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THE GARLAND

2014

GARLAND

VOLUME 27

GARLAND

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EDITOR'S NOTE

“Because once upon a time, we grew up on stories and the voices in which they were told.

We need words to hold us and the world to behold us for us to truly know our own souls.” – Taylor Mali

Taylor Mali is absolutely right in this regard. We used to need stories in our lives. In the humdrum of college days where there is always another essay to be written, another textbook to regurgitate, another expectation to be met, we forget. We forget how stories kindle our souls, and how words can be trusted to hold parts of us that people cannot.

It is my hope that this edition of the Garland will allow you to fall in love with words once more. I wish readers will find something hidden within these stories and poems and pictures that echoes something their souls have trouble articulating. Let these stories grow on you, and unsettle you. We are never too old to take away something from a new story.

I would like to thank our artists and writers for being courageous enough to believe their work was worth sharing. A big thank you goes to my many assistant editors, who were in every part of the editing conversation and advertisement process. This issue could not have reached the quality that it is today without our teacher advisers Professor Southworth, Professor Knight, and Professor Curtis. Their passions for writing and organizational skills have helped revive the literary and arts community on campus.

Madelyn Fagan
Editor in Chief

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The Garland does not claim publishing rights of any kind for the material within its pages; all rights remain those of the author or artist. We invite the Loyola student body to submit original poetry, fiction, artwork, and photography for next year's issue. All submissions remain confidential and anonymous. Please direct all electronic submissions to garland@loyola.edu, and feel free to visit The Garland website at <http://www.loyola.edu/writing/garland.html> for more information.

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POETRY

RACHEL CHRISTIAN

Corrective Lens

What's so wrong
with the way I see
the world?
Soft edges,
blended features,
selective focus:
my world is painted in impressionism
like a masterpiece by Monet.
The beauty of the undefined
is lost
as corrective lenses
obstruct my vision.
In the mask of reality,
the edges are too sharp,
the features too clear,
and I can no longer focus
on a single subject
or blur out irrelevant details.
The truth is unvarying and dull
without the mystery of the unseen.
Yet I continually wear my mask,
conforming to society's correction.

MATTHEW DERIGGI

Butterflies

Looking out into the open sky
you see them
flying above us—
with no qualms,
elegance radiating with every gentle movement.
You aspire to be like them
calm, quiet,
composed—
but yet
a feeling of uneasiness lies in the pit of your stomach.
Tension begins to escalate.
You gaze at this ominous creature

choking on feelings of discontent
and quarreling with ambiguous thoughts
you hesitate—
and hold back
silence fills your heart
a rush of anxiety floods your thoughts.
It becomes a clash between your mind
and your gut
until there is nothing left to do
but succumb—

left breathless,
contemplating your decision
a battle lost so many times before
as you peek back up,
cautiously, staring at them
and analyzing your thoughts
suddenly
you realize—
it wasn't always that way.
They weren't always that stunning
they too had to blossom
and escape those feelings of fear
by flying into the great unknown.

JOEY DWYER

Purple Cancer

Rising like dough in an oven
starry late night spread out
like ants in the canals of dirt.
You think of all the times we fought
Every shift, every shuffle, every time
you thought we had a break.
All up until now you thought
the little moments didn't matter, like how
some starry nights we just sat
outside dreaming about the future.
Talking as if we had all the time in the world.

Yet it rises above my skin
like the sun that dawns after a long night, or
the goose bumps you made surface
the first time we met.
You pined for me
and you never gave up.
Relentless like the storm of winter
or the disease that ravages my body now.
All I have left is a few weeks, days, moments,
yet I am the happiest man in the world
to say that I have spent them with you.

You think so much over and over
about all the people we have seen pass
saying, "How unfortunate,"
as if it would never touch us.
One day, you will be looking back,
wishing the hands of the clock would rewind
or the hourglass could lose its gravity.

But the cancer grows and spreads
along my skin, making it crawl.
Still, like the time you walked
down the aisle to me and all I thought was,
"How could it be?"
That the most beautiful person
the world ever knew
is the one that's rushing to me.
In the pouring rain,
through all the fights and all the pain,
you're still here. I don't mind anymore
the little conflicts and grudges
because here and now tells me everything.
The last thing that I am telling you is
"Thank you. For everything."

