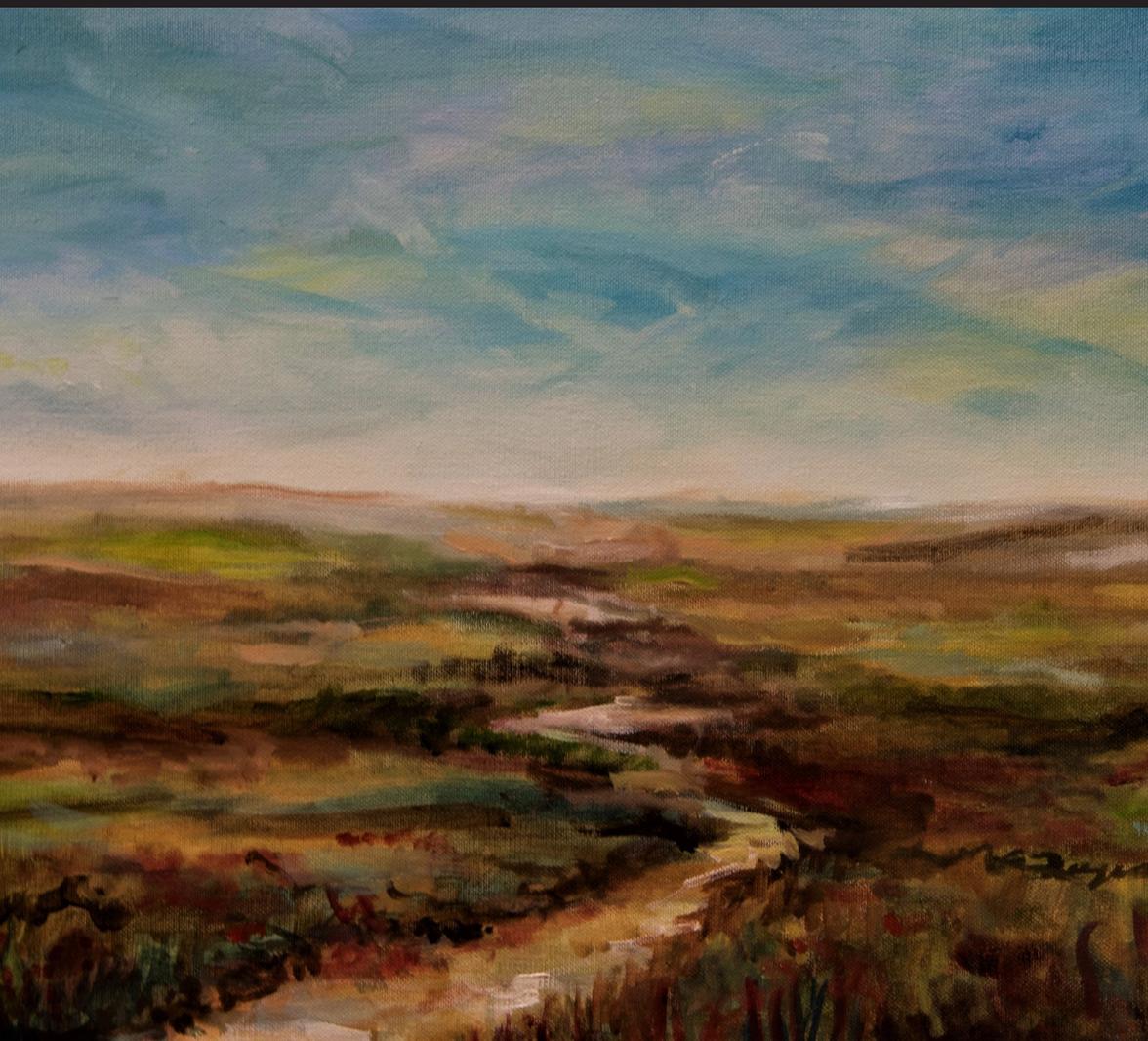




TOUCHSTONE



Kansas State University

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Spring 2019

Kansas State University

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A Note From the Editor

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to present to you the second edition of *Touchstone* since its return to print in 2018, and as we celebrate the creativity and talent of this year's featured writers and artists, we cannot help but acknowledge with profound gratitude the path that was forged for us last year, which we now follow with somewhat more ease thanks to the hard work of those who came before us.

The return to print also marked a shift in the identity of the magazine itself. Its binding, cover art, logo, and yes, even its marketplace bind and bookend this collection of creative work – they make it tangible, flippable, foldable, and savable. *Touchstone* continues to change, though, and this year, our primary objective was to feature more work by Kansas State students. We wanted to create a publication that is meaningful to large swaths of the K-State community and that would capture in a sort of snapshot the ideas, attitudes, and inspirations that have gripped the creative minds of our campus this year. The extent to which we've succeed, we leave up to you. However, this year's magazine, perhaps even more than last year's, sings a song of Kansas. A sort of nostalgic longing, as if for paradise lost, pervades much of the work, and in some pieces, the love for the prairie is inescapable. As you read, I hope that, whether you share these feelings or not, you wonder about it. After all, this book will presumably exist far longer than you or I, and it is fascinating to imagine what it says about us, those Kansans studying, loving, *living* in 2019.

I owe thanks to many people for the successful publication of this issue. I'd first like to thank Jason Teal and the previous

editor, Gavin Colten, who laid the foundation for what we hope will be many print issues to come. They showed us the way, often literally, and their contributions to *Touchstone* will never be forgotten. I'd like to thank Kaitlin Vincent and Gaby Deanda for their constant support in maintaining *Touchstone's* activities throughout the year. I especially appreciate Kaitlin Vincent's talent for social media and her dedication to looking after our website, even during her busiest moments. I'd like to thank a spectacular team of genre editors: Anna Meyer, Maddie Pospisil, and Vilune Sestokaite. Many thanks also go to Mawi Sonna, our art editor, as well as our wonderful copyeditor, Katie Cline, who coordinated a team of talented assistants under a very tight deadline. Many thanks to you all!

Finally, I must express an inordinate amount of gratitude to *Touchstone* advisor, Dr. Kimball Smith, and Department Head, Dr. Karin Westman, whose guidance throughout this process has been invaluable, and to the Creative Writing faculty and the rest of the English department, I hope we've put out a publication befitting the rich community of writers that call Kansas State University "home."

Alyssa Cook
Editor-in-Chief

Contributors

(In order of appearance)

Savannah Winkler is a senior at Kansas State University and writes fiction and poetry. She has been published in *Teen Vogue* and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. Follow her work on Twitter @savannahshea_ or at icedcoffeepoetess.wordpress.com.

Macy Davis is a senior at Kansas State University and writes poetry and fiction. She will be published in the *I-70 Review* and is a member of ChALC and Sigma Tau Delta. She serves as an English Ambassador and department office assistant. Follow her work on Twitter @bookishlybright or at www.contextualizingtheclassics.wordpress.com.

Rachel Hermes is a senior at Kansas State University and works with oil and copper etching. She is a member of the K-State Painting Society. Follow her work on Instagram @rehermesart or at www.rachelhermes.com.

Desiree Schippers is a senior at Kansas State University and writes creative nonfiction and produces documentaries. Follow her work at bigknuckleproductions.myportfolio.com.

Aaron Cole is a senior at Kansas State University and works with printmaking and graphic design. Follow his work on Instagram @aaronwaldnercole.

Jimmy Portella is a senior at Kansas State University and writes poetry and fiction. Follow his work on Instagram @jimmy_portela.

Changming Yuan writes poetry and has been published in *The Origin of Letters*. Follow his work at poetrypacific.blogspot.ca.

Brenna Leahy is a senior at Kansas State University and writes fiction. Follow her work on Twitter @Brenna_Leahy.

Madeline Smith is a senior at Kansas State University and works with oil and canvas. Follow her work at artbymadelinesmith.com.

Cameron Morse writes poetry and has published work in *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, and *South Dakota Review*. His first published collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award, and his second collection, *Father Me Again*, is available from Spartan Press. Follow his work on Facebook @cameronmoresepoems or at cameronmorsepoems.wordpress.com.

Lynn Snyder writes poetry and literary nonfiction. Follow her work on Twitter @linenk.

Holly Day writes poetry and nonfiction and has been published in *The Cape Rock*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Gargoyle*. Nonfiction publications include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano and Keyboard All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *Stillwater, Minnesota: A History*. Poetry collections include *A Perfect Day for Semaphore*, *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing*, *In this Place*, *She Is Her Own*, *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy*, and *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes*.

Sophia Brooks is a 2018 graduate of Kansas State University and writes poetry and fiction. Follow her work on Twitter @Sophie10B.

Rachel Lord is a senior at Kansas State University and works with oil paint. She is a John Weary Art Scholarship recipient and member of the K-State Painting Society. Follow her work on Instagram @rachellordart or at rachellordart.wixsite.com/mysite.

Cheyenne White is a 2018 graduate of Kansas State University and writes creative nonfiction.

Seth Strand is a senior at Kansas State University and works with charcoal. Follow his work on Twitter @SpcStrand, on Instagram @Seth_Strand, or at strand0.wixsite.com/sethstrandart.

