

2019



CONCRETE

LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Diana Patino

Armorless

I have never been harassed for my ethnicity in my life. I look into the mirror every morning during my daily routine. No one would ever know I am Hispanic from a glance. My pale face and straight hair deceive many. Not until I open my mouth and trill my R's do people even realize I am an "other." I can hide amongst the crowd.

I do not want to hide amongst the crowd.

You could say I'm lucky. My sister is just a few shades darker than me, and she and her friends get stopped by the police, but I don't. She gets recognized by other Hispanics as a friend and gets spoken to in Spanish. I don't. You could say I'm unlucky that way.

This morning, I focused my attention away from my European-looking features and went back to deciding my outfit for the day. I settled on a plain black shirt, a floor-length red skirt with white accents, and an eye-catching white scarf with red accents, which I tied to my waist. I took two red ribbons and braided them into my hair in two pigtails. To match my armor, I applied red lipstick as my war paint. I refuse to hide amongst the crowd.

I thought back to what my friend Walter would say about my clothing. He was Romani, and the braids and the skirts and scarves were very familiar to him. He'd laugh and say I dressed like his grandmother. Funnily enough, the scarf was my grandmother's. However, I did not dress in that way to perform an ethnicity that wasn't my own. I wanted to look pretty, and I wanted to look like my grandmother, like a real Latina.



The train doors scraped open at the platform. I stood at the other door, which remained shut. The last person to enter the car was a middle-aged man. He glanced my way, noticing me like most people do when I look like this. What was different about this man was that he kept on staring. Not a glance, not even a double take. He didn't take his eyes off me.

"Hey, I know you," he said.

I did not know him.

"I know what you are. Romanian or something. What do they call you?"

Did he think I was Romani?

For a second, I wanted to laugh. I could text Walter and tell him about the stupid "Gadje" who thought I was one of Walter's people. What a joke. Could he not distinguish Latina from Roma? Clearly not. But while my mirth stopped, the man didn't.

He took his seat, which was unfortunately only a few meters away. "You're one of those tinkerers," he continued. I didn't say anything in return. No one else on the train looked our way, not even the woman sitting next to him. I wanted her to so I could share a look with someone, or roll my eyes with her, or receive a look of sympathy. Anything. But no, I was sure to the other passengers, it sounded innocent enough. Or at least, they'd catch the malice, but miss the meaning. It was a racial slur.

Do I patiently explain to him that I'm not a "gypsy tinkerer" as he kindly put it? That I have no diklo on my head, so I can't be Roma? That the scarf I'm wearing was made in Mexico? Would he even care? Of course he wouldn't. I couldn't bring myself to open my mouth to him.

Should I move to the other end of the car? No, moving would just bring more attention to me. I needed to leave, but my stop wasn't for another minute or so. My only recourse was to look outside the train car windows, watching black tunnels replace other black tunnels, with the occasional yellow glow of a lightbulb to shake up the monotony. I didn't know how else to deal with him or the flood of emotions that was filling up my pretty little head. I'd dealt with a sexist comment on the street before, a whistle once or twice. I could always just keep walking. But now, the metal box we were all in was shrinking, and us passengers were being crammed closer together.



He said nothing else the entire time. For the time being, I could pretend he did not exist. Seconds felt like hours, until finally, the train began to pull in to my stop. I turned around to face the door I had been leaning against, preparing for my escape. But it seemed like the man had been waiting for this moment the entire time.

"I remember what they call you," he said. I could hear him getting up from his seat, and then quick, hard, footsteps behind me. I didn't turn around. I didn't walk off the train any faster.

"Gypsy scum!" His ugly, yellow breath kissed the back of my neck and I wanted to shudder, but instead I was stone. Again, I said nothing.

I lifted my skirt to my ankles and walked down the steps. I walked through the platform with grace and purpose. Head high, shoulders low, I refused to turn back. I'm sure it looked good. I kept up a great appearance for everyone. What a good show I put on.

The doors closed and the train moved on, but I didn't turn to look back. It wasn't out of some sense of grace or appearances. No one was on the platform to look at me anyway, and the audience had moved on. No, I didn't turn back, because if I didn't, then he wasn't

there. If I didn't turn back, he'd still be on the train. He wouldn't be following me close by. His breath wouldn't hit my neck. His words wouldn't hit my ears. His hands wouldn't hit my face.

I looked beautiful that day. My skirt was my armor, lipstick was my war paint.

But it simply isn't. Cloth protects no one, not when it can be ripped so easily by determined hands. Lipstick smears underneath rough lips, rough lips that can so easily silence all verbal protest.

If I didn't turn back, then he wouldn't be there. If I did turn back, then I would have been able to run.

I said nothing.

I say nothing.

Nona Lovell

Beholder

It's something on the inside
and it's hard to show when all they see are your outsides.

At night you claw at your chest,
stripping skin, trying to get at that thing.

You pull away at bungee cord tendons and muscles,
and slip your fingers between your ribs and pull.

You'll feel pretty soon, it doesn't matter that you hear cracking and feel the
bones breaking because you're doing what people want, and it hurts, but
you just want someone to tell you you look good,
appetizing,

so you pull your own heart out, red and pulsing,

feel the weight of your skin,
flashes of pain up a razor wire nervous system, sharp knives at the back of
headlight eyeballs fixed on your reflection

bloodied,

inadequate.

Owen Elphick

Cornfield

The cornfield is like an excavated corpse.

Its barrenness alerts me to the season.

The sky seems to speak to it, the twilight's blood dripping into its horizon.

Every time I pass by, I am hungry.

My pen bites the page, and the ground shudders.

That, or I shudder, and the world seems to shudder with me.

Crows croak through the cornfield, talons clutching dark earth.

I approach and the whole field screams, rises into the air.

The cornfield keeps escaping me.

It does not want to be written into this poem.

It does not want its emptiness immortalized.

I try to see into the blackness between the remaining stalk-stubs.

I want what is not there, to hold its absence in my palm, like soil.

I want to harvest this nothingness like an archaeologist.

To pull the dust to my lips and swallow it like corn.

I want the crows to be ravens, to speak their language, for them to live inside me.

But the cornfield is not giving me answers.

And I dare not enter it, when I don't even know the questions.

Isabella Rodrigues

Season of the Caterpillars or the Story of a Breaking House

The House isn't broken, not exactly. It just rests on the edge, like a glass of water that's filled too much and another drop might cause a flood. It was built by my grandfather, who died before the first window frame peeled. Then it was my grandmother's, who didn't like the empty halls and the creaks of the cabinets. Then it was my father's, who soon liked someone else's house better. Finally, it was my Mother's. Swipes of wet around her eyes, she pointed her finger at the large white square. "Don't try anything. I'm staying." Because there was nowhere else to go.

I don't remember much of the breaking as a child. At ten, a window shutter flew down on my head, but I never thought much about it. When I started realizing, I suppose I was grown. Stove fires, light bulbs bursting, a splintered floor, floods in the basement, storms picking at the roof with their violent fingers, and a bathtub that never drains completely. Resilient in everything she does, my Mother pushed back. Spent weekends fixing the

plumbing, or on her hands and knees, keeping the invading weeds at bay. I guess I never helped the situation much, bringing stray dogs in during the summer and herding feral cats in the basement during winter.

People on our street always glanced at the fence and its missing teeth with a miffed eye, or held an insult when they heard the seemingly eternal animalistic noise from our walls.

There's a peach tree on the side of the House that chokes my Mother's hostas. I begged her to keep it. The flowers are pink and no one else has them. Plus, I liked throwing the rock-hard peach fruit. "It's not good for the others," she would mumble. She never got the axe, though.

She would rip vines off the paring white shingles and always make sure to leave flowers the bees would like. Sometimes it would be peaceful, even when we were using a piece of wire for a door knob, or wilting in the summer heat with no air conditioning.

The worst was always when the caterpillars came. Little black worms from the underworld that ended up on my pillow and in my breakfast. Every year between March and May, caterpillars would descend on heads and eat through everything. I would squish them between my toes and see the driveway become a battlefield of the dead.

I would always escape to other people's houses during those days. There, everything seemed fine. The toilets would work, there was never a Rat Problem of 2013, and barely a dirty dish in a sink. My friends had nice houses. Ones by the seas with pools and no caterpillars. Their mothers would apologize: "I'm so sorry for the mess." And I would feel a tug.

The hate and embarrassment would billow through me like wind through a sheet on a clothesline, which none of my friends had because they had working washing machines. Why did my Mother think new bar stools would hide the truth? Our House hates us. It's breaking.

I still have no idea why my friends visit my House.

"Oh yeah, use the downstairs bathroom and make sure to hold the lever down until it flushes completely."

"No, I don't have a generator so the storm must have shorted out the TV."

"Oh, my mom must have forgot to pay the Internet bill!"

