



eleven4seven

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“**WORDS HAVE NO
POWER TO IMPRESS THE
MIND WITHOUT THE
EXQUISITE HORROR OF
THEIR REALITY.**”

– Edgar Allan Poe

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EDITOR’S NOTE

In 2008, I had the distinct pleasure of studying with B.H. Fairchild at TCU when the renowned Midwest poet was here as the Lorraine Sherly Professor of Literature. As a poet myself, I sought guidance: What was it at the heart of a poem that made its image burn in the mind months, years after reading? We spent months talking about it. As undergraduates we had work to do to learn our craft, to turn over metaphors, to fine tune the use of imagery but these things don’t do the job unless you are knocking on something deeply human and recognizable to the reader. The way B.H. Fairchild put it to us time and again was that we must work to “describe the indescribable.”

In a moment after class, I asked him what exactly that meant and he said something like this to me—please forgive the paraphrase--“You know when you’re out in the yard and you’re playing Frisbee with your kid and the light from the afternoon sun cuts through the trees? It cuts through just so—right on an angle where there is suddenly this burst of light everywhere. It makes you think, ‘yeah’—like that.” And then I knew what he meant. There are moments of simply being in the world that hold still for us and we utter that unexpected “yeah”—a kind of hallelujah—when we recognize that we have seen or been part of something uniquely human and sacred. Those moments add up and they burn within the artist for expression. It is why the dancer gives over the body for flight in a grand jeté, why the poets and writers put beauty on the page to lift the wings of the reader’s imagination, and why the designer wakes in the night to fitfully sketch in an effort to keep a vision close and alive.

We offer to you in this journal the beautiful, terrible, and real moments of living that beg the artist for expression—a mother that must live with a child’s suicide, the tide rolling in at sunset, men that cannot trust their own sanity, and young people watching the pillars of their faith crumble. These works strike at the “damaged and hardened, /soft and hidden” heart of what it means to be human and as close as we can get to the indescribable.

Lindsay Cowdin

Editor-in-Chief, fall 2015

SILENT OBSERVER

Thomas Merryman



THE JOHNSONS

Brianna Schneider

Last time I saw Mrs. Johnson was when Mr. Johnson brought her back. Momma had sent me over with a casserole dish, some potato and green bean thing that Mrs. Johnson had once told her she liked. Mr. Johnson had let me into the house and pointed towards the living room. The place had a funny smell, sweet but not pleasant. It smelled like they'd tried to spray air freshener over a full garbage can. Mrs. Johnson was sitting in the living room. She didn't really look like Mrs. Johnson anymore though. Her eyes seemed too big for her face, even though her eyelids drooped halfway down. Her baldness scared me, even covered in a scarf her head looked wrong. Bare. I thought she looked like one of my baby dolls, the kind that closed their eyes when you laid them down. Only sometimes their eyes get stuck half closed and you can't make them open.

I didn't see her anymore after that, even though Momma sent me 'round their house every few days with a new casserole. Mr. Johnson never invited me back in. He just took the casserole from me when I rang the bell. Every time he opened the door I would stare at my feet. I didn't like how he looked at me. He never looked angry but his eyes seemed to get larger and his lips went way up past his gums when he smiled at me. We never talked much. The first few times I brought over the dish he would say things like, "Aren't you getting big, you must be nearly as old as Josie!" and, "I can't believe such a beautiful flower like you can carry such a hot and heavy casserole." I never heard him call Janie or Josie "flower."

Mrs. Johnson had gotten sick last May. I still don't really know why, but since their house is only two down from ours, the two girls came and stayed with us for a little while. Momma said I had to be nice to them 'cause their momma was sick, but I didn't like them. Josie always took my candy and Janie still peed the bed. Whenever I tried to play games Josie would call me stupid, just 'cause she was older, and Janie cried if she didn't win. It wasn't fair. Josie was only eight, that's only a year-and-a-half older than I am. She had no right.

They stayed for what seemed like too long, though Momma said it was just three days. During dinner one night their daddy showed up and took them back. I don't think he said anything to either of them. Just thanked my momma and left. They followed out the door behind him lookin' like

– *The Johnsons* –

the dogs momma won't let me pet in the city. That was the last time I saw Josie and Janie.

Momma makes me pray for Mrs. Johnson before I brush my teeth at night. Last month when Mr. Johnson brought her home, I overheard Momma on the phone talking to one of the other ladies in the neighborhood about it. Momma said Mrs. Johnson was going to die. The doctors had said there was nothing they could do and she should just go home and be comfortable and die.

Dying sounds really hard but living with someone dying would be even harder, I think. My goldfish died last week. He went upside-down in the bowl and floated there. Dad had to scoop him out and we flushed him down the toilet so he could go to heaven. I wonder how Mrs. Johnson will get to heaven.

The last few times I delivered food I smelled something real strange. My nose would crinkle up each time he opened the door and I just taught myself not to breathe when I heard Mr. Johnson unlock the door. I've never smelled that smell before and I don't ever want to again.

Just this last time I went over there and saw a new vase of flowers standing in the entryway. They were too bright to be for a dead person so I thought this meant Mrs. Johnson must be better. I finally broke my silence and asked Mr. Johnson how she was. He looked at me a real long time before answering.

"She's a lot easier to take care of now—she's happier, I think."

I thought that meant she was all better so I asked if Josie and Janie would be coming back. He didn't seem to like that. He made a face like he'd been forced to eat something bad.

"I don't think you'll have to see them ever again my flower. They weren't special, like you."

I didn't understand so I just nodded to my shoes and turned to leave. The door shut real hard behind me.

This morning I woke up to a real loud knocking on our front door. When I looked through the spindles on the upper landing I saw Momma talking to a man in the doorway. As he moved into the house I could see a metal badge on his chest. And a gun on his hip. The top of their heads moved

past my landing and into the kitchen where I could hear Momma moving stuff around. I sat there trying to listen; Momma didn't like it when I interrupted adults talking. But I wanted to know why a police officer was in our house. Momma had always said if anything bad ever happened to me I needed to find a police officer, they'd stop any bad guys. There were no bad guys here though, so why would a policeman come?

I knew if I was quiet enough I'd be able to sit next to the kitchen entryway and listen. I was about halfway down the stairs when I heard a glass break. I nearly fell down the rest of the stairs it scared me so bad. I could hear Momma crying now. I finished sneaking down the stairs and took my spot near the doorway. Momma was still crying, it hurt me to sit there just listening. I wanted to make her feel better but something wouldn't let me move. I could hear the policeman talking now.

"I know this comes as a shock ma'am, but I really need to know if you can tell us anything useful."

Momma didn't seem to be able to answer 'cause I could still hear her crying. After letting her go for a few more minutes the policeman interrupted Momma again.

"Ma'am is there anything, have you seen or noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

I couldn't hear what Momma said in reply. Her breathing was weird and high pitched and her voice cracked in the middle of each of her words. I did hear my name though. I didn't understand. What did this policeman want and why would Momma talk about me with him? I must have done something wrong. I only had a few seconds to think about all the bad things I'd done before I heard the policeman speak again.

"Your daughter? Is she here? Would you mind if I speak with her?"

I strained to hear what Momma said back to him. She wouldn't let the policeman take me away, would she? I hadn't done anything bad enough to go to jail, had I? My heart was beating too fast; it was hurting my chest. My hands had also gone cold and it felt like someone had sprayed water on my forehead.

A chair scraped back. Not wanting momma to know I'd been listening, I ran up the stairs as quickly and quietly as I could. Scared, I laid in bed. I only had a few seconds to grab a book and pretend I was reading before

I heard a soft knock on the door. I thought he'd just walk on in but when he didn't I got up and shuffled to the door. I twisted the knob and saw black work boots on our carpet. I couldn't look up.

"Hi there, your mother said I could talk to you. Is that okay?"

Without looking up I nodded.

"Would you like to talk in your room? I see you have a very nice tea table there. Maybe we could have some tea while we talk?"

I nodded again. I kept my eyes fixed on the floor, like I was looking for something but couldn't remember what. The policeman moved towards the table and sat down in one of my chairs. I brought over the teapot from my box and decided I should look at him. I glanced up quickly while I pretended to pour him some tea. He looked nice. His hair was very light colored and his eyes were crinkly in the corners. He smiled and thanked me as he took his tea. After a few more minutes of silence he spoke.

"I bet you're wondering why I came up here to talk to you."

Looking back down at my socks I nodded. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. He's going to tell me I have to go to jail.

"I just wanted to ask you a few things about Mr. Johnson. Your mother said you sometimes delivered food to him and Mrs. Johnson?"

My eyes bounced up towards his face. I didn't understand why he was asking about Mr. Johnson. Did this mean I wasn't going to jail? I nodded to him but just kept staring. I didn't understand what was going on.

"You see, Mr. Johnson has gone missing. We went to his house to look for him and he wasn't there, do you know where he is?"

I was doubly confused now.

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Johnson? Or Janie or Josie?"

A strange look crossed over the policeman's face. He looked almost scared, or maybe a little sick. It took him a few seconds to answer my question. "Unfortunately it's not possible for us to ask her or his two girls where he is." The policeman made a weird shaking movement, almost like he was trying to get water out of his ears. "We just want to know if he ever said anything strange to you? Anything that made you feel uncomfortable or confused you?"

– Brianna Schneider –

I just stared back at him. I told him how Mr. Johnson called me flower and how he said Mrs. Johnson was happier now. The policeman looked angry, I couldn't tell. I was worried I had said the wrong thing. Trying to be helpful I told him about the flowers and funny smell that came from the house every time Mr. Johnson opened the door. The policeman definitely looked sick this time.

"Thank you so much, you've been very helpful! This tea was delicious too, thank you!" With that, he got up and walked towards the door. With his hand on the doorknob he turned and said to me, "Try not to think about that house too much, okay sweetheart? Just forget about everything." He gave me one last smile, that didn't make his eyes crinkle like they had earlier, and left.

Momma made me go outside after the policeman left. She said I needed to play in the sun and gave me my favorite ball. Her eyes were red and her voice sounded funny when she spoke. She gave me a really tight hug. I didn't want her to start crying again so I went to the backyard and started to bounce my ball up and down. I liked to pretend it was a spaceship and that if I bounced it high enough it would fly right up into space. As I went to throw the ball down again I saw a shadow move behind me. I turned and looked up to see someone walking towards me. The sun was in my eyes making me squint and it hurt to try and look at whoever it was. I shut my eyes tight against the sun and waited until they were right in front of me. His head blocked the sun as he leaned down towards me.

"Oh, hi Mr. Johnson."

"Hello, my little flower."

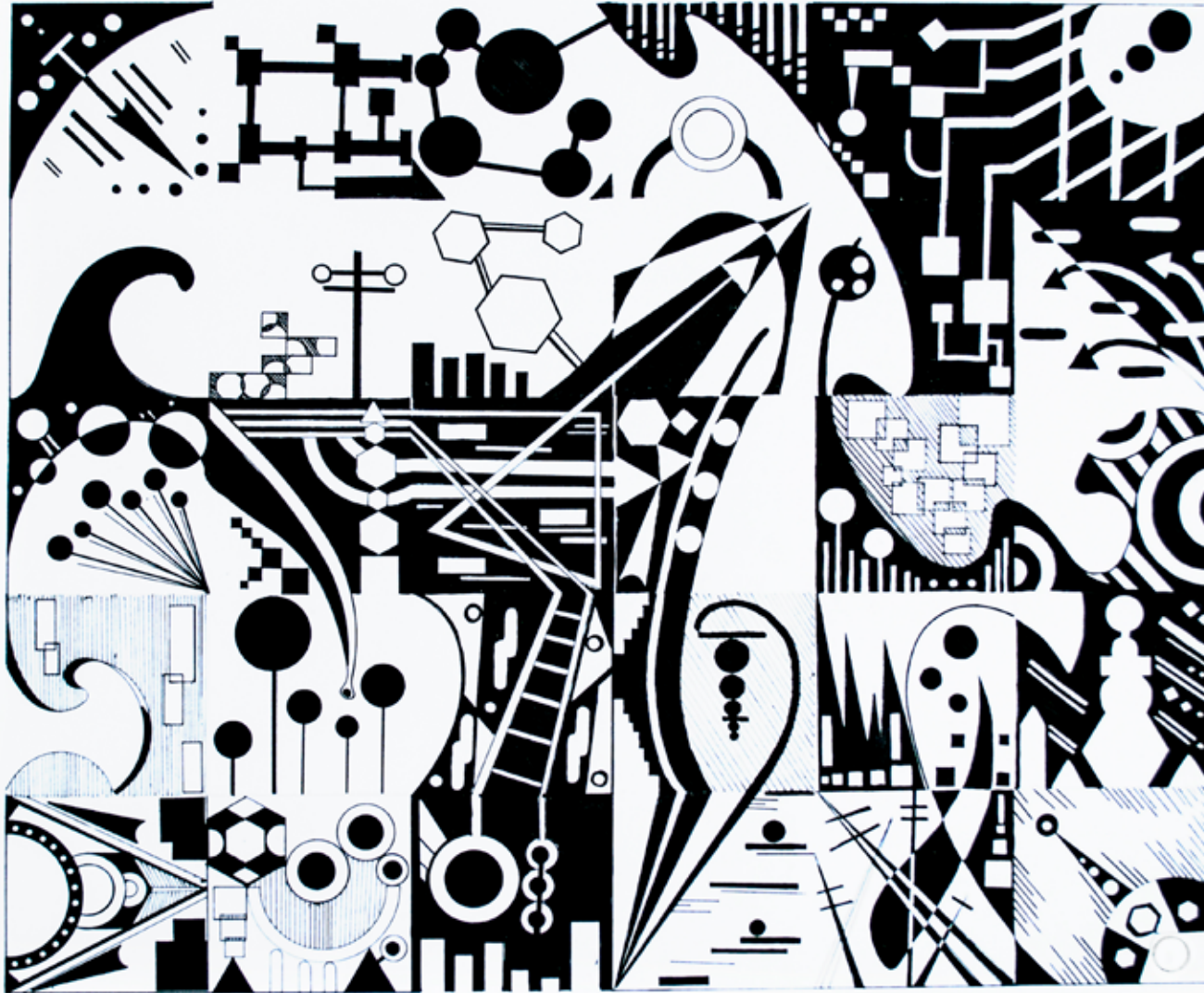
BRAIN CONSTRUCTION

John Truelove



UNTITLED

Dora Fonseca



FIRE IN THE BRAIN

Neale Hood

A short play

CHARACTERS

ADAM—20's. Handsome, all-American type. Smart, manic.