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The Apple Tree

Savannah Winkler

Lily was at Bible Study, memorizing Exodus 22:18 and eating a sugar cookie, when her sister began to levitate. It wasn't until Evie was touching the ceiling that Lily realized her sister wasn't sitting next to her. Lily looked up and dropped her sugar cookie. Their Bible Study teacher, Miss Mills, shrieked. Evie was looking down at them, a blazing smile across her face. Her flushed cheeks matched the red hair around her shoulders.

“Hey Lily,” Evie said. “Can you go get Mom?”

But Mom and Dad were already rushing down the hall. Mom clutched the cross around her neck. “Finally!” Mom wiped a tear as she looked up at Evie. “I knew it would be you.”

The entire church gathered in the recreation room. Pastor Richards bought a red velvet cake and blueberry muffins. Bibles, with their worn edges and covers, were left forgotten on the tables. Lily stood in a corner and listened to her mother talk to the other women.

“We had been expecting it.” Mom took a sip of lemonade. Lily watched as a drop of it landed on Mom's crisp purple blouse. “I already have a list of schools. All the best ones, of course.”

“You're so lucky,” Janice said. She was eyeing her own daughter, a pale girl named Abby who tended to trip over her own feet.

“I know,” Mom sighed. Lily followed her mother's eyes. She was watching Evie run around the room, shooting purple sparks from her fingertips. “She's going to look so cute in those little plaid skirts.”

Lily left the shadowy corner and headed towards Dad. She noticed he was talking to Pat Graysmith, the man who owned the other hardware store in town and always sold more

wrenches. The redness in Dad's cheeks told Lily she should go somewhere else, so she went to the dessert table. The blueberry muffins, her favorite, were already gone.

Lily sat on the floor and ate a dry piece of red velvet cake. She watched Miss Mills play the old piano and Pastor Richards fan himself with his Bible. The toddlers broke out into giggles as Evie levitated around the room.

As Lily looked at the church members around her, she realized one was looking back. Noah was leaning against the wall and staring at her.

Lily swallowed, stood up, and walked over to him. The trembling sensation in her stomach told her to turn back but she didn't.

"Hey," Noah said. "I like your dress."

Lily smiled. Noah always wore a short chain on his pants and on it he hung all of his favorite keychains. Lily loved all the bright colors, like turquoise and yellow. She especially loved the little green elephant that always had a grin on its face, so she could barely move when Noah suddenly unhooked the green elephant and handed it to her.

"I was wondering if you could give this to your sister?"

Lily nodded, the taste of metal rising on her tongue. She slipped the elephant into the pocket of her dress. She was going to ask Noah if he wanted to go with her to the church's rummage sale next weekend, but he had already walked away.

Lily stood there for awhile, touching the tiny elephant in her pocket. She thought about taking a piece of cake to her father, but he was still red-cheeked and fuming. Mom was surrounded by more fellow church women. Lily thought their lipsticks were too shiny and their laughs too loud. They drank more lemonade and gushed over Evie, who was floating towards the ceiling again. Lily could hear the other children squealing with joy as she left the recreation room.

Paintings of Jesus and photographs of old Pastors watched Lily as she walked through the church. She kept her eyes down

and focused on the carpet. It was a color she had known since she was a baby. Red like black cherries.

Lily made her way past the photographs and paintings. She went out the back entrance and greeted the spring breeze. The lawn behind the church was green and smooth. It was where they had face paintings in the summer and caroling in the winter. A single apple tree stood in the middle of it all.

Lily walked up to the apple tree, which was drenched in the light of the pale moon. The apples on its branches were scarce and small. They looked more like swollen, bloody grapes. Pastor Richards had said he doubted the apples would ripen that year. They hadn't the year before, either. Mom had said the church should cut it down.

Looking at it now, Lily couldn't imagine anyone taking an ax to the tree's dark trunk. She knew that nothing, not even the strongest bolt of lightning, could take it down. She grabbed onto the lowest branch and started to climb.

Lily made it up two more branches before she slipped and fell. She didn't remember falling. One minute she was in the apple tree, and the next she was lying in the grass. The moon glowed through the leaves and branches above her.

She thought that maybe if she was strong enough, good enough, then she could just snap her fingers and turn those dying apples into little moons. They would become white and blue and float through the night sky. Lily would follow them and fly towards the moon. She would take the little elephant out of her pocket and let it fall to the earth.

She would watch the church disappear, but she wouldn't go back. She would just keep soaring.

On Walking into the Woods after Lights Out at Summer Camp

Macy Davis

Summer feet speak of cheese grater
paths and the same pair of sandals
calluses peeling into wide skin swaths

I use to floss beer can revelry out
of my teeth, getting drunk on bleeding
gums. What do boys around a bonfire

find more beautiful: My mercenary smile
or the way I swallow their smoke mouthed
jokes and regurgitate as a “total bro”?

Another laugh at the little light weight.
Three drinks in and spinning sorry summersaults
into the lap of the swimming instructor.

Natty Light condensation drips from his
hand onto my hip. Where are the mosquitos
I have been expecting to snack on me

since the first moment I jabbed the
nail of this place into my palm?
Rub dirt into an open wound.



Dreaming of Lambs, oil on canvas, 24x28 by Rachel Hermes

Hands

Desiree Schippers

I follow my mother down the brightly lit corridor toward his room. I hope that he's asleep. I hope that there isn't much discussion, that we can just sneak in and out without being noticed, staying just long enough to say we've been there. My shoes squeak on the floor, the room smells like alcohol rub and sterile laundry. The M*A*S*H theme song plays quietly from the television, and I desperately try to find an appropriate place to rest my eyes. They find refuge staring at the massive, calloused hands resting on the outside of the covers. His hands, the oil stained hands of a mechanic, seem out of place in the crisp cleanliness of the room. A silvery white scar spans the length of the left thumb. I wonder if the old wound was caused by a slip of a knife in the kitchen, or a mishap while repairing the motor of his run-down Toyota. Before thoroughly pondering the question, the form under the overly bleached sheets starts to stir. Panicked, I shift my gaze to the floor, feeling as if I am intruding on a situation where I don't belong.

“Hey, kid.”

His voice was hoarse, yet familiar. It brought to mind a few vague associations, Christmas once or twice as a child and the occasional drunken voicemail, quickly turned off and dismissed by my blushing mother. Turned off, but never deleted.

“Hi Grandpa,” I said, the words tasting funny in my mouth.

My mother had told me many stories about my grandfather's hands, oftentimes after a glass of wine or two. She told me how those hands used to come down on her and my grandmother like wrecking balls, how they tore her family apart. With her own pale hands shaking, she described how one winter he had abandoned them, refusing to pay the electric bill, leaving them at the mercy of the bitter cold. She remembered

my grandmother's grateful embarrassment when the Red Cross came to their door with food and blankets. She could give a detailed recollection of the night my grandmother loaded her in the station wagon in search of my grandfather and found his unfaithful hands wrapped around another woman.

Those hands should have disgusted me. I should have wanted them as far away from me as possible. Nobody would have blamed me if I had spit on those hands, turned my back, and never saw them again. But instead, I timidly approached them, sat down on the hard hospital bed, and took one of them into my own.

* * *

“Oh no,” Aunt Stacie gasped. “Oh god no. Why? Just... why?”

Curious, I looked in her direction. Like my mother and I, she was knee deep wading through my grandpa's mountain of stuff. 60 years' worth of items, from high school sports trophies to an unreasonable amount of cat food, spread in a collage on the floor in front of us. Nobody would have ever guessed that this much junk could have been holed up in his tiny, one bedroom home. On the inside, it smelled of stale cigarettes and cat urine. On the outside, the chimney leaned precariously to the left, and the yellow paint was so faded and peeling that it looked as if a strong wind could have blown it away. It was my first time in the house, and I wondered what it would have been like to have spent my childhood here. Would I associate the shag carpet with competitive games of Candy Land? Would the dark wood paneling take me back to a Christmas many winters ago, when my brother was a red-faced baby and Santa Claus and Jesus were still people I believed in? My mother's voiced pulled me from my thoughts.

“Stacie, that's disgusting. Don't touch it! Put it down!”

But it was too late. Stacie's nose was already burrowed deep into the magazine, her blue eyes wide and curly blonde hair poking haphazardly out of her scrunchie. The expression she wore is what I imagine she looked like as a child.

“Oh guys, this is sick. Look! It’s Bill Cosby!”

My mother snatched the magazine out of her hand and instantly erupted with laughter. I peered over her shoulder at the glossy 1970s Playboy and felt my ears flush red.

“God, why does he have this shit?” Stacie said.

“Why did he do half of the stuff he did?” my mom asked.

She and Stacie exchanged a look. Intimate and exclusive, they shared more of a connection in those few seconds than I’ve ever experienced in hours of conversation with them. After a little while, we went back to digging through the piles. I found a gold tooth, some military medals, and Stacie’s social security card. Pretending not to hear, I listened to my mom and Stacie rediscover memories that had been buried deep for years. They weren’t fond, and they weren’t happy, but I felt a pang of envy in my stomach while hearing them recount the stories. I stared at them and longed to be included, to be one of them. I realized this was silly, that nobody should want to have gone through what they went through, and that if they had the choice they would probably go back in time and change it. But in that moment, their past was beautifully complicated, drawing them closer together, and I wasn’t a part of it.