REBECCA HEEMANN

NaCl

The salt that litters the carpet reminds me of a Tuesday.
As I traipse across the floor, I carefully lift my feet to avoid crystal shards,
scattered across the sidewalk outside to keep us from slipping.

I recall us almost falling, testing the point of the salt with a toe.
Gloves wound tightly together, arms linked in a kind of fragile security.
In laughter we marched on, moving with the tentative steps
of a toddler testing the waters of solid ground.

You loved the season, the simplicity of it all.
“The flurries look like clouds of gnats.”
They did, I saw it after that.
Snowflakes littering the air as swarming pests.

The railing has two indents in the side from where you leaned over,
I can see the rewind playing now, your expression all flush and marvel
at the quiet of the world, if only for a moment. Then, it was weighted with a
“goodbye,” however temporary.

I hate that the salt still lines the carpet like a trail of ants.
Neglect does not melt, and I can’t spare the time
or anything else
to toss it back out into the cold.

RYAN MATTOX

Drinking with Ichabod

What if told you I drank with strangers
and drifted off into a dream,
when I awoke twenty years had passed over
me like a rock in the bed of a stream

*Well, what if I told you, I was chased by a man
a town or two over that way
astride a black horse and missing his head.
Tell me, what would you say?*

I say, my friend, that we’re two of a kind,
at the mercy of supernatural strangers.
I would be glad to drink with you, man
and swap tales about our weird dangers.

*I’ll drink to that too but wait just a bit,
my friend as demented as me.
Greetings my name is Ichabod Crane,
and just might who you be?*

Rip is my first name, Van Winkle my last.
I meet you well, my wiry man.
I come from up north where I had my adventure
I slept through the war that unshackled this land.

I will likely be awake for the next war,
and every war that ever comes after.
I’ve not aged a day since I drank of that potion,
so let us pass this evening in laughter.

BILLY MITCHELL

"So, Like, Why."

I said I love you as if that's enough, I hide
handicaps by using this crutch, and while
I don't lean on it that much, the last thing she said was
it's time to grow up. So now I
draw at bars ignoring friends in booths.
I'm buzzed on the blues like they are on booze
but I'm still there,
whatever that proves.

Amidst stutters, slurs, and simple conversations,
my eyes scan the room in a moment of frustration
and she's smiling, shining, like a celebration.
Bright like a fly to a light fixation,
I'm floating forward, fully mesmerized
All until my gawking catches her eyes.
She's a supernova
in empty skies.

Their lips move and make no noise,
because I'm sitting, staring, silently poised,
stuck on hers as they begin to bend
and release a laugh that just might send
my mind to a better place, a better time.
A simpler sense that everything's fine.
So I stand up breathe and find my spine,
Think up and then forget my line.

She's beautiful in every way.
Or at least built up beyond the display
And I'm an idiot, I don't even know her name.
I know nothing but that there's nothing in my brain;
there's no past, no history, no pain.
It's just all white except for her stain.

I review valiance, the reasons why
I should initiate, I should shun my shy
and all before my mouth gives a try,
She turns smiles and says "Hi."

BILLY MITCHELL

Mamary-Durkin

You don't know how I feel
but then neither do I;
How can you draw your emotions?
How can you paint your insides?
Can I take a clean page
and leave it totally blank?
A reflection of the expression
I left stuck on your face
when I told you
how little I feel,
how it never really seems
their deaths are real,
like they're back in the closet
playing the sickest of jokes.
They'll pop out at any moment
and we'll laugh at the hoax,
but she's stuck and she's broken,
half collapsed to the floor
shrieking "oh my God
I can't take anymore,"
then she turns to me
"How can you be so composed?
Please, God, cry or shake or scream
please, God, I can't be alone,"
but I just stare in her eyes
dazed and confused;
how strong can she feel
for something that can't move?
I'm sorry I'm numb,
I swear, truly I am.
If I could change in any way
I would, understand;
but since I was eight,
when I buried my dad,
I buried parts of myself
So now death won't make me sad.