SETH—Late 20's/early 30's. Scraggly and shaggy, either malnourished or overweight. Seemingly catatonic.

NURSE CANDELO—Mid 30's. A stretched-thin sort of pretty. Warm, but weary.

TIME: Present day.

SETTING: The recreation room at a mental institution.

"I told myself: 'I am surrounded by unknown things....' And I grew afraid of everything around me—afraid of the air, afraid of the night. From the moment we can know almost nothing, and from the moment that everything is limitless, what remains?"— Guy de Maupassant

1.

At rise, ADAM is bouncing a tennis ball off the wall. SETH is slumped in a wheelchair at a table, vacuous and limp. There is a disinterested familiarity between them. Both are wearing white. Lincoln Logs are scattered on the table.

ADAM: (*Bouncing the ball between each sentence.*) Seth's dumb. Seth's a dumb guy. Quite literally. Homonym jokes.

Adam suddenly slaps the tennis ball out of the air. It hits either Seth's table or Seth himself. Adam flinches, seeming to have hit Seth unintentionally.

ADAM: Shit.

– Fire in the Brain –

Adam begins to retrieve the ball. Seth looks up with a spark of indignation, believing Adam did this on purpose. Adam sees this and stops. Seth returns to seeming catatonia. Adam makes no effort to retrieve the ball, and instead stands staring at Seth. NURSE CANDELO enters, carrying a tray of medication, and picks up the tennis ball.

CANDELO: Mr. Miller, that's enough!

Adam holds out his hand to receive the ball, still staring at Seth.

CANDELO: No, Mr. Miller, I told you you'd lose it if you did that again. Here, time for your medicine.

ADAM: Ah, yes, please. Addle me.

Adam grabs the medication and makes a show of swallowing it.

CANDELO: Good boy. Why don't you play with the Lincoln Log set?

ADAM: (*Not completely ironic.*) Oh, shit yeah. Maybe I'll build a house.

CANDELO: As long as you don't send it everywhere when you're done with it.

CANDELO crosses to Seth. She pats him on the shoulder and speaks as if to a child.

CANDELO: How're we doing, Seth? Yeah, me too. Ten more minutes and we'll be going back to your room. Don't go nowhere. (*To Adam.*) Be nice.

2.

Candelo exits. Adam looks after her, pulls up a chair, and sits opposite Seth. He begins constructing a structure with the Lincoln Logs.

ADAM: God, she's so patronizing. I could be making more money in an hour than she makes in a damn week if I wanted to. If I'd chosen to. I was going to be a lawyer, you know. You've probably heard me mention that before - I do that. Makes me feel good. (*Holds up a log.*) By the way, Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer, so there's no shame in me playing with these. (*Resumes building.*) So, Seth. I saw you flare. When that tennis ball hit, you totally stank-eyed me. What's the story, there? Am I wrong? Am I actually nuts?

Seth blinks, almost imperceptibly. Adam catches this.

ADAM: Nah, you did. You totally did. No judgment, man. You've got a

good deal, here. You get to kick back while the world feeds you and wipes your ass, and you spend all of your time ruminating on what I assume is going to be the next great American novel. Yeah? The Grapes of Dick by Seth... what's the last name, again? *(Pause.)* I used to know a guy with a last name of "Sharts," hand to God. I guess that's as good a guess as any. To Kill a Catcher in the Gatsby by Seth Sharts. This is fun. We're having fun, here.

Seth sighs.

ADAM: Oh my God. You are in there, aren't you? Seth! I knew it! What... Why are you...? *(Pause.)* I gotta say, this makes you about a billion times more interesting. It's... I find your engagement with disengagement engaging. Woo hoo, go Adam. Point is, I know now, so you can sit there being sullen all you want, but I know your secret. Wanna know mine?

Adam looks in the direction of the audience warily, then spits a pill on the table. Seth doesn't react.

ADAM: Ayo. Since turning your head is apparently too much trouble, know that that thing that just smacked the table was my pill. Actually -

Adam grabs the pill and pockets it.

ADAM: I'm all for theatricality, but we'll just put that away. They almost certainly have cameras on us, in addition to *(Points in the direction of the audience, referencing an unseen attendant.)* Sasquatch over there. *(Looks in that direction.)* Oh my God, he's

3.

asleep. He totally fell asleep. Seth, get excited! We could burn this place down if we wanted to, or wear silly hats! *(Beat.)* Anyway, yeah, I didn't take my pill. What? I don't take my pills. Holy shit! Because I'm Not Crazy. For fuck's sake. I'm only here because my lawyer went with the insanity defense, which, speaking as an almost-lawyer, is practically never effective outside of movies, but here I am. With no expiration date. But I'm sane as all tits.

Seth snorts.

Boy, you are just ON today. I can't get a word in edgewise. But yeah, I, can I tell you my story? We've got a few minutes before you roll away and I haven't found a single person in here who will sit still long enough for

me to get through it. I need to tell someone who will understand, because I did something amazing and I feel woefully underappreciated. That said, will you be my backboard, Seth Sharts?

They sit in silence for a moment. Seth moves his head just enough to make eye contact with Adam.

All right! Thank you. I would go for a high-five, but, y'know.

Adam continues building his structure during the following.

Hoo boy, where to start. So, I'd always found success in everything I did, really. Sounds arrogant, I know, but it's true. Sports, academics, music. Whatever. I'd always been able to overcome any obstacles through sheer determination. Then one day, I was - and I was studying law at this time - I was watching Animal Planet or something, and I saw a leopard kill a mother baboon. Then, when the leopard saw the baby baboon the mother had been guarding, it sat with it and protected it from other predators. It was great. A very human reaction in the animal kingdom. And I was like, "Huh." This raised the question: What separates us from animals?

About a month later, I was speaking to a friend of mine who was majoring in psychology. And he started in on the Myers Briggs personality test and how popular it is and how he believes it's worthless. Do you know the Myers Brigg test? It's a personality test, you get letters... I'm an ESTJ, myself. Don't dismiss it—self-indulgence is underrated. Anyway, yes, my friend was saying the test was worthless. And he said something that stuck with me: "This test is popular with those who don't understand that psychology is empirical." Meaning that psychology is finite, and that, theoretically, everything we do can be predicted by someone who knows our brain's chemical makeup. And if we're nothing but matter, that leaves no room for free will. Every good thing I

4.

ever did, or excelled at, I was always going to do. There's no choice in the matter, or any matter. Because everything's matter and nothing matters. Ok. So. I started thinking how everything - animals, people, plants - everything is conditioned to act in its own best interest. Even plants lean into the sun, right? We think we're doing stuff, but we may just be some dumbass leopard acting on instincts and coding far above our understanding.

I had this girlfriend at the time. (*Chuckles derisively.*) Cindy. And I looked at her one day and realized that I didn't really know why we were together. She was gorgeous, but she had no... no real interest in living the Life Examined. We were together because I'd always just traded up. I'd always broken up with every girlfriend I'd ever had when a more attractive candidate came along. And I was talking with Cindy and it suddenly became, we suddenly became so... rudimentary. I thought back to when we met, and how we found that we had interests in common, and had coffee together and talked and danced together and felt a certain chemistry and slept together and fell into a comfortable, inoffensive pattern. We were like monkeys picking lice out of each other's fur.

By this time, Adam has stood up, abandoning the logs. He paces, in an energy that's somewhere between a man speaking to a jury and a man speaking to the walls. But it wasn't just that - everything was fucked. Really, big picture: What had I ever done? I was the state wrestling champion in high school, you know, and captain of the debate team. I was in law school, good grades, had a hot girlfriend, had a goddamn six-pack. Was all that just photosynthesis?

But then I thought, what if someone were to say, "No." What if someone were to make a decision outside of what would help them? Something that was profoundly against their own best interest. Wouldn't that be something?

I was in law school at the time - I might have mentioned that - a sophomore. And I decided to re-dedicate myself to my studies. I had this awesome professor, Dr. Brendan Burke. Dr. Burke was the most personable teacher I'd ever had - here's this big, intimidating Irish guy, who just genuinely loved his students. At the same time, Burke was just... a wolf when teaching law. His arguments were so, cutting and so... (*Cherishes the word.*) syllogistic. No artifice, no smoke and mirrors - the man could argue any position.

I went to him and asked him if I could be his protege. I was nervous and tripping all over myself, and I said, "I don't know if this is, y'know, done, but if there was someone I could pattern myself after, it'd be you, Dr. Burke." And he said, I'll never forget, he said, (*With a well-practiced impression of Burke:*) "Call me Bren."

5.

And he took me under his wing and kept me motivated - which was easier once I broke up with Cindy Mc-I-Just-Work-Here... and he always reminded me to balance academics with my emotional health and... I could never say enough good things about Dr. Burke. Dude was a beast.

Eventually, I graduated, ninth percentile in my class - always kicked myself for slacking freshman year - and took the bar and tore it a new asshole. My friends threw a party for me, and Dr. Burke - Bren - was there, and he hugged me - I swear I saw tears in his eyes - and there everyone was... and... (*Adam bristles, shudders.*) And I took a razor blade out of my sleeve and pulled it across his throat.

Seth starts.

Like, like fucking Sweeney Todd.

Adam pushes over the log structure he's been building.

Everyone was there, everyone saw it, and he was trying to hold his neck together and I tried to tell him, "It had to be you. Losing you wounds me most, Bren." And he was looking at me and I could see he didn't understand, how could he, and they were pulling me away from him, there's blood everywhere - big ol' guy- and some of his blood had found it's way into my mouth and, uh, well... That was that. Obviously, uh, lots of witnesses, so, legally, the case was a slam dunk. That's why I did it when I did. It was a cumulative moment of disaster for my life - losing what I loved doing by killing a man I admired so. Total annihilation for my career, my social life, my everything. And I chose for it to happen.

And my lawyer, my fucking lawyer, decided I should explain myself on the stand, and I did. I explained how this isn't, what I did wasn't some EXISTENTIAL CRISIS. It was a motherfucking OPUS. I had given them fire, and now was being burned at the stake. But, y'know, I didn't expect recognition. My lawyer, as I said, pulled the insanity defense, against my, (*Laughs.*) against my recommendation, so, in his mind, my testimony strengthened his case. And apparently, he was correct. I was ready to plead guilty. I was expecting to go to prison. No law career, I chose that. This, (*Indicating their surroundings.*) I didn't anticipate. But I was ready for whatever the consequences were. And this isn't so bad now that I'm considered a "medium level threat" and can fraternize with you low levels.

Before, I was with the high levels - there were four of us, and wow. Those three other guys were freaks, man. It took six months of good behavior to get me in with your sort, and it's not terrible here. Mostly, it's just boring. Too much time, to...

6.

Y'know, I killed Bren. I murdered him. And that still... sits in me sideways. I can't be still when I think about it. It's so off. But because I did that, everything I ever loved and appreciated about him, I now know that that was him. He had a choice in the matter.

By this time, Adams has found his way back to his seat. Seth clears his throat and glances toward the audience, or "Sasquatch." His voice begins raspy, but becomes less-so over time.

SETH: Why?

ADAM: Seth! Welcome back!

Adam extends his hand. Seth makes no move to shake.

Okey-doke, then. Why? Well, because, if I had the opportunity to do goodness and didn't, then he had the same opportunity and did. Q.E. friggin' D.

SETH: Why?

ADAM: Because! You can't, you can't do right unless you can do wrong.

SETH: Why?