I spent nearly every day with my grandpa after his stroke, watching him undergo physical therapy, helping him brush his teeth and hair, or simply sitting next to him while he watched television. After his time in the hospital was up, he was officially declared incapable of living alone, forcing him to be placed in our local nursing home, a four-hour drive from where he’d spent most of his adult life pretending we didn’t exist. The stroke took his short-term memory, upper levels of cognition, and his freedom, something he seemed to value most. He was suddenly forced to rely on the family he had forsaken so long ago. In order for Medicaid to pay for his nursing home bills, we were required to sell everything he owned: his house, garage, race cars. The only things he could keep were his clothes and what he could fit in his 12 by 12 nursing home room. His girlfriend at the time left

him, and he had to give away his beloved cat, Scummy. Worst of all, he had to quit smoking, a habit he had indulged in for over 35 years.

Most people would call it Karma. They would say that he is suffering the consequences of his actions. Paying his penance. Getting what he deserved. However, I couldn't bring myself to hate him or even resent him. For a while, I tried to make sense of him. I wanted to know why he did what he did, what made him so selfish. I wanted to know if he was happy with himself, or if he had any regrets. But, most days he couldn't even remember what he had for breakfast, and I was happy when he could muster the mental capacity to remember my name. He behaved as if everything was as usual, like we had known each other for years, as if he'd always been a grandpa and father. It's almost as if he got a second chance at being what he could have been, except for now he is confined to his wheelchair and the dementia ward at Prairie Senior Living Complex, his hands folded in his lap.

* * *

“Hello? Hello? God damnsumbitch. Pick up the phone damnit!”

His voicemails aren't that much different than they used to be. He still cusses and slurs his words. But now, it's for different reasons.

He calls me everyday, usually more than five times a day, sometimes more, depending on his condition. Today I pick up the phone and remind him that I'm in college, like I always am on Tuesdays, and that we can eat lunch together. This usually calms him down, looking forward to having company. In the four years following his stroke, we've spent the countless hours together. What started out as ritual visits to the nursing home to see him turned into me establishing relationships with other residents and staff, eventually resulting in full time employment at the facility.

I don't know why I did it. Part of me wants to say that the moment I saw him, a scared, broken human being, my natural instincts kicked in, and I selflessly jumped into action without a

second thought. But that's bullshit. I've read enough Ayn Rand to have developed a cynical take on altruism. I've also wondered if it was some sort of religious act. As if somewhere deep down, I internalized a Sunday school lesson about reaching out to sinners.

I've often felt guilty about being so close to him. Most days we aren't even that nice to each other. I'll come and watch TV in his room while he cusses and rants about wanting to go home. He'll ask me for cigarettes, and I'll lie and tell him that I'm not old enough to buy them. I know there are other people in the facility who would better appreciate my company, yet there I sit, with him. His redeemable traits are few, he's often irritable and unkind. We don't share any special hobbies, and we aren't particularly similar. But when we first connected, he at his lowest and I in a confusing state of teenagerhood, he helped me realize what I wanted to do with my life. Spending time with him at the nursing home directed me toward an education in Gerontology, a field where I can learn about and advocate for people just like him. Though I think fondly of the relationship we've developed, I often feel a creeping sense of guilt for being so close to him. When my grandma passed away, about two years before my grandpa's stroke, I wasn't there for her. I didn't drive the nine hours to go be at her deathbed. I loved her and cared for her, yet I wasn't there in her time of need. Now, I sit with her abuser and wonder if she would be angry with me if she knew.

Sometimes I try to summon her in my memory. In the picture in my mind, she wears a yellow dress that ends just above her ankles. She has long blond hair that she's teased out in a 1980s-like style. I can smell the thin cigarette that rests between her fingers. Her nails are painted pink and her tiny little hands couldn't look any more different than my grandfather's.

Maybe, due to my age and distance, I was too far removed from my grandfather's actions to feel what I needed to in order to hate him. I realize that after his stroke I could have put in my ten-minute visit and then turned my back. Nobody would have blamed me. I don't know why I clung to those ugly, rugged hands

and I don't know if I ever will. But, I do know exactly where I'll be every Tuesday at 12:00.



Under the Surface, 12x15.5 by Aaron Cole

I Can't Watch the Storm Blow

Jimmy Portela

Mother slept in when the school bus arrived.
A distant bus ride, but a brief car drive.

Father was up before the sun's bright eye
and home when the day birds no longer fly

The flaky-white rumbling fridge held his prize,
Case of Blue Ribbon, that spark in his guise

The walls closed at night, of the cold and storm.
Mother still sleeping, the same lifeless form.

Father cracked aluminum, in a gale
a glass heart, amidst a schism and hail

A storm drew closer, the walls ever still.
Distance grew longer, rumble on a hill

Dog bark in the yard like thunder, spoken.
Tempest house, the people inside, broken.

Sonnet in Infinitives

Changming Yuan

To be a matter when there's no question
Or not to be a question when nothing really matters

To sing with a frog squatting straight
On a lotus leaf in the Honghu Lake near Jingzhou

To recollect all the pasts, and mix them
Together like a glass of cocktail

To build a nest of meaning
Between two broken branches on Ygdrasil

To strive for deity
Longevity and
Even happiness

To come on and off line every other while

To compress consciousness into a file, and upload it
Onto a nomochip

To be daying, to die

Stay

Brenna Leahy

It was dark out, even though it wasn't late yet. The darkness had been there since I woke up this morning. It was the type that sticks with you throughout the day, wraps itself up in you and wears you. I almost rolled over and stayed in bed this morning, but I had an essay due midway through the day, and I needed the money too badly to skip work no matter how cold it was outside my blanket.

The cookie dough in front of me was frozen solid. The other delivery driver for Insomnia Cookies, Miguel, was probably in the back room, the drivers' room, getting high. I separated out the cookies that looked like they had freezer burn and placed the surviving dozen neatly on the sheet lined with wax paper. It was almost clinical. The method is timed down to the last second. I didn't need to mentally present as I went through the steps – I just needed to set the timer and remember to always produce an evenly baked cookie. This wasn't technically in my job description, but the official baker, Addie, took smoke breaks with an alarming frequency and I would cover for her.

My mother taught me how to bake. We made cream puffs and pies out of flour and butter and so much sugar, pressed and baked to asymmetrical perfection. This was much easier, and the cold feel of the dough bleeding into my fingers made me feel less homesick, closer to the familiar leisurely numbness.

I snapped off my disposable gloves. They left a chalky dust that clung to my skin. I turned on the sink with my elbow, slathered my hands with soap, and started to scrub. I could see my tattoo snaking out from beneath my hoodie, tendrils of black ink hiding underneath the suds. The tattoo sunk down my arm, took over the translucent skin on my wrist. The ink formed the last city that had felt like home to me, shrouded in clouds and fading at the edges. It was a bigger city than this

one, and it felt more like home. I had almost stayed.

When I got my first tattoo I was afraid to tell my mother. I knew what she thought about tattoos, and I knew that she had a certain notion of who got them. I think she expected the ink to spread across my skin like a disease, to take over the daughter she raised, the person she painstakingly formed me into. When she found out about it over Thanksgiving break – and there was no question that she would find out, it wasn't discreet – he didn't say anything overtly bad about it. She just asked how much it cost, and then her lips pressed together in a thin line until we started talking about something else.

“Hey,” Miguel said, making me jump. I had made the cookies in a trance, filled up the heated drawers that sat waiting beneath the cash register.

“Hey, sorry,” I said. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I've been told I make no sound when I move, so really this one's on me,” he said, laughing. Miguel had obviously been smoking. His eyes were glinting at me in the light from the fluorescents, his pupils huge and deep.

“You having fun back there?” I asked.

He smiled at me, the skin around his eyes creasing in a fan of deep lines. I thought about how they would look when he was older, of all the delicate lines that would decorate his face.

“I don't know what you mean, Erin.”

“You have got to get me one of those pens, you don't smell like weed for once,” I said.

“Right? They have revolutionized getting high at work for me. If you give me thirty bucks I can get one for you,” he said.

“Oh yeah? Do you know a guy?” I said.

“I know a guy. Anyway, uh, do you want to come over tonight? It's not like a party party or anything, but my room-mates and a few other friends are going to hang out at my place if you want to join.”

“After work tonight? I don't mean to sound old, but fuck

I'm tired," I said. I knew I looked exhausted, too. We all did. The manager who had hired me had been fired a month ago, and we were all overscheduled to the point of exhaustion.

"No, no, no, you'll have so much fun. There will be weed, and snacks, and beer..."

There was a pause.

"I have some water..."

"Whoa, you have water? Why didn't you lead with that?" I said, smiling at him.

"I know you're making fun of me, but does this mean you're in?"

"I might stop by," I said.

"Erin, my cat misses you. You should come-- -- you know the place. Do you have any orders for me?" he asked, his face tightening as his eyes shifted to Addie walking back through the door, holding a plastic bag in her hand.

"You can go back if you want. I've got nothing."

Addie looked up at us as she walked. Her face had gotten bird-like in its thinness since I had known her in high school. Her exhaustion looked bone-deep today. She was older than me, my brother's age. We had both moved out here to go to school, but she dropped out when she had her son.

