splayed out on his white couch like a starfish.

Perhaps he was just a shark, like Tommy, and I just never noticed his bloodthirsty mouth. Or maybe he was the ocean. Seaweed limbs wrapping around me. Hands all over, the stinging tentacles of a jellyfish searching for something shiny in a shipwreck. But he found nothing worth loving in the rotting planks of wood.

Drowning in the stained leather of the couch, I began to see myself as the reflection in the painting. The reality. No magical lungs or gills or whatever the mermaids would use to breathe in the chaos of the ocean if they were real. Nothing more than a girl trying to touch something that looks mythic, magic, but is just as raw, as real as she is.

Now, I don't dare go in the ocean. Not a single painted toenail touches the seafoam. Even pools scare me when I can't feel the floor below me. The concrete scraped holes in the thin fabric of the pretend mermaid tail I outgrew.

But I still think if I stare at the ocean for long enough, I'll see the sparkle of a mermaid's fin somewhere in the distance. So I watch the waves closely, waiting for my girlhood to return. ■

The Clarity of Sobriety

Val Hogan

WE'VE ALL built facades, woven intricate tapestries of half-truths to veil our deepest wounds, our most uncomfortable realities. I was a master of that deception, both to the world and to myself. Trust meant nothing when my survival seemed more secure within a fortress of lies.

And then, like the inevitable shattering of a too-thin mirror, the facade cracked. The burden of deception grew heavier with each fragile piece that fell. Shadows I sought to hide became menacing figures; the weight of guilt turned leaden in my veins. Denial, once a cozy blanket, was now a suffocating shroud.

I had spun myself a cocoon, and now it was my time to struggle against it. The lies weren't just whispered to others. They were my internal mantra, a bitter pill swallowed daily. I was both the perpetrator and the victim, trapped in a toxic play of my own design.

The realization was a lightning strike in the midst of a relentless storm. I could no longer hide the wreckage within. This

truth had to be bared, the chaos confronted. Slowly, as if prying myself open with rusted instruments, I began facing the consequences. They were painful, as deep as the original cuts, and messy, a bloody tangle of apologies and strained bonds.

But in that chaotic unveiling, a strange clarity emerged. It was not resolution, not forgiveness, but an unfiltered view. Like an arsonist standing in the fading embers of a once-beloved home, I was left with raw earth. Here, within the ashes, there was nowhere left to hide, but also an undeniable starting point. It was from these ruins that a stubborn resolve grew. Every step away from the self-made inferno was a step toward an unknown, less treacherous future.

This is not a redemption story, not yet. It's a battle march sung in a shaky voice. Some of the damage is beyond repair. Yet, I've seen a flicker in the abyss. It's not a warmth or a clear path, but a willingness to be reborn from the very flames that tried to consume me. ■

My Bed
Megan Ikley



SECOND PLACE • *Art*

The Nest

Glyn Salabao

I WAS 8 YEARS OLD when I found the nest along with my childhood best friend, Marissa. That afternoon, the air buzzed with mosquitoes and our skin stunk of sunscreen and bug spray. We were playing around the pond behind our houses, as we always did that summer, when we came across it neatly tucked away. It sat at the base of a tree, cradled almost lovingly by its roots, and filled with fat, dove colored eggs dappled with brown. We stood there for a while to admire our discovery, and then promptly took the most logical course of action in our young minds: poked it with a stick.

Marissa hefted her chosen stick up into position like a sniper peering down his rifle, one eye closed and her tongue sticking out in concentration. She extended it carefully, with as much precision as her little fingers allowed, but her eyes widened as she became unbalanced, swaying forward and back like a pendulum. I rushed to catch her as she fell with a yelp, but our combined weight launched us forward instead. I squeezed my eyes

shut as we came hurtling towards the nest with our full momentum, the inevitable clear. There was the hard crunch of egg shell breaking, and then the sickening splat of delicate membrane splitting and giving way. The sounds resonated through the humid air, and then there was silence except for the scattered chirpings of the summer cicadas.

I heard Marissa gasp next to me. When I finally had the courage to open my eyes and confront the reality of what we had done, my heart leapt in my throat. Somehow, we had only managed to damage a single egg in the nest—the stick had speared straight through its innards. I watched in horror as a dark red, gelatinous substance began to slowly drip out of the entry point like an open wound. It was a far cry from the bright yellow liquid we expected. Blood speckled the remnants of its shell along with its untouched siblings. We screamed and scrambled away like rats scurrying from sudden light, bolting away from the bloodied nest.

The walk back home that evening was quieter than usual, but before we parted ways, we pinky promised to never tell another soul of what had happened that day. In our heads, we had committed the worst sin one could make, and at eight years old—we had taken a life!

That night, I glumly poked at my dinner, my attitude souring the atmosphere like a bad smell until my parents were forced to ask me what was wrong. The guilt wore on me; at that moment, my pinky promise was all but forgotten. I told them of the poor egg, and our horrible crime, and by the end of my recollection I was ready to be locked up with the key thrown away. My mother laughed at me and told me to finish my food. My father, on the other hand, only asked me where we had found the eggs. I remember finding that question strange, but I paid it no mind, busy stewing in my ridicule. I dreamt of baby ducklings that night. The very next morning, Marissa knocked on the door. In her hands, she held scraggly, freshly picked wildflowers. I nodded solemnly, knowing what we needed to do. We walked to the pond with heavy hearts. The day was cool and balmy, the sun softened by the clouds. Arriving at the tree, I steelled myself to face the nest once more. Marissa was first to squint down

at it carefully, but then her eyebrows drew together and she let out a confused sound, looking lost. Curiosity took hold of me and I looked down at the nest, too, only to find it heart-stoppingly empty.

We left the flowers inside the nest and returned to my house with only more questions. The driveway was occupied by several cars, and when we entered, we were met with the warm, aromatic smell of Filipino cuisine—my father was cooking for his friends. The house was filled with the sound of chatter in Tagalog, the kitchen bustling with activity. I ran in excitedly, hoping to eat adobo or pancit, only to immediately stop in my tracks. My father was cooking with dove colored eggs dappled with brown. I watched as he cracked one open, a fully formed, bloody pink fetus sliding out and plopping onto a sizzling pan. Before I left, I watched him put another into a boiling pot of water. I told Marissa not to go in the kitchen, and then took her upstairs to watch a movie. It wasn't something she needed to know. I later asked my father why he had taken the eggs, and he said: "How often do we get to eat authentic, home-made Balut?" ■

Covid Created a Monster Mom

Kayla Pegram

2020 DEVELOPED into the downfall for countless humans. Entire cities, states, and countries crippled from the outbreak. You tasted the icy fear from the news anchors telling you to stay home when the shut-down started. Watching entire grocery stores across the world emptied in sheer panic. Given notice your job was closed, effective immediately until further notice, with no indication of how you were supposed to pay your bills, your rent, or for groceries. Pacing behind the sliding glass doors, gazing out at the sunny green yard wondering, could this be real? Then, the schools ordered the kids home for “online learning.” How do you keep a wild kindergartener on task, on a computer, at home, for five days a week, not to mention PE in the dining room? It was an atrocity. I took on the role as an unemployed mom and a stay-at-home schoolteacher for my son in the span of a few weeks. The level of stress emanating from me put me into full panic mode. The outside world was shutting down, and I shut down with it. Being a mother to a five-year-old during a pandemic was a test. A test to reveal who I am, a test to help me evolve into the type of mother I was proud to be.