ADAM: What is this, your thing? Are you going to keep doing that? *(Pause.)* Look: if a man wakes up and feeds himself, well, that's fine, but it's not good. Animals feed themselves. But if he wakes up and makes breakfast for his sickly mother, or decides to smother her in her bed, either way, a decision was made that had moral worth of one sort or another. We can only make the decision not to bite if we have teeth in the first place, and I proved my teeth. You see?

SETH: Why?

ADAM: Fuck it, I'm not doing this with you. *(Pause. He can't resist.)* Because some things are and some things are not, okay?

SETH: Why?

Adam crosses his arms and glares at him. Seth stares back, more quizzical than combative.

7.

Why? *(Pause. A confession.)* I don't remember why. *(Pause.)* Which. Is how I got here. I guess.

ADAM: By asking people "Why" until they wanted to get rid of you?

SETH: No.

ADAM: What, then?

Seth thinks. This re-entry is not easy for him.

SETH: I remember, uh, two years back or so. When it started. I'm trying to tie my shoes. I'd always had trouble with knots and things. Anything that was... uh...

Seth wiggles his fingers, trying to communicate the word.

ADAM: Tactile?

SETH: No.

ADAM: ... Fine motor skills?

SETH: No.

Seth looks down at his hands and deflates a bit.

ADAM: *(Taps the table.)* Hey.

SETH: Sorry. *(Caves, unable to think of the word.)* Uh... mechanical stuff, I guess. And I think, "Why is this so hard for me?" Why me, y'know? And I look and everyone else is going about their day, and I'm stuck wondering why I'm different. Twenty five years old, still at home with my parents.

ADAM: Jesus.

SETH: Yeah. I guess I never... I never found an angle, you know?

ADAM: So, how did that...? I mean, what landed you in here?

8.

A beat.

SETH: Honestly, I don't feel like talking. I'm tired.

ADAM: C'mon, man!

SETH: I don't feel well.

ADAM: But we're getting somewhere, here! You can't start talking all of the sudden and not follow through.

SETH: Why not?

ADAM: I made you break your silence. This is big. We've got to capitalize.

SETH: "This is big?"

ADAM: Yes!

SETH: What, what do you...? You're not...

ADAM: What?

Seth waves it off.

I'm not what?

SETH: You're not... my savior or anything.

ADAM: I am so your savior. C'mon, you lived at home, you wondered why. What next?

SETH: I don't even... I guess I got to thinking why was my life so wrong and backwards when everyone else had it easier? It's not like I'm retarded or anything. I was always great at math, and history. I had my things. But nothing I could see myself doing, y'know, long term. I guess I... It was like - Have you ever looked at a word too long?

ADAM: Have I - yes.

9.

SETH: And it stops making sense? It just looks like a bunch of letters?

ADAM: Yep. It's called "semantic satiation."

SETH: Oh.

ADAM: Yeah, I had that psychology friend. He talked about it.

SETH: Oh.

Pause.

ADAM: It can be hard when you find out you're not the first person to think of something, huh?

SETH: What? No, sorry, I was thinking about something else. *(Beat.)* Uh, yeah, so that's where I was. Am. There was this stream of people going about their business and I was outside it. And that scared me, and the fact that it scared me made it worse, because no one else was struggling with it. I'd try talking to my parents about it, but they'd just give me stuff to do. "Mow the lawn," or whatever. So, it kept getting more... bad. I mean, worse than bad. Whatever makes life... hold together enough to live stopped doing it. For me.

ADAM: ... And now you're here.

SETH: Yeah. Well, no. For a while there, I decided to, you know, enjoy myself. I would eat anything I wanted, I tried to stop kicking myself for being at home, because, whatever, and I, *(Laughs sadly.)* I masturbated a lot. But after a little bit, all that stopped interesting me. I would get distracted. Felt like when you're on a roller coaster and it drops, you know, only all the time. One morning, I couldn't get out of bed. I didn't know where to start. *(Beat.)* My dad broke down my door after I hadn't come out of my room for a while. It's hazy to remember. I think my room smelled. They took me to some people and my mom would talk to me and I wanted to respond sometimes, but it was like trying to pull myself out of mud. I didn't, I didn't... know where to start.

Pause.

ADAM: The Upside Down Man.

10.

SETH: ... Sure.

ADAM: By Seth Sharts.

Seth smiles.

SETH: They visit me here - my mom and dad, I mean. I'm not sure how often. I think it's been a few weeks, but...

Seth shrugs. Pause.

ADAM: Well. I find your problem interesting, for what it's worth.

SETH: It's not worth much. (*Beat.*) Oh my God. I just remembered you're a murderer.

ADAM: Yeah. Most people find that pretty memorable. Maybe the most memorable thing about me.

SETH: (*Disgusted.*) You murdered that man. You... you fucking... piece of shit. You asshole.

ADAM: Word. I was surprised at how well you were taking the news. I still haven't been able to explain the whole story to Nurse Ratchet McBitch. She's real kneejerk with this stuff.

Seth stares at him in disbelief for a moment.

SETH: Don't you regret what you did?

ADAM: No. Never. And, of course. Every day.

Seth thinks on this.

Hey, stay with me. What would help you?

SETH: Why?

ADAM: Oh, God.

11.

SETH: No, I mean it, why? What's the point?

ADAM: I don't know, man. I feel like I've laid out a blueprint for a person who's not even at the table.

SETH: Sorry. My time's almost up anyway. She's gonna come take me back to my room.

ADAM: Ask for more time!

SETH: I can't. She'd freak out and tell everyone I'm better. I'm not. You just irritated me into responding.

ADAM: Look, let me, let me work through this with you.

SETH: I don't want help from you.

ADAM: Yeah, well, you need it.

SETH: ... Why?

Adam thinks. A beat.

ADAM: Maybe, maybe because you ask why. I'm trying to break it down. The core of your problem is that nothing makes sense, right? But you feel there's some... inherent... need for sense. You can no longer see the Chains That Link, and that's left you unhappy. You feel angst over that. Where does that angst come from?

SETH: All you're doing is saying words.

ADAM: What? No, I'm not! Focus on the point.

SETH: I don't think you're going to be able to -

ADAM: Well, the mere fact that you think something means there's something to think! Just, just pay attention, that's all I'm asking. You said you thought about, uh - well, you said you enjoyed math. And history. Right?

SETH: Uh huh.

12.

ADAM: Now, to respond to that just now, or to say it in the first place, you thought of each topic. And in your mind, there was something that allowed you to shift between those two concepts. Regardless of what those words did or did not refer to, there was some path between the two that your mind walked.

SETH: I guess.

ADAM: So, we've got it! An A, a B, and a path connecting the two. Here, push your foot into the floor.

Seth gingerly shifts in his seat just enough to do so.

Concentrate on the sensation of the floor coming up through your leg. That's a beginning, Seth. Start there. You just need to relearn and re-accept.

Seth returns to his previous position.

SETH: I don't know.

ADAM: I do. Let me build a case.

Sounds of Nurse Candelo approaching. Seth slumps in his chair.

Shit. Seth!

Candelo enters.

CANDELO: Are you bothering Seth, Mr. Miller? You'd talk a wall down.

ADAM: I'm attempting to. Can you give us a more few minutes?

CANDELO: It's time for poor Seth to go back to his room.

ADAM: Poor Seth can decide for himself. He was just talking to me.

Candelo turns to him, surprised. Adam mirrors her reaction.

Right?

13.

CANDELO: Seth spoke to you?

ADAM: Oh, yes. He and I were having something of a summit, would-you-believe-it. So, do you think you could find it in your beneficence to grant us a little more time? We're getting somewhere, here.

Nurse Candelo crosses to Adam, concerned.

CANDELO: Adam, you did take your pill didn't you? Tell me you didn't hide it under your tongue, I get enough of that.

ADAM: (*Incredulous.*) No, I - no. I took it. (*Short pause.*) What does that even -

CANDELO: You know you can't trust yourself when you're off your medication.

ADAM: I don't...

Adam trails off.

CANDELO: It's all right, Adam. We'll just take a look at your dosage tomorrow morning.

(*Inspects Seth.*) No drool today. Are you ready to go, sweet boy?

(*Begins to push him.*) Up and at 'em.

ADAM: Hey, Seth! I'll be right here tomorrow. Don't check out again. I'll build a case for you, brother. A Case for Life!

Seth and Candelo exit. Adam begins gathering the Lincoln Logs and building a foundation, agitatedly.

He spoke to me. He absolutely did. I saw it with my eyes and heard it with my ears. I won't start over. Certain things are and certain things aren't. If not, where does that leave us?

Adam stops building, smiles to himself. Then, in his Dr. Burke voice:

"Adam, Never ask a question you don't know the answer to."

Adam's smile fades. He sits back and stares at the logs, lost in thought. Blackout.

WATER GARDENS

Haley Rylander



MAN ON THE MOON

Laura Simard



TRAMPOLINE HYMNS

Nick Barnette

I.

The black quilt of the trampoline
hid weeds that shook
when we decided to fly.

The storm-drain echoed
our chants—songs that kids are
born with but grow into forgetting
like the cheat combinations for Zoo Tycoon.

I do remember someone,
sun-blond and -burnt,
sprawled in the middle
while the others circled him
with a song that started with—

dead man, dead man, dead man rise

—and ended with staccato-mid-air fistfights.

II.

Dad at the pulpit, me choking back
vomit—I praised Jesus and cursed the Bunny
who had force-fed me basketfuls of sugar.

The tomb was empty, but I was a cup
overflowing with the CVS candy aisle.

On the way home from church, Dad pulled over
and I spewed an offering over a stranger's lawn.
Before exploding, I burped out a hymn in church—

O, the wormwood and the gall! O, the pangs His soul sustained!

—that ended with God double-bouncing Jesus to heaven.

CHAPEL

Viviane Huynh

9 AM, the droning bells ring
like memorial chimes on
a solemn day,
the faces around me comatose and
lifeless. We walk like soldiers,

boys on one side, and
girls on the other.
We enter into the dark, musty room
and take a seat on hard, wooden pews.

Sixty minutes each day,
standing still like zombies,
staring straight at the
enormous gold-plated cross,

chanting the same Hymns and Psalms
day by day.
Without the will
to even grasp the meaning of it all,
the same lines repeated,
day by day.

So engrained in our minds that
we didn't even have to think.
Maybe we just didn't want to think
about the harsh truth written out.
Instead they became nothing
more than letters on a page.

We vowed each day to live
our lives according to a book
without a second of thought
to what that really meant.
It became ritual, and
it came to mean nothing.

AN ATTEMPT AT ELEGY

Richard Metzger Jr.

Shrapnel is not
Relegated to war.

Metal and glass fly,

With momentum from
An unfortunate
Physics equation.
A fair-skinned beauty,
With one last look.
A final glimpse into warm, loving eyes.
Her last, unique laugh
Stolen, by the one she loved.

He died with her.

A mortician's nightmare
To replicate her beauty as remembered in life,
After a violent death.

A parent's nightmare
to bury a child.

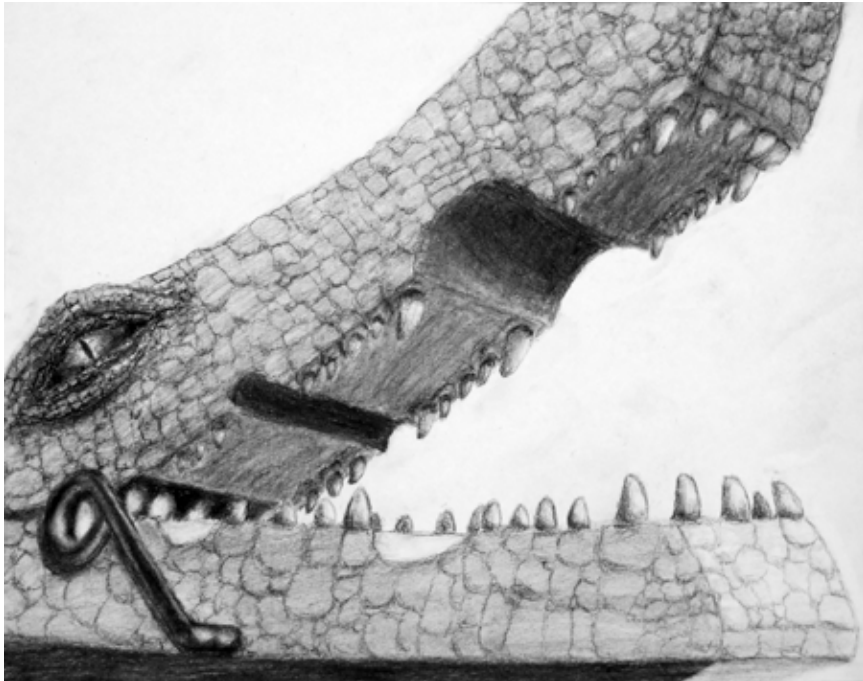
ONCE.