I asked my Mother why she didn't move. We could have had a house by the sea or one with a game room. She told me, "Life is never easy. It's gonna push back *hard*. And sometimes the only thing you can do is put a patch on it."

It was a non-answer. She loves those. She would still yell and rub her temples. "I hate this goddamn house!" And we would all look at each other with ironic and angry smiles when a door fell off its hinges or the fridge stopped keeping meat from rotting. Every year I spit and clench my teeth as the caterpillars come back, worming their way through our already diminishing kingdom. I pull splinters out of my dirtied feet and repaint the bathroom ceiling with flowers. I vacuum the couch and all the cushions when the pets get fleas. I console my Mother when she has sore feet and cramped hands. She has fought long enough. I help search for lost rings and papers and other things that seem to have their own legs. I buy insect repellent in bulk, but still get enough bug bites for my friends to comment on.

I don't love it. But it isn't broken yet.

Jaden Cruz

Man in Bed

The Man in the Bed abruptly woke up in a room with no memory of what existed in the past or future of this moment. For all he knew, none of it existed at all. Each attempt to grasp at the past slipped through his fingers and he struggled to recollect it. He was a man dying of thirst, but the water he sought would leak through his hands before it could reach his mouth. Looking out at the unfamiliar room before him, he struggled to find the names of the objects in the room. It was much easier to write them off as oblong shapes, but he found himself attempting to find their names anyway—despite its futility, which even he was aware of.

The whole ordeal was making his eyes hurt. They were tired and wanted only rest. So, in order to appease their earnest protest, the man turned away from the room and the questions it asked of him. He was now faced with a cool blank wall that stood to his immediate left, and allowed his eyelids the peaceful indifference they pleaded for. He spent a few moments studying the wall, almost as if it was a piece of scripture. In fact, one could argue the calmness and serenity offered to his suffering eyelids was comparable to divine salvation

or something of that sort. If you asked him in that moment, the man would probably go as far as to say this wall was his savior, and his God. It was all he knew, and it had saved him from the chaos, and offered him an oasis in the desert he currently found himself in.

However, within seconds of meeting that which his poor eyelids cried for, he heard a new cry of agony. His limbs could not stand the weight his body forced onto them, for even the slightest pressure would produce pain, as if all the life was being squeezed and crushed right out of them. In order to combat this, The Man in the Bed squirmed vehemently, like a worm left out on the sidewalk after a day of rain, delegating minimal amounts of pressure onto each of his limbs. The unrelenting movement created by his constant wriggling under the weight of his body proved to be too much for his helpless eyelids, who were now jostled into an employment they objected to. At this point, he had no choice but to wake up, no matter how heavy his eyelids felt. The rest his tired eyes desired was a small casualty when put into comparison with the rest of his aching body. He lay there for a moment with a groggy sense of dread. Confused and frightened, he felt as if a thick mist obscured every message being sent from his body to his brain. He rolled over to his back.

Staring at the ceiling above him, he thought of the few differences between ceilings: they are often white; some may have bumps, while others may be smooth. This would all be irrelevant to most people when looking at a ceiling. He spent some time allowing his eyes to leisurely pass over the ceiling's breadth, and noted its relative stability and sameness, not at all aware of his own redundancy. He found this extremely soothing, and was intrigued, almost seduced, by the natural charisma inherent in the ceiling he currently studied. He began trying to think of every ceiling he had ever known—and took enormous amounts of pleasure at the prospect of doing so—but was once again faced with the complete and total

lack of anything substantive in his head. The inkling of self awareness this garnered gave way to vexation and fury. Where was he? Why was he here? To these questions he hadn't the slightest answer, which only served to frustrate him more. It was out of this anger that he pushed himself over once more to face the bedroom, which had ruined his otherwise peaceful sleep—if not out of curiosity, then out of wrath and a peculiar sense of justice to avenge the rest which his eyelids had been deprived of.

The Man in the Bed was greeted coldly by the room, expressionless and plain, livened only by a small wooden desk with two adjacent wooden chairs in the far corner of the gray square which made up his new abode. The room was also complete with a domed ceiling light, which until now he had not realized was there. It lit up the room with a weak yellow glow, which struggled to light the farthest reaches of the tiny domicile, instead leaving shadows that made the room feel boundless and eternal.

He found this unsettling, and decided to focus his attention on the ceiling light and the questions he had regarding it instead. His newly awakened eyes placed what attention they could muster on the small dome that made up the only light in the windowless room, and quickly began to obsess over the light and the obvious implications he felt he was being beaten over the head with.

To him the fixture resembled the breast of the Madonna, only rather than nourishing him with the strength needed to take his first steps, the light drained him further. It made him feel as if he were a small child, red-faced and crying with all its might, whose helplessness and inability to act on the rage they felt could only give way to tears and pathetic ploys for attention. After all, was he any different than a child? He had been lying shackled to his bed for what felt like hours, was still, even in this moment of self realization, unable to escape his crib, and had until this point only managed to substitute action with pointless thoughts concerning ceilings and his own discomfort.

Within moments, he was awash with hopeless despair and shame as the vindictive light shriveled his entire being into nothingness. Each beam seemed to violently strangle his identity with an iron grip made up of every rejection he had been subjected to, and

strengthened by every shortcoming and failure that had been born out of his weakness, stupidity, and lack of moral fiber.

Yet how could he look away? Every moment spent hiding from the light was a moment of inconsolable guilt. The poor light's only course of action was to provide him with that which was essential to his being and allow him to navigate through the darkness, which would be all-encompassing if not for the light's existence. By ignoring the ceiling light, he would be depriving it of its sole purpose: to cover him in a warm glow, and gently nurture him into wakefulness. To him there was no greater crime than preventing one from acting on their natural urges; by rejecting the bosom of light above him, he was committing sacrilege against everything he believed in.

Despite this, he knew the truth. He knew the light was failing him, that its attempt to cover him in a maternal glow failed miserably. Subjecting himself to a heinous manipulation of affection such as this would be just as bad as the guilt he felt ignoring it. Robbed of his free will, his only choice was to remain in limbo between each of his options: guilt or suffering. Simultaneously, he felt the invisible eyes of an unknown audience, watching him with both contempt and voyeurism in the shadows of the room created by the yellow light. He knew their thoughts, and the disgust they had for him, his ungratefulness, and his lack of sensitivity and understanding for the ceiling light. He heard them laughing at him, felt their sneers, but knew he was in no place to defend himself. His struggle was pathetic, and had he been a member of that shadowed audience he would laugh the loudest of them all. He thought to himself: imagine a man's biggest struggle being to accept a love he felt to be unjust, or to deal with the guilt that overwhelmed him from neglecting it. It made him feel small and with that The Man in the Bed slowly began to shrink into himself.

He allowed his limbs and heavy head to weakly curl into his torso, once again reverting to the familiarity of the fetal position; but the pain was inescapable. He softly began to sob, sob until he felt himself at the point of complete exhaustion, until death seemed to be the next logical step in this tortuous journey he had begun only moments ago. It was at this point, when his cries reached a high resounding peak, and his body was at the point of

complete exhaustion, that he felt he could not go on for one more second on this pedestal he had been placed onto. He reached catharsis.

Quickly, with concise movements born out of his physicality, he leaped out of the bed with the swiftness of an animal fulfilling its inherent primal desires, and made his way towards the wooden chair in the corner of the room. Without thinking, he smashed the chair into the breast of light above him, and allowed the cascading shards of crystalline glass to fall onto his naked body. With that, all the strength he had recently acquired was expelled through his pores, and he fell, nearly lifeless, into the pile of glass that surrounded his feet. He lay there in a pool of his own blood and semen that twinkled with shattered glass, allowing himself to be gently cradled to sleep by the cool darkness and isolation of his room.

Thomas Lee

Dangling

Drown in my depression
Decapitated dreams descending
Daily dancing with my demons
Dead and damned still doing decent
Dare to dive off the deep end
Downplaying my defense
Dark days darker desires
Dad declines when I dial
Disappointment daunting
Devastation dawning
Deemed different doubts divided
Dirty drag amongst diamonds
Defected diseased defeated
Deny detach delete it
Decisions grow drastic
Different drugs new damage
Derailed by dysfunction
Doomed to self-destruction
Dearly hope demise is swift

Ana Hein

Consider the Cactus

	If you touch a Cactus, you are not allowed to say OWW!	
	It's your own fault for touching it. It clearly does	
not want to	be touched, tapped,	thwacked,
spanked,	grabbed, hugged,	groped,
smacked,	felt, caressed,	poked,
or any	assortment	thereof.
It has	spikes for a	reason,
you know;	don't be stupid	enough to
touch it.	And if you are	stupid
	enough to do just that,	you don't
	get to feel sorry for yourself afterwards	
	or cry out in pain that you might have been spared, or complain that the Cactus was Just a damn tease. Consider, for just a second, how that Cactus must feel.	