Reading is my safe place, my comfort, my home, it always has been, but it

was none of that for my son, Anson. We reviewed the seemingly easy assignments together. He forgot each word as soon as he uttered it correctly after agonizing minutes of trying to help him figure it out. I lost my thinly veiled composure. I bellowed, “You just said it, how can you not remember! Pay attention!” How could he not? Reading is so easy, it comes naturally, but not to Anson. The silence from him was deafening. I watched his shoulders start to tremble softly. He stared at me in quiet disbelief, as large tears streamed down his face and he stuttered, “I’m just so stupid Mommy.” Scorching shame washed over me and I sank to an all new low. I was now unemployed, a single parent, a stay at-home teacher, and a monster. I was not living up to be like the mother who raised me, my best friend, my biggest fan, and supporter. I was failing miserably.

I grew up in a quiet neighborhood in Las Vegas. No, not on the strip or in a hotel, just a normal neighborhood with kids playing outside most days. My dad worked construction, slaving away in 115-degree weather for twelve hours, five days a week. For a while, he traveled to different Hard Rock Cafes around the world. He was absent for months at a time. His absence created times of peace

with my mother and me. When he came home, the house filled up with the sound of loud, obnoxious sports on the television and his deafening snores coming from the now constantly occupied couch. Changing the channel was out of the question. He instantly woke and mumbled about still watching that, while starting to snore, again, before his head even hit the headrest. He seldom involved himself in my upbringing, my day-to-day life, or my schooling. He was overbearingly strict. He lacked basic understanding of a young girl, even though he had five older sisters. He occasionally acted goofy, in that annoying, I want to smack you way. He held me down and tickled me until I kicked and screamed too often. Despite all those less than qualifying features, he loved me, and he provided for our family. My mom owned her own business cleaning houses. We spent every morning and evening together for meals due to her flexible schedule. She was the polar opposite of my dad in every single way you could possibly imagine. She spoke with a strong Mississippi accent that my friends made fun of, but I found comforting. She was softly spoken, until I wrung out the southern fire in her. She conveyed bashfulness around those she didn't know. Her tenderness and affection created the nurturing environment that made my world revolve around her.

I remember my most cherished times as a young child, getting ready for bed, obviously not for the sleeping part. I hopped into bed and the smell of Sweet Pea and baby powder engulfed me as she snuggled in beside me. I remember her

reading "The Little Engine that Could" and begging for the entourage to be "Milton is Missing." I tended to get my way for two books; I was loved, and a tad spoiled. I never fell asleep while she read. I needed to hear the entire story from beginning to end. My fondest memories include my mother curled on the couch or basking in the warm sun on the back porch with a book in her hands. My insatiable love for books emerged from my foundation with my mom. Immersing myself in the stories of fantasy, horror, or thrillers was my second favorite place to be, my first was next to my mom. Well, if I am completely honest, I basically sat in her lap. I found immense pleasure getting under her skin...I was a kid, after all.

As I got older, she stopped reading to me before bed. Instead, I read to myself. I loved reading, it's as simple as it gets. I never lacked a book to read. From the creepy R.L. Stine novels, FBI serial killer mysteries by Lisa Gardner, multiple detective series by James Patterson, to the overly emotional North Carolina love stories by Nicholas Sparks, I couldn't read enough to quench my need for more, I was a full-blown addict. Let's be honest, I still am. Reading helped me escape the mundane everyday life we all know too well. My evenings consisted of curling up with my mom on the cool leather couch with a huge fuzzy blanket. Sometimes I read my own book, other times I read over her shoulder. She aggravated quickly. I garnered a few southern tinged choice words accompanied by "Kayla Marie!" and a healthy swat on my arm. I think we both gravitated towards reading

(Continued on page 25)

THIRD PLACE • *Art*

Burning Hot Star

Alex Waitkus



easily, since it was dad's way or the highway, and he claimed ownership of the TV. We expressed zero passion for sports, and there's only so many times you can watch *Bonanza* reruns or eighties movies before it feels like your brain starts to shut down and your eyes glaze over from sheer boredom. This kept my mom and I closely bonded throughout my youth. Her immeasurable love for reading bled into me and I never stopped.

The supportive, loving, nurturing, amazing mom she exemplified made me gravitate to her my entire life. I strived to be as resilient and wonderful as she portrayed herself. She was the best role model a girl could ask for growing up. She sometimes lost her patience with me; who wouldn't? But she loved me fiercely, and I knew I could depend on her for anything. That's the woman I'm supposed to be, who guided me through every obstacle life threw at me. But I failed to portray that extraordinary mother to my own child. I vomited the ugliness and stress from the outside world all over my baby. I allowed it to color me in a way I was ashamed to be viewed. I was stripping my child of the one thing I found endless joy in, by clouding it with negativity and misery. If I didn't fix it, he would hate reading, he would associate it with self-doubt and loathing.

Anson is anything but stupid. He's exceptionally bright, outrageously funny and silly, sweeter than any candy I have

ever indulged in, and spicier than any hot sauce you could ever tempt me to taste. He should never think of himself as anything less than extraordinary, and I needed to do better. Raising a child, I must give him every opportunity to love himself and to feel as loved as I had. So, I sat down on the hard wooden chair beside him, I pulled him to me, I kissed the top of his feathery blonde head, and I whispered, "You couldn't be stupid if you tried."

We barely survived kindergarten. It continues to be remembered vividly as the hardest thing I ever did. Luckily, Anson's memory of that time is filled with happiness and freedom. My harshness failed to imprint on his tiny sponge brain. Anson made it to third grade, and he can read! With the help of books, video games, board games, and the song title with the artist on my vehicle's display screen, he succeeded. We continue to work every day. Some days are more challenging than others, but we keep trying. He loves books and the joy of spending time with me as I read to him. I'm doing better at following my mother's guidance with practice. We're currently reading *Revenge of the Lawn Gnomes* by R.L. Stine, and he delights in it every bit as much as I did when I read it my first time. ■

Coffee and Corn: A New Folktale

Heidi Beneduci

NOW LOOK HERE, the sun is a burning wheel, like the kind that makes thread from wool. There's a lady with red gold hair that keeps it spinning, and what she spins are rays of sunlight from primordial fire.

This lady has a slew of beautiful daughters, too many to count. Their pa is always up and about, bringing storms of wind and rain all around the world that keep the earth fertile and clean. He's a big man with a red beard and flashing eyes, and he likes a hearty drink. He's a good-natured feller, and his laugh is so loud it's damn near the only thing that can shake these mountains. When he comes home to his wife after a long time away, he covers her with their gray quilt and makes love to her with so much passion that the heavens quake. When he leaves, she shines brighter than ever. And that's how they came to have so many daughters.

Now, this lady spins the wheel in the sky that we call the sun, but she lives underground where it's always summer. Her land is all verdant forest, far as the

eye can see, with enormous trees that'd take ten grown men to hug around just one. The water that runs through it is warm and filled with healing minerals. I hear it all bubbles out of a spring somewhere, and the spring is endlessly flowing. Bathing in it cures most any illness. This is her home, and that of her beautiful daughters.

Now, these daughters are about half their mother's nature and half their father's, by which I mean they carry that soothing warmth of their mother within them, but they yearn to roam. So, after Christmas has ended and the world is drab and dreary, these young ladies kiss their mother goodbye and leave off to find adventure. They've got long, dark hair, and dark eyes, and long, graceful necks, and they take off in flight together, laughing in delight. When they cross the mist-laden gorge that divides their side of the world from ours, they turn into big birds with long black necks and brown wings and white bellies, and their deep-throated laughter echoes against the mountainsides.

They turn this side of the world warm and green when they come. The snow melts. Flowers bloom. Leaves bud and burst. These girls swim in the rivers and lakes all spring and summer long, and they chase away all those spirits that make folks sick, tired, and hungry. They play when their father comes, laughing and dancing amid the clouds and thunder and helping the rain pour down from the sky. But they can't do it forever. You see, the longer they spend away from their mother, the weaker they get, and the leaves start to turn and the warmth begins to fade. Eventually, they got to go back home to be nourished. So they fly back over that gorge, and then winter sets in.