Miguel pulled out his pen, took a long hit and said "I will be in my office, ladies," as he exhaled and walked away. Sometimes when I saw Addie I thought about the time I had seen her get arrested. It was like a compulsion. Maybe I did it to make myself feel better on off days, I don't know. It had been during Fall Fest, our old town's annual celebration, and I had been paused on the Ferris wheel with my first boyfriend-- -- the nice one-- -- when I saw her down below. She had been so angry that she had screamed when the cop arrested her. He had dragged her down the sidewalk to the station, kicking her long legs and trying to flip her body out of his grasp like a fish. I think she had stolen candy from the gas station, I'm not sure. It felt wrong to watch.

As she walked past me the cigarette smell made my nose

tingle. I sniffed and rubbed my nose, trying not to sneeze. I think she noticed.

“What’s up?” she asked. The skin under her eyes was sunken and dark, and her face looked drawn.

“I’m fucking tired,” I said, and shot her a smile.

“God, so am I,” she said. She sat on the stool in front of the cash register. “Thanks for getting us stocked up on cookies.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem. I get pretty bored back there. Nothing against Miguel, it’s just the driver’s room is actually more of a storage room with a single folding chair.”

Addie laughed. “Yeah, don’t forget about the dead crickets.”

“How could I?” I said, leaning against our walk-in freezer. “So what’s up? You look exhausted.”

“Yeah. I am. I don’t know.” She started to say more when the computer announced an order. “Fuck, is it your turn to take this or Miguel’s?” she asked.

“Is there a good tip?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yes, actually.”

“Then it is my turn,” I said.

The cookies were always bundled up in a carrier bag, so they stayed warm. I carried them to my car and opened the passenger side with a squeak to lay them gently down. I shoved the skeleton of one of today’s caffeinated beverages to the ground to make room. I should have worn gloves-- my car has a heater, but it doesn’t work for at least the first fifteen minutes of any trip. At least it wasn’t icy this time.

I parked in the street and made sure my mascara wasn’t smeared, that my hair was tucked correctly into my hat, and leaned over the driver’s seat to reach the cookies. I saw headlights reflecting on my windshield. They illuminated the gore of all of the unwashed, dead bugs.

“Hey, turn around!” A white truck was idling behind me, with a guy hanging out the passenger window. One of his arms was draped down the door of the truck—I didn’t focus on his face, just the fact that he was there. I decided to keep my head

down, get to the house and ignore it. My phone had an app on it that was tracking my location for work. Someone knew where I was. My feet took me to the sidewalk, my eyes were glued to the directions on my phone as my shoulders started to tighten, my heart started to speed up.

“You should learn to answer when you’re spoken to, bitch!” he called after me, his voice carrying over the well-manicured lawn and burrowing itself in my ears.

I reached the house and rang the bell. Time seemed to distort as I stood there waiting for someone to answer the door. I began to wonder if the address was wrong and no one was going to answer this door, I imagined the man in the car coming up behind me. I wanted so badly to look but I could hear my mother’s voice telling me that I shouldn’t acknowledge it, that it would be fine, that I should just find someone and make sure they remember me, that I should make them keep me safe.

The door opened, and I heard the truck’s engine rev and pull away. I wondered if they would be back. My ears were buzzing when the customer opened the door.

“Oh, thank you, I’ve been looking forward to this!” said the middle-aged woman standing in the doorway. It sounded like she was trying to speak at a normal volume across a great distance. I smiled and nodded back at her. I tried to let my body to relax as I felt the warmth drift out from her house to touch me for a moment before leaving.

“Have a good night.” I said, with my customer service smile. It felt wrong when I turned towards the road, like I should have asked something of her before I left, or made an excuse to stay longer in the safety of company. My car was still cold when I got in. I started the engine quickly and drove in the opposite direction that the truck had gone.

I drove back to the store, and as I parked, my heater started to kick on. Addie was still at her stool when I walked in. She glanced up at me and waved, but her stare lingered when she saw my face.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, trying to laugh. “Some guy just yelled at me from his truck and it freaked me out.”

“Oh, shit, are you okay?” she asked again. She looked genuinely concerned and I felt bad about how I was thinking about her earlier.

I laughed and sat down on top of the deep freeze in the kitchen. “Yeah, it isn’t like it’s the first time I’ve been catcalled, it just was dark and it scared me I guess. It could have been worse.”

“Yeah, it could have,” She agreed.

I laughed but her words brought me back to darker places. I felt better now that I was in the store. I never thought I would see this place as a haven, but I was so happy to see that fucking neon cookie sign when I drove up.

“You know, one time this guy started to follow me home from the grocery store,” she said.

“Really? What did you do?”

She nodded.

“Yeah, really. I was at Walmart, getting diapers, and he was parked right by my car. I kind of gave him a look as I was getting in, and he got so red in the face. He told me not to look at him stupid, and, you know, at this point I was just ready to get the fuck out of there so turned on my car and basically peeled out,” she said, pausing to drink some water.

“And then as I was waiting to get on the road I saw him coming up behind me. I ran that red light so fucking fast,” she said, and then barked out a short laugh.

“That’s fucking crazy,” I said. But the thing that scared me was that it really wasn’t that crazy or out of the ordinary. Not really.

A door opened in the back and we both jumped. It was just Miguel leaving the drivers’ room.

“What’s up?” he said. “You guys look like you saw a ghost or something.”

I laughed. “No, I just got catcalled on a delivery and I still

feel kind of weird.”

“Oh, man I get yelled at all the time when I’m delivering,” Miguel said. “You just have to shake it off, don’t worry so much, Erin.”

Addie glanced at me as I tensed up.

“Miguel, don’t.” she said.

“What? What did I do?” His eyebrows travelled up his face innocently. Maybe he was right. Maybe I should have reacted differently. Maybe it would have been better if I had said something back, told him to fuck off. It was easier to imagine how brave I would be next time in my temporary haven.

“Forget it, Miguel.” Addie said, rolling her eyes at me. “I’m going to smoke and maybe get some food after, do you want to join?”

I hesitated. It might be nice to talk with Addie more, but it was too cold outside, and I didn’t really smoke cigarettes anyway. “No, go ahead. I’ll hold down the fort.” I said, smiling at her. She nodded and left Miguel and I alone in the kitchen.

Miguel’s arms were crossed tightly across his chest as he leaned against the freezer, trying to seem nonchalant.

“So what happened tonight?” he asked. When he saw me start to hesitate, he said “No, no I’m serious I didn’t mean to joke about it before.”

I told him what had happened, but I told him how it felt because I wasn’t sure he knew. As I spoke, he relaxed and moved closer to me. He sat next to me on the freezer and I let him move closer and closer. When I was finished talking, he started to rub circles on my hand with his thumb. It brought my eyes toward him, which lit up my nerves even more. His pupils were blown and wanting.

“I’m sorry about before. I didn’t mean to be a dick.”

The lights were still fluorescent and harsh, but time felt like it was slowing down. Miguel was warm and solid beside me.



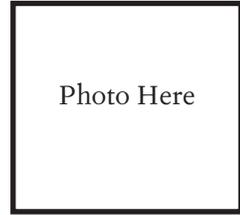
Floatin Croton, watercolor, 24x28 by Madeline Smith

REVIEW: Midnight at the Narrow-Gauge Cinema

Macy Davis

Broadsheet boy, a full fold out newsprint number. The lover smeared her breasts with fragile ink misses. Moveable type fingertips tap tap tapping across her collarbone, a hollow home for the salt she said she lost through outdoor osmosis on Sunday. When asked, she answered, "I've not showered since Friday, not fallen into pieces since three weeks ago."

Here is their headline: "Young woman guzzles youth like Mountain Dew." A one-column image of them will be inserted above the fold, holding hands on the way to the movie theater. She paid for their tickets and he snacked on typewriter keys and regret in between pop corn kernels, call it a Milk Dud moment. A finger on the back



of her thumb and the song she will not let go of. A noisy office layout, lights off. Exasperation and Imagination are written on their still entwined hands when the car doors open. This is why journalism is dying. Read More: First Date pg. 13

Self-Portrait in MRI Machine

Cameron Morse

For the hundredth time I lie down, listening
for the chirp of the coil chiller below McClean singing
take me home, country roads in my headphones.

The mirrors mounted overhead display me to myself
in three parts: the top mirror snags my bearded
chin, Mufasa-like and red, the beard of a father
at the height of his powers.

The bottom slat depicts
the planetary top of my head, shadowed outer
rim, penumbra,
my left arm folded over my heart kicking like a frog
on Luigi's dinner plate.

What the middle mirror shows are linens draped over
elevated knees, snowcaps drifting farther and farther away,
as though an illusionist is sawing my body in half,
turning my lower half into a raft
that floats away while McClean sings *take me
home, take me home, take me home.*

Tonewood Tree Speaks to Lorenzo Pellegrini

- inspired by “Maple’s Lament,” a song by Laurie Lewis where the violin remembers being a tree.
- Google: John Laurenson, BBC News, 14 April 2013

Lynn Snyder

When I was a sapling,
I had growing pains.
“Spruce,” the tree picker said
“slowly, slowly, slowly.
That’s how violin trees grow.”
In a millennial bed of humus,
protected by mosses
and fungal filigrees
of the *Forêt de Risoud en France*,
my tree family crowds
around me dense
as the hair on the tree picker’s head.
I push mainstem
to the light.