Owen Elphick

Self-Portrait as Egg Shell

Your emptiness,
your cartilaginous fragments
of a life before life. Papyrus-thin,
you crumble at the touch. You were made
to come apart.

Yellowed by the dirty
air, purple spots pepper you,
a chicken-pox pattern, a dull speckling.
Your insides crusted with sand.
Your curve.

Your collapse. Your folding
into yourself like paper half-charred,
yanked from the fireplace before total
incineration. Flecking at the ashy edges and twisting
into a fine, congealed dust.
Left on the edge

of this marsh like litter, scattered
beside a vast greenness. So small,
it is a wonder you ever held
anything.

Splintered by time
and the unceasing birthing of things.
Nothing is born without a breaking,
and jagged shards stick from you like
a shattered mirror.

Life hid in you once,
stewed, boiled, grew, broke
through, cracking you, leaving you
vacant. And now you lie here, dead
calcium, purpose complete.

Samuel Levy

Syndrome

At six o'clock this morning, I slouched in bed against the wall of my walk-in, closet-sized dorm room and did what could be referred to as “social media time travel.” I had two classes back-to-back starting in less than two hours and needed sleep desperately, but something compelled me to the point where sleep had to wait: a memory. A cluster of them, really, all about this boy I used to know. Zach Bryer. He came to mind suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere as I lay flat in bed, my eyes open wide toward the invisible ceiling in the pitch-black dark—that’s when I do a big chunk of my reflecting, during that short, quiet period of inactivity after resolving to sleep but before the sleep comes.

I wanted to see what the years had turned Zach into. I wanted to remind myself of the way he looked, because time was beginning to bury the image. Resting my hot computer on my thighs, I sat up in the near-dark with the white burst of electricity radiating toward my face and typed his name into the Facebook search bar. After scrolling down past a list of about thirty other Zach Bryers and clicking “show more results” at least twice, I finally stopped the mouse on a profile picture I thought might be the one. It shocked me to find

there were so many other Zach Bryers out there in the world, and it vaguely depressed me, too—I wondered how many name-twins of mine, how many Marcy Roths, would come up before me if someone decided to look me up.

From what I remembered, Zach had no distinct features to go on: brown hair, brown eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Pretty standard. But the guy in the picture was a closer match than anyone so far. True, he was *smiling*, and the Zach of my past didn't smile, especially not in pictures. But the more I saw of his photo album, the more traces I began to spot of the Zach I remembered. I could see his familiar overbite more clearly—probably why he grew the beard in the first place. There was that tall, skinny, upside-down triangle of a head, and the rimless, rectangular eyeglasses he had taken off for his current profile picture. I checked his friend count and found he had five friends total. Four out of the five were family: Doreen Bryer, Cal Bryer, Annette Bryer, Lindsay Bryer. If Zach had retained anything of his past self, I figured there probably weren't many more friends to count in his life outside Facebook.

To explain how I knew him, I'll have to explain a bit about my childhood first.

I had a friend problem growing up and the problem was that I didn't have any. I've been a naturally nervous person since I could form thoughts, and kids don't like to be around someone nervous because it makes them feel nervous, too. But I also had Tourette's—a very conspicuous case of it—and that didn't help. If my personality alone wasn't enough to make a loner out of me, Tourette's was. I might have had a hard time socially even if I had been born “normal,” but Tourette's all but destroyed the possibility of friendship. For all of my early childhood, I went to school, came home, went to bed, and went to school again. Period. I never had any extracurricular activities or anything resembling a friendship. That was acceptable, if not ideal, until middle school. At that point you're expected to have at

least one friend or else people start to get ideas about you, thinking there must be a reason. I was conscious enough by then to notice my own loneliness.

My parents found a therapy group specifically for kids who were “like me,” hoping the others in the group would be as desperate as I was and as a result wouldn’t mind my condition because, you know, beggars can’t be choosers. Besides, they had it too—they were sure to have more empathy and there was sure to be less of a stigma around the symptoms. We sat in a circle of chairs and shared our feelings with a mediator, who spoke in a soft, gentle, intentionally soothing voice. “It’s okay to be sad, you know,” she told us.

We were the spazziest looking group of kids you’ve ever seen. There were about fifteen kids altogether, and at any given moment at least a few of us were simultaneously in the middle of a tic fit. The mediator would tell the rest of us to ignore them (or the rest of them to ignore us) and continue on with the discussion. We’d have to speak and listen over the sound of yelping. Sometimes it got so bad for someone they had to leave the room just so the rest of us could hear each other. The mediator would escort them out to their parents and then come back to us.

Many parents sat outside in the waiting room together trying to schedule playdates for the younger children and “hang outs” for the older ones. My mother and father made chit-chat and faux casual banter with the other parents in a sort of attempt at networking on my behalf. They got especially friendly with this one woman whose husband never showed up. Her name was Doreen Bryer and her son was Zach. I never talked to Zach in group, but, observing him from across the room, I always categorized him as weird. He blinked hard and jerked his neck suddenly on repeat—those were physical tics—but sometimes he made an obnoxious kissy fish face with his mouth while other people were talking about serious problems of theirs. That was not a tic. And he sat with his legs under his butt and he hooked his pinky finger inside of his cheek. I didn’t like him. But my parents liked his mother so they set the two of us up.

They drove me up to his house on a Saturday, forty minutes there and back. While we drove, I tugged at my hair in the backseat, watching the scenery get more and more pasto-

ral as we got farther into the country. “He’s gonna be so weird,” I said.

“You never even talked to him,” my mother answered. “How would you like other people to judge you for *your* Tourette’s?”

“I don’t think he seems weird because he has *Tourette’s*,” I said. “I just think he seems weird. And I guess you guys think just because we both have it that we’re the same or gonna be best friends or something.”

“All we’re saying is give him a chance, that’s all,” my father said as we bounced to a halt in front of a three-story house. “You need a friend, he needs a friend, you could be each *other’s* friend. Boom, problem solved for both of you. And we know it’s a long drive, but listen, if you like him then it’s well worth it. Mom’ll drive you up here whenever you want. But just promise you’ll give him the benefit of the doubt.”

And I did. I doubted I would like him.

As soon as we parked, my anxiety, which had been laying somewhat dormant for the past forty minutes, culminated into something palpable. The inside of my stomach cranked up to a higher voltage. I’m not sure why I was so nervous—I certainly wasn’t eager to make a good impression for Zach. But the whole scenario seemed so forced, so artificial and orchestrated, so *condescending* that I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. Besides, I had no experience with friendship and I didn’t understand the logistics of it. What was I supposed to do with this strange boy who I had never really met? Was it his duty as a host to find activities for us, or was it expected of me as a guest to bring with me some form of entertainment? Would we end up sitting far apart in his room in silence while my parents and his mother laughed in the living room downstairs?

Right as my father took off his seatbelt, I started cursing and apologizing in between. I could hardly get a word in edgewise. “*Fuck fuckitty fuck fuck a motherfucking fuck in the fuck shit—I’m sorry guys—fuck that, fuck you, you little shit bitches—I’m really sorry, stop, stop stop it, Marcy—Fuck!*” They waited silently in the back of the car until I got it all out of my system. They had trained themselves to let this kind of thing pass with patience.

“You think it’s over now?” my mother said. “We can sit here as long as you want, sweet-

ie. No pressure to go in right away.”

I nodded, breathing heavily out of my nose, keeping my mouth closed as tight as humanly possible, clenching my teeth, and straining my jaw. The way my parents looked at me had a gentle kindness to it, but also a strained attempt at understanding something that wasn't within their realm of experience. They couldn't relate to me, no matter how much they tried. I could see them resisting the urge to say, “Well, why don't you just stop, Marcy? Just shut your mouth and don't open it.” Like I haven't thought of that before.

When I calmed myself down, we got out of the car and my mother rang the doorbell for me. I hid behind both of them. Between their bodies, I saw a silhouette getting larger and darker on the frosted glass door. When a woman about my mother's age opened up, I used my mother's body as a shield against the woman's eyes. I didn't want her to see me—I most of all didn't want her to hear me, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

“She's a little shy,” my mother said. I always resented it when she excused my behavior on my behalf. “She can be very quiet. Until she's not, of course.”

The woman laughed. They were both laughing about me, if not at me, while I stood right there. They were laughing about their own children, whose unusual ailments they had learned to find the humor in. I saw the humor, too, but I didn't find it funny enough to laugh.

“Hi,” I said, sliding through the gap between my mother and father.

Zach's mom seemed thrilled and grateful to have me there. She was aggressively hospitable to me and trembled with nervous energy, so jittery to please my every desire it crept me out after a while.

“It's rare for Zach to have guests over, so you're welcome here any time you like,” she said, all adult-giddy while escorting me on a tour through the house. “This is the bathroom. If you ever need it, no need to ask, just go. And right here is the kitchen. If you ever need a snack I can whip up anything you want, as long as we have it. I'll even give you soda. Shh, don't tell Mom and Dad.”