Now and then, one of them won't want to go. You know how young folks are. There's one I know of that was like this, and it was all because she fell in love. Who did she fall in love with? Well, it was a mountain – a great, broad mountain with a pretty little creek that turned into a pretty little waterfall where she and her sisters liked to swim. Sweet mint, and white and violet wildflowers, and the softest mosses grew along its banks, and mayapples and ferns and azaleas grew deeper in the woods. The mountain seemed to love her, too. A gentle breeze shushed through the leaves in the trees, caressing her, day and night, keeping off

the heat. Fish jumped from the creek right into her beak. Bushes fruited ripe berries overnight so she never went hungry. There was nowhere else she'd rather be, not even in the warm embrace of her mother. So she decided she'd stay. Her sisters called to her, begging her to come home with them, but she turned away and swam in the pool of the waterfall.

"Go on," she said over her shoulder. "Tell mother I love her."

What could they do? Their strength was waning; the air was growing cooler every night. The leaves would lose their green and show their true colors soon. The girls' hearts yearned for home. They left without her, sad as could be.

The young girl stayed with her mountain, playing in the creek and catching fish, nesting at the roots of trees, all the while growing colder and frailer. The fish went away. The berries dropped off their stems and rotted. The wind went from cool to brisk to chill, and she started to lose her feather cloak. The mountain did nothing – there was nothing for it to do. It could keep off the worst for her, but it couldn't change the passage of time. She grew hungry and tired. She felt herself growing thin, threadbare, spreading out into a mist. She wandered the drab woods, searching for food to satisfy her, to fill her with warmth and strength, and she moved so slowly and silently it was

like she was hardly there at all.

She traveled all the way down the mountain, and beyond it to the town in the valley. There, she found warmth and light inside homes, and people with strong bodies, laughing and cooking good food and telling stories. She tried to go in, but the doors and windows were locked against her. And it's a good thing they were. You see, bad as I feel for that girl, if she'd gotten in any of them homes, she'd have stolen the warmth from one of them living inside it. She'd have wrapped herself around them and sucked the life right out of them. She didn't mean to hurt nobody, but she was hungry, see. And hunger will turn anyone into a devil. Folks used to leave out food for haints like her when I was a boy: a bowl of grits, or scraps from dinner, especially around Christmastime. That'd do the haints good, at least for a little while, and they'd remember and not harm the family none.

You're probably wondering how I know all this, and what happened to this girl who turned into a haint. I was up in the woods on her mountain early in the morning, tending to my corn harvest, if you know what I mean. It was still dark, not even a sliver of violet on the horizon yet, and so quiet that you could hear a branch break a mile away. Even the squirrels weren't up yet, and I had my rifle with me in case I came upon a bear or

mountain lion. I got my fire started with some brush and warmed my hands with it, and poured some of the coffee from the thermos I brought with me into a cup and took a sip of it. I was pretty content with my station right then. I was a young man, and the cold didn't bother me none, not like it does now. I liked those peaceful mornings in the woods.

Well, I felt something creeping up on me. I looked around, and a thick mist was approaching from my left. It hovered a foot or two above the ground and slipped around the trees, coming slow and steady towards me and my fire. Somehow, maybe from the way it moved, I could tell it wasn't a normal mist. It was deliberate, thoughtful, tense, like a cat stalking its prey. It spread out as it drew near, gauzy and pale, surrounding me on all sides. It was cold, much colder than the clear air around it. I knew the stories about mists that steal your breath and make you so cold you never get warm again. I couldn't run or hide from it, so I did the cordial thing and hoped for the best. I offered a seat by the fire and poured more coffee into the cup and set it on a flat rock.

I took a sip from the thermos itself, and when I set it down again, there was the prettiest girl I ever saw beside me. Long dark hair, eyes so dark they were almost black and caught the light of the fire in them. Long, graceful neck and

arms. She wore a dark, gauzy kind of dress, not near warm enough for the season, and no shoes on her feet. Without even thinking about it, I took off my overcoat.

"You ought to have this," I said. "Where'd you come from? I never seen you before."

She said, "No, I'm not from here. My people are far away. We came here together, but only I stayed."

"Why'd you do that? And where you living? I don't know of any homes up around here, except a shack hunters sometimes use."

"Just on the mountain," was all she said before she took a sip of the coffee, my coat wrapped like a cape over her thin shoulders.

We talked like this for a while, just small talk, while I tended to the business I came there for. She didn't seem to mind it, what I was doing, and I shared my breakfast with her. Eventually, our small talk turned to deeper subjects, and once she saw I could be trusted, she told me the story that I'm telling you. I kinda think she needed to tell someone, to get the weight of it off her.

Now, if I told you I was surprised, that wouldn't cover the half of it. The old folks told me all kinds of stories about haints when I was a young 'un, but as you get older, you believe those stories less

and less. But now I was sitting face to face with a real spirit.

"So what you gonna do?" I asked her when she was done.

"If I can survive the winter," she said, "I'll meet my sisters in the spring and go home with them in the fall."

"What about your mountain? I thought you didn't want to leave it."

"Oh, it'll be here when I return again. Mountains are constant, but I see now I'm not meant to stay. I'm done with my foolishness." She was quiet a minute, and then she said to me, "Thank you for feeding me and letting me sit with you."

I was stoking the fire beneath the still when she said it, and when I turned to tell her it was no trouble, she was gone and had taken my coat with her. There was only the empty cup on the flat stone.

Whenever I was up on the mountain that winter, I left some coffee and breakfast for her, hoping that'd keep her going til spring. Later on, after spring had turned to summer, I found my coat hanging from a tree limb. There were feathers scattered around, and broad, webbed prints in the mud of the creek bank. From that, I knew she was all right. And then, when fall came again and I heard those haunting, deep-throated cries of geese passing above my house, I thought for a moment maybe she was finally going home. ■

Full Immersion

Mike Lewandowski

Deputy Parks muttered to himself, “Good Lord. What’s this guy doing?” The dashcam was on and recording.

“Unit 116. Airport Road west near Melfa. Following a John Deere lawn-mower. Driver is a white male. Green cap. Red tee shirt. Cargo shorts. Possible 10-51 (drunk in public).”

“10-4” was the bored response from Dispatch.

From behind the mower, Deputy Parks flipped on the blue flashing lights.

Woop. Woop/Woop. Woop.

The mower driver pulled onto a side dirt road, crossed a ditch and stopped in a cloud of dust as he was about to enter a large soybean field.

Parks left his patrol car on the road and slowly walked up behind the mower.

“Hey,” shouted Parks. The driver sat hunched over the wheel and looked back at Parks.

“Hey,” repeated the deputy.

“Was I speedin’?” the mower driver shouted back. The offender wore a Bass Pro Shops cap with a jagged white ring around the middle from old sweat stains. His patchy beard was long and wispy and his eyes were half shut. Unwashed light

brown hair hung over his ears and down his neck. Imprinted on the faded shirt in gold lettering was “Brew Thru” and “Outer Banks”. His black Converse High Tops were grass-stained. He was deeply tanned, narrow-shouldered, and had thin arms sporting crudely drawn black ink images of crosses, Bible verses, and skulls. A Bud Light was in his right hand.

“Turn the mower off,” Parks yelled.

The man reached for the key and the engine died quickly.

“What’s your name?” asked Parks.

“Dutch.”

“Where do you live?”

Dutch pointed behind the patrol car.

“Oh, ‘bout two miles back that way.”

“You know it’s against the law to drive a mower on the highway.”

“I’m just goin’ up here to the Stop and Shop. I go every day. They know me.” Dutch was pointing in the direction of an intersection with a traffic light and a corner convenience store.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Today?”