RACHEL SARGENT

My Childhood

In my younger years,
I had a lot more yard,
at least some weekends.
Giant pines and oaks in every direction,
rolling hills and mountains,
and a front yard perfect
for playing ball.

On bad days,
my mind strays to a log cabin on a hill,
to a cold garage full of laughter,
packed to the brim with people and food.
Pungent sauerkraut
and the sickly sweet taste of sweet potatoes
that my sister loves.

In summer,
I miss sitting on the back porch
eating a pickle, legs kicking,
juices running down my face,
surrounded by my aunts
as they peel corn.

On cold days,
my limbs miss the tingle from
sitting in front of a fireplace for too long,
feeling slowly returning to limbs
after playing in the snow,
traveling up and down a hill
on an ancient wooden toboggan
with metal runners.

RACHEL SARGENT

Longingly,
I think of skylights above wooden beams,
ladybug-covered window sills,
soft afghans folded over patterned sofas,
sliding in socks over wooden floors,
the sizzle and smell of fried ham,
my grandmother's strong voice next to my weak one,
and sitting on a porch swing on the deck
of that log cabin.

I daydream of
catching toads in a sandbox — skin rough but slimy —
or of dragging old plywood into the forest
to create a fort — decrepit but wonderful —
of playing hide-and-seek at night
under a pitch black sky where you could actually see stars,
of my hand clasped tightly in my sister's
as a flashlight approaches,
anxiety high in my small body, feet ready to flee.

ALYSSA VILLANI

Repetitive Repetition Repeating

It's not you or him or me
but rather the relationships I've ruined
individually —

Individually and yet together,
I harbor these hazy thoughts
in the most aggressive weather —

Whether or not you understand
my discontented mind,
I hope you know that I mind;
you just can't see my thoughts all crammed —

Crammed and split and stuffed and frazzled,
I find myself juxtaposed to my nastiest conclusions
but I still see that shine in your eye, that bright dazzle;
I try to adopt that simplistic brightness,
but pause from sickening illusions —

Illusions which haunt my conscience
and my moral purity because I am
utterly unsatisfied. I've lost it,
I miss myself and it's hard enough
to admit but I'm falling slowly
and I need help.
I cannot count the many times I've cried
recounting the burden of my insecurity —

Insecurities have fibbed me and kept me scared,
hidden in my falsified idea of confidence;
I yearn for the day that I can shake them cleared
and finally feel good enough in my own sense –

Sensed and felt and forgotten,
you left so abruptly that I barely had the time
for anything else but images of those cotton
sheets, sheets we slept in and sat in and formed a relationship in
although we never made it to a sublime;
instead I was left to toil with my confused and
crooked thoughts like a broken clothespin –

Unclothed and pinned down by the things I feel,
I begin to turn numb, sweetly and calmly,
but closer now to a surreal beauty
that I won't stay away from–

From now on, I will diminish my internal pests
by strengthening the most genuine vibes I have.

Blissfulness of the Night

To see with my eyes,
you laying next to me, my hand on your thighs,
I miss you with me along for the ride,
but you're no longer here. The tears I cannot hide.
at night, alone. Visions of you creep into my mind,
my heart searches for yours, a love it cannot find.
My pillow now salty and dry,
I close my tired eyes that can no longer cry.
Happiness is painted across my mind,
dreams of me and you, moments time has left behind.
My pulse increases, the sunlight breaks inside,
eyes open, confusion. Now happiness has died.
I search for my phone, what's the time?
No message on the screen, back to life.



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FICTION

ROGER PARKS

by Rachel Christian

Raindrops fall from a pipe on the corner of the roof of Jimmy's Bar. Roger Parks feels only the weight of his wet clothes. Under a thin green canvas, Roger sits bent over, trying to catch his breath on a worn wooden bench. In faded letters, it reads "Baltimore: the Greatest City in America." The incandescent lemon lime lights flicker in the window, as if the bar itself was intoxicated. The lights keep him awake. He listens to the hush of the cars as they pass by. They sound like whispers of people who have come and gone, saying something but nothing. Always the same sequence of light: brightening white, then darkening red. Roger stares into his distorted reflection in the puddle at his feet.