Fifty seasons of the tree picker’s domain,
come snow and gales, cuckoos and bees –
“Spruce,” he says, “some day you
will grow no more, but stand
to gather strength
for a thousand years.”
He taps my trunk, like a luthier
seeking resonance,
and hears me claim:
“I am the 24th century

Stradivarius tree.”

The tree picker wraps wiry arms
around me and climbs like a squirrel.
He feels the sway of my heartwood
and watches the August moon rise,
lentement, lentement, lentement.



A Vision, 20x24 by Aaron Cole

Where We're Going

Holly Day

A famous poet
moved into the nursing home
where my sister works. She called me up to tell me about him
said she recognized

his name from a magazine
I gave her the home's lobby. She says he's
a nice man, that I should come by to meet
him, give him someone to talk with about poetry.
Weeks later, she tells me not to come
the poet has become a problem, he
cries all the time. "If he'd just take his medication,
he'd be fine," she sighs. "How can someone so smart

be so dumb?" She says they're going to take
his computer away because
all he does is look up Internet
porn. "It's so sad," she tells me. "I think he's
trying
to write something."

Perry

Savannah Winkler

She was a girl made of copper wires and jagged branches. That's what Gram liked to say, anyway. Perry's elbows were sharp like the corners of a kitchen counter, and not even her mother's hairdresser could calm her angry curls. Gram always gave a small "oof" when Perry sat in her lap. Perry hardly noticed old Gram's discomfort because her head would be spinning with excitement to hear about the three little pigs again. Or, if Gram had a bit of wine, Perry might hear the story about the gorgeous New York City accountant and her many jilted lovers.

Her summers were spent with Gram and her bulldog, Francie. Perry thought they made a fearsome trio. Gram always knew how to get the best coupons for the best places like Dairy Queen or the movies downtown. And the old manager of the theatre was soft on Gram, so he didn't say a thing when they ate their ice cream while watching the movie. Gram even bought Perry a new bathing suit when the kids at the water park laughed at her old, ugly one.

But the absolute best thing about Gram was that, unlike Mom, she never got angry when Perry decided to wander. Not even when she wandered away from the water park and decided to climb a tree. She had seen some older boys do it last week and wanted to try for herself. Once she was up the tree, Perry could see everything. She closed her eyes and felt the cool wind wrap around her. Afterwards, she came running back to Gram.

"Gram, did you see how far I went?"

"Uh-huh." Gram was sitting on her usual bench, eating pecans and finishing that day's sudoku.

"Did you hear that lady yell at me? She was really mad."

Gram tossed a pecan to Francie, who ate it up quickly. "She did?"

"Yeah, and she pulled me down. Look, I hit the ground and

scraped my knee.”

Perry showed Gram her knee, which was covered in tiny red cuts and dirt.

“It hurt pretty bad.”

Gram put her pencil down and grabbed Francie’s leash. “Where’s the lady?”

“What?” Perry was already distracted from her bleeding leg by a particularly big roly-poly.

“Where’s the lady who pulled you down?”

“She’s over there, in the big hat.” Perry pointed to a woman reclining on a plastic chair.

What happened next was like nothing Perry had ever seen before. First of all, she had never seen Gram walk so fast. Well, it was more like awkward waddling with Francie being dragged behind, but it was still faster than she’d ever gone before. Gram walked up to the woman who yelled at Perry. Then came a stream of words Perry had never heard before. A large sunhat was tossed into the air. The woman shrieked, and Francie howled. She could feel how heavy the words were, like bricks being thrown into the air. She told her herself to write them down later, in the journal Mom didn’t know about.

Then Gram was back, telling Perry to start putting the towels and sunscreen away. Perry did what she was told, but her face burned as the kids around her stared and whispered. Her brown curls stuck to her warm cheeks.

“You said some words to that lady over there,” Perry said on the way to the car.

Gram wiped sweat from her brow. “Uh huh.”

“Words people use when they’re angry.”

“Yup.” Gram swatted at Francie, who was trying to steal the bag of pecans.

“Why were you angry?”

Gram didn’t answer until they made it to the car. The minivan was where Gram stored the dolls and other antiques she took to flea markets around the state. It always smelled a little bit like

must and salt from McDonald's french fries. Perry liked it very much.

Before starting the car, Gram turned to Perry.

"Don't ever let anyone put a hand on you if you don't want them to. It's as simple as that."

Gram played Bowie on the way home, and Perry found herself being quiet for once. Something hummed inside of her, from her arms to her toes. She didn't think it was the cookie dough and hot fudge sundae from earlier. It was something even sweeter and stronger than ice cream.

Gram died that Christmas Eve. She was wrapping presents in the basement while Mom picked up an extra shift at Blockbuster. Perry had been watching Christmas movies when she went to ask Gram for some apple cider. Perry found her there, lying between the boxed-up Halloween decorations and Mom's broken treadmill.

Perry tried to remember the three numbers Mom told her about. Nine, one, and one. But she couldn't. Her eyes blurred, the cartoons roared in her ears, and she couldn't find the phone. She lay next to the Christmas tree and closed her eyes. She didn't remember much after that.

#

During the spring, Mom drove to flea markets to sell Gram's dolls and antiques. Perry went with, using Francie as a pillow during the long drives. She liked organizing the dolls at their table and chewing on kettle corn while talking to happy customers. But she didn't wander and explore like she used to. She suddenly felt tired all the time, and Mom started to bring blankets and pillows for her to nap on.

When business was slow and Perry was awake, Mom told her old stories about Gram. One story was about when Gram worked at a gas station, and she tackled a man who stole an old woman's purse.

"She did something like that at the water park. A lady pulled me down and made me scrape my knee. Gram yelled at

her,” Perry said.

“She told me about that,” Mom said.

“At school they said we have to be nice to everyone. All the time, even if they’re mean. Is that true?”

“Gram told me it wasn’t.” Mom smiled. “I’ll never forget the screaming match she got into with Mr. Thompson.”

“Who?”

“My old piano teacher. I took lessons with him when I was a girl. He said some bad things to me, and your grandma yelled at him. A lot.”

“What kind of bad things?”

“Just things you shouldn’t say to little girls.” Mom’s smile had disappeared. She stood up and straightened some dolls on the table. “I was glad your grandma was there. She put him in his place.”

“So I don’t have to be nice to people like Mr. Thompson?” Mom sat back down and touched Perry’s curls gently. “The most important thing is that you stand up for yourself.” Perry sat in silence as Mom started to count the cashbox. She tried to picture a young Gram in her mind. Her curls were copper instead of white, but she still had red cheeks and a big nose. Perry imagined Gram yelling at Mr. Thompson on his front porch while everyone in the neighborhood came to watch. She probably looked like a female Viking, with a blazing look on her face and fire on her tongue. Perry rested her cheek on Francie, who was fast asleep, and smiled.

They didn’t sell much over those months, and Mom said she couldn’t afford the gas money anymore. Some of the dolls were given to other sellers, but a few stayed in Perry’s room. She put them on her bookshelf with other things she had inherited from Gram, including her Bible and favorite movie tapes.

Perry spent the rest of that spring at school. She ate cold pizza and juice in the corner of the cafeteria and read library books while lying in the tire swing. She watched girls trade bracelets and rings they got from the vending machines in the mall and

squeal when the boys snapped rubber bands at them. On her way home from school, she bought Starbursts and soda. The rest of the day was spent watching cartoons with Francie.

She didn't go to Dairy Queen or to the movies downtown. The old manager sent her a card and a dozen free tickets, but she still didn't go. Mom tried her best to make everything normal, using the cookbooks Gram left behind to make Perry's favorite meals, but nothing worked. Perry couldn't seem to leave the couch, where the quilts and pillows kept her warm.

One day, Mom came home and lay next to Perry on the couch. She was going to become a manager, she said, and Perry would be going to a new place for the summer. A place run by two women who watched kids for a living.

"I know to keep the door locked," Perry said.

"I know you do."

"And to let Francie out to pee."

"I'm going to install a doggy door for her."

Perry touched one of Francie's ears. "She'll get lonely."

"You'll still see her every day."

"I bet their food is bad."

"Perry, this is the only option."

Perry knew it was, so she didn't try to fight it much. She prepared instead, filling her backpack with Gram's favorite doll, the Bible, and Francie's collar for good luck.

Perry's new babysitters had matching blonde hair and clean blouses. Their names were Donna and Meredith, but Perry quickly forgot who was who. They painted the walls fun colors like blue and green and had a tank full of goldfish. But the white carpets and nice couch made Perry nervous. She already missed her living room's shaggy, brown carpets and the couch Mom inherited from Perry's great-grandma.

Perry was looking at the board games when Donna (or at least she thought it was Donna) touched her on the shoulder.

"You just turned ten, right?"

"Eight."

“We have another boy here who’s about to turn ten. Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes.” Perry did not want to meet this boy. She wanted to eat Starbursts and watch *Looney Tunes*.

“He’s downstairs,” Donna said. Perry was pretty sure this was Donna now; she was the one with stinky perfume. “The other children are outside playing in the sprinkler.”