She put her finger to her lips and laughed. She always offered me unhealthy foods and

drinks I wasn't allowed at home; I think it was her way of bribing me to return. I guess she thought if I ate food I liked when I was with Zach I'd be conditioned, Pavlov-style, to think I liked *him*.

Next, she led me up to Zach's room, opening the door and letting me enter first. He was at his desk by a computer playing video games. He sat on a big, tall rolling chair that made his legs hang off of the ground and wore an oversized pair of headphones that covered both his ears completely. There was such a horrific intensity to the way he played, his eyes wide and bulging and aimed stubbornly at the screen. Even back then it made me sad. His video games meant so much to him—if he had the choice, I bet he would have spent his whole life locked in a windowless room and left alone to play them, eating from a tray shoved through a slot in the wall and doing his business into an all-purpose bucket near his bed. I always figured his games were all he had in the way of company, since other people weren't really an option. He didn't look at us when we came in.

"Zach," his mom said. "Zach. Zachary. Hey Zach, you've got a friend here to see you."

Nothing about him budged. He kept beating up his keypad with so much force I could hear the clicks from the doorway. He was biting his lower lip and bouncing up and down manically every few seconds.

"Zachary, be gentle. You're going to break your keypad if you're not careful."

His mom walked up behind him and took the headphones off. He started yelling at her without taking his attention off of the game. I had never, and have never, seen anything like it. He kept playing his game as intensely as before while shouting, "HEY MOM! WHAT THE HELL? PUT THEM BACK ON! I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF A REALLY IMPORTANT PART RIGHT NOW! IF I LOSE I HAVE TO START OVER, YOU'RE GONNA MAKE ME MESS UP, PUT THEM BACK ON!"

At first, I thought she would obey, but instead she coiled up the headphone wire around the headband and said, "Listen—hey, listen for a second, okay? I'm serious right now—I want you to stop playing your game for a little while because that girl we told you about is here to see you. Look, she's right there. Look."

“What girl?” he said, still refusing to look my way. It was then I saw his first tic, a series of blinks so severe they made him crinkle his nose. “You never said anything about anything.”

“You don’t remember?” his mom said. “About a week ago we said a girl from group therapy wanted to meet you and that we were going to arrange something. And then last night at dinner we told you she’d be coming today. You really don’t remember?”

He blinked again and looked at me. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yes, we did,” she said. “We can ask Daddy and he’ll confirm it.”

“Well, you should’ve told me this morning! I’m not in the mood to see anyone.”

His mom turned to me. “I’m sorry about this, sweetie. He doesn’t mean it, he just gets a little—well, moody sometimes. Once you two get to know each other he’ll warm up, trust me.” Then she turned back to Zachary and started whispering something harsh in his ear, maybe a threat of taking away his games. She moved away from his ear and said, “Look, she came all this way to see you and she’s here now so regardless of whether or not you want to see her and regardless of whether or not you remember us telling you, we’re not gonna turn her away. So, you be a good host now and talk to her. I don’t want her sitting here while you play your little games because that’s rude, you understand? If you want you can give her a lesson on how to play and maybe you can play together.”

“We can’t play together,” he said. “It’s a one-player game, plus there’s only one computer, so...”

“Then play a two-player game or don’t play anything at all.”

She told me to make myself at home and I thought, *I wish I was at home*. Then she left the room and left me alone with him, this demon boy who clearly didn’t want me around and who I didn’t want to be around, either. He was my problem now. At first, he said nothing, and I had no intention of breaking the silence. I just stood there by the door while he sat at his desk and we both looked at the ground from opposite sides of the room.

Then he said, “You can sit on my bed if you want.”

I sat on his bed, which had red-and-blue striped sheets and a pillow with a brown stain

on it. “Just give me a minute to log out of the game and shut off the computer,” he said. When he finished, I thought he might sit with me on the bed, but instead he swiveled around and rolled himself over to me on his chair, propelling himself forward by pushing his hand against the edge of his desk.

“So, you have Tourette’s?” he asked.

I said yes.

“I do, too.”

“Yeah, I know that,” I said. “That’s why I’m here, I think.”

“Do you want to watch me play video games?” he asked.

“Not really.”

Zach was in eighth grade and three years above me, a piece of information I felt uncomfortable about. He was much less eager for a friend than his mom was for him to have a friend. I could tell he saw me as a chore, a younger cousin he had to babysit for free. He brought me to his room and showed off his collection of action figures as if they were trophies to brag about. His mom bought them for him, but for some reason he was proud of them. He’d hold one in each hand and pretend they were fighting by clashing them together and making immature explosion sound effects.

He acted immature compared to students I’d seen of his age, and I could tell he didn’t have much practice talking to people. On our first date—or playdate, or whatever it was—he asked me a series of random questions about myself. Every time I answered he would ignore what I said and move onto the next question. It was more of an interview or a quiz on my opinions than a dialogue. “I have a cat, are you allergic to cats? What’s your favorite color, besides blue because everyone says blue?”

He tried to “teach” me how to play the games downloaded on his computer, but that was just a ploy so he could play them. He wouldn’t let me take a turn at it because he was afraid I’d mess up his overall score, his “ranking.” But I could bear witness if I was quiet, he said, like he was granting me some sort of sacred privilege. He ended up getting so absorbed in his virtual battles that he forgot about me altogether. So, I sat on the edge of his

bed twiddling my thumbs while he clicked away at his desk, until my mom's car pulled up and his poor little mother summoned me downstairs.

He bossed his mother around when she came in with snacks for us, which were laid out all fancy on separate plates, with each ingredient organized in perfect segregation. He'd call her "*Mom*" with oral italics and command her to get out of his room. As far as he was concerned, she had trespassed on private property, even though it was her house, even though she was doing us a favor, even though he ate the snacks afterwards anyway. She'd just laugh it off and do as ordered. And I pitied her the way I wouldn't want to be pitied myself. She was a weak-willed shell of a person. If her son had any chance of growing up with any character at all, she was spoiling that chance by spoiling him, by feeding into his behavior.

I always apologized to her on his behalf when he got nasty; I felt guilty being associated with him. He was a classic brat, not someone who had the constitution for friendship, and I knew it. But I needed the company desperately and thought, *Well, nobody's perfect*. So, despite the long drive—and, you know, *him*—I went to his house almost every Saturday as a fixed part of my weekly schedule for a few years, until his dad got transferred to Chicago for work and they moved out of state. I learned to bring books and teenage girl magazines to entertain myself, flipping through them and occasionally lying down to count the paint-freckles on his ceiling. We might as well have been alone, really—and I guess we were, if it's possible to be alone while in the same room as someone else.

Our little formal appointments were usually silent unless one of us was having an outburst. I didn't have the twitches, but he did—muscular tics and sporadic jerks of the neck that made him cramp up and gave him minor whiplash. He also had the cursing, though, so we switched off, back and forth, with that. In a way it was nice, I guess, because we both accepted it completely when the other had an outburst, and we wouldn't ask about it or look surprised or confused or irritated. Our ears had been desensitized, and so had our brains. The sound of a screamed "FUCK" registered as nothing more than a fly buzzing or a clock ticking to me. Once, I had a particularly brutal one—one so bad I got a sore throat afterwards and needed cough drops from his mom's medicine cabinet. He paused

his game, got up on the bed next to me and held my hand through it. He held it tight. And he pressed his other hand against my mouth, covering it, trying to keep it from opening to help me stop. To shut the bad words in, to prevent them from escaping. I didn't feel scared because he wasn't suffocating me. He was trying to suffocate the words.

That's the only nice memory I have of him. Maybe there were more, but I don't remember.

When he moved away I didn't miss him so much as I missed having someone that qualified as a friend. At least with him I could pretend that I wasn't alone. At least I had another human body near me. Even if he didn't care about me, he didn't care about my tics, either. Not only did he accept them, he barely noticed them most of the time. And that was freeing in its own sad little way. When he left he took that freedom with him, and everything went back to the way it was. We weren't nearly close enough to write to each other, and I knew if I wrote to him he would never write back.

I idealized the relationship as much as I could. I stretched it as far as my brain allowed because when something bad is all you have, you try to delude yourself into believing it's okay. Sometimes I even tried to convince myself he was my boyfriend, and before every visit a part of me nurtured the hope that this would be the time we fell in love. That this would be the time I broke down his barriers and he showed me his real self. After a while, I started to realize that the person I saw the first day I came over—that was his real self. There was nobody better behind it.

Neither of us could find the kind of friend who was capable of finding other friends—in other words, nobody who had options would have taken us. It was a friendship founded on mutual desperation. In retrospect, I bet he was as lonely as me under all that brattiness. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking; he had the sickness worse than I did, and it wasn't any help that he looked weird and acted weirder. I learned early on you needed to make a real effort to be sweet if you wanted anyone to look past your tics.