Nghi "April" Tran



CLOTHES PIN CROCODILE

Nicole Bosley



BLUES BETWEEN LINES

Paige Poe

i had to get out:
 i'm out of breath.
sitting flat on my ass in the corner
room you beat me into just
couldn't cut it anymore, and the silence
 drove me halfway between
 bell jar and bukowski—
damaged and hardened,
soft and hidden.
 wandering out into the street,
leaf-legs trembling, with my
half-dead heart barely thudding
with every inch of concrete confronted,
i'm finally outside,
 emptying and filling myself
with every spinning atom and second-hand
smoke and exhalation,
 praying this simple act, beginning,
will save me from my own
self-induced suffocation, but still
wondering if that elementary exchange
 will be enough
to dig myself out of myself.

BRUSHES

after Watson and the Shark (1778)

Nick Barnette

You don't have to know much about it to like it. A boy is in the water and a Shark is in the water; that's all you have to know. A boy is in the water and a Shark is in the water, which is the formula for a blockbuster—the spring-break-campathon where a girl disappears, then a dog, then someone important. You can read the inscription on the bottom of the gilt frame— “...a remarkable occurrence in the life of Brook Watson”—or the panel next to it— “...obvious influence of Laocoön and his Sons.”

I don't know Brook Watson or Laocoön, but I do know the Shark and the faces it makes underwater because I was a kid at a pool that fed kids to sharks. Every brush against our legs was a Great White with whiffle-ball eyes we'd clawed with our fingernails— sharps as puppy-teeth. I like the painting because a boy is in the water and a Shark is in the water and it looks like the pre-Shark Week shark—an Old Testament Leviathan that looks more horse than fish. I like the painting because a boy is in the water and a Shark is in the water and the Shark doesn't look like a Google image “shark” but like a blue tube of toothpaste with teeth for a cap.

If you've never dived into YMCA pool with closed eyes so you don't have to see the sharks, you might not like the painting.

GLENN'S MOTHER

Richard Metzger Jr.

Swinging,
the body found by a mother,
now, a woman.
Her status stripped
with every swing.

Did stupidity or hatred
wrap the belt around
his neck?
She asked the body,
instead of leaving its presence.

She didn't want to admit
its significance,
that it changed self-loathing
to healthy mourning.

In the days that followed,
there were whispered eulogies at school
driven by fractions of his dying breaths.
His story was told,
we all knew and shared it.

But what of her?
What of the discoverer
of her own life's misery,
the self-proclaimed assassin?

Glenn sentenced her to a life in exile,
his gavel was his own lifeless foot
hitting the lower edge of his bunk bed.
I hope to never know her loss.

I don't remember Glenn.
His laughter, personality, faults
live on with others, with her.
I do remember her.

BALBOA BAY

Emily Nicholson



LUCK'S BEND

Zack Amato

Navy Chevy HHR. 2010. Back heavy. Bought for six thousand dollars from Blake's dad. A deep gash on the left side from the handle of the driver door to the taillight. A dried puddle of... something in one cup holder, forty-seven cents in the other. Sunglass case in the driver door, knock-off Ray Bans bought at the Praer County Fair rattling inside.

Chase pushed the driver door open and stepped into the August twilight. Brown eyes. Dirty blonde hair just longer than school would want it when he walked in for senior year on Monday. Tan Vans. Chocolate chip cookie brown cargo shorts. Green shirt with the Boone quote his dad loved plastered on the front. "Heaven must be a Kentucky kinda place."

Chase's friends were already parked in the grass, gathered near Isaac's 2002 Honda Accord.

"Hey hey! The man of the hour!" Stag embraced Chase. Typical Stag. Isaac, Blake, and Rudy welcomed Chase in turn with handshakes and brief hugs.

"Can you fucking believe senior year starts on Monday? I mean shit, right?" It was clear that Stag was attempting to dispel the tension lingering amongst the boys. It trickled through the air, mixed with the humidity and the hot breeze left over from the storm the night before. It floated around the friends, their cars, down Pinehill Road and the half-mile to Luck's Bend.

His friends went on with the small talk of hating Math, sleeping through History, and burning their summer reading books. Chase eyed Pinehill's hook.

Luck's Bend ran for one-tenth of a mile, ultimately creating a 101-degree turn. Lining the right side was a wall of rock the color of clay, extending up to a cliff from which you could see the forest run on for miles, intermittent tiny neighborhoods, and eventually the underwhelming downtown area of Richmond scattered within. It was a 130-foot drop from Luck's Bend to the forest floor on the left side. There were remnants of a guardrail the town hadn't gotten around to fixing in ten years.

No one quite knew how the name took hold, though those the age of Chase's dad remember it coming about.

– *Luck's Bend* –

"It hits ya something funny," his father would say about the name. That's all his father would say about Luck's Bend.

Children had nightmares about it, teenagers dared it, adults avoided it whenever possible. Those who were now too old to drive cars told outlandish stories about it. Only some of the stories were untrue.

The week before, cops had found a smashed deer, a smashed 2007 Ford Fusion, a smashed wedding cake, and a smashed Ronald Bean on Luck's Bend. Two months before Sammie Fleener took the hook too wide and hit Annie Boggs head on, destroying his 1994 Buick Oldsmobile and her 2014 Audi A5 and both of their lives. Two months before that, the cops found Allie Nixon's 2005 Toyota Corolla wrecked along the rock wall with fourteen beer cans and her body inside.

Ninety-two deaths from the time Chase could form memory. One hundred and nine from the time he was born. One hundred and sixteen from the time he was a thought.

All of Richmond had blood in Luck's Bend. Chase reached into his pocket and fingered the locket on his keys, his mother trapped forever inside.

"So you ready, my friend?" Stag snapped Chase out of his trance. Chase nodded.

It had been two weeks since he'd agreed to challenge Luck's Bend. Drunk in Rudy's basement, the infamous turn had seeped into their conversation. An unwritten rite of passage had formed at Richmond High, the town's only high school, for the toughest of seniors to take the turn as fast as they dared. Chase remembered first hearing this when he was in seventh grade. Thirteen teenagers had died on the bend since then.

Stag sprung out of his chair and jumped onto the table.

"I bet none of you fuckers," he spun around and pointed at each of them, "would ever take that fucking turn."

None of them had spoken for several moments until Chase claimed the dare. They had looked at him in shock and pity. Stag said he was only kidding, said Chase, of all people, should stay away from that road. They gave him a chance to take it back, and they had given him several more since then. Chase had refused them all.

Chase squeezed the hands of each of his friends once more as they muttered good lucks under their breath. Even Stag lost his enthusiasm as Chase walked back to his own car.

He opened the driver door and looked back at them huddled together. They almost looked pathetic. They looked scared, but of what Chase wasn't sure. Of the turn? Of him? For him? For what he was about to do? He thought it was none of these, but instead of what was to come. Not just this moment, not just this turn, but beyond. To them, Luck's Bend represented the past, the present, and the future; hard times that had been, hard times that were now, and hard times yet to come. It was a belief shared by many in Richmond, but one Chase had never bought into.

Richmond was it for them. Kentucky was it for them. His friends, his father, this town. It wasn't it for Chase. He dreamed of more, knew there was more, knew he could have more. It was a dream he was willing to face. He was going to ride Luck's Bend to Ohio or oblivion.

He tilted his head toward the sky and breathed deeply. A coyote on the cliff stared down at him.

Chase ducked into his car and shut the door. He thrust the key into the ignition and turned it without hesitation. His friends took a step back.

Chase pulled up so just his front left wheel was on the asphalt. The sun was below the road now, lingering over the trees like one last stoplight. The glow it cast was too weak to sway Chase. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

He hadn't told his father where he was going or what he was doing tonight, had just given his typical farewell. His dad had countered with his typical gesture, presenting a beer can over the top of the newspaper that could only be interpreted as "see you later."

He'd thought about it for these two weeks, figured he could hit fifty, bring his left wheels just to the other side of the divider line, then slow it down to about forty to cut the hook. The standing record at Richmond High was thirty-eight for those that had made it.

He lifted his foot off the brake and floored the gas.

The grass ripped up, sprayed back, and turned to patchy dirt under the wheels. The car jolted forward onto the road.

10.

He remembered when he met Rudy and Isaac in second grade. He had told them he wanted to be an astronaut. They laughed at him, then the three played tag with some of the girls in their class. No one from Richmond had ever become an astronaut.

20.

He remembered when he met Blake. He had fallen off his bike in third grade outside of Blake's house and scraped up his arm and leg. Blake's dad saw it from the window, brought him inside, cleaned him up. He had gone out back to play with Blake afterward.

On his way out the door Blake's father said, "You gotta be careful, son. You'll find the asphalt ain't a friendly thing."

He had been more of a father than his own since that day.

30.

He remembered when he met Stag. It was eighth grade, and the boys were playing two-hand touch football at recess. He had fought with his dad the night before and was pissed off. Stag had caught a pass nearby, and, rather than tapping Stag with both hands, he ran into him at full speed, throwing both of them to the ground.

Instead of getting angry, Stag leapt up and extended his hand, a smirk on his face.

"Bout time someone showed some balls in this game," he had said.

40.

He remembered the one time he saw his father cry. He was five, playing in the living room. The cops had shown up at the door. His father opened it, saw who it was, told him to stay, and stepped outside. He scurried to the window and peered over the bottom ledge just in time to see his father fall to his knees.

His mother never came home.

50.

– Zack Amato –

Luck's Bend was on him. Chase listed left and tapped the brake. He cut right. His car swung around the bend, tires screeching as science battled itself.

Richmond faded from his peripherals. The sun was almost fully set. The sky was red.

His back left wheel caught something. A slick spot where the rain hadn't dried up, a crack in Luck's Bend, he didn't know.

Chase felt momentum take the back of his car forward and the front of his car backward. The rock wall appeared in front of him and then to his left. He saw it come closer.

Stag, Blake, Rudy, and Isaac heard the slam but could not see it.

Chase's father slept on the couch.

SELF PORTRAIT Emma Holland



Fix My Eyes On You

Yessie Ortiz



GUT

Nick Barnette

The night I became
a black-bean fountain,
I left most of my weight
on your rug before
collapsing on your sofa,
shirt- and dreamless.

That night, I spilled
and you smoked.

I woke up the way
a goldfish dies—
belly-up and starving.

I scraped myself from the fibers
—kneeled and scrubbed,
kneeled and cursed—
until I'd erased our
fault-lined archipelago,
my peptic calligraphy
that spelled out:

thank
youimsorry

thiswont
happenagain
letshangout
more

I
you

illnever
eatblackbean
burritos
again

JESUS WAS A GINGER AND OTHER UNCONSIDERED POSSIBILITIES

Hayley Zablotsky

People often talk me into supervising their children, and it's annoying as hell. Everyone has always told me that I am so good with kids—loves kids!—but no one ever asks me if I even like kids.

Sometimes I do. Other times I don't.

There was one delightful four-year-old I looked after named Chloe. Her hobbies included licking the frosting bowl, forcing the dog to let her pet him, and whining. For several months she was my little Velociraptor, running around, nipping at perfectly decent human beings (i.e. me), and screaming out "Let it Go" from the nauseatingly overplayed Frozen movie soundtrack.

Chloe and I had one thing in common and one thing only: we liked to color.

One afternoon, like many others, we began coloring with some felt pens. We were receiving Spiritual Education while we had our Fun because the coloring pages were of Noah's Ark, GOD IS LOVE letters, and Jesus walking on water.

Personally, I prefer Barbie coloring pages, but I'm mature and can cope. I was given the Jesus walking on water coloring page. I did the water a stunning cyan, and the disciples in the boat got flowing chestnut robes.

"Now for Jesus," I said. "What color should I do his hair?"

My little friend quickly dug through the pens and presented me with a bright orange one. I stared. "This one," she said, pushing the pen at me.

I hesitated, a little afraid. "This one?" I glanced down at Jesus. "For Jesus's hair?"

"Yes."

I was about to protest. Jesus's hair was dark brown. Duh. Everyone knows that. I wasn't really asking for an original answer when I asked Chloe about Jesus's hair. Why on earth would I give Jesus orange hair?

But then I decided not to put up a fight because you never really can win an argument with Chloe. So I mechanically took the pen and began drawing in Jesus's hair in a hideous carrot orange.

What a strange and horrible experience for me. "You know," Chloe said, "it's okay if you get some on the face." I glanced at her coloring where she had just gotten a tremendous streak of blue sky on some apostle's face.

"Right," I said out loud. Yeah, right, that is what distinguishes your coloring from mine and the category of art in general.

But that got me thinking about ART. About Picasso and his heads plucked off and glued on again sideways. About Pollock and his SPLATOS. And all these other people who just refuse to believe that Jesus's hair was a nice dark brown.

How can we know anything if we think like this? If there aren't any limitations? I mean, if Jesus was a ginger, then... nothing is out of bounds. We could be wrong about everything we think we know. Gravity, ancient Egypt, commas, lunar eclipses. Hummus. Nirvana. Twitter. We might have it all completely wrong.

What if Little Red Riding Hood prefers a trendy mustard yellow?

What if the Table was actually Square and not Round?

What if Shakespeare was a woman?

What if the egg came before the chicken?

(What if the chicken came before the egg?)