“Sir, how much have you had to drink?”

“I dunno.”

“Do you have a driver’s license?”

"Expired. Can't drive anyway – my wife took my truck keys."

"Step off the mower."

"Why? Is it against the law to mow grass?"

"Just step off the mower."

"I ain't done nothin' wrong."

"Just step off the mower, sir," said Parks, his volume escalating.

"Dammit man. Look, I gotta pee."

"Sir. Step. Off. The mower. Now."

"All right. All right." Dutch swung a leg over the steering wheel. With a little effort, he pushed himself off of the seat and stepped to the ground.

"Pour out the beer."

"Aw man. That's my last one," Dutch mumbled as he straightened almost to his full height.

"Pour out the beer, sir."

Almost crying, Dutch barely tilted his hand and slowly emptied the remaining half of the sixteen-ounce can. Beer gurgled to the ground. He threw the empty over his shoulder.

"Now you're littering." Parks was rapidly losing patience.

"Man, I'm on this road all the time."

"I'm going to have to take you in for being drunk on the road. Put your hands behind your back."

Dutch swayed. Parks spun him around, leaned him over the hood of the

patrol car and cuffed him.

"Ow man! Them things hurt. Why you givin' me such a hard time? I know my rights."

Parks marched Dutch to the rear of the car, opened the door, pushed Dutch's head down so he'd fit into the back seat, and stuffed him in.

Back in the driver's seat, Parks radioed in. "Bringing in a possible 10-55 (intoxicated driver)."

"10-4."

"Hey man. What about my mower?"

"We'll call your wife and get her to pick it up."

"Damn. She'll be pissed. She's at her mama's. Don't even know I'm outta the house." Dutch had a coughing fit and nearly vomited. He reeked of sweat.

With the front windows open in the patrol car, they arrived at the county lock-up. Parks unfolded Dutch and ushered him through the windowless security door on the side of the red brick, one-story building.

"Wellllll. It's ol' Dutch," said Deputy Colonna, who was texting from behind the large duty desk.

"Man, I gotta pee real bad," pleaded Dutch.

The booking process was quickly completed and Dutch was escorted by Colonna through several sliding security

doors to a holding cell. Seven other prisoners were in the cell and were scattered around the walls. They saw Dutch as the barred door was opened and several nodded at him. They seemed to know him.

Dutch went immediately to a stainless-steel toilet and exhaled a long “Ahhhhhh.” He stood there for what seemed like five minutes. Ambling over to a bench next to the longest wall, he sat heavily near a neatly dressed young man whose thick hair was slicked back on top and gathered in a pony tail. The sides of his head were shaved. The other prisoners kept their distance. Dutch leaned over, looked at the floor and showed no concern for his surroundings or recognition of his cellmates. The man seated on the bench moved a little closer to Dutch and mumbled a greeting. There was a slow, quiet, easy exchange between the two.

Deputy Parks sat at his desk and logged into the police records system to complete the necessary forms for Dutch’s arrest. The expired license was issued in the name of Henrik Bork van Berg. Files revealed a series of offenses scattered over thirty years. Dutch hadn’t

committed any violent crimes, but had a long list of misdemeanor convictions for shoplifting, stealing shopping carts, trespassing, urinating in public, bouncing checks and possession of small amounts of marijuana. Most of the charges were dismissed with probation, but due to his repeated trips to the county facility, he had earned six short stints in the state prison system. His behavior while locked up was exemplary. Oddly, guards observed that he was accepted by the various inmate communities. He seemed to have gained some measure of respect and trust, especially with those who were serving long sentences. Neither intimidating or threatening, Dutch moved easily within the walls.

Parks wearily plodded through the required forms. He looked over at the clear plastic bag which held the contents of Dutch’s pockets. Reading glasses, a phone with a cracked face, and a large key ring. A ballpoint pen from Citizens Bank clipped to small notebook with pages of illegible scribble. An old leather wallet containing thirty-four dollars, a tattered library card, and a picture of a smiling woman stuffed into a sun dress. No belt or shoelaces.

A crumpled envelope, which had been in Dutch's back pocket, was addressed to Berg Enterprises with a P.O. Box in nearby Melfa. Small print in the upper left corner showed a return address of DTP on Constitution Street in Philadelphia.

The puzzling envelope was too much

for Parks' curiosity. It had already been torn open, so he reached in and pulled out a tri-folded letter. A check dropped on his desk. It was for three thousand dollars and had been issued by Double Tap Publishing. The letter was dated June 17th and read:

Dear Dutch,
Enclosed is the first advance for your next Henry Vann novel. We always are delighted with your spellbinding mysteries. When you are free, I look forward to discussing the plot and the progress of your research.

Sincerely,
Jordan Ashton
Editor-in-Chief

"What the hell?" Parks gasped.

Henry Vann had written top-selling crime novels for decades. They always involved heists of fabulous proportions. No murder. No guns. Just complicated stories of deception, scams and technological genius. The intricate details felt as if they were being proudly recounted by the diabolically clever perpetrators.

The books told tales of drained bank accounts, pyramid schemes, safes cracked, vanished diamond jewelry, and unique art pieces swiped from secured displays. Suspects were pursued, but the trail was always maddeningly vague and shifting. The offenders were never brought to justice. Perfectly executed capers.

The favorite targets were families with “old” inherited money. Their status was earned in an earlier generation by a patriarch who risked it all and whose entrepreneurial gene had been steadily diluted with each iteration. The villain seemed to take particular delight in humiliating advisors and lawyers who originated from and catered to the families within the closed ring of affluence. These professionals whose annual bonuses were large enough to fund a donated building were the most fun to twist into greed-induced poor judgment.

All of the cops had read the novels and were fascinated with the fast-paced action, tense plots and compact writing style. For a few of the detectives with years of experience, Vann’s fiction had an uncanny similarity to unsolved cases they had investigated during their

careers. The stories contained technical specifics, and, combined with a little creativity, the books could serve as “how to” manuals.

The guys in lockdown read the books too. They knew the stories well and took great pleasure in having a clever crook stick it to the upper crust.

Parks sat in stunned silence and stared at the steel security door which accessed the labyrinth leading to the holding cell.

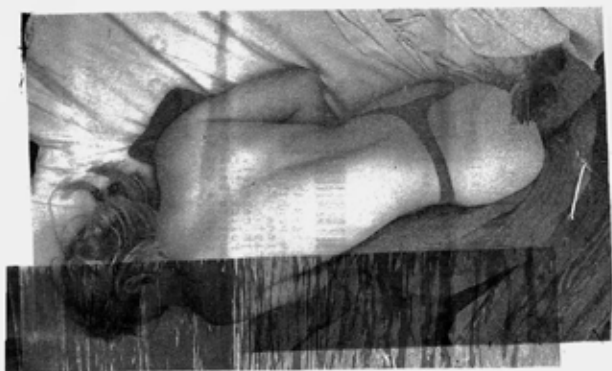
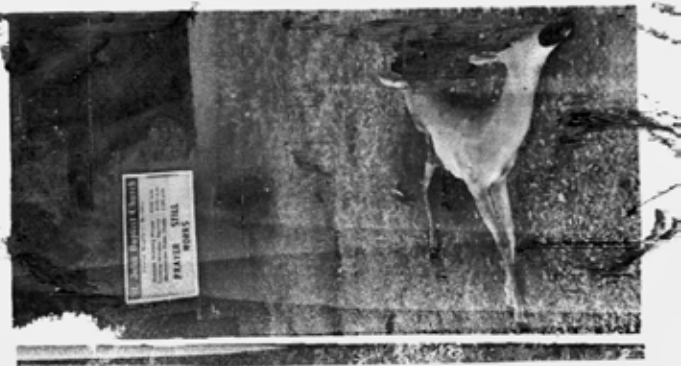
Dutch languished in silence, head against the cell wall, eyes closed, fully resigned to being a guest of the state system for the next several months. Henry Vann was delighted. ■

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dear to him all year long
Lilith Watts



HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*

The Bride of Wellington Woods (A Ghost Story)

Zachary Jones

“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him; yet I will argue my ways to His face.” - Job 13:15

“It is a characteristic conceit of our species to put a human face on random cosmic violence.” - Carl Sagan

“PLEASE, LET ME get home,” he repeated plaintively, softly. His eyebrows tightened against one another, and his heavy breath came and went. “Please, let me get home.”