If there was any hope for me, I always felt quite positive there was none for him. He was doomed, an adult loner in the making. The type the neighbors and the FBI keep a close

eye on. Eventually, one of those old men you see hunched over tuna fish salad with a fork in a food court, picking at a crevice in their teeth every so often to get at a stuck piece.

This morning, I investigated his whole Facebook profile top to bottom, starting with the “about” section. He’s a professional YouTube gamer now. That made me want to laugh—maybe I would have if I didn’t feel so gloomy. He tapes tutorials and walkthroughs of games, posts them on YouTube, posts the links on Facebook, and somehow, he gets paid for that. Advertising, I guess. I bet he records his voice-overs and cuts out parts where the tics act up—edit around those parts until he’s got a clean chunk of narration. No boss, no co-workers, no one to make his Tourette’s into an issue if it’s still there. He has something, no matter how shallow and depressing it might be to anyone else—he’s found a method of coping, and if it’s enough for him then it’s enough, period. He probably got hooked on them in the first place because they were the only way he could have any amount of fun while in a room alone, quarantined from the rest of the world. A video game can’t reject you; it doesn’t need you to be a certain way and it doesn’t get annoyed by your abrasive idiosyncrasies. I’m sure he’ll use them as a social substitute his whole life. And maybe that’s good, in a way. Unfortunately, I never got into video games.

The first few pictures I saw were selfies, which didn’t surprise me. Zach standing against a blank wall; Zach waving at the camera with a forest behind him; Zach waving at the camera with a beach behind him. He looked older, but not very different. The same disconnected eyes. Then, as I kept looking, I saw a recurring female figure appear next to him in many of his pictures. She had a lazy eye, thick, dry hair, and waxy skin. Before I could write her off as a relative I saw that in one of the pictures they were kissing each other, frozen in time. *Good for you, Zach*, I tried to think. But I couldn’t believe it, and I couldn’t quite will myself to feel happy. He has someone—he, of all people, *found* someone, someone who could stand him—and I’m still very much alone. *What is it about me*, I thought, *that I’m less of a catch than Zach Bryer? Am I really that bad?* And then I felt shame and guilt at myself for having such a nasty thought, but that didn’t stop me from having it. *Maybe he got over his Tourette’s. Yeah. That’s it. Maybe he’s cured.* I shut my laptop and clenched

my teeth behind closed lips, laying back down to get a measly hour of rest before the day began. The last thought I had before falling asleep was, *Good for him. Good for him.*

Laura Rodgers

The Loon

The old man rubbed away the steam from the mirror, revealing his wrinkled face. The glass was cold underneath his sun-spotted palm. He peered at himself closely. His eyes were the color of dirty ice, like muddy snow that is too stubborn to thaw in the spring. They were the only thing he recognized about himself anymore. His cheekbones were thin and his eyelids sagged. His head was shaved but white pricks were beginning to hug his ears. Hell, it felt like his hair decided to stop growing out of his head and switched to his nose.

The mirror was cracked in the corners and hung above a pink porcelain sink. The bathroom had barely enough room to turn around. If he wanted to, he could have gone to the bathroom and brushed his teeth at the same time.

It was almost four in the morning and sleep was like a siren's call to his heavy eyes. He quickly dried himself and pulled on his one-of-two pairs of jeans with a plain, white collar shirt. He had almost forgotten a belt again, but his wife had made sure he packed it. He could hear her voice shouting, Jay, don't forget your belt again! He slipped it on, the well-loved grooves making it easy for his shaking hands. Parkinson's be damned, he would always be a fisherman.

Jay meandered into his two-room cabin and pulled on his waterproof fishing boots. The twin bed had a multicolored quilt with two lumpy pillows. His wife would always complain about the pillows. She'd use the quilt as a headrest instead. The lamp on his bedside table had cobwebs along the bulb and the two windows had holes in the screens. His son always brought duct tape with him to cover the holes, or else they both would wake up with bug bites all over. He passed a woodstove in the corner next to a pile of rotting wood, where several years ago his granddaughters tried to burn their Polly Pockets in the fire. Now, the pungent smell of mothballs overrode any potential scent of pine from the trees outside.

Jay wouldn't trade it for anything else.

The trees outside the window looked like dark ghosts as he pulled his antique bamboo fishing rod from its metal casing. The sole red cotton armchair coughed dust as he sat down. The rod was divided into three parts and had to be gently pieced together. He unwrapped the end of an old wax candle and gently rubbed a protective coating over the wood. The wax prevented too much friction which could cause it to snap. He pushed and gently twisted the pieces together to create a nine-foot rod. He attached an antique reel on the handle and threaded the line through the guides up the pole as softly as a lover buttoning their partner's shirt.

Jay could do the process in his sleep. Once the rod had the reel weaved through the guides all he had to do was attach the fly. His busted hips groaned as Jay leaned down to grab his plastic case of organized fake flies; they were all various sizes, shapes, and colors to appease different kinds of fish. He chuckled as he remembered how his granddaughters only chose pink flies when they were children. Now they were in college in a city far away, their fishing roots dormant but not forgotten. One only needed to smell the sweet water

again to be reeled back into the serenity of the lake.

Jay plucked out a bright yellow Wulff. His eyes weren't what they used to be and he had to use a tiny lens to make the end of the plastic line visible. Jay wondered if he would wake the neighboring cabin up with his loud cursing as his shaking hands failed to make a knot for the third time. Once he had a decent knot tied securely around the fly he clipped the excess off. Finally finished, he hooked the fly on the bottom of the pole so it wouldn't swing as he walked.

He swatted a mosquito, grabbed his other fishing gear and left the cabin. Jay meandered down the main road, the gravel crunching under his feet, and rod bobbing against his shoulder.

He had been coming to this fly fishing camp for over fifty years. Sometimes Jay brought his family and dogs, sometimes it was just him. Over the past ten years, once he reached eighty years old, the camp had begun to degrade. The wooden boats leaked and were cheaply repaired until they broke again, the food quality had plummeted, and the old timers that had been regulars for generations were being pushed out for a more appeasable "family-friendly" audience. Jungle gyms had replaced fish cleaning stations and rabbit pens were scattered down the dirt road while the ten cabins along the waterfront crumbled.

There was no cell service for almost five miles and the nearest town was a forty-five minute drive away. There was nothing out here but forests, the lake, and the loons. Many couldn't appreciate the silence of the docks or the aggressive three course meal they served at the dining hall. The camp owner was trying to sell a small fishing camp in Maine to young parents and children who had the whole world at their fingertips through tiny black screens.

It made an old man's heart ache.

The stars weren't visible anymore but his eyes slowly adjusted as he reached the docks. The dock boys were nowhere in sight. Typical. Their only job was to help load older men into their boats and pass them their gear. No other fishermen were near either meaning they were young fathers sleeping in until breakfast, or even more of the older genera-

tion stopped coming this year. The slapping water sounded weak and lonely, like the lake missed having groups of fishermen explore her before the sun came up. Jay thought about getting email addresses from his niche community to stay in touch, but he didn't want to hear about the funerals.

Dawn would be approaching in an hour. A faint loon call echoed off the water. Jay wondered how many new baby loons had been born this year and if he would see the birds this trip. How many more times would he get to see the beautiful creatures?

What if this was his last?

There were no sounds of people and the nearby cabins were dark. Jay could almost hear his son, almost fifty years old now, saying that he should wait for someone to help him into the rocking boat.

Well, Jay was never one to wait.

Jay loaded his depth finder first, an expensive machine that showed him how big the fish were underneath his boat. The other geezers stuck their noses up at such technology, saying he wasn't a real fly fisherman, but he didn't care. He knew all the best spots on this lake to catch salmon and trout. The others be damned.

The chill from the water went right through his fishing vest, shaking him to the core. The blood thinners he's been taking after his second stroke always made him feel like he was in Antarctica. Jay lowered his rod next to the motor like he was laying down a newborn babe into a cradle. His knees protested and stabs of pain shot up his lower back.

What would his younger self say if he saw his state now? His hands were doughy from years of office work and his greatest enemy was falling into a body of water. With a small smile Jay remembered how he used to steal corn from nearby farms in Massachusetts then spark a fire with his friends in some secluded area, cook and eat the corn, and be back home before dinner. Now there was a list of foods he couldn't even sniff or his doctor would throw a fit.

Jay stood and stared at the chipped green and white paint on the boat. How many more years could he do this?

He shook the morbid thought from his head. He only had to get into the boat. Jay gripped the corner post with his right hand and placed his left foot on the boat's bottom floorboards. The boat rocked from his weight, but he balanced himself. With experienced agility, he pulled the boat toward the dock, let go of the post, and swung himself onto the main seat.

A louder, garbled loon call shot across the water, as if the bird was laughing at Jay's stubbornness. A flash of fear came over him when he realized that no one would have been around to help him if he had fallen and hit his head. His breath came in wheezing gasps, but he was safe.