Perry followed Donna through a maze of beanbag chairs and plastic toys. In the basement was a small boy sitting at a table covered in Legos.

“Aaron? This is Perry, the new little girl I was telling you about. She’s ten.”

“I’m eight,” Perry said.

Aaron looked a bit like Ron Weasley but with bored eyes like the boy who was in *Home Alone*. His eyes were glassy like black licorice, and the red sweatshirt he was wearing was much too small. She noticed how he studied her copper curls and worn Keds. His careful-but-bored stare made Perry’s hands turn sweaty and cold. She turned to ask if she could play in the sprinklers too, but Donna was already gone.

“Do they have any Bowie CDs here?” Her voice came out wrong, broken and tangled.

Aaron ignored her. “Want to see something cool?” he asked.

Perry nodded. Aaron went over to the backpacks in the corner and rummaged through a pink one with “Anna” written on the front with glitter glue. Perry heard a small song, light like her mother’s wind chimes, and then saw what Aaron was holding. It was a ballerina on a music box, her arms outstretched to the ceiling.

“Wow,” Perry whispered. She had tried to be a ballerina once, but the leotards and tutus were too expensive. She always wondered how nice it would feel to wear something so light and colorful.

Aaron twisted the tiny key on the box, and the music

played some more. But no matter how much the music played, he kept twisting and twisting and twisting. There was a small noise, a metallic crunch, and the music stopped. Aaron dropped the tiny key to the floor.

“Oh no.” Perry’s heart broke at the thought the ballerina would never dance again. “Should we tell Donna?”

“No,” Aaron said.

“I bet she could fix it,” Perry replied.

Aaron was looking at her directly now. “Don’t be a tattletale.”

Perry felt a knot form in her stomach. “I’m not!”

“I think you are.”

As Perry stared Aaron down, she remembered Mr. Thompson. She remembered Gram and her red cheeks and her fiery tongue.

“I think you’re a mean boy who likes to break other people’s toys,” Perry said.

Aaron’s eyes shined, and he walked over to her. She smelled something on him, sweet and sticky and red, like Starbursts or strawberry soda.

In one quick movement, Aaron grabbed onto her curls. His fingernails tore at the back of her ear, releasing a sting that burned from the inside and out. Her curls, so many of them, were being ripped from her all at once. Why didn’t she yell? She had yelled so many times before, sometimes just to annoy Mom. She tried to think of something, something else. She closed her eyes. Pecans, kettle corn, or sudoku. Anything. Anything but the stinging and pulling.

Then it stopped. The sting was still there, but her curls were released. She opened her eyes, and Aaron had already walked away. He was hiding the broken music box behind the couch. Perry caught a glance of the ballerina, looking still and broken. She tasted something sugary on her tongue, like hot fudge or cookie dough.

“I’m telling Donna,” Perry’s face grew hot. “I don’t care

what you say.”

Aaron turned towards her, his black eyes blazing, and reached for another stray curl. Perry felt her fist hit Aaron’s stomach. A scream filled her ears. At first, she thought it was her own, but then she saw Aaron. He was curled up on the carpet, clutching his stomach.

Donna appeared in the doorway. Her eyes went to Aaron and then to Perry’s clenched fist. Before Perry could get a word out, she was being whisked up the stairs.

Perry sat in Meredith’s bedroom for the rest of the day, with only some old perfume bottles and a waterbed to keep her entertained. Donna came by with lunch but wouldn’t look her in the eye. Perry fell asleep after eating a grilled cheese and apple slices.

A gray, shabby figure was looking down on Perry when she woke up. It took her a minute to realize it was Mom. She wore a stained Blockbuster polo, and her copper wire hair was even more tangled than Perry’s. The circles around her eyes looked like smudges of black crayon.

“Go to the car,” Mom said. “Now.”

Perry followed Mom out to the car. The other children stared at Perry as she went, all of them wide-eyed and whispering.

When they finally got to the car, the words flew out of Perry’s mouth. She explained everything from the broken ballerina to Aaron’s black eyes. About halfway through the story, Perry realized Mom wasn’t listening. She was staring straight ahead, and her blue eyes looked blurry.

“Perry,” Mom said. “I need you to be on your best behavior. You can’t hit the other kids here, no matter what.”

“But you said—”

“I don’t care what I said. We have to make this work. No matter what, we need this to work. This is the only place I can afford.”

“Gram would never—”

“Gram isn’t here to watch you anymore!” Mom covered

her face with her hands. "I'm so sorry, sweetie, but it's true. This place is our only option."

Perry closed her mouth, pushing her lips together in a painful line. She knew not to say another word, but she couldn't even if she tried. The words on her tongue disappeared and hid inside her chest.

As the days went by, Perry kept an eye on Aaron. She watched him share snacks with his friends, and push girls on the swing. She watched his mother pick him up, her car full of dirty car seats and screaming babies. She watched until she couldn't handle it anymore. She spent her days outside, alone, reading Gram's Bible and touching the scar behind her ear.

One night, Mom brought home Starbursts. Perry didn't eat a single one.

#

The treehouse became the place to hide. Balanced on four wooden stilts, it had a yellow slide and a green tarp for a roof. The younger kids were too scared to play up there after a boy named George told them a ghost slept in it at night. Perry decided there were much worse things than ghosts and made the place her own. She practiced becoming invisible.

Perry laid on her back and listened to the tarp bustle in the summer wind. She let it drown out everything. How much she missed Francie and the TV. How Mom still hadn't taken down the Christmas tree, no matter how many reminders Perry left on the fridge. Or how last week she found a page of sudoku between the couch cushions. It hadn't been finished.

Sometimes she imagined that Gram was there in the treehouse too. Eating pecans and telling her about the gorgeous New York City accountant. Perry thought about telling Gram about Aaron, but she decided against it. She stayed quiet and listened to the stories she'd heard dozens of times before.

Perry did make one friend, a nice girl who shared an even nicer book called Heidi with her. But the next day she was gone, and Donna said she went on vacation. Perry hadn't seen the girl

since.

Perry thought that maybe the higher she was, the easier she could escape everything that was wrong with the world below her. But the water park incident should have taught her better than that. No matter how far she wandered or how high she went, there was always someone waiting to pull her back down. Sometimes it was Donna or Meredith calling her to lunch. Most of the time it was Aaron.

He hadn't pulled her hair again. But he did come up to the treehouse every once in a while. Sometimes he climbed up the ladder just to laugh at her or push her out of the way when he wanted to go down the slide. He called her a tattletale and made fun of her Keds. She didn't dare mention his tiny sweatshirts and jeans that stopped at the ankles.

One time, before she could react, Aaron reached for her and grabbed a belt loop on her pants. She pulled away, and he yanked her closer. Perry tasted something horrible in her mouth. It was like when Gram cooked pancakes for too long. Burnt maple syrup and cinnamon sugar. She escaped down the slide and ran to the house.

When she went home that day, Perry noticed how everything looked blurry around the edges, like she was walking in a dream. Mom picked her up late, so she missed the newest episode of *Hey Arnold* and took a nap instead. Her quilts and Francie's fur had never felt so warm.

Just as Perry was dozing off, she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. Mom whispered something in her ear. She asked if Perry wanted to get some ice cream. Maybe go to Blockbuster for free movie rentals.

Perry smelled vanilla sugar. Mom's favorite perfume. There had been such a distance between them that Perry had forgotten the smell of her mother's perfume and the touch of her warm hands. She never wanted to forget them again, and her stomach growled for ice cream.

But Perry didn't move. She squeezed her eyes together and

didn't say a word. She heard Mom sigh, and the warm vanilla sugar was gone.

Perry hid under the quilts and tried to ignore the dull pain in her stomach. She began to wonder if she really was a girl made of copper wires and jagged branches. Breakable and impractical.

#

When June turned into July, the clouds became gray and heavy. Rain had started on the day they had pepperoni pizza for lunch and hadn't stopped since. Perry's treehouse turned dark and droopy. Donna made her come in after she snuck outside. Her socks were wet the rest of the day.

The only good thing about the rain was that Meredith brought out the TV from her room. Kids lined up bean bags and fought over bowls of popcorn, coating their fingers in salt and butter. Perry sat in the back, trying to keep her eyes open during the many showings of *Toy Story*, but mostly listened to the other kids argue. During a fight about who got the green beanbag chair, George pinched a girl named Molly. When Donna came back into the room, she didn't notice the tears in Molly's eyes.

Little girls like Molly always went unnoticed, Perry realized. Little girls who swallowed the words that danced on their tongue, no matter how many times they were pinched or pushed. The thought made Perry's stomach hurt.

As long as it continued to rain, Aaron stayed away. He got stickers or extra snacks for helping with clean-up. Perry was scolded for taking too many naps.

But the gray clouds couldn't stay forever, and Perry watched as they moved on to their next destination. When the sun finally arrived, Donna found her playing with watercolors downstairs.

"Alright, sweetie, you can play in the treehouse now. Just try not to fall asleep up there, okay?"

Perry promised with her fingers crossed. She walked out of the house quietly. Aaron was playing board games upstairs, she was sure of it. Mom was picking her up early that day, so she

wouldn't be outside for long.