Alex’s car traveled the road. It was winter, and the road was narrow and curved, barely lit by the headlights offering him relief twenty yards or so at a time. He thought as long as he didn’t see her appear, that frail apparition waiting in the abyss of night, then he would get home safe and laugh at how crazy he was.

He had driven this dark road more nights than he could care to guess. He wasn’t even aware of this absurd ghost and her moronic legend until recently. Before then, the only thing he would have to worry about while out late and

weaving through this isolated stretch of woods was being caught out past curfew. “What could you possibly be doing out after midnight?” his mom had berated him before, charging with a superstitious conviction, “Nothing good ever happens past midnight, young man.”

The legend of the Bride of Wellington Woods was told to Alex a couple months prior. The lore of the woman in white, who spontaneously materializes on the side of Horsebuck Road—the lone road that winds through Wellington Woods—had been circulated by high school students for decades. However, that autumn morning between class periods was the first time Alex had heard it mentioned. “Oh, no, Ally boy. Too bad Horsebuck’s the only road you can take to get to your house. Ooooh,” Wally, a bucked toothed

ferret kid, commented.

However, this comment wasn't exactly true. There was a safer second route one could take to get to Alex's neighborhood, but the geographical inconvenience of this route outweighed the apprehension of taking Horsebuck Road's sinuous trek. Once, Alex's father was bringing him home and Horsebuck was blocked due to fallen power lines. The steel and wood of a cracked pole

could be seen disfigured, collapsed onto the pavement. Black cables were sprawled like arteries. A patrol woman with unfettered indifference instructed each driver to take the alternative way.

"Oh, great. Now, I gotta circle 'round my ass to get to my damn elbow," his father muttered through his teeth. "Something seems to be against us today, Alex. God damn it."

THE KIDS OFTEN added or changed certain details of the legend. As far as Alex knew, it went like this:

The woman was a bride to be. She came from an older time, and she had no name. She was on her way to the wedding, traveling in a carriage, but was stopped by a heinous incident. In one version, she and the rest of her party are garroted by robbers. In another version, her coachman—secretly in love with her, and devastated by the elopement—stops the vehicle mid-journey, enters the cabin, stabs her in the throat, and then draws a pistol on himself, all of it happening too fast for the bridesmaids to react. The version Alex thought to be the saddest though was the one where the bride was a victim of her own elation, brimming with such excitement that she climbed to the roof of the carriage to sonorously sing out her everlasting love for all of God's

creation to hear, only to trip and fall, her neck snapping under the back wheel.

Whichever way it happened, now on strange, still nights, the dead bride will wait by the roadside as pus bubbles from the infected, bloody basin of her esophagus. There she will slowly wave, attempting to cry out for a ride to the wedding she never saw. If you are the hapless driver who sees this ghastly specter, then you have only two options: If you pullover and offer the bride a safe passage to her betrothed, you must look at her directly, for she will study you and gauge your intentions, her rotted shriveled eyes inches from your face, forcing themselves into you. If your intentions are noble and brave, she will attempt to open your door only to fade away as she tries, her body disassembling into mist. You will then be free to go. But, beware. If you do not stop, and instead, pass the bride

out of cowardice or callousness, she will not let you travel far. She will follow you. She will be behind you. In your backseat. The gargle of her fluids will deafen you, and then...

Alex had dismissed the legend the first day he heard it, rolling his eyes and

giving the middle finger to Wally. A couple of nights after, he was driving alone through the woods on Horsebuck. He thought about the bride and laughed. He was slightly giddy and the hairs on his arm rose.

WEEKS LATER, an accident occurred on Horsebuck in the dead of night, and for days it was covered by the local media, causing everyone at Alex's school to gossip about it. A mother with a blood alcohol level of .18 had crashed her Volkswagen Golf. Five children had also been in the car and forensics concluded that they had been shoved into the back, all without seat belts. Three of them had been ejected from the car as it rolled. Two of them had been a neighbor's kids who the

woman was supposed to be watching for the night. She had been known to drink, but no one suspected her alcoholism was that bad. And no one could figure out why she was going down Horsebuck with those kids at four o'clock in the morning.

"The Bride of Wellington Woods got them all, dude," Wally said during lunch. And the table speculated how the bride could somehow fit into the horrific ordeal.

ON THAT WINTER NIGHT, Alex felt forced to think about the drunk woman and the kids. He didn't know why he was fixating on all of it right then as he drove through the matted forest. A faint fog suffused the road, uncurling and creeping over the car like the splayed fingers of a predatory hand, and everything was beginning to look different. Each scenic marking once familiar seemed to distort

itself into some perverse reimagining of an Edenic tableau and Alex squirmed with the budding confusion of lost souls who will soon recognize themselves to be so eternally. The music from the speakers squawked and clanged. The bass rattled his lungs and the singer's howling enraged the pulsation in his ears. He turned the music down, yet still they both continued throbbing in

the silence, each beat pressing harder and harder into his skull. He swallowed saliva to wet his drying throat and told himself to focus; he needed to have all his senses ready, en garde to detect any supernatural assault. "I better be able to see you," he snarled. "It ain't right to attack me for speeding past you if I can't see you." The incoming blacktop before him then seemed to elongate and bend, expanding forward twice as fast as his car could go. The swirling sick of confusion began to overtake the final havens of reason within him. Am I actually taking this seriously? Could I let her stare into me? Will I be able to stare back? He gripped the steering wheel tighter. The car accelerated and swerved over the two yellow lines that bifurcated the coiling track. The trees, no longer bystanders, seemed to assail like venal sentries, their jagged, splintering hands each grabbing as they charged his periphery. Oh, God. Where are you? His eyes began watering. Just get it over with. His chest sucked into itself. He began to see shadows like creatures crawling, each leering within the liminal realm of penumbra the headlights made against the winding banks of ditches. Damn you. Tears began to fall. His throat began to close. Frantically looking around he peered into the rear-view mirror. Transfixed, he saw the

road behind him disappearing, as if a monstrous void were at his heels, erasing the world he knew, all his life ripped into a vacuum. Please, no. He strained to whisper. His face contorted with agony. He felt that this was something pulling him beyond the comprehension of evil, beyond the imposed configuration of the self, descending to a place where relative judgements of the kind could no longer be fathomed to orient status, or to ballast an identity, like the swift disemboweling absence of purpose gifted by all nerves aflame. He would no longer be conscious of his predicament, or able to assign it a value to compare with others, or able to cobble a fortitude with the assurance of cosmic reprieve. No. The insipid meaning of his life, either forged in victory or molded within the comforts of victimhood, would cease to be. Never will there be any construction of story with which to qualify esteem or worth. There will be no suffering. Just instant pain repeating. You will only feel. An endless gasp. The mother tongue of the drowning. A wandering shriek gagged with no memory of respite or vision of refuge. A panicking doll. Doomed to become the mindless embodiment of the loneliest grief.

No... please, not me...Mom...Dad...

And then...