But thinking about fears never got him anywhere. Jay untied the rope from the post and tossed it next to his feet. There were already three inches of water along the bottom. He sighed. Jay started up the motor and jumped from the noise. His hearing aids picked up certain frequencies that sounded like nails on a chalkboard. It sounded like an intrusion on the silence of nature, a man-made growling that smelled like gasoline. He could feel the pollution leaking into the air, like cancer spreading into a clean body.

The water looked like onyx-colored glass as he made his way across the lake. Jay was careful to drive the boat at an angle with the waves so the boat wouldn't flip. There weren't any white caps to worry about, yet. Suddenly, he forgot where he was heading. Was the cove on the east or west side of the lake? The boat slowed as he hesitated. The wind roared and Jay had to clap his palm onto his hat or risk losing it to the lake.

His memory flooded back to him. Of course, it was the west side because the sun always hurt his eyes as it rose. He knew his memory was fading, just like the rest of him. His soul was slowly leaving his body, and he almost hoped it would speed up the process while he was still able to dress himself. That was one thing he never wanted to subject his family to: having to care for his rotten body while his mind had completely checked out. Jay would rather find the old hunting rifle in his basement and save them the medical bills.

Jay made his way to a small cove away from the wind. The water settled and he turned his machine on. It beeped for a few seconds and various dots appeared. He grinned.

Take that, shitheads.

He unhooked his fly and pulled a few feet of line from the reel. He stood still, but relaxed, so the boat didn't rock. The algae on the water had a clean scent you can only get on the edge of a lake. He scanned the water to see if any fish rose. A gray blanket had taken over the sky, tucking itself in at the horizon.

He cast. The process of drawing his right arm back, whipping it forward without too much force, and letting his arm follow through on the swing was almost like a dance. He could see the small yellow spot on the silver water about thirty feet away. Every seven seconds he gently tugged the line so that the fly appeared like it was jumping on the water. It almost fooled him too, sometimes.

A mist slowly spread to him, which looked beautiful but made his yellow fly hard to follow. Re-casting was the only thing that separated time on the water. It lulled his mind with each swing of the arm. Crickets chirped on the shore and occasionally the water splashed when he got a bite. After each fish he caught, he had to dry his fly by putting it in a container of salt and shaking it. The water would be absorbed and then he would recast.

He napped one fish that kept him fighting for ten minutes, a record time for a trout. It snapped the line. Jay let loose string a long line of curses, not caring if anything heard him. Twenty minutes passed before his shaking hands managed to retie a knot with a new fly. It was clumsy and feeble, but it would do.

The air was warming and his shivering slowed. He was about to find a different cove when the fly was sucked underwater. He straightened his arm up immediately. The rod snapped to attention and the battle began. The repetition was a dance of respect; if you pulled too hard your rod could snap, if you were too lenient the fish would cut the line. Let it go, reel it in, let it go, reel it in. It took a few minutes of fighting, but the fish began to tire.

He was in the last stretch and got his large net ready. The fish bobbed on the surface and he scooped it out of the water. It was a bright silver salmon, reaching about fifteen inches long. He took his forceps and removed the hook and fly from the fish's mouth. The fins

were flailing and it struggled against his firm grip. At least it wasn't a foul hook and the fish wouldn't be in too much pain.

The belly had yellow spots that trailed along to the gills. Jay cursed. It felt like no fisherman could pull up a fish these days without some parasite on them. He felt water coming up his shoes and had to empty them for the fifth time. Even during his favorite pastime, he could not escape the sense that sickness was all around him. He yearned for a period of peace where he could move without physical pain. Frustration boiled inside of him and for once he didn't feel cold as heat rushed to his cheeks.

Jay threw the fish onto the boat floor. It splashed in the muddy water.

A different splash on the water made his head turn. A loon was coasting on the waves less than five feet from his boat. They loved to wait until fishermen caught something, then dive under the water while they were fighting to snatch it up.

"You want it?" Jay grumbled. "Well, too bad."

Jay took the small, wooden hammer from his supply bag and held the twitching fish down. He slammed the hammer on its tiny head, over and over and over. He didn't stop until blood coated his fingers.

The loon stared at him, its beautiful green neck twitching. The white dots on the animal looked like jewelry. It flared its wings. The man began to feel the first rays of sun on the back of his neck. His stomach growled, and he knew he should head back to the camp. He stole another glance at the majestic bird.

"I'm still alive," he said.

It cooed back to him and dove into the water. He wondered what it was saying. It resurfaced thirty feet away, and then another surfaced next to it, and then another. The black figures bobbed on the water and in unison the birds wailed like widows mourning.

For some reason, the heaviness in his heart was lessened. He looked at the mangled fish and sighed. With the sun on his back and the foul smell of blood on his hands, he turned his boat and headed back for the docks, a white river of bubbles sputtering behind him.

Erin Hattamer

Upper Case Zebra

And here we are again and I decide to close my eyes.
Better people have kept them open. Me? I fall asleep to the
conversation that has made its rounds. Fogged its windows. Kicked its
dust. *How can you be numb?* they ask. You should be angry.
Exhausted, I respond. Whatever part of my throat that talked of these things died
of consumption.
Finally, they say. This time, they say. I believe her. We believe her. They will believe
her!
God has not shown mercy to a woman in a court of men. Witches have hung at gallows.
Hell has collected no criminals. Criminals with white halos and wings that fly over
words.
I have seen them before. Welcome to my school, my home, my court of law. You
joke, you laugh, you marry, you live. And the rest of us wonder if we should do the
killing ourselves. Bury our dead, tend to our wounded, and wait,
listening to the words *Me too* enter the void.
Me too? No, not just me. But her and him, and them, and we, against...
nothing, I wish the enemy had a single name,
or a single face I could scratch hard enough to break skin.
Perhaps then, they would test the DNA under my fingernails.

Quietly, they watch the show. The definition of insanity enters my brain, not my mouth. Rape is not a verb, they explain. It is a preposition. It's an At, an On, a From. It shows the relationship of a noun to a pronoun. A she to a He. A life to a Way of Life. An answer to a Question. I have the answer. Why do you have a question? Understand me when I say I care. I care about the scars across her wrists and the scars across her various body parts, that were used and then thrown out. Like a condom. When we talk, we discuss better things like ships that take us places. Xylophones ring. The rapist is calling her. The rapist is on the TV. He's inside the house. You tell her to cut the power, and listen carefully. When we hear hooves clop, I tell her it's not zebras. It must be horses. She says it's always zebras. Zebras on the senate floor.

Eric Bischoff

Sour Honey

now. the death of the bee and
the souring of honey begins
slow, subtle. as a father
tiptoeing up to his bed.
as a dead anger
in his face's flushed red.

i was 13. the bee did not
turn over on its back
and feel the weight
of love sink the soul. it did not
cry out to the heavens, or raise
a triumphant wing.
it stopped in its tracks
for a very long time, and never continued.

the bee had flown from its hive,
looking for nectar to make honey.
the bee was too late. and gone
for too long.

i looked for the hive,
as absent as spring.
i searched in memories of
honey-milk and flowers,
playing in the woods and that tunnel.
that dark, narrow place my brothers and i found:

i crawled.
my knees hurt.
it was tight.
i saw bones.
i was scared, a whisper
like insect wings.
our father,
who art in heaven,
hollow be thy name.
sit with me, eric.
christmas tree lights. cologne.
awkward, fussy.
i want you to sit with me

*because one day it won't
be like this. and you might
need this.*

*i bought this fucking house. i
worked for this fucking house. you're
not going to kick me out of my own fucking house—*

confusion, cries choked by the heavy cold.
i'm not a therapist, eric.
numbness. the bee

trembled its broken wings like a used candy wrapper.
*who left you behind? did you
wish to save the final flowers? did
you not know that they, too, must go?*

a thud.
a pounding,
right over
my heartbeat.
i looked for a safe place:
a hive. sticky with life.
warm in my center.
then a raised plastic hanger,
a slamming door,
a dog barks.
he laughs. when the

hive breaks, the
mind swarms:

don't fight my battles.
mom drove with one hand
for the first time. *i don't*
want to lose you boys,
i can't live without you.

looking in a mirror, practicing
personality: eric. trying to taste the
honey. trying to remember the
entrance or exit of the tunnel—

therapy?
he liked it because he got to
talk about himself. other than
that, it doesn't work.

stirring, staring at coffee. toast.
you're allowed to cry, eric.

i know.

so, you're okay then?
yeah. so?

i stood in the doorway.

she had her suitcase.
one brother was crying.
i don't want to lose you boys.
i shook my head, stared at
my shadow
in a
freezing moment
and no
thoughts came.

in the tunnel were broken,
and dry bones, weightless
and incoherent. felt, but
not seen. the bee searched
for his hive
with only his hungry memory.

why does she hurt herself, mom?
maybe your friend has a rough home.

how does she feel so much? how
does she seem so alive?

i found the hive later. it felt dry
as my winter cough. dry
as the fucking house he
fucking bought and lost and

tried to live
in anyway.
nowhere to take the bee's nectar. no exit, but
bones. no entrance, but a whispered
prayer and then

the sound of waves.
let's go for a walk, eric.

okay.

your friend died.
each thought became nothing
in the chaos, in
the buzzing, static swarm

the melody the cooing wind the distant
exit hollow name children laughing and
the narrow tunnel the fact of winter the hope of spring
 the dark the dry dead hives
honeyless.

oh. how'd she die?