But the air outside was slick with humidity. Meredith's lilies drooped in the garden. The air weighed on Perry like a blanket. Without meaning to, she rested her cheek against the damp wood of the treehouse floor.

Maybe she would have stayed like that until Mom came, but the ladder creaked.

"Hey, tattletale."

Perry forced herself up, still groggy, and headed for the slide. Aaron stepped in front of her, maintaining his careful stare.

Perry tasted the burnt cinnamon sugar again. She wrapped her arms around her middle.

Aaron went for her curls instead. She watched them become tangled in his fingers, like angry vines. The corners of his mouth formed the smirk that made Meredith and Donna gush.

Perry let her muscles go limp. She must have done something, she thought. Maybe it was because she watched too many cartoons or said mean things to Mom. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad to deserve this. To have pieces of her broken off little by little and her copper wires ripped away.

She would take the pain with eyes closed, teeth gritted. She hid inside her chest. But before she could completely disappear, a gust of wind blew through the treehouse. She felt its cold arms wrap around her.

Suddenly, Perry was weightless. She was climbing the tree again, feeling light and colorful. She could see the entire water park, from the kids eating candy bars to Gram on her usual bench.

Old Gram, playing her sudoku and eating pecans.

Perry's mouth turned hot, but it tasted sweet. Something like sugar hummed through her veins.

The words came spilling out. They came out slow, fell softly to the ground, then turned heavy and tough. She threw them into the air one by one, like bricks, and Aaron fell back. But his eyes shined, and he yanked her curls again. Hard. This time Perry

cried out, like the night she woke up next to the Christmas tree, and grabbed Aaron's wrist.

He didn't let go until she dug her nails into his skin. Using his other arm, he lashed out at her. His hand hit her cheek, but she didn't waver. She didn't shrink. Her blood was too hot.

Finally, he backed away. He said something. Something about it being a joke, and she shouldn't tattle. He went to the ladder and said he was going inside.

But Aaron didn't go down the ladder. He turned, and Perry felt herself reach out. Her hands grabbed his shoulders. She pushed.

Aaron disappeared over the edge. Perry didn't hear him hit the ground. Her ears were still ringing, and the green tarp shook in the wind.

Perry couldn't hear him, but Donna did. She was already running out the back door. Mom was on her way and would be driving up any minute. They would find Aaron on the ground, legs tangled and his cheeks wet. He would look so broken in his tiny sweatshirt and jeans.

Perry knew they would want her to talk. Maybe she would tell them everything, or maybe she would say nothing. Only she could decide. For now, she just enjoyed being in the treehouse, and looking out at the world.

She could see everything.

Happy Hour at Betty's

Sophia Brooks

Only locals know how to open the front doors
of Betty's Café: like a magic trick, push and pull
equally and at once. Steve's on piano and his shivery fingers
fever out "Hound Dog". You grin over the tang of 2 tomato beers,
teeth lined with the sweet black of poppy seed filling—
kolaches made tender by Katharine
and sold at the bar, \$1.25 each. You didn't know
a mouth could be so delicious and full and still
hold the potential for decay, did you? That sometimes death travels
unrecognized? Stops by like a tourist, to savor
and to linger lithe and quiet? There's a local legend told
on every corner: a photographer from *National Geographic*
passed through to illuminate
the small pieces of American lives
for all to see how hope glimmers
like a handcrafted disco ball twirling
in an antique gymnasium. Kenny tells you,
That's where I danced with my wife for the first time.
Can you hear the thick syllables
of history here? Names like *Huncovksy* and *Karnick*—
muscular, sharp enough to break clavicles
or the metal bones of the barstool you sit on. Steve's taking
requests now and someone cries out
for "Home on the Range" and everybody starts to sing,
happy and warmed with beer. No one notices the photographer
just outside the windows of Betty's, wearing a dark green
raincoat and capturing a photo
he will entitle "Last Call in Cuba, Kansas"—
to be glossed over and hung up.

Refracted Reflections

Changming Yuan

1/ Inner Penetration

Dripping, constantly
Into the heart
Of the rock
 Quietude splashes
Over its whole being
Inside out

2/ Transporting

Once the road begins
To run forward
 The car can drop us off
At any destination
Beyond earthly traffic

3/ Spiritual Freedom

For every human soul, there is
 A whole patch
Of sky (or heaven), where
 It can fly freely
 Only if it can find
A taking-off position up there

The Blank Page: 8½ X 11 Super Bright White

Everything we do is music. – John Cage,
American Composer

Lynn Snyder

∞

The musician sits still
with her instrument silent
for 4 minutes, 33 seconds.
The ambient cough,
the lozenge unwrapped,
a cell phone dropped,
confused scuffling of feet –
all turn to music, John Cage,
minimalist,
reductio ad absurdum.
The latent universe
is even now stretching
the eardrum.
We wait.

∞ ∞

Your clock, Robert Rauschenberg,
is but a triptych of stretched canvas.
We watch live shadow puppets,
reflections that linger.
Our phosphenes project
onto its pure white surface.
We count seconds
as notes adhere to the static
of subliminal sparks.

∞ ∞ ∞

The poet sits like a mountain,
pen motionless,
poised above the paper,
mind timeless, sensing
possibilities unperturbed.
Choose. We count eons. Choose not.
Gravity precedes the Big Bang.
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Clean Wind Energy, oil on canvas, 36x48 by Rachel Lord

Bethlehem

Cameron Morse

Blue, stillborn
baby blue, cold dog

water in silver
pail, sky—bluer & bluer.

December, December,
all my life: clouds

grate like glaciers,
crumble before my eyes,

before my wife comes
home at five. Darkness

crawls into the arms
of the oak trees.

We are weak,
weak enough to break.

Inside us an ache for God
that is deeper than

God, thaws.

Paying Respect

Cheyenne White

Like every other cemetery I've visited, it's quiet. The crunch of gravel and dirt as you enter seems to hang in the air, two tire troughs cutting through the grass like the sound cuts through the stillness. Chatter occurs in the car sporadically, but mostly it is silent, as we survey the graves. Exit the car. Crunch gravel underfoot. Stand, unusually upright, and face the wind. It's quiet, the whispering of the trees a hushed static in the background. There is a sort of weight in the air—the heavy moment in-between breaths where you pause. We don't even know what we are waiting for half the time. At least, I don't think any of us really do.

The Vermillion cemetery is a long stretch beside 29th Road—not 29th street, but the 29th road. The roads through the cemetery are little more than gravel and dirt-lined tire troughs cut into the grass, forming looping m's around the back of the graves. A long line of trees stretches across the back of the cemetery, blocking the view of the plowed field that lays behind. Graves of various ages, heights, and designs are scattered. It's a typical cemetery, that quiet solemnity descending on you as you enter.

The town it serves also has a sort of stillness upon it. Going down Main street, you'll see a couple of people, a smattering of cars, and nearly every building in need of repair or at least new paint. It's the type of town that seems bookended by its own agricultural origins: co-op on one end, fields on the other, with little of significance in-between. That's its deception, though. The town carries many stories between its thriving past and dreary present, stories of families like my own.

My dad grew up in Vermillion, the youngest of four by a large margin. His father was a former military man and his mother a homemaker, elementary school cook, care home worker, and overall force of nature. They lived in a white house shaded by a

large tree, a fact they always mention for its ability to regulate the temperature in the house during the summer. Vermillion is a place I grew up hearing about, the small town that lived more vibrantly in my grandmother's mind than it did in reality. It was the place where she raised her children and made her life. It was the place where she made extra money by enlisting the family to take care of the cemetery. The Vermillion city council offered the position of groundskeeper to anyone who cared to do it, the mowing and what-not, and my grandmother latched onto the opportunity. My father was enlisted once he was old enough to help, often being sent in place of the adults to do the heavy work of mowing around all those tall stone graves. To this day he comments on the advantages and disadvantages of flat stones versus plinths and the annoyance of certain types of grave decorations in the process of mowing.

Vermillion was a run-of-the-mill Midwestern town, with family names tossed around, a badge of belonging in the daily gossip. The daily unpacking of new information, whether you call it gossip or conversation, is always a ceremony with my grandmother. At her current age of 92, I'm never sure whether she didn't hear my question or if she's answering the question she would have rather been asked. She talks of her time in Vermillion distantly, not because it wasn't important, but more, I think, out of a compartmentalization. My grandmother carries a lot of loss with her, her brothers and sister, a stillborn baby, her husband, her friends, her town. I think her vague avoidance of information at times is a self-preservation tactic, her effort to prove she can't be hurt by loss at her age.

And yet, when we drive through Vermillion with her, she can point out every single empty lot where a house used to be.

"That used to be where Marge lived. Last time, her house was still standing but it really needed torn down. It was a sore sight."

She continues on, looking to the next house. We travel down roads that are little more than alleys bisecting the blocks.

Here's a private crop of corn in that yard, and there's a lot full of rusting cars and tractor pieces. The houses are ramshackle at times, some so slanted as to look unsafe while others just desperately need some paint that doesn't flake off in large sheets.