BACK ON THAT late autumn day, as fateful as any other, Silas and his crew had been first on the scene. His firetruck had arrived before the police and the EMS, and he remembered how quiet the scene was. Of course, in hindsight, he knew that this quietude had to be his mind's defense system turning on, allowing him to complete the engine crew protocol. His unit had just blocked off the road and his captain quickly questioned the couple who called in the wreck. The woman was inconsolable, trapped in a cycle of escalated heaving, working herself into an eruption of screams, then ceasing them by burying her face into the man's chest. The man, crying, explained how they came upon the accident. Silas had inadvertently blocked all this out as he approached the Volkswagen. He saw the three children scattered. Two were in the ditch. One was a ways farther, lying in the road. The unit pried open the car and found the other two children and the woman. Each unrecognizable as human. Their bodies were stiff and hollow looking. They did not look peaceful, muted in the blue shades of morning.

Silas was better at keeping his eyes dry and his hands steady this next time. He secretly underwent therapy after the drunk driving accident and deployed his coping methods as he saw Alex's stunned face dangling. The left half of it was caved in, pummeled by a tree branch

that smashed through the driver's side window.

"What do you think? Drinking?" his crew member asked.

"Maybe," Silas sighed. "Looks like a pretty young kid."

"Yeah. Really sad," said his crew member.

"Welp. It ain't our job to find that out" their captain barked behind them both, "Now, hurry up and get those God damn people out of the way for the paramedics."

Later, taking off his gear at the station, Silas wondered about the boy. He wondered whether or not he was drunk. Whether he was texting or messing with the music. Or maybe an animal ran out and startled him. Maybe he was speeding, and the car got away from him. In his bunk, knowing he wouldn't sleep, Silas thought about a conversation he had as a kid with his grandmother. She would pray silently to herself, and Silas would sometimes catch her. "Mamaw, are you praying to Jesus?" he once asked.

"You could say that," she said and smiled.

"Do I have to pray to Jesus?"

"No, not necessarily."

"Do I have to believe in God?"

"No. You just have to accept what is true."

"That there's a God?"

"That there are things that can't be accounted for," she answered. "Forces at

play that we will never know.”

“But,” Silas remembered objecting innocently, “my teacher says we’ve discovered laws and named forces, like gravity, and we’ll keep discovering things and we’ll keep knowing more.”

“That’s true,” his grandmother said and rubbed his shoulder. Her touch comforted him, and with a deep inhale he breathed in her small room that always smelled of citrus and used linens. “Even so,” she continued, “there will always be things we can’t understand or account for, Silas. And these forces are not concerned about us. Not concerned about us no matter how much it seems they ache to possess us or scheme the character of our hearts animation. And no matter how destined we are to perceive such quantum collapses as separate entities of matter and movement, capable of bartering with the so-called will of man, it all remains impersonal. Hevel, hevel, all is hevel is what Solomon is said to have said. And we just have to accept the paths we’re led down.”

Silas, confused by this, remembered looking down and thinking for a moment. After a brief silence, he slowly looked back up and asked, “Like accepting God’s plan?”

“You could say that,” said his grandmother. “He certainly won’t change it for you or me.”

“Then why do you pray, Mamaw?”

Silas couldn’t remember if his grandmother was sad when she answered his last question or if her answer just made him sad. Either way, Silas thought about how she passed years later. Her skeletal figure in the hospice bed. His mom wetting his grandmother’s mouth with a damp cloth and waiting.

He thought about Alex, the drunk mother, the dead children, and all the other bodies he saw and would come to see. He had a better idea about what forces his grandmother meant to accept but couldn’t fully. He thought about how our own bodies, and our own minds can deceive us. And the endless ways we can betray ourselves and others. He wondered if he would always remember each body he saw, or if he would eventually see so many that he’d forget them mostly. Or if they would congregate and lay hidden, somewhere in his being, and somehow influence him. To help write the story of himself. And maybe to help betray him, too.

Maybe one day. At an unwelcome time. ■

Mother's Feeding

Miranda Dearbeck

CERISE SITS in Art History class as Professor Verdino wraps up his lecture. For the past thirty minutes, she feels like her eyes have glazed over. She's too busy thinking about the girl next to her to have room for 20th century art left in her head. Every day, Cerise would sit next to Blair. Usually, Blair would start the conversation by bringing up some place she's been that Cerise has never gone to or some sort of gross animal trivia. In fact, the first thing she said to her was about how birds all have cloacae. Not today, though.

"Hey, um, what do you think of..." What was that lecture about? Cerise glances at the projector. The current slide is a painting of simple shapes in three fields of color. No brushstrokes are visible. The colors are so flat; they appear digital. At the bottom of the slide is the name, Red Blue Green, 1963, Ellsworth Kelly. "...this minimalist thing?" she asks Blair. She scratches her neck.

"Looks like it could've been done in five minutes in MS Paint to me, but that's the art world," Blair chuckles, "Not that it matters. I'm sure the people who can afford it love it."

"It was fine... I guess..." Cerise says. "Would you like to go get some coffee? If it's a good time and you don't have to work or do school things or anything. It's okay if you don't want to." She grips her neck as the itchy scab opens into a colony of small holes like a lotus head. Each hole stings and swells. They dilate. Cerise's neck releases a cloud of scarlet vapor that envelops Blair, whose eyelids droop.

"Dude, my brain feels like it's floating. Can you smell that?" Blair asks. She sinks into her chair. "Can I touch your hair? It looks so soft and fluffy, and I just want to... what were we talking about?" Blair reaches out towards Cerise.

"I was about to ask you if you wanted to get some coffee."

"Anything you want."

BLAIR OPENS THE DOOR to the coffee shop for Cerise. Cerise orders a vanilla macchiato and Blair orders the same. She pays no mind to this, until she crosses her legs, left over right, and taps her fingers. And then Blair follows suit. Her taps have the same exact rhythm as she practically inhales her drink, and then sucks down every drop left in the crevices of the cup.

Cerise tries her coffee, and her esophagus constricts, forcing her to spit it out into a napkin. The skin on her stomach tears, revealing a small mouth positioned vertically along her linea alba. Its teeth are crooked and sharp. Cerise looks down to make sure it hasn't ripped through her shirt. The fabric is still intact, but it's covered with drool and blood. She figures no one has seen the mouth, but she zips her jacket up just in case.

"I'm sorry, I, uh, am not sure what that was." I've gotta get out of here. "Damn. I really don't want to be one of those customers," Cerise searches the room. Hopefully, no baristas heard.

"No, I get it. It tasted like someone threw up in my mouth," Blair laughs. "Where'd you like to go next?"

"Is it okay if we hang out in my car for a while?"

"Absolutely."

Cerise and Blair sit down. Various receipts, gum wrappers, energy drink cans, and ChapSticks scatter around the floor and seats of Cerise's car. She pushes her hands into her eyelids, hiding her face. Cerise attempts to cover the holes in her neck to block her transmitters, but it burns her hand while the vapor seeps through the gaps between her fingers. Blair massages her thigh. Her hand reaches Cerise's stomach, which tightens and bites the tip of her index finger right off. Blood streams out of the wound.

"Fuck!" Cerise screams. She rips off a piece of her skirt and rolls it around Blair's finger. Blair just stares in awe of

Cerise and lunges at her to put her hand in her abdominal mouth. Cerise pushes her away and winds down the window to let the vapor flow out.

She thinks about how Blair used to be, trying to ignore her as she is now. When they first met, Blair was her awakening. When she strolled into class last year, she had a smirk on her face. She sat next to Cerise. Blair wasn't afraid to tell you that you were wrong, and she'd say it with her lips pursed and a side-glance. Cerise was immediately drawn to her long, slender hands and her taste in music. Blair introduced her to a song called "Tom's Diner," and every time she listened to it, she thought of her.

Whenever Suzanne Vega would sing,

There's a woman on the outside

Looking inside, does she see me?