*don't know. probably took a
bunch of pills
or something.* one hand on the wheel

the inability to cry *she probably had a rough home*

the fear of the hanger
the fact of tunnel

the hope of exit

the dry hive

the law of survival in the dead eyes

the strong: hollow name. the weak: dead bee.

sour honey. sour honey. sour honey.

a sick white static:

a ring
which muted everything.

i dug my hands into the dirt.
swallowed the dead hive.
fed the dark tunnel sticky,
sour honey. choked an
insect's prayer. trapped and
starved,
a boy playing with bones.

i didn't cry at

the wake,

i didn't go to
the funeral,

but i began
to see my friend's
faces change in time
while mine dried
into a cold mask,

as hidden as the
reason why she
wandered out even
after spring. why the hollow

bee couldn't feed the fallen
hive. the curious entrance

and the hope of exit she
ignited. in all that swarming time:

a friend, a mother,
a father, and me,
somehow stuck in
the same sour honey,
yet seemingly alive.

Thomas McCorkle

The Incapable Charles S. Sycamore

Charles S. Sycamore had certainly seen a lot of things this morning.

When he woke up at six A.M. to prepare for his half-hour long drive to South Charles University, he observed the tidy fashion of his one-bedroom apartment located on the outskirts of London. His eyes moved in a sweeping manner across the span of his bedroom, passing over a large wooden two-door wardrobe, which held his vast array of consistently pressed suits, ties, pants, and undergarments; a foot locker sporting the insignia of South Charles from his own time at the university; and a small standing desk showcasing the divorce papers from his uncontrollable wife as well as a picture of his lovely daughter Emelia.

A plain room to be sure. However, plain and simple is much easier to manage than complex or abstract.

Charles saw his reflection in the downstairs mirror after neatly combing his taper-cut brown hair, getting dressed in a dark gray suit, and putting on a black bowler hat sporting an ideal leather trim. What looked back at him through the mirror was a well-groomed, fifty-six year old, five foot six inch tall British professor but whose slight writer's hump

brought him down to an inch lower than that. His face was always cleanly shaven, and he made sure to keep his nose hairs constantly trimmed.

Charles S. Sycamore was in complete control of himself.

After eating breakfast and organizing his papers for class, Charles proceeded out of his house. Upon closing the front door behind him, he grabbed the newspaper delivered to his doorstep every Monday morning, opened the door of his polished 1969 Lincoln Continental Sedan, and set out for the South Charles campus.

Seeing as how the university was far out in the beautiful English countryside, there reached a point when Charles began seeing fewer and fewer people driving alongside him. When there were little to no cars left, Charles began periodically glancing down at the weekly paper sitting in the seat next to him, like a friend patiently waiting for his attention.

“If only my students were as quiet and knowledgeable as you. Then again, if that were so, the classes I teach would end up concluding a few months short. I wonder, what would I do during that empty quarter of the year with no minds to mold or enlighten?” he asked of his paper.

Charles, however, wouldn't make it to his class that day. In fact, he had hardly finished going over the newspaper's third headline when the world decided to throw him a curveball.

His car had begun to pass an open field. From the corner of his eye, he was able to get a glimpse of four boys playing with some balls and a bat relatively close to the road before his eyes quickly darted back to the paper.

During the course of this morning, Charles S. Sycamore had seen his bedroom, his reflection, the weekly paper, his car, a long stretch of asphalt, an open field, and four boys. What he didn't see was the ball, which came hurtling toward the front windshield of his

automobile. What he didn't see was the ball, which hit the windshield with such speed that it immediately created a spiderweb of cracks on the glass. What he didn't see was the ball, whose impact was so unexpected that it caused his body to accidentally jerk the wheel of his car a little too far to the left.

What he did see was his car making contact with a nearby telephone pole while still going at least forty miles an hour. What he did see was his entire day flying out of control into the sun like a proverbial Icarus. Then he saw nothing but darkness.



Charles S. Sycamore woke up to the smell of smoke, the sound of grating metal, the taste of blood, the sight of horror, and the feeling of dread. Everything about him seemed to have been recently placed underwater, as his vision kept awkwardly swirling around and around until he was finally able to get a sense of where he was.

Charles was soon able to vaguely make out the compacted front of his once-mint-condition 1969 Sedan through the large cracks in his windshield. Despite his senses being dulled and his movements feeling like they were encased within a thick gelatinous mold, he eventually got the door of his car open and set his feet on solid ground.

When he finally managed to stand up, Charles was aware of a strange feeling within himself. He soon began moving his hands up and down the length of his body.

What is this strange sensation? I feel detached, like the body I currently inhabit is not my own. As if I'm a mere passenger while somebody else holds the reins. This feeling... this... this feeling... I don't like it. I don't like it at all!

Charles' inner thoughts were cut short as he noticed a presence behind him on the other side of the road. When he turned to look and see who it was, he bore witness to the four boys from earlier, standing side by side, watching his tragedy unfold before them like a play. They each possessed a full head of amber-brown hair that seemed to shimmer in the morning sun, as well as pale skin with an apparent lack of blemishes. They each seemed about the same height of five foot eight, and looked to be around thirteen to fourteen years old.

Those boys. I remember them. I saw them playing in the field right before that ball hit...

Charles' eyes widened as his anger toward the whole event came to a boil, his voice lashing out at the boys.

"Come on now, out with it! Who is responsible for this?"

Several more minutes of silence passed as the boys looked at one another in a questioning manner.

"For God's sake lads, who hit that bloody ball? There can't be more than one, so who did it?"

After some more questioning glances, one of the boys, who sported a t-shirt and shorts covered in swamp camo, stepped forward and spoke with the voice of one pursuing a life in the militia.

"Sir, come now, you're acting quite ridiculous. Besides, that question isn't even applicable here."

Well now, this boy seems to have a good mind for language. Pity he would use such talent for such an idiotic statement.

"And how's that? The person who hit that ball is obviously the one responsible for this."

"Sir, no disrespect, but I believe there's a logical fallacy in that statement of yours."

"What do you mean fallacy? It caused the wreck, so it almost killed me!"

"Listen, friend," said another one of the boys, who stood with a slouch, hands pushed within the pockets of his snow-white rain jacket. "Did the damn ball force your hands to turn that wheel into the pole? Listen, I'm pretty sure that shit was you."

How dare this child address me with such horrid language. Were it not for my current state, I would very much like to rush over and give his face a good smack. Although, what good would that really do? At this point, I should really just ignore these little pissants and call for an ambulance.

When Charles reached into his left pants pocket, though, he came to realize that his phone was no longer in its usual resting place. He checked his right pants pocket, his suit pocket, and even the inside of his mangled car to no avail.

What in high hell? I'm sure I took that damn phone with me before I left. Every morning, on top of the nightstand, right into my left pocket.

Charles turned begrudgingly back to the boys.

“Would any of you happen to have a phone on you?”

The slouching boy spoke up again.

“Listen man, that ain't gonna help you now.”

“How do you figure that? If I had one I could call an ambulance, or better yet, a police car to take you hooligans to the mental ward.”

Another one of the boys decided to respond, this one clad in what looked like an amalgam of neon colors. Charles couldn't tell where the boy's shirt stopped and where his pants began. It was simply maddening to look at and showcased no form of orderly fashion. The boy spoke with the voice of a child aged seven or eight.

“Oh no, that wouldn't be fun. That would be boring. We still have to find out who did this.”

The energetic boy's face lit up with excitement as he turned to the other boys.

“Oh, does this mean we get to go to the courtroom today? Oh, please, please, please tell me we can.”

Charles stood, dumbfounded.

Alright, Mr. Whitfield, you appear to be in the presence of potential lunatics. Maybe I should just gather up my papers and begin making my way toward campus. Hopefully somebody will pick me up along the way. Anything's better than staying with this insensible lot.

However, when looking back into the remains of his vehicle, he could find no trace of his class papers, nor of the newspaper, which he could still recall the headlines of.

“Sir, are you going to participate or not?”

This sudden response appeared to be coming from closely behind Charles' hunched form, causing his body to start and his head to accidentally bang into the Sedan's roof. When he turned around, his eyes were greeted with a most peculiar sight.