Roger pulls his forest green backpack from under the bench. He rummages past a hotel shampoo, a Fiber One bar, his other shirt, and a copy of *War and Peace*.

Not there.

He tries the smaller pouch, careful not to rip the photograph of his son with his rough hands. He finds the hallow box and lights his last cigarette. Inhale—exhale. It was his reward for making it this far.

A blue cab pulls up and releases a crew of college kids dressed in their Friday best. "Everybody goes to Jimmy's." At least that's what the girl at the soup kitchen had said.

As girls in their heels skip over puddles on the sidewalk, Roger checks the faces of the boys. He doesn't see who he's looking for. They all look like actors and actresses from some classic black and white movie, the kind of movie that's a guilty pleasure on late nights after hard days. Roger used to be one of them. They were laughing, probably at him. As they pass by, he hides his face behind his coat collar.

Once the bar inhales the kids, Roger gets up from the bench. He limps to the window and peers through the condensation. He has been coming here every weekend this month, keeping an eye on his son, Patrick. Past the waves of the people in the crowded bar, Roger gets glimpses his son. Patrick is alone

tonight, hunched in his seat at the counter. His brown hair is going in all the wrong directions. He looks more drunk than usual. As people shuffle here and there, one of them stops next to Patrick and pats him on the back. He jumped. Then they laughed. He punched his friend's shoulder. They clink fresh, full glasses and chug.

A circle of girls settles by the window, blocking Roger's view. Catching a glare from one of them, Roger turns and stares at the door instead. He imagines that the brass doorknob might somehow burn his hand if he touched it. But hell with it! He'd bust down the door if he had to, dodge every stare, ignore all the laughter and the faces, and walk right up to his boy. His son would spit out the drink from his mouth and those brown eyes would be widen. Then he'd get up and they'd hug it out, and there would be drinks all around. Or Patrick would punch him in the jaw. Or yell. Or spit.

The bar door swings open. Patrick stumbles out and pukes into the puddle by Roger's feet.

"Oh man, I am so sorry!"

Roger jumps. He feels like he has been splashed with cold water.

"No, it's fine, really."

Patrick groans and sits on the curb and pukes again.

Roger sits and hesitantly pats Patrick on the back. He offers Patrick a McDonald's napkin from his pocket.

"Thanks." Their eyes meet. Patrick's eyes are bloodshot. He wipes his mouth.

Patrick stumbles up and back into the bar.

Roger sits back on his bench, slack-jawed. The boy has not shown a trace of recognition.

The splash of streetcars makes a hypnotic music, distracting Roger from his thoughts. He closes his eyes and listens, slowly drifting off, thinking of the day...

The pine smell from the Christmas tree fills the house. The fireplace spreads warmth throughout the house. Roger separates from the family and walks toward the fire. He watches it burn. Soon the fire spreads to the carpet at his feet. It surrounds him. He is alone and burning. His screams don't make a sound.

A car splashes water as it passes, waking Roger with a start. He punches his green backpack and spits on the ground. The last few nights, he had that same nightmare.

The rain is gone, but the sky is still gray. He squints into the twilight and notices a cop car with no lights on. The officer is already approaching him. Roger sits up, and flattens his shirt. He fumbles in his pockets, only to find some loose change.

The cop has harsh eyes and his wide shoulders. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?" he says with a crooked neck.

Roger avoids meeting his eye, as if his pupils are bullets.

"You hear me? You shouldn't be here."

Got that right.

"You better answer me." The cop cracks his knuckles and steps closer.

"Yes, sir." Roger pulls himself up and straps his bag on his back.

"That's right. Now don't you let me find you here again, you hear!" Roger nods and studies his feet as they navigate down Howard along the metro tracks in the road. He passes the already bustling

Lexington Market and turns the corner to Saratoga. A couple blocks away from the business area, Roger lets out a sigh. The boarded buildings don't judge him. Now he is on autopilot. He brushes his hand along the brick wall of a \$5-all-day parking garage where a Sudanese man once let him stay for a cold winter night. Roger avoids the bottles on the ground as he makes his way under the graffitied freeway ramps, through a lot where men like him used to sleep. Now it houses cars. Across the street lies Healthcare for the Homeless, Our Daily Bread, and the jail. The line for breakfast is already long. He takes his place in the sea and zones out. Step forward. Again and again.