...she's hitching up her skirt

And while she's straightening her stockings

Her hair has gotten wet

Cerise imagined the woman from the song as Blair. The skirt was the same black miniskirt she would wear every Monday. Her stockings, the knee-length bright white ones she would have underneath her black clogs. In Cerise's daydreams, the woman had Blair's ash blonde shag that reaches her shoulders.

Now, she only likes songs Cerise likes. And Blair would never wear clogs again since she would only like what Cerise wears. Blair never cared for dark cabaret! Why is she absolutely ecstatic about listening to "Girl Anachronism."

She taps her feet to the music, jittering with excitement. Cerise hits the pause button on her phone.

“Do you not like this song?” Blair asks.

Cerise thinks for a moment that maybe if she says no, she can test to see if she really is following everything she says. That’ll let me know if she actually likes me. Then I can say I like it and see if she changes her mind. No, that’s so fucked up. But this whole evening is... I need to know. I need to know how my pheromones are affecting her. I wanted her to like me back, but not like this. “No, I don’t.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a chaotic mess.”

“But that’s what makes it good. It really shows how she’s feeling and what’s going on in her head.”

“That’s so cool, dude!” Blair responds instantly.

Suddenly, Cerise’s phone starts to ring. It’s Mother.

“Hi, Mother...” Cerise greets.

“I need to see you, honey. You need to drop your things and get back here. You are missing feeding time,” Mother demands. Her voice gurgles and alternates pitch up and down.

“Mother! It’s only 7pm!” Cerise exclaims, “And I’m twenty years old. God!”

“I know your transmitters have activated. I can sense it. It took you long enough. Bring that man home. Now, sweetie.”

“I’m not with a man.”

“Well, bring her home. Or them. You know I’ll always love you no matter who triggered your pheromones.”

“I’d like to meet your mom! Why not? I can handle any weirdness you guys can throw at me,” Blair interjects.

“Blair, no.” Cerise says, covering her phone’s speaker. She resumes her conversation with Mother. “She’s not coming with me.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to drop you off here.” Cerise gets her wallet out and hands Blair \$15, more than enough for an Uber. She refuses and instead tries to give Cerise \$20.

“Cerise, if you come home alone, it will be the last time you do so,” Mother bellows.

“Fine, Mother.” A quick hello, and I’ll drive Blair back home. Immediately.

CERISE AND BLAIR arrive at Mother’s house. Glass litters the yard from the broken windows and old beer bottles. Several turkey vultures pick at an unidentifiable mound of tissue. Their faces are wrinkled and covered in blood, as is their meal. An older vulture feeds the other one a curved section of meat that resembles a seahorse. The blue shine of the night makes the piece appear glossy. The young one gobbles it down.

“You have vultures here? Oh my god. They’re so cute,” Blair screeches. She never mentioned she liked vultures before. Not once has she shown any interest in birds until now that they’re in Cerise’s mother’s yard.

Mother's house is large but dilapidated. Black mold grows on the sides of the home, which is covered in vines. The roof curves in at the middle. Cerise opens the rusted doorknob, and they walk into the kitchen.

Several of Cerise's sisters have brought men home, offerings for Mother. The first man's hair falls over his eyes as he smiles like an idiot. He's hunched over a woman, so close his sweat drips on her. The man bites his fingers until the skin is raw. The woman is Cerise's older sister, Rachael. She waves to Cerise as she shoves the man into Mother's lightless bedroom.

"There's some beans on the stove. Eat what you want. We already ate. Mom's still working on her meal, though. She wants to meet your new girlfriend," Rachael informs Cerise. The faint sizzling of stomach acid is audible through the door.

"Blair's not my- we just got some coffee! How is she my girlfriend if the only reason she's so obsessed with me right now is because of these chemicals that I keep emitting from my neck! Why won't they stop? You all have control over yours."

"Because we do the fucking dirty work and feed our mom! And you just sit around and moan about your pheromonal dysfunction."

"Girls!" Mother yells from her room. "I need to talk to you, Cerise. Bring your girlfriend in."

Cerise enters Mother's room. She

lies in a bed covered in deep red-brown and yellowish stains, watching a reality show. Cerise notices that there's a clean bed next to her. Mother's form has rotted away, except for her head and a large gaping mouth in place of her lower body. Her face is jaundiced and drooping downward due to gravity. At the end of the bed is her rejected food, a lobe from the finger biter's brain and a pile of his hair. To the right of Mother is a translucent womb with twin daughters inside, both biting their fingers. Mother's neck releases the same vapor as her daughters', but it never relents.

"Hello, dear," Mother whispers. "Oh, you chose such a beautiful girl. She looks delicious." One of Mother's intestines extends and strokes the side of Blair's face.

"Mother, you never eat women!" Cerise yells, clenching her nails into her palms. Her new mouth grinds its teeth. But if so, why would she want Blair here? What is happening to me? Mother grabs Cerise by the waist with her intestine and forces her down on the bed next to her.

"No, but you will." Cerise's abdominal mouth splits up and down her body. It tears her apart from chest to perineum. Her legs fall to the sides of the bed. The mouth expands and fuses with the mattress, permanently gluing Cerise to it. Her skin creeps down the bed as it melts. Her pheromones spread like never before and turn the room foggy and red.

Blair crouches and feels Cerise's leg.

(Continued on page 47)

HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*

**Turquoise Browed
Mot-Mot**

Robert Wynne



She looks up at the mouth and staggers towards it with her pupils dilated. Out of Cerise's mouth comes several intestines that wrap around Blair's body. They pull her in. The mouth engulfs her, tearing her skin away from her body to synthesize it. Each of Blair's organs dissolves in acid. Her hair is vomited back up.

Cerise screams as Blair's body melds with hers. All she can hear over the piercing sound of teeth biting into bone is her last words, "Oh. Oh yes." Cerise's uterus exits from the mouth and a tube attached to it extends to the side of the bed. Their combined DNA circulates around itself and forms a ball of cells. These cells inject themselves into the womb where they attach to the placenta. The development into a seemingly viable infant takes nine minutes instead of nine months. But it does not stop. The womb grows larger and larger to accommodate a toddler.

FIVE HOURS LATER, an adult woman arises from Cerise's womb, covered in blood. A placenta three feet in diameter follows behind her. Cerise picks up the placenta and grips it firmly. The woman peels away her caul. She has the same red hair as Cerise and tall frame as Blair. The woman follows the fallopian tube from the womb to Cerise's stomach. She taps her creator on the shoulder. As she sees her "daughter" for the first time, Cerise knows her fate.

"Mom? Please. Please cut me free," the woman pleads, holding her umbilical cord with both hands, "Mom, you look so

hungry. Please let me go so I can get you a bite to eat." Cerise refuses to look at her.

"I'm not hungry," Cerise insists. Her stomach feels like it is eating itself.

Cerise's mother slips her tentacle-like intestine under her bed. She pulls out a clamp and a rusted pair of scissors. "Shh...Take them. They've never failed me before." Cerise flings them away. They clink when they hit the floor. She holds her new daughter back with her intestine, but she pushes her away and runs for the tools. She clamps her own umbilical cord and cuts it. A stump is left behind.

The door is opened and a beam of light divides the room. Cerise's daughter walks up to Rachael who offers her a pink velvet robe. They disappear from Cerise's view.

Cerise speaks to the woman born of her own mouth, "Whatever they tell you to do, don't bring home any dinner for me. I'm not hungry. I'm not hungry!" She tries to close her large jaws, but her legs will not move. Cerise watches the light from the door become a thin line and vanish. Now, it is just her and mother. She stares at the black mold on the ceiling, averting her eyes from the womb and her mouth.