What if it's really better to receive than give?

What if nothing depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow?

What if Life is actually like a box of... tissues? Crayons? Raisins? DIY fake nails?

I don't know... what if?

So I stared down at my drawing and just wondered if Jesus would mind. My little oblivious friend leaned over and took a look at my work. Chloe beamed. "Well done, Hayley," she said.

I squinted a little and noticed a tiny line of orange outside the lines, marring Jesus's earlobe. I sighed, feeling inadequate. "Well, thank you."

And then she said to me, "You're a real artist."

I ended up giving her the picture because I just didn't want it. It's not one of my better works. There's the issue of the earlobe. And his hair isn't brown.

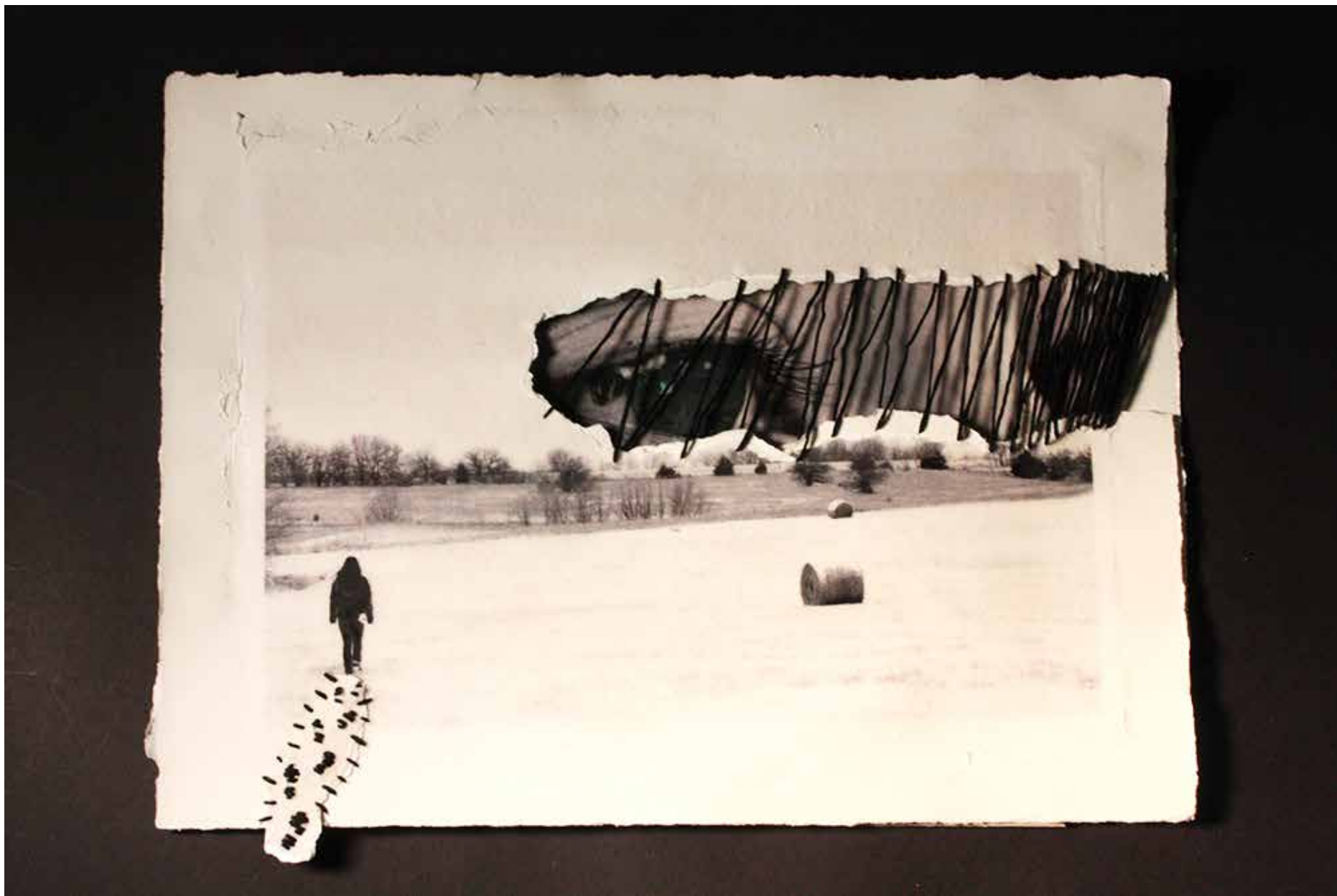
REVOLUTIONARY

Jacquelyn Turner



BORNE BACK

Emily Nicholson



TICK, TICK, TALK

Julie Winspear

The more Charles thought about it, the more he realized he couldn't reduce the problem, even in his head. There was simply no way to make the dilemma sound like anything less than it was, even when he repeated it to himself over a dozen times in the mirror: "The worst that could possibly happen is that everyone at the wedding blows up."

Then, of course, he'd sigh and rinse his face of the remaining cream left from the morning's shave.

On this particular morning, a crisp Tuesday with an electric tang ghosting on the edges of the breeze, Charles had taken the day off from work. His boss had been remarkably understanding; after five years on the job with hardly a sick day, he had earned a well-deserved reprieve, certainly for an occasion as momentous as this.

"After all," his boss had said, peering at Charles over the top of the morning paper, "what this town needs is a wedding." Then he'd stood up, clapped Charles on the back, congratulated him on finally hunting down a woman who'd take him, and wished him all the best. There was no mention of who'd pick up the slack while he took the time off, but Charles didn't care to ask. With the business of business set aside, Charles had a fresh set of tasks awaiting his attention, and worrying about one while attempting to handle the other would lead only to disaster.

Disaster. That word tended to crop up frequently these days, particularly in the newspaper — today's issue was no exception. Charles didn't even have to pick it up; the front page told him plenty:

BANK GOES BOOM! DISASTER LEAVES NINE DEAD, 30 SEVERELY INJURED

Today another explosive comment shook 32nd Street; the third instance this week. The Brook, Olson, and Mills Bank was rocked by a class three detonation this morning at approximately 5:25 a.m. The detonator has been identified as one Victor Ainsworth, an employee of the bank. Though there are several suspected triggers, none have yet been confirmed, although bystanders mention a previous verbal altercation between Ainsworth and a certain Timothy Freeman, one of those injured in the blast. Further investigation is under way-

– Tick, Tick, Talk –

Charles blinked his eyes and tried not to think of it; this stuff was happening altogether too often these days. A good cup of coffee with whatever milk was left in the fridge would clear his mind. He set himself up with his second mug of the morning and a plate of toast before sitting down at the table, where Helen had left the stack of papers for his perusal.

"More relatives?" he grumbled, flicking through the cards with various names. He'd always admired and slightly envied Helen's large family (in fact, he believed that her sense of family values had been one of the reasons he decided to fall in love with her) but at this time, particularly with this sort of climate in the area, it just seemed inconvenient. More work. Each warm, smiling, congratulatory face meant only more work for Charles.

The parents, Beth and Emilio (who'd moved from a place that didn't suffer from the same drastic outbreak as Charles' city) seemed safe enough, even if one could never be sure these days. In any case, Charles thought, they were charming people and couldn't be left out even if they did pose a danger. It would have to be ignored. A similar circumstance would apply to Helen's two brothers as well, since she would require both Chase and Daniel to be at the wedding. Charles smirked wryly, knowing that meant purchasing some extra beer. He tolerated Chase, who always seemed to think that if Charles was marrying his younger sister, that made him equivalent to a younger brother and subject to all the hazing and heckling that came with the position. Daniel, on the other hand, was the youngest in the family and far more good-natured than his older brother. Charles had liked him immediately, and knew that he would probably end up seeking out Daniel at almost every family event in the future. The problem, Charles thought with a mild wince, would be telling them apart. Both brothers had Helen's thick, dark hair, and were practically identical from the back. Charles would have to take his chances.

So with the parents and brothers safely on the list, that left the cousins. Sorting them out, Charles thought as he picked up the next list of names, would be far more difficult. Not all of them were close with Helen, but some of them seemed to be more likely candidates than others. Charles puzzled over the sisters Sophia and Blanca for a long time before discarding their names; they were very nice, and Sophia was always prepped with a good joke in a pinch, but the two of them tended

to be hot-headed. Too volatile. Even their short arguments, held for approximately ten seconds in rapid-fire Spanish, could be too much of a risk. It was with a twinge of regret that he shuffled the notecard with the names Sophia and Blanca handwritten in his fiancée's scrawling cursive into the discard pile.

Bad things always happened at weddings, and it never used to matter. Someone would slip up during the vows, a relative would make a nasty joke during the toasts, someone would break down in the bathroom because their date ditched; there were all sorts of minor tragedies that could be dredged up and laughed at later. Not anymore. Things couldn't be that simple and carefree.

His coffee cup was drained and the discard pile was an inch high by the next time Charles looked up from his work. With a start, he realized that the morning was nearly gone, and he still had to head over to the florist to pick up the bouquets Helen wanted. Or was it to check on the catering? Charles tapped and swiped at his phone until his reminder app told him that yes, it was the food he was supposed to be in charge of because Helen would be busy handling the flower arrangements. That was a relief; the heady aroma of roses, freesias and lilacs might have been soothing to Helen, but it made Charles want to play football, go hunting, take a drive and go snow camping for a week. He preferred the scent of roasting meat and herbs along with the busy efficiency of the restaurant/catering company, and he mentally thanked Helen for thinking to schedule the right errand for him.

After scribbling a quick note to Helen in case she got back early, Charles grabbed his keys and ducked out of the apartment, careful to smile politely to anyone he passed on his way.

When he had crossed several streets and had reached one of the main thoroughfares, Charles began to follow the usual landmarks to his eatery (and now catering company) of choice. There was the old-fashioned barbershop, the taco truck on the corner where he took a left, and finally the street with all the brick-fronted buildings. Charles crossed through a small square and headed for the building whose walls were plastered with detonation awareness posters, urging the readers to "Know Your Risk!" and "Control Explosive Reactions!" and "For Yourself and Loved Ones, Get Informed About Your Odds of Detonation." Paying them no mind, he pushed open the blue door as one poster came unstuck and fluttered to the ground.

"Charles!" The manager greeted him when he arrived, "Good to see you! You're looking well—you seem immune to the stress of planning the big day! What can I do for you?"

Charles sighed, unsure of how to pose his question. The manager was an old friend of his, and he had no desire to create any awkwardness. Sensing the hesitation, the woman lowered her voice.

"Did you want to change the menu? It's fine; it's not too late to do that. Would you like to sample some of the other possible entrees?"

"Not just now, Nora, I'm sorry. Actually, I was wondering if you had maybe something like a background check available for all of the servers who will be working the day-of? I hate to ask, but..."

"No need to explain. These are difficult times. Of course I will provide you with full background information, resumes, psych analysis and whatever materials I have available."

"Thank you. Sorry for the extra trouble."

"No one can fault you for being cautious."

Charles nodded and waited while the woman ducked into her office. After several minutes, Nora emerged with a sheen of perspiration on her high forehead and a stack of folders in her arms.

"Don't hesitate to call if you have any further questions, or even if you do decide to change the menu."

Charles smiled and took the folders, the weight a reassuring pressure in his hands.

As he strolled down one of the busy roads, Charles chanced to pause and glance up at his city's striking skyline. The buildings glinting a proud silver in the early afternoon light made him take a deep breath and smile. Everything was going to be okay. He was getting married—the rest of his life was just beginning, and it was looking just as bright as the sun's reflection in the skyscrapers' tinted windows.

It was then that someone detonated.

"Hey, sorry ma'am," a man said as he brushed by an attractive woman in a crisp blue suit. He had knocked her arm slightly, and the contents of her purse spilled and twirled across the sidewalk.

“No, no, it’s fine, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“What’s the rush?”

“I have a lunch date, actually. Oh, thank you,” she said as he handed her one of her pens.

“Of course you do, a pretty thing like you—”

Then, naturally, she blew up. In a high-definition special effects type motion, she threw her hands into the air in exasperation, her cheeks flaming red for an instant before the heat wave shook her from the inside out. Both she and the stranger were reduced to smoldering piles of ash, with a couple of loose pens and what remained of a purse left to show that they’d been there at all.

Charles was several yards behind the two of them, so he was fortunate that it wasn’t a very powerful blast. Mere chance had spared his life. He’d known people to blow up over far less than that, and far more powerfully, too. Shaken, he picked himself up and managed to get his cell phone out of his pocket in order to dial the detonation hotline. Charles stood silently for a moment, after he’d told the dispatcher his location and his best description of the detonator and the victim. He’d witnessed a detonation before (as most people had) but it never ceased to unsettle him. The way a person could suddenly, in a wash of heat and fury, simply dissolve until nothing was left.

A buzzing in his hand alerted Charles to the fact that Helen was calling him. “Hey honey, I’m just on my way back from the catering place. How was the florist?”