Where before there had been a wide, open field, there now appeared to be an incredibly

large courtroom filled with chairs, desks, podiums, the entire mess of it all. Everything was made out of oak wood apart from the judge's stand, which seemed to be made out of chocolate. There were no windows, no doors, and the only source light came from a series of six bright orbs hovering near the roof of the courtroom. The room was completely empty apart from the four boys, who seemed to be taking up the spaces of prosecutor, lawyer of the defendant, bailiff, and judge.

Looking down, he realized that he currently sat behind the defendant's table, with the camo boy standing in front him, acting as bailiff.

"Sir, are you going to participate or not?" the boy in camo repeated in a most formal manner.

The only words that escaped from Charles' lips were, "Wha... What, WHAT?!"

From the prosecutor's table, the slouching boy asked, "Listen your honor, this shitstain of a defendant seems to be pretty out of it. Can we just get on with the game already?"

Charles looked up and saw the energetic boy sitting atop the judge's stand. In the boy's right hand rested a gavel. Its handle was made of candy cane, and its head was a large marshmallow. After banging this gavel a few times—and somehow still producing the sound of wood hitting wood—the energetic boy began to speak.

"Okay then. We will now start the case of the broken car. The defender is Charlie S. Sica... Sicka... the defender is Charlie. But since he can only say the word 'what' right now, his lawyer will have to talk for him."

The energetic boy then whispered, "Oh, lawyer, that's when you talk."

Dazed and confused amidst this madness, Charles couldn't help but immediately look to his left and gaze at the fourth boy, who was dressed in a black tweed jacket and rugged jeans. The boy constantly twiddled his pointer fingers and couldn't seem to keep his eyes in one place for very long. When he started to speak, his voice was all aquiver like a broken vibrato.

"Well, my client has... well, he drove his car into a pole... but, no, that's not right... a ball hit his car and then we... but he was still driving the car..."

The energetic boy banged his gavel again.

“Okay Mr. Layer, your time is up. Mr. Prosectutor, it’s your turn. Also, Mr. Balip, get me another glass of milk. Mr. Jug is thirsty.”

Charles had had just about enough of marshmallow gavels, disrespectful tones, and people talking for him.

I might not know where I am or what the hell is going on, but I know for damn sure that I shall not sit quietly while all sense of normality and reason is stripped from my day.

Charles placed his hands on the desk before him and stood up with the force of a raging bull.

“What the hell is going on here? Why are we in a courtroom? Why does this little truant think he can speak for me? I clearly have control over my own voice, so if anyone is going to defend me, it shall be me. In fact, why am I defending myself, when it was your ball that caused me to jerk my car into its current state? It’s your fault I’m in this situation, hell, it might as well be your fault that my phone and papers are gone as well! Yet, despite...”

...all of that, you all refuse to take this matter serious—wait... what? What is this now? No words are coming out of my mouth. I can only hear myself think. What...what utter devilry is this?

Charles’ hands slowly crept upwards, to his arms, now to his chest, his shoulders, his chin,, his nose.

My mouth! Where is my mouth?

Charles’ hands furiously rushed over the space once occupied by his maw, now merely showcasing cleanly shaven flesh.

The entire room was silent. The boys looked at each other, almost as if they were carrying on a conversation that Charles was incapable of hearing. After a while, the boy in camo spoke in a much more serious tone of voice.

“Sir, we are in a courtroom because we have to determine where the blame must go in this case.”

Charles felt a strange sensation, a painful sensation, spike up through his arms. Looking

down, he saw the length from his hand to his elbow slowly being sucked up towards his shoulder. Inch by inch, both his arms grew shorter and shorter, folding inwards, curling back up inside themselves until they were nothing but stumps.

What... what is happening? What is happening to my arms? I cannot move, I cannot scream. I am not in the presence of mere boys. Have I come into contact with demons, angels, hell itself?

Charles' thoughts were cut short by the same curling sensation in his legs. His calves began scraping up along the chair's legs, then the seat itself. Now they were inside of his thighs.

The nervous boy spoke up, "Well... I... I'm speaking for you because... um... you can't speak."

Before he could react, Charles' attention was suddenly drawn to the energetic boy, who now appeared right in front of him along with the other three boys, forming a semi-circle around his figure.

"Oh Charlie, you are defending yourself because it was you, me, and everybody else who made your car break."

At that very moment, Charles felt himself being torn. Not figuratively, but very literally. Right down the middle, his flesh split and began to fold over. Charles found himself staring at a layer of red tendons and muscle. This layer was made larger and larger with each passing second, until his entire body was inside out. After this was done, his arms and legs shot back out of their self-made holes, each appendage devoid of skin.

As soon as his limbs returned to their original positions, however, Charles became aware of a sudden lack of pain.

Wha... I... how's this? I can see my insides before me, I sense them molding themselves to the contours of the chair. Yet, the pain I once felt, is gone. I am... numb. Oh, what the hell am I doing? I have my legs back. I must escape this court of devi—

Charles' right arm slung forward.

Hub?

Charles' chest puffed out, and his head looked to the right.

Why... why won't my body move the way I want it to?

Charles' right heel connected with the chair underneath him, sending his body toppling to the ground. Charles tried crawling away, like an insect under a child's magnifying glass. Every time he tried to send an arm or a leg forward, though, another part of his body would begin moving instead, making it so that he couldn't move an inch forward, backward, or sideways. He was stuck squirming on the courtroom floor.

The slouched boy spoke up, his compatriots surrounding the fumbling fellow.

"Listen here, shitstain. We ain't takin' this seriously because you ain't in control no more."

The slouched boy raised his pointer finger and began to inch it, ever so slowly, toward the back of Charles' head.

What can I do? I can't think in this realm of madness. These boys have taken total control of me, to the point where I can't even beg for their mercy.

He couldn't think of the four boys, the open field, the long stretch of asphalt, his car, his paper, his reflection, or his bedroom anymore. All he was allowed to think about was the tip of that one finger making contact with his skull.

I... I... I have lost myself.

Before his eyes finally closed, Charles S. Sycamore was hit with the scent of lilac and the sight of white. An image of London at sunset flashed through his mind. He felt like he could touch the tops of its buildings, those gray concrete monuments reaching out for the sky in a desperate attempt to give the common folk below a sense of power and control. A city filled with people yet to face the courtroom, yet to see the boys of fair skin and glimmering auburn hair.

Yet to lose control.

Contributors

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JADEN CRUZ is a first year Emerson student from New Jersey, with writing inspirations that range from Kafka to Camus. In his work he hopes to explore themes of deviance, identity, and isolation vs. community and the feelings of guilt and shame we are often confronted with when facing these issues.

OWEN ELPHICK is a junior pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing. His work has appeared in The Hartford Courant, Corridors, Concrete, Stork, and Gauge, among other places, and has been presented at the O'Neill Center's National Theater Institute, Emerson Stage's NewFest New Works Festival, and the Connecticut Drama Association Festival. He is the Assistant Fiction Editor for the Emerson Review, Head Copy-editor for Stork and Concrete, and the Historian of the Hip Hop Society at Emerson.

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TOMMY LEE is a second-year student at Emerson College, currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in journalism. The subject matter of his writing typically focuses on mental illness and substance abuse. Along with poetry, Tommy is also a recording artist, known under his stage name, Jae Fiend.

SAMUEL LEVY is a twenty-year old fiction writer, non-fiction essayist, poet and filmmaker. He has completed a book of collected short stories, a book of collected poems, and is currently working on a novel, all of which he hopes to publish; he has also won two Gold Key awards and six Honorable Mentions from the Hudson-to-Housatanic Scholastic Writing Awards, and his short story "Midnight Snack" was published in Hypertext Magazine in 2017. As a writer, director and editor, Sam has made several short films that have been selected and screened at over thirteen international festivals.

NONA LOVELL (she/they) is a 21 year old poet who strives to convey the visceral experiences of living in a world of hetero cis-normative expectations. Her poetry is her act of resistance towards the western colonial binary system of male or female. In Beholder, she reflects on the embodiment of beauty, femininity, and the cruelest edicts we impose upon ourselves.

THOMAS MCCORKLE is currently a sophomore at Emerson College pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing. He enjoys writing anything from short stories, to novels, to poems, to screenplays. He currently serves as a Staff Reader for Stork Magazine, as well as a Staff Writer/Film Critic for EIV News. His favorite genre to write in and about is fantasy, while his spare time is primarily spent on his studies and producing films.

LAURA RODGERS grew up in the cold of New Hampshire loving cats and reading. She is due to graduate Emerson College in May 2019 and enter the publishing field. She has been published in other literary journals such as Black Swan, New Found Square, and Generic.

ISABELLA RODRIGUES goes typically by Bella, unless being scolded by her parents in which case it's Isabella Marie. A freshman WLP major from Mattapoisett, Massachusetts who can beat anyone at Just Dance or Air Hockey. Never been published before except by High School paper, Paw Prints, which she was the Editor for. Reads Tarot cards or doodles frogs in her spare time.



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