"Here, put on whatever you want," Mother offers Cerise the remote, but her daughter's eyes do not stray from the ceiling. If she does not look at the mouth, then it is not real. Mother wraps her intestines around Cerise and pets her hair. ■

Homecoming Part I: Sheila

Monique Thompson

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD August was playing in the living room with his trucks when he heard rapping at the front door. He peeked his head into the entryway and saw a man pulling his hand away from the screen door and stepping back slightly. The man was in an oversized tan suit and hat. He smiled at the boy and waved in a friendly manner. August slowly stepped into the entryway and moved cautiously towards the door.

“Hey there, young man,” said the man in the suit. He smiled brightly at August. “Is your mother home?”

August, never taking his eyes off the man, leaned his head back and bellowed, “MOMMMMMMM!”

From the kitchen at the end of the hallway, the instrumental music that was playing softly turned down. “What now, August,” his mother called, slightly annoyed. In the last 20 minutes, she was sure he called her every other minute. Normally, he would come to her and talk to her, but today he’d been shouting at her from whatever room he was in.

“There’s someone at the door,” August called back. He was still eyeing

the stranger. The man made him uncomfortable, and he felt like he needed to keep a close watch on him.

“Oh,” she said with surprise, and came shuffling out of the kitchen. Her dark face was sprinkled with flour, and wisps of hair had come undone from her ponytail. She dusted her hands on her apron, and hurried down the hall towards the door until she saw who was there. She grimaced and considered slamming the door shut.

“What are you doing here,” she snarled, rushing over and yanking August behind her so that she stood between her son and the screen door.

The man smiled at her winsomely. “Sheeeeeiillllaaa,” he called affectionately. “Aren’t you going to let me in? It’s been so long.”

Sheila winced at the man calling her name. It pained her that he thought they were still close. “Go away. You don’t have permission to be around here. And you ain’t allowed to come into my home.”

The man’s eyes twinkled as if she had just told him a funny joke. “But Sheila, I missed you so much and I want to come

home.”

Sheila snorted. “There ain’t no home for you here. Now go away.”

He took a step towards the door, and even though his face remained happy to see her, his tone became sinister. “Don’t you want to hang out like old times? I hear Jaime’s back in town. We can see what he’s up to.” He chuckled. “Even if you don’t miss me, I know you miss him.”

Sheila sneered at the man in disgust. “I’ve had enough of your lies. And I’ve told you to stay away from me. August, go get my weapon.”

The boy took off running up them. His small body almost flew up the stairs. Once he reached the landing, you could hear his little feet pounding on the floor above.

“Now why you gotta go and do that for,” the man asked menacingly, and sneered equally in disgust at her.

He kicked her screen door angrily. “Now why you gotta go and do that for!”

Sheila stepped closer to the screen door. “I am not afraid of you.”

“Yeah,” he said softly, stepping towards the door. Then he spun around quickly and throwing his arms wide open yelled, “What about us?!”

August ran down the stairs and slid his mother’s weapon in her hands at the same time seven people appeared in their yard. The new people began walking towards their house menacingly. There were four men and three women, varying in height, weight, and complexions. All of

them had different styles of clothing, one barely had any.

“Hello, love. Won’t you let me come in?”

Sheila turned to look at the new man who said those words and quickly averted her eyes. He was shirtless and his dark eyes beckoned her to come closer. He was the most handsome man she had ever met in her entire life, and her body instantly reacted from just a glimpse of him. He called to her again and she forced herself to ignore him. His voice was silky smooth and dripped with wicked promises. It seemed to caress her skin, and she knew that he wasn’t only talking about letting him in her house.

Another man, with large muscles and murderous eyes, was furiously punching and kicking at the walls of her house. He was shouting obscene language and threatening to kill her and August if they didn’t open the door. A woman, lethargically lounged in one of their yard chairs smoking weed and laughed sluggishly. She egged the others on but was too lazy to walk any further.

August took a step backwards, afraid of what was happening. Instantly a different man with dark, curly hair and watery eyes appeared with his face pressed against the screen door. He breathed deeply and his eyes stared longingly at the boy. He began clawing at the glass.

“Is that fear I smell,” he whispered softly, his breath fogging the glass. “Are you inviting me in, young one? I promise

I won't hurt you."

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind," Sheila stated.

Fear hissed, disappeared, and reappeared at the bottom of the porch stairs. He stood the farthest away and was rubbing at his arms aggressively where a bright red rash had appeared.

Sheila lifted the bible that August had put in her hand and opened it. "I said that you're not welcomed here but if you insist, I will defend me and mines."

The unwanted visitors all took a step back simultaneously except for the one in the chair. In an attempt to get away she fell over and tiredly pulled herself up with the chair. The expressions on each of their faces ranged from slight worry to pure hatred. A beautiful woman dressed from head to toe in designer clothing walked forward, taking off her shades. Her long hair floated behind her ever so gently as if she had her own personal wind. Her makeup was flawless, and she smiled sweetly with sparkling white teeth at Sheila through the screen.

"You know," said Vanity, "if you let me in, we can make Jaime pay for all he's done. He called you a fat cow and told you that you were ugly. But together we can show him. We can—"

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised," Sheila responded.

Vanity's words brought back insults Jaime hurled at her towards the end

of their relationship. She had honestly thought she had healed from them. And she also knew an underhanded insult when she heard one. She looked down at the black and white dress she was wearing. Jaime had said a lot about her and called her many names, but she did not recall him ever calling her a fat cow.

Vanity screeched as her shades cracked to pieces and a red gash formed across her face. "That's why no one will ever love you! You'll die an old hag!" Vanity began screaming more insults and curses.

Sheila ignored them and began praying, "O Lord, turn my eyes away from worthless things and preserve my life according to your word. My God, I repent of the wicked things in my heart that I desired. I renounce them to You, and I replace those vile desires with heavenly thoughts. I want nothing more than Your presence and Your Word to wash over me."

The demons began screaming as red gashes and boils began appearing on their skin. They fell to their knees and writhed around in agony. Their fake appearances began melting away and their true hideous forms came to light.

"You, Lord, are my light and my salvation. You, Lord, are my strength and my song. Of whom shall I be afraid when You walk with me through the valley of death? You are my shepherd, Lord, and I will fear no evil."

One by one they began disappearing

until only Pride in his oversize suit remained. He had lost his hat, and his clothes were ripped in areas. His head had begun transforming into a mass of tumorous, pink lumps. One of his eyes was bigger than the other and a sharp row of teeth snarled at them from behind thin red lips.

"All you had to do was let me in," he wheezed, staggering weakly to his feet. "All you had to do was let me back in!" He crashed to his knees and looked at them angrily.

"I'm not that person anymore. I've renewed my mind and offered my body as a living sacrifice to God. I am a new creation in Jesus Christ. The old me is gone."

At the name of Jesus, Pride fell to his face. He felt as though a giant foot had stomped onto his back and he could no longer look up. He weakly reached a hand towards Sheila thinking, you used

to be so prideful; that's why you stayed in that abusive relationship for so long; you thought you had everything under control until you didn't.

Sheila opened her bible to James chapter 4, verse 7 and recited, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Pride's hand fell and right before it hit the ground, he disappeared. Sheila looked at the empty yard and began praising God. She remembered a time when she would have given in and walked herself into bondage. August seeing his mother worship, began worshipping too.

Sheila turned to August. "Come on. We're going to anoint this house down and pray, and then I'll finish making those cookies for you. And tomorrow, we're going on a fast."

She walked towards the living room where she had a bottle of anointing oil and August followed her. ■

Inspired by:

Matthew 12:43-45 NKJV

⁴³ *"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none."* ⁴⁴ *Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order.*

⁴⁵ *Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."*

References:

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THIS JOURNAL CONTAINS the winning
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at Brightpoint Community College.

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