There was a pause as Charles listened to his fiancée recount the difficulties of selecting the right arrangements, particularly because they’d gotten the arrangement wrong and had replaced lilacs with freesias, which were unacceptable. But she’d told off the clerk, and everything was now all sorted to her satisfaction.

“Thank you for doing that, Helen. You handle those things so much better than I do.”

Charles nodded at Helen’s response, heard her pleased tone over the line, and waited while she related another list of things she’d like him to handle while he was out, as she had some other things to do.

“Sure, I can manage that...alright; can I call him from home? I wanted to check up on these resumes. Sure thing, hon. See you tonight.”

Charles clicked his phone off and finished his walk back to the apartment. He still had a white-knuckled grip on the folders he’d received from the catering company, and he almost had to pry his fingers from the stack of papers before he could spread them out on the table.

The next hour was a long, painful process. Charles went through the resumes halfheartedly, but dove into the background reports on each of the catering employees, hunting for the slightest detail that could alert him to any abnormality in their character. A fight in middle school. A sudden dismissal from a previous job. A recent breakup. Parental issues. Even the death of a beloved pet could be a factor to consider. Every minute disturbance had Charles on edge, as the too-fresh memory of the detonation swirled through his consciousness.

It was two in the afternoon. Charles had gotten down to a list of five catering employees he categorized as “safe” with a separate list of ten rejects. Seven “maybes” had their files resting to the side for further perusal. Charles could set aside a little time later to figure it all out, as well as the criteria for dates of the wedding guests. He wanted to be absolutely certain that he would not allow any possible threats in the vicinity, whether as servers, musicians, or guests.

He made a couple of phone calls, put a couple more files into the “safe” stack, and after some consideration, opened a bottle of Opus One. Helen was home by 3:30.

“A special occasion?” she raised an eyebrow upon seeing a glass of the Bordeaux blend waiting for her.

“Of course. We are now one day closer to being married. That’s occasion enough.”

They spent a couple of hours loosely in each other’s company. Charles resumed his work in the kitchen, where he’d started preparing dinner, while Helen turned on the television to watch the news. She changed the channel to watch a comedy show after five minutes, and watched that until Charles was halfway done with dinner. Then, in a manner that had begun as a joke and was now a legitimate division of labor, the two of them swapped places. Charles reclined on the couch while Helen finished

cooking the vegetables, filling the apartment with warm, spicy aromas. The TV was showing the end of an action film, featuring the dismantling of a powerful bomb before the timer ran out.

Conversation at dinner was held over pork tenderloin, broccoli, and two new glasses of red wine. Helen talked about all the congratulations she'd received from friends, and retold her account of the florist shop struggle. Charles remarked on a billboard on his way home, suggesting that the two of them went to see the movie it advertised. Neither of them mentioned the topic that had been on the forefront of their minds for the entirety of the day. Instead, Charles allowed himself to be mesmerized by Helen's casually polished demeanor, present in the way she tilted her head and moved her hands as she talked. Her blouse was identical in hue to the wine she sipped. When she chanced to glance up, she found his gray eyes sparkling contentedly.

As neither of them cared one iota about living in sin, Helen stared into Charles' gray eyes as he removed her wine-colored blouse before carrying her to the bedroom.

On Wednesday, Charles went back to work, if only to ease his mind. The catering was taken care of, the necessary relatives had all received finalized details of the venue and time, and Helen was in high spirits. There wasn't much left to be done, and it was starting to look as if the hastily planned wedding might end up being an elegant, tasteful affair.

But. There was a 'but' just waiting to be voiced. Charles ignored the annoyance of it as he typed up his reports, shied away from the discomfort of it as he took his lunch break, and finally gave into the insistence of it as he pushed back from his desk at 4:30. He had to know.

It was a taboo topic that would evoke many raised eyebrows and uncomfortable coughs when brought up in conversation or discovered in an online search history, but there were ways to learn about it. Bibliographies in little-known science articles, theories on late-night radio shows, and the occasional loose-lipped doctor could be counted on to provide hints.

Under the pretense of a sudden head pain, Charles made a last-minute appointment with his physician, Dr. Tully. Unfortunately, Tully was out that day, so Charles was ushered in to see slim woman with a sharp brown bob who introduced herself as Dr. Warner.

"What seems to be troubling you? Head pain?"

"Ah, yes, of a different sort I'm afraid. I have a wedding coming up, you see—"

Her eyes glinted. "A wedding? Ah, I see, the headache of finding a date to take with you to one of these occasions can be quite overwhelming." She smiled and crossed her long legs.

"Well..."

"Anything in particular?"

Charles swallowed. He felt the woman's eyes on him, and he became very aware of the fact that, though he was fit, he was not quite as muscular as he could be, and his clothing was rumpled after a day at the office. He focused his attention on the clock in the corner of the room, and the steady movements of the second hand. "Yes. Yes, actually, in my search, I have a problem determining who is the right choice."

Dr. Warner tilted her head and leaned closer.

"The safe choice."

"Ah. I see." She leaned back and raised one plucked eyebrow. "You aren't here for healing, you're here for expertise on what can be considered an anatomical anomaly."

A silence of confirmation.

"Well, I do know a bit about such things, though most of my colleagues won't admit to much knowledge on the topic. There is a genetic factor that can increase a strange amount of hydrogen in the body, which can easily raise the incendiary risk for an individual with this trait. Of course, there are psychologists who will tell you that it is purely an issue of the mindset; that a paradigm shift is all that is necessary for an at-risk individual to reduce his or her danger levels or eliminate them altogether."

Charles thanked her, still getting the distinct feeling that he didn't know any more now than he did a moment ago.

"Here," Doctor Warner said, producing a book from a large satchel by her feet, "if you're still worried, this might be a more immediate solution."

Accepting the book with a grateful smile, it took Charles a moment before he registered the title: *Trigger Tricks: The Year's Most Damaging Detonation Phrases and How to Avoid Them*.

"Thanks. I think this is what I needed."

"Hope you find a date."

"Actually," Charles said as he walked out the door, "it's my wedding."

There were 374 pages of triggers, with a mere fifty-seven dedicated to their avoidance.

Four-eyes, kleptomaniac, psychopath, twerp, dick, poseur.

"You're just like your mother!"

"How can you enjoy that crap?"

"You're too old for this."

"C'mon, babe, don't act like you don't like it."

"Leave this to the men."

"You think you're meant to be here?"

A moment of weakness. A lapse in judgement. A sudden breakup. A betrayal. An accident. Trigger, trigger, trigger. Each one a deadly blast, a powerful force.

The last dozen pages were a summary of common sense anti-detonation techniques, which mostly consisted of "if it is rude, could be construed as rude, is controversial, is widely rejected, could be untrue, or is in any way causing some vaguely disturbing emotion, don't say it. Think thrice before you speak. You are responsible for your own safety, and the safety and comfort of those around you."

Charles threw the book into the nearest garbage bin as he turned the corner, his feet perhaps slapping the pavement a bit more loudly than they should have.

At the nearest internet cafe, Charles purchased a cheap cup of coffee. He wasn't tired, but he needed the excuse to snag a seat by one of the public computers in the shop. A few subtle clicks of the keys and he was skimming through pages of scientific articles about the most popular detonation theories. Though doctors and psychologists had

their explanations, it seemed that scientists had largely agreed on a new idea. A scientist by the name of Justin Zhang had explained it best: micro bodies that had been mistakenly created in a lab (perhaps radiation had something to do with it) and could float on the air. From there they could be inhaled or ingested by anyone, and would infiltrate a body. Before long, a person could be infected by tiny explosive bots, ready to detonate at the slightest change in blood pressure or heart rate, and be completely unaware. The sources cited for the internet article looked rather credible.

Charles leaned back and took a deep breath, mentally laughing at the irony. It didn't matter—everything was just a theory. If someone had decisively proved the cause of detonations, he or she would be getting more recognition than a few likes on an Internet article.

When he started receiving glares from the cafe employees—evidently one cheap cup of coffee was not enough to buy him hours of time on the internet—Charles picked up his things and headed home. The afternoon hadn't done much to reassure him.

"You took your time today," Helen remarked when Charles entered the apartment, "did you have to stay late because you took Tuesday off?"

"No, I just wanted to look into a couple of things for the wedding on my way back. I got a bit sidetracked."

Helen shrugged and beckoned for Charles to sit beside her on the couch. He complied, and as he draped an arm over his fiancée's shoulders, Charles began to wonder if it he could find a way to tactfully and lovingly postpone the wedding.

That night, smoky, burning, inhuman things haunted Charles' dreams. It began as a passive dream, where he simply watched people talking and saw words like "explain" and "enthusiasm" and "soup" act as triggers. Then it was active; Charles was running through this world of shadows while figures made of fire and ash loomed towards him. They were all in the same stage of dying, and it was impossible to distinguish who had triggered and who had detonated.

Charles woke up feeling sick and hot.

"Whose fault are they?"

"The detonations, you mean?"

“Of course. If we want to get to the root of the problem we have to determine who is responsible,” the expert said to the reporter beside her. “In the newspapers, there’s no consistency. Who is the victim—the detonator or the trigger?”

“I think,” the reporter said with a knowing smile, “the answer there is obvious. In any given situation, we can assign responsibility to—”

Charles wasn’t listening to the news program—it was mere background noise to the business at hand. The restlessness of the night before had him desiring more than ever to ensure the quality of his wedding day. Its rapid approach gave him anxiety that outweighed anything the cold-footed grooms of his family had warned him about.

The days flew by. The dream didn’t recur, but the memory of it continued to drift over Charles at odd times, making its influence all the more fearsome. Meanwhile, Helen came home carrying a garment bag with a white dress inside. Her eyes grew brighter as the wedding drew nearer, and Charles experienced an overwhelming desire to protect her from any of the dangers and complications of the crowded day. Who would pose a threat to her? Her bridesmaids? Her parents? It wasn’t even unheard of for siblings to detonate. Anyone could be a risk. Anyone at all.

That thought echoed a while, rattling like the last puzzle piece abandoned in the box. Charles looked again at Helen, his gaze just a bit more wary. A chill crept down his neck. As Helen set her dress gently aside and prepared herself a mug of green tea, Charles turned and left the room.

The ticking of clocks began to annoy Charles on the eve of the wedding. It began in the morning, when he woke up at odd hours by the tick-tick of a ghost second hand. His bedside clock was digital. The timer for the toaster seemed to continue to tick, even after the toast was browned, removed, and eaten. Even the click of the heater turning off and the sound of tapping keys on a computer began to make him uneasy.

As relatives and friends began staying in town, stories began to circulate about detonations. At the rehearsal dinner when the wine began to flow, people would whisper a bit too loudly about what they’d seen—who had gone and blown up, who should have seen it coming, who should have known better than to say something. But it was at the bachelor party that Charles heard the gossip really pouring out.

“Tony went and blew. Right in front of his damn kids, too.”

“Yeah but he was one right from the start. The way he’d shoot you a look when you said anything about his wife, ever. That one time when he was at his company party—you remember? It was pretty clear he’d go sooner or later. Shame about the kid though. Think he passed it on?”

“My friend Sharon detonated, ten years after her mom blew. Ten years to the day.”

A distant acquaintance eased his way into the circle, using his big belly to clear some room. “But when you’ve got people like that, the ones just waiting to go off, you’ve got to know what you can’t just go and say.”

Things got uncomfortable after that, and several guests migrated towards the bar to wait for Chase and Diego to stop monopolizing the beer.

“Hey, little brother,” Chase said, already on his third cup. His arm seemed to loop itself over Charles’ shoulders of its own accord. “Careful when you bang my sister tomorrow.” His words were so slurred it was difficult to understand them right away, but when Charles finally made sense of them, he didn’t even bother to make an excuse to shrug Chase’s arm off of him.

It wasn’t the fact that the irritating older brother was making a vulgar joke about his bride that made Charles squirm, it was the way he’d said it. Charles felt his left eye wink a bit, just out of nerves. Everything was building up, the very city around him holding its breath, afraid to exhale.

He stepped outside, into the empty hallway, and leaned against the wall. Charles had told himself he was just smoothing things out until the wedding, just protecting himself and what he cared about, just hanging on until the wedding. He was sure he was doing right by ridding himself of every possible trigger, every likely detonator, without realizing that he could be strapping himself to the bomb. And how, Charles wondered idly, could he be sure he wouldn’t be the one to send it all sky high?

Out in the quiet hallway, all alone, Charles found that the ticking had stopped. Only a crescendo of silence remained while he waited for the inevitable boom.

RAW DAMAGES

Abigail Buckley

A sunshower is a natural paradox,
where soaked sunlight streams
through cold-cut leaves
and deepens the world
into sepia tones reminiscent of
an age-curved novel.

Storms aren't meant to be puzzling;
they're the most natural state
the world can take, where
grief meets necessity
in a burst of scattered liquid fire.