"Regular or vegetarian?"

"Regular, please."

The plump server holds up her arm to signal the kitchen. She moves on to the next guy.

Roger takes inventory of his table. A twitchy old man with a chair, a tired woman with thin hair and thin arms, a big black guy smiling as he lifts his hands in prayer, a quiet kid around his son's age. Looks like a fine enough bunch. Shouldn't have any trouble from them.

A familiar face comes around with his maroon mug of iced tea.

"Hey Roger! How are you doin' today?" She smiles and he tries to mirror it.

"Becky! Hey, I'm alright."

"Just alright?" She puts her hand on her hip and questions him with her eyes.

"What, did you have a bad night? Did you have any luck at Jimmy's yet?"

"Well, I don't know if I would call it luck. I found him, even touched him, but he didn't recognize me."

Becky pauses her work. She questions the ceiling for a moment. "You know what, maybe you just need a good shave. Did you have that beard last time you saw him?"

"No, actually. But I don't know if that will make much of a difference."

"Might as well give it a try. I've got a hairdresser friend, Monica, down on North Street by the bridge. Tell her I referred you. She'll take you for five dollars."

Another guy waves for Becky's attention. She smiles again before moving along with her work.

A plate is plopped in front of him. Another mystery casserole. Too bad it's not chicken day. He could really use some nice fried chicken. He sips his tea. Maybe he'll try Viva House Wednesday afternoon if his leg can take the travel. Roger spins his fork around and takes a bite. It's still the weekend. Patrick should be back at the bar tonight. That was the closest he's been to his son in 10 years. Maybe with a fresh shave and few drinks, he could say something.

He takes his plate to the kitchen window. "You take care,"

Becky catches him on his way out, touching him on the shoulder with her free hand. “And good luck!” He smiles at her and nods shyly.

Roger pulls the cardboard sign from his backpack. He checks to see if the black ink ran from the rain last night, but the thick cursive is still clear. He hangs his bag on the branch of a tree in the median and begins his daily march up and down the same street, like a lone protester. He tries to think of it that way. It takes him back to his activist days, when he was protesting the war and the abuse scandals. He got paid to organize those kinds of things. He still gets paid for protesting injustice, but not with large checks or promotions but in granola bars and spare change. The cars pass. He limps along.

Twenty minutes, nothing. Finally one suited woman gives him a dirty look as she passes in her Mercedes. He wonders what Patrick would do. After about two hours, one young man rolls down his Honda’s window and hands Roger a dollar bill. Thank you, sir. Bless you.

Four more for the shave. And more than that for a drink.

Roger checks his reflection in his glass of whiskey. He brushes two curled fingers on his smooth chin and smiles. Becky was right; he looked different without the beard.

The smell of his whiskey brought back bittersweet memories from his own college days. He was tempted to down it all at once.

The kids next to him at the bar look like the brainy type, maybe Hopkins. They are on their third round of shots, and the thin Asian girl looks like she’s already had too much. On the other side of them sits Patrick. The bar is kind of curved, enough that Roger can see Patrick’s face. His whole face is red tonight. He’s with a friend this time, and they are arguing. Roger realizes that tonight might not be the best night to reconnect with his son. It might be safer to wait till Patrick is sober. Or maybe it is better that he is drunk.

Roger downs the last of his whiskey and slams the glass to the wood. A familiar tingle passes through his veins.

A couple walks in the bar. The man has the build of a football player, and the thin girl has olive skin and lots of makeup. Patrick swings around in his chair. The two men’s eyes meet. Patrick slides off his chair. He strides toward the couple like a hockey player nearing the puck. The buff guy shoves the Patrick’s girlfriend aside and throws the first punch. Then stillness. The man on the ground is not Patrick. Roger lies sprawled between the two men, with blood dripping down his freshly shaved jaw.

Patrick’s face turns pale. He slowly kneels down. Roger sits up and their eyes meet. “Dad?”