As of 2010, Vermillion had a population of 112 people. It is a town whose population is diminishing. Filled mostly with farmers and construction workers, the town seems destitute of youth. Anyone you see on the street is mid-50s or older and the few signs of childhood are often trikes packed onto cluttered porches or a discarded play-thing in an overgrown yard, more remnants of past children than indicators of present youth. It makes sense that there aren't many children here. The high school closed when my dad was 4 and the grade school closed in the 1990s. People say the last place to go before a town is set to die is its school. As a *New York Times* journalist wrote, "But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it" (Egan). Even so, Vermillion has become the seat of the district school offices, now residing in what was once the old school. My dad claims this as the sole reason Vermillion has held on as long as it has. Even though there is life in the town still, its vibrancy has dimmed. Once containing a movie theatre, at least 2 gas stations, a hardware store, and several grocery stores, the town has shrunk to the bare bones of functionality. In the 1912 book *Kansas: A Cyclopedia*, Vermillion is described as "the trading point for a large section of farming country" with "banking facilities, grain elevators, a newspaper, schools, churches, express and telegraph offices, and an international money order postoffice with four rural mail routes" (Blackmar 844). From the 1910 census count of 366 to the 2010 census, the population of Vermillion dropped by over a third.

Vermillion's descent from thriving agricultural town to place of desolation is not uncommon. Many Midwestern rural towns have undergone the phenomenon of "brain drain," a process under which the more highly trained and educated people leave to the detriment of the local economy. This process has turned Vermillion into a town where nothing seems destined

to last, an unsustainable bastion for those who wish for the old days of community and simplicity. In many ways, Vermillion is following in the footsteps of its mother-town, Vliets. Laid out in 1889 by the Van Vliet family in Marshall County roughly 20 miles south of the Nebraska border, Vliets was an agricultural hub in this part of Kansas, with the Co-op and granary basically the only remaining things in the town today. Noted as having “perhaps a dozen houses”, Vliets is made up of scattered clumps of life, with the Co-op on one side and most the residents living down Tumbleweed Road, a name that brings to mind a fairly accurate representation of the atmosphere of such small towns.

These towns lose their young people as they pursue opportunities in larger cities. *The New York Times* reported in 2003 that all but 97 out of the 99 counties with the highest percentage of residents older than 85 were in the Great Plains. After the younger generations depart, the better off seem to be the next to go. Wanting bigger and better things than a small town can offer, or perhaps simply chasing a more stable situation, those with the means and freedom to leave often do. Then you are left with those who cannot leave or do not want to leave—the poor, the people tied to the land for their work, those who remember the good old days and stay because it is the only home they have known. These people are the keepers of the secrets, the concentrated history of the place all in one. Yet there is a sadness, a despair for outsiders like me who look at towns like Vermillion and see it like a graveyard. The quiet and stillness of Main street, the boarded-up businesses on the main block, the broken-down houses in the shadow of the water tower, all these things pile on to weigh a person down into a despair.

The people who stay in such struggling towns have few options about how to make a living. The major employers in the rural Midwest are agriculture and healthcare, with hospitals providing necessary support to town populations. For towns like Vermillion, though, agriculture is the only option beyond contract labor. Most farmers are aware of just how precarious their

situation is. With the nationwide shift from local, family-owned farms to agri-business mega-farms, small town farmers are worried about their future. Government subsidies are no long-term solution and they know it. With some going so far as to claim these subsidies are “gutting” Midwestern agriculture, it’s not hard to see how small towns like Vermillion can become permeated with a sense of dread and anxiety.

Beyond the uncertainty of rural livelihoods lies another layer of complication: the lure of better pay in the city. For those in rural counties of the Great Plains, income can be as low as 48% of what urban counterparts make. While costs may be cheaper rurally, the absence of many businesses such as restaurants, stores, and entertainment venues can make urban centers much more interesting to those tired of the decay of their communities.

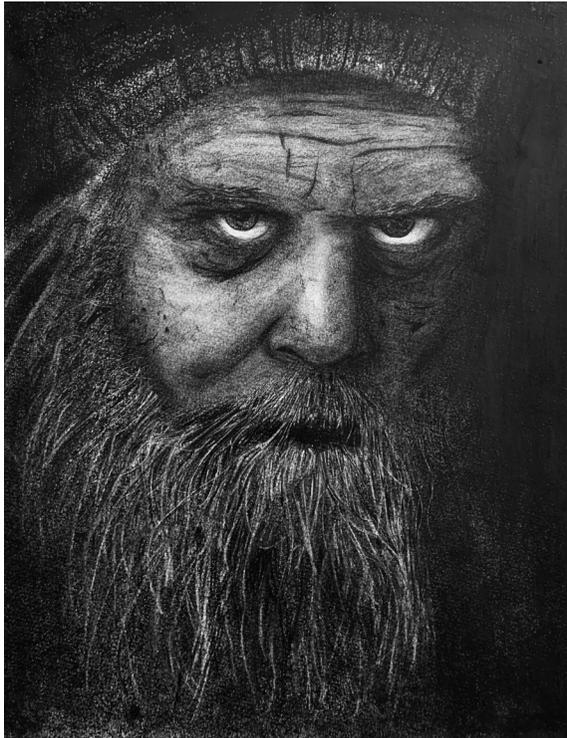
Towns that suffer from “brain drain”, and dying towns in general, have come to be known as undesirable places. They have no entertainment options outside of home entertainment systems, restaurants are limited to a bar and grill, and the nearest grocery store or Walmart is anywhere from 20 miles away to an hour’s drive. However, people are starting to realize that these towns could offer more. Small towns are making efforts to attract families and young people through the promise of a quiet lifestyle or incentives, such as guaranteed employment or even cash offerings for those who restore homes and move in. These efforts, sometimes called “brain gain” for the way they lure in young people, have made a difference in some small towns, but the widescale issue still persists. Oftentimes surges in population are merely waves of natives returning to the place, nostalgic for home or disillusioned by the city. Regardless of revitalization efforts, it seems as though some towns are still destined to die, either from an absence of new efforts or efforts that can’t pull them out of the spiral they have entered.

These towns have become traps for those who can’t flee the impending disappearance of their communities. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the role of upward mobility in

who stays and who goes. That too contributes to some of the dread and exhaustion found in such towns, with run-down houses and dreary streets caused at least in part by a lack of funds rather than mere disinterest. Experts say that towns such as these must market their history to tourists or produce something unique for rural America to have a future. Yet this loss of people is not just a rural issue. Whole states are suffering brain drain, with Kansas as a prime example. Even metropolitan Kansas City is battling this issue, as more and more young Kansans with higher education leave the state for greener pastures. In Wichita, the problem seems to be a nearly stagnant local economy that prevents many young people from moving up in their companies or finding job opportunities. Jeremy Hill of Wichita State University's Center for Economic Development and Business Research says the city loses out to other states because Wichita is "just not capitalizing on [its] resources efficiently or effectively" (Sandefur). For many cities, this seems to be the case; there is potential in these cities, but leadership and the public do not know how to market the city's qualities to draw in a sustainable amount of people. With a trend so pervasively expressed across the state, it's easy to feel an ominous foreboding about the future of the Midwest and the people who call it home.

I've lived in Kansas my whole life, and I'm well acquainted with the sense of sadness often found in small towns such as Vermillion. Moving numerous times as a child, I experienced the different levels of town life offered in Kansas, from suburban cul-de-sac to dirt-road living. I spent ages 7-11 in a town of roughly 800 people, a town where every other vehicle on the highway carried a load of cattle to the feedlots in the next town over. In small towns, especially for kids, it is so easy to feel trapped and isolated. Even with a good school, a public library, a couple of diners, and a grocery store, small towns can become stifling to those who wish to explore more than the field behind their homes. In a town like Vermillion, it can be hard to imagine why young people would want to stay.

Towns like Vermillion may hang on like Vliets, clinging to the fringes of the agriculture that birthed the settlements. There's fewer people now, but the fragments of a community can still gather to talk over the latest news of those who left for the big city or the next county over. People still pay respect to their roots, whether they return or not. Take a walk through the Vermillion cemetery and you'll still see flowers and wreaths scattered amongst the grass and graves. Someone still comes to mow, even if it isn't my dad's job anymore. And if you stand very quietly, beyond the rustling of leaves and the stray chirps of the robins, you can almost sense the gaze of the past on you, waiting to see what will play out.



Homeless, graphite drawing, 11x14 by Seth Strand

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Love Letter to the Prairie Girl Standing in a Pasture

Macy Davis

The wind raised you wild
woman, like generations of women before
you and like your daughter will be
as long as you give her this place planting tiny
feet, deep in rich soil creating a small

thunderstorm battered tornado resistant
lonely prairie tree of a woman
nothing can tear your roots from
bluestem, brome, and home
your hips have become sunflower

stalks after so many years of watching the sun
smile, darling
when the sky becomes a painting
your soul manifests Kansas

wildflowers blanketing summertime moonshine
even the blossoms on the prickly pear are beautiful
despite the blood they pull from your fingertip fears
loving anywhere else is hard when

everywhere feels like you can't breathe
in miles and miles of uninterrupted horizon
meadowlark calls are the only music besides coyote howls
leaving the dark landscape in wait of tomorrow

The wind raised you wild
woman, like generations of women before
you and like your daughter will be
as long as you give her this place planting tiny
feet, deep in rich soil creating a small

thunderstorm battered tornado resistant
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“Love Letter to the Prairie Girl Standing in the Pasture”