I had a word for that once

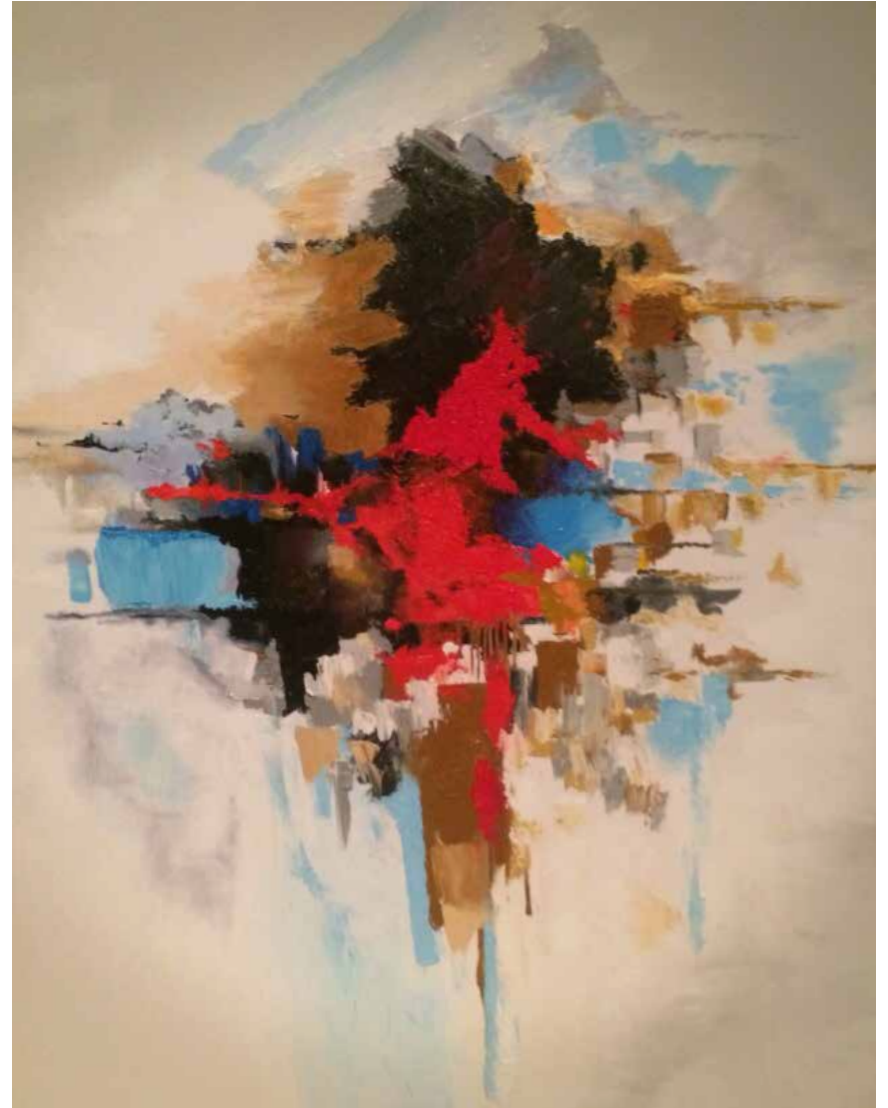
when a wound leaves a remnant,
a whispered hallelujah,
of times long past;
when your skin screams with victory:
I have prevailed.

Perhaps sunshowers
are a silent cry of triumph
raining from the sky:
where soothing warmth
meets falling tears.

The earth and I
could compare scars,
if only I didn't have
this horrible habit of forgetting
where mine came from.

THE MOUNTAIN

Emma Holland



TREE TRUNK

Chloie Costello



THE SKY TILTED

Nghi (April) Tran



THE BOHEMIAN

Emily Nicholson



PINWHEEL DISCO

Kara Coonrod



REMAINING PAGES

Emily Nicholson



REMEBERANCE

Emily Mitchell



SMASHING PENNIES

Adam Kelley

"This is bullshit," my brother hollered from several yards behind me. I looked over my shoulder and grinned. Being midway through high school my younger brother Josh was at the age in which almost everything was bullshit. For the last hour I had listened to his heavy breathing and various muttered expletives as he struggled to keep up with the enthusiastic pace of Uncle Dave.

"We're almost there," Dave said. "Maybe another half a mile."

Our uncle Dave was definitely what you would call a "nature person." The kind of person whose daily attire, regardless of season, was cargo shorts and hiking boots, and who took every opportunity available to show off his fortitude and "woodsmanliness." He liked to think of himself as a maturing Bear Grylls. "A little greyer sure, but still filled with my youthful vigor," he would say. Being an Eagle Scout myself, I knew he still had a way to go before his skill in dealing with nature actually equaled his enthusiasm for it. Just earlier that same week a heavy storm had knocked over a tree, blocking the road up to the cabin where we were staying. So of course Uncle Dave, being the man he was, decided that the best way to solve this problem was to run it over with his truck. The fact that we had access to a chainsaw and that the owners of the cabin were lumberjacks—actual LUMBERJACKS—played no role in his decision making process. After several minutes of tires spinning pointlessly in the mud and a tense moment in which Dave nearly drove off a small cliff, the little truck finally gave out. It made a valiant effort I must admit, but one that left Dave a few grand in the hole after some much needed repairs to the suspension and front axle.

"There, look."

We reached the top of a hill and the diverse central Missouri terrain opened up in front of us. The deciduous forests roamed over hills in the distance, broken only by the occasional open field of tall yellow grass. The muddy Missouri River ran horizontally across the landscape, cutting the scene in two.

– *Smashing Pennies* –

"The railroad tracks are right down there," Dave exclaimed, gesturing with his hairy suntanned arms. "Before the drop-off to the river."

A muffled "Thank God" came from behind me. I turned and glared at my brother, mouthing the word "stop." He rolled his eyes and continued to pick bits of leaves and nature out of his perfectly messy auburn hair.

Dave apparently hadn't heard the sarcastic response however, and continued forging the path. "You know, Bryan and I used to hike this trail all the time," he said. "Go down to the tracks, lay a couple pennies on the rails, and then go skip rocks on the river. I always thought it was beautiful up here."

"It is beautiful," I said. To the east the rolling grape fields of Stone Hill winery were just starting to come into view. I smiled. My family loved wine.

The beauty of the scene was interrupted suddenly by the sound of my brother cursing and grunting in frustration yet again. I looked over my shoulder to see him knee deep in a patch of stickers. Those damn stickers. We didn't know what they were really called. Some kind of plant. But their seeds were extremely sharp and stuck to just about any article of clothing they could find. They especially loved socks.

"Having trouble back there?" I called.

"Screw you," Josh huffed.

"See you found some stickers."

He lifted up his leg and chucked a couple of the seeds at me. I smiled and ducked underneath, before turning to catch up with Uncle Dave, who hadn't seem to notice the delay.

"Maybe on the way back we can stop by the abandoned house," Dave continued talking. "It's just through those trees a bit behind us. Kind of creepy. They say a whole family was murdered in there. We went inside once; Bryan and I. I didn't see anything unusual, but Bryan was convinced he saw blood on the walls and even supposedly heard some footsteps. Fascinating stuff."

"No way I'm going in there," my brother mumbled, still lagging slightly behind. "I don't do ghosts."

Dave laughed. "C'mon Josh. It's just a bit of fun. Ghosts are people too."

Josh shook his head. “I’m not going in there. No way.”

“You two don’t actually believe in ghosts do you?” I asked.

“Why shouldn’t we?” Dave responded. “I believe everyone has a spirit. And ghosts are just disembodied spirits that, well” he scratched the silver stubble on his chin. “I guess that can’t let go.”

“Let go of what?” Josh questioned.

Dave shrugged. “I don’t know. Anything. Life, loved ones. But something important. Something that keeps them here.”

“Here as opposed to...” my brother suggested. “Heaven?”

“Yeah,” Dave answered. “Something like that.”

“So do you believe in angels too?” Josh asked in a semi-mocking tone.

“All right we can save this talk for another time,” I interrupted. “I’m not mentally prepared at the moment to begin a deep philosophical discussion. We still need to get to the tracks. And it’ll be dark soon.” The three of us trudged onward down the steep hill, through the tall grass before reaching the edge of a small patch of trees bordering the river. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a seemingly out of place wooden structure. The small square platform was attached to the side of a tree on the edge of the clearing and rested about 10 feet off the ground. A seemingly hand-made ladder was propped against the opposite side. A *deer stand*.

“Is it deer season already?” I asked.

“Uh,” Dave hesitated. “I think so. Although I’m not really big on hunting anymore. Guns and killing things...well just not really my cup of tea. But if my memory serves me right I think hunting season just started, yes...I think.”

“Well should we really be roaming around out here then?” I asked.

“We’re not exactly wearing bright clothing.”

“Nah, we’ll be fine,” Dave said. “There aren’t that many hunters out here anyway.”

“There’s at least one,” I muttered under my breath.

Dave ignored my comment, stepping gingerly over a fallen log and

disappearing into the patch of trees like a phantom. The wooded area extended for several hundred yards separating the field of knee high grass from the river below. I looked at my brother and hesitated a moment before following Dave over the log. The thick foliage above blocked out the sun and instantly the world around us became darker.

“Watch out over here,” Dave called. “There’s some poison ivy right off the trail.”

I looked over to where he was pointing. *4 leaves*, I thought. *Poison Ivy has 3 leaves*. Again I held my tongue.

“Why are we walking around in a place where we can get poison ivy anyway?” Josh whined.

“Why did you come along if you were just going to complain the whole time?” I retorted.

“All I’m saying,” Josh countered. “Is that if we had stayed on that path we were on earlier this wouldn’t be an issue. Also, I didn’t know we’d actually be out in the wilderness. I feel like freakin’ Lewis and Clark out here. Like we’re all going to die of yellow fever or something.”

I chuckled. “And Dave is our Sacagawea.”

Dave turned around and grinned. “Did you guys know that Sacagawea was actually pregnant when she left home to guide Lewis and Clark? Pretty incredible if you ask me.”

“Are you trying to tell us something Dave?” I asked, smiling.

“Now that you mention it my stomach does feel a bit bigger than when we got here. But I think that’s mostly because of your grandma’s cooking.” He looked at me and flashed a toothy grin.

We stomped through the undergrowth, dodging low hanging branches, stepping through shrubs, and inadvertently killing all manner of vegetation in the process. I ducked my head underneath a spider web, keeping several paces behind Dave at the front. A few seconds later I heard a loud spitting noise followed by the crunching of leaves and several muttered “what the fuck”s and I knew my brother had found the web as well. After several minutes of trekking through the woods we stepped out into a small clearing.

“Woa,”

The smell hit us before anything else. Like 100 pounds of hamburger meat that had been left out in the sun for too long. The smell of rotting flesh. On the edge of the clearing a dead deer was propped up slightly on a tree stump. The skin had been ripped off along the torso and the exposed bones mostly picked clean. A mangled front leg lay several feet away from the body.

“God,” Josh gasped, arm covering his face. “That’s disgusting. Did a hunter do that?”

“I guess,” I mumbled.

“Why would they just leave it sitting out here? Don’t they usually take the body back with them? I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“That is really strange,” Dave said. “The meat is all gone...maybe they just really wanted some deer jerky, but didn’t think the rest of the body was worth taking.”

“So, what?” I asked. “They just cut all the meat off the bones here, put it in a sack and then hauled it off somewhere else?” That didn’t sound right.

“I don’t care what they did or didn’t do with the rest of it. I’m getting out of odor range,” Josh said jogging off toward the river.

“Yeah, me too.” I turned to follow, stumbling on a tree root and landed deep into a patch of stickers. “God dammit!” I screamed, dropping to my knees. I looked down to inspect the damage. My right leg was covered in the thorny seeds. I exhaled loudly and reached to begin picking the bastards off. Half way there my hand stopped itself.

“Dave,” I called. “Come look at this.”

My uncle appeared over my shoulder, gazing at where I pointed.

“What is—” he cut the question short. A mark nearly the size of my hand had been left several inches deep in the mud. The print was made of 5 distinct parts. The lower U-shaped portion was the largest. The other four formed a semi-circle around the larger, and were more egg-like in shape. It was an animal track. And it was big.

“Bobcat?” I asked hesitantly.

“That’d be a monster bobcat,” Dave replied.

“So...what? Mountain lion?”

“I think so...incredible. We should definitely tell someone about this when we head back into town later.”

I nodded, grabbing my phone to take a picture. “That’s gotta be like 5 or 6 inches across.”

“Not exactly your average house cat,” Dave agreed.

“Hey,” my brother’s voice came as a shout from behind the trees. “Are you guys having a picnic around the dead deer or what? I can smell it from here. How are you still conscious?”

“Josh, come look at this,” I shouted.

“Whatever it is I’m fine.”

I stood up and ripped a couple of sticker seeds off my leg, cursing under my breath, before heading in the direction of my brother’s voice. The dense woods suddenly gave way to open air and the dirt and grass underfoot changed to loose gravel. I looked out at my brother who stood on the edge of the train rails attempting to balance on one leg.

“There’s a print back there,” I said.

“What kind of print?” he asked without looking up.

“We think it’s a cougar. And not the Pamela Anderson kind either.”

His gaze met mine, one eyebrow raised. “Yeah, ok,” he said sarcastically.

“I’m serious,” I said holding out my phone. “I took a picture. And if you don’t believe that then you can go look at it yourself.”

“Really?”

I nodded. Josh jumped off the rail and jogged over to me, snatching the phone from my hand.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. “You sure it’s not just a big dog?”

“If it was a dog there’d be claw marks,” I answered, internally thanking the National Geographic program I had seen a few weeks prior. “They can’t retract their claws like cats can.”

“We’ll have to stop by the police station or something on the way home,” Dave said stepping out of the trees. “So they can send somebody to take care of it. Animals like that don’t belong this far east.” I nodded my agreement. There was a reason the mountain lion had the word “mountain” in its name. And mountains weren’t exactly a geographic feature that Missouri was particularly known for. Hills, yes. Mountains—

“We’ll worry about that on the way back,” Dave continued. “For now, who wants some pennies?” He pulled his hand out of his pocket and tossed a pair of small bronze coins in our direction.

“What are we supposed to do with these?” Josh asked.

“You really are sheltered aren’t you,” I replied. “You put them on the tracks and the train comes by and smashes them. Like those hand crank machines they have at all the tourist traps. Except more exciting.”

“So we have to wait for a train to come by now? How long will that take?”

“We’ll leave them here for now,” Dave interjected. “Probably have to come back for them tomorrow.”

“Come all the way back here?” Josh moaned, placing his hands behind his head. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“All part of the plan,” I responded. “Although now that you’re aware of what we’ve been trying to do, it complicates things a bit.” I bent down and picked up a small black rock. It was smooth, rounded on the edges and almost completely flat on both sides. *Perfect*. I turned and whipped the rock side armed toward the river. Spinning, it skipped off the surface of the water several times before sinking below. “5,” I announced. “Not too bad.”

Josh picked up his own rock and cast it toward the river. It hit the water with a thunk, sinking immediately. “Dammit,” he muttered.

“That rock was too big,” Dave said over his shoulder. “I always told Bryan you want small and flat.”

I smiled tauntingly at my brother before tossing another stone. It flew nearly parallel with the river, skipping half way to the far shore. “6!” I shouted.

Josh walked up closer to the river, stone in hand, twisted his entire body and flung it crookedly at the water. *Thunk*. “Dammit!”

“5, again,” I said smugly.

Thunk. “Dammit!!!”

“Man you suck at this,” I said before tossing another stone. “7!”

Thunk. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“It’s all in the wrist,” Dave instructed. “Just flick it. I remember one time when Bryan and I were down here. He got one to skip 15 times. 15! Can you believe that?”

Thunk. “Oh my God, shut up!” Josh shouted back. “We can’t all be as perfect as Bryan!”

Silence.

I turned and glared at my brother. His eyes were on the ground, hand covering his mouth.

“I...I know you’re,” Dave whispered. “I didn’t mean to—” he hesitated. I knew the scene that was playing back in his mind. The memory that was reflected in his eyes. The two suits knocking at the door. His wife moaning in the next room. The letter that told him his son wasn’t coming home.

He lowered his head and began walking down the tracks along the river, still clutching a penny in his left hand. The sound of water lapping against the shore seemed much louder than before.

“Nice going, asshole,” I hissed at my brother. He stared at the ground, kicking bits of gravel into the river. I looked up at the sky. The edge of the sun reached out to meet the horizon. Soon it would turn a bright pink in the gradual transition to night. I jogged over and placed a hand on Dave’s back. We stood quietly for several minutes as I searched for something to say.

“He didn’t mean it,” I said tentatively.

“I know he didn’t.”

We looked out at nothing in particular, standing side by side. “You...ok?”

“Yeah, I’m ok,” his eyes were red.

“We should head back,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “It’s almost dark.”

Dave nodded.

“We can come back tomorrow to get the pennies.”

He nodded again, and turned back toward home. I stared down my brother as we approached, silently and sternly urging him to come apologize. He shuffled over reluctantly after failing yet another halfhearted attempt at skipping rocks.

“Hey Dave,” he mumbled. “I was just frustrated is all. I didn’t...you know...sorry.”

Dave forced a smile. “I know,” he said.

We headed back for the trees and the way we came. But this time, Dave was following along slowly instead of forging ahead. I sidestepped some “poison ivy,” dodged a few stickers, and eventually we made it back to the clearing with the deer, holding our breaths and covering our noses as we came closer. The air was dead still. The only sound was the crunching and snapping of the dense brush under our feet. Darkness just beginning to swallow the trees.

I stopped.

“What are you doing?” my brother groaned. I held up my hand to shush him. “Seriously,” Josh said. “What—” a piercing scream suddenly ripped through the clearing, causing every hair on my body to stand on end. A scream that I felt deep in my bones. Like a young child shrieking in agony: a blood-chillingly, humanlike sound, followed by a low pulsating hum.

The mountain lion was perched on a rock 20 yards from where I stood. She had seen us long before we ever saw her: crouched low to ground, ears pinned back and teeth barred. Her muscles rippled under a thick layer of sandy brown fur. I was frozen in terror. My hands began shaking and my chest pounded uncontrollably as I felt every individual drop of sweat sliding down my body. The humming noise continued and was eventually capped by another deafening scream. My muscles disobeyed the continuous signals from my brain, ordering them to move. Petrified.

My mind jumped from image to image, recalling everything I had ever seen or read about defense against wild animals. None of it seemed applicable. Both parties remained still, waiting for the other to make a move. My legs felt ready to buckle. I found myself wondering how much time had passed? A minute? An hour? I couldn’t tell if time was speeding up or slowing down; a disorienting feeling. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. Dave stepped between me and the panther, arms and legs spread as wide as he could get them. “Make yourself look big,” he whispered.

I gulped, and finally managed to overcome my temporary paralysis. I reached down and grabbed a stick about the size of a baseball bat and began swinging it side to side, arms raised high. Looking toward my brother, I motioned for him to do the same. The cat hissed a reply. I screamed back.

“GET OUT OF HERE!” I yelled. “GO!” my voice cracked. Dave and Josh looked at me in surprise, and then began screaming as well.

“RUN AWAY YOU STUPID ANIMAL!”

“WE’RE NOT AFRAID OF YOU!”

“HEY, FUCK YOU!”

“GO!”

Eyes still fixed on us, the big cat took a couple steps backward off the rock. She crouched down again, tail twitching behind her. I didn’t know if our shouting was working, or only making the panther angrier.

Should we run? I glanced quickly at my brother and uncle. I was definitely the fastest of the three of us. *They won’t make it if we run.* I turned back toward the cat and screamed again. *No.* My thoughts finally settled on defiance. *No. No. No! NO! NO! NO!* Her claws flexed, digging deep into the dirt. She let out one last roar before turning her head sharply to the side. I caught a flash of movement to my right and a booming crack echoed off the trees.

The lion dropped to one side with a short cry. A pool of blood began to form underneath her.

“Christ! Is everyone alright!?” an unfamiliar voice called out. I turned slowly as the green and orange clad hunter made his way over from

behind the trees, rifle in hand. I dropped my stick. The hunter's face was clean shaven and kind, though not overly handsome, with dark eyes and thick brows. He wore a bright orange cap that read "deer hunter," as if the camouflage vest and rifle weren't enough of a clue as to his identity. I nodded at his question, unsure how to react.

"I heard all your whooping and hollering so I came running," the man said. "Looks like I got here just in time. I ain't never seen a cat like that around here before. Y'all must have been scared out of your minds. What the hell are you folks doing out here anyway?"

I shrugged and shook my head, heart still pounding. "Just...going," I licked my lips. "Railroad tracks."

"Well...you better get on home then," the hunter said softly. "I can walk with you for a little bit if you'd like."

I shook my head.

"Ok," he said. "I set up camp just through those trees there if you change your mind. I'm gonna go call someone real quick. I'll be back."

He shuffled off and I turned toward my brother and uncle. Both were attempting to regain their breath, hands on their knees. Suddenly the mountain lion let out a huff and began scraping the ground with her front claws weakly. *Still alive*. She moaned in pain, her sandy coat now stained a deep scarlet. I looked away. It was painful to watch, and even worse to listen to. Again I became reminded of how humanlike she sounded. Her breaths came shallow and hoarse. She panted unevenly. Dead leaves rustled under her heavy shoulders, which began to convulse violently. I looked up to see Dave standing over the dying cat. He dropped to his knees beside her head, tears welling in his eyes. His knuckles turned white, still gripping the penny in both hands now.

"Such a shame," he whispered. "Such a shame."

The cat shivered one last time, and then lay still. I walked over to meet my kneeling uncle. "Careful," I said.

"Killed it," he continued whispering. "Unfortunate," he inhaled deeply. "Didn't have to kill it."

My brother walked up behind me, cautiously. "So it's dead?" he asked quietly. I nodded. For several minutes we sat motionless. A train

whistle sounded in the distance, and I felt the ground begin to rumble gently.

"Train's coming," I said to no one in particular.

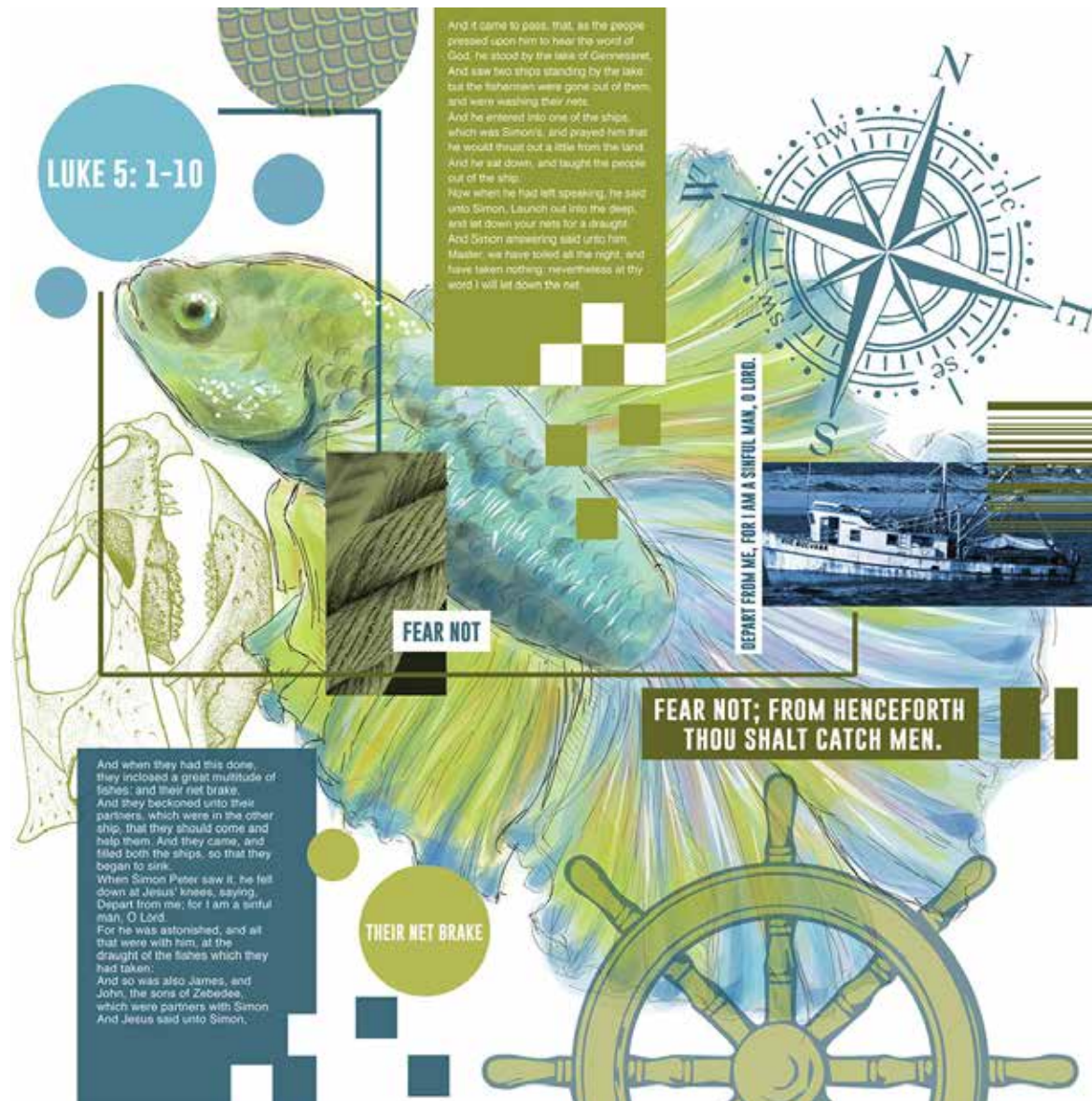
Dave looked down at his hands for seemingly the first time. The copper coin still clutched tightly between his thumb and index finger. Squeezing. He refused to let go.

"I think I can still get this out on the tracks before it gets here," he said.

Nobody moved.

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“
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ALL BEAUTY LIES
SOMETHING INHUMAN.”

– Albert Camus