Before Roger can speak, the buff guy knees Patrick in the stomach. “That’s what you get for what you did to her, you son of a bitch!”

Patrick groans and turns with bloodshot eyes to his accuser. He punches the hockey player in the jaw. Roger stumbles up and grabs an empty bottle. He aims for the guy’s head, but Patrick punches Roger in the gut too. The bottle smashes as it hits the floor. Patrick swings again, but Roger ducks. He steps away, crunching the broken glass. The other guy lifts a wooden stool, but Roger catches his arm. A stab to the ribs, more glass falling down, a punch, a shove, three men on the floor, going at each other like vultures. A siren. Police pull the men apart.

“You!” The policeman recognizes Roger from this morning. “I told you not to show your face here again!” He cuffed Roger and forced him outside.

In the car, Roger catches a glimpse of his son one more time. They make eye contact, and Patrick spits toward him. Shards of broken glass never cut him so deep as they do tonight. He coughs up some blood onto his lap. I deserve this. He bangs his head against the window.

The car pulls away. Roger thinks of Sara, his wife. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is my fault. It’s too late now. I thought you’d be better off without me. But look at our son. This is my fault.

At the police station, Roger is put in an empty stall. He sleeps on the floor beside a rusty prison bed.

GOD

by Michael Ebmeier

Most people who talk about “near death experiences” are full of shit. They’re usually religious phonies who use their car accidents and surgeries as an opportunity to shill for their preferred myths and superstitions. They talk about bright lights, a sense of calm, blah, blah, blah. None of this is true. Last year I had a major heart attack. I spent ten minutes legally dead before the doctors were able to restore my heartbeat. Ten minutes I spent, staring directly into the eyes of God.

You may ask me, quite reasonably, that if I know God exists, then why don’t I go to church? Why don’t I pray? And, if you’re feeling particularly macabre, why do I continue to take my heart medication to prolong my life when I know I’ll meet God when I die?

I can answer all of these questions at once. If you saw the God that I saw, you would do anything not to see it again.

TO DUST

by Rebecca Heemann

“I’ll take it,” she said, almost dreamily. “It” was an antique urn, oriental in appearance, the woman thought, tracing a manicured finger around edges grooved into wings and meticulous flowers set atop a bronzed shell. It reminded her of something ancient emperors might wear on their balding heads. The woman slipped her hand into the curve of the urn, fitting one hand and then the other around the aged copper (bronze? Bronze, or copper? details) as if she were about to pick it up. Old—it was very old, with a grainy feel to it.

The young man behind the counter wet his lips, looking bored, and bobbed a shaggy head in response. As he ducked under the counter, rummaging for a box sturdy enough to hold the urn, Geraldine took the piece into her arms. She first held it out front, as if examining the mood of a squirming infant, and then cradled it. It weighed more than she had expected, and that gave it more of a realistic feel, made her believe about six percent more strongly that it hadn’t been recently stripped of a “made in China” sticker. She hoped it had been made in China, of course, but not within the past, say, few centuries.

“Cash or credit?” the adolescent asked, and then yawned.

“Credit.” She replied, only looking at the clearly-used box he offered, not taking it.

He set the box down and looked at the aging computer perched on the counter.

“S’broke,” the boy grunted, shrugging a lopsided shoulder. Geraldine considered this, then reluctantly sat the antique down on the plastic-lined surface so that she could retrieve her wallet. As she handed over a series of bills, she couldn’t seem to keep her gaze away from the urn’s body for very long; the roses almost seemed like little bursts of fire amongst a golden sky, waving scarlet in a last moment of triumph before the fall of night.

The register made a pleasant sound. Geraldine happily collected her change and her purchase, and then she left the shop, heading for her car under the cover of a November’s 8:39 P.M. As she slipped into the emerald Chevrolet, it reeked, as usual, of what so many affectionately called “new car smell,” and Geraldine wrinkled

her nose in disgust. They hadn't needed the damn thing, she'd told him that. And now, adding insult to injury, that God-awful scent was flooding her senses, dissolving into little beads on her tongue, even. The taste of disapproval and cheap leather. Pursing her lips, now, Geraldine reached for the tin of mints that sat to her right, her constant companion. Popping one into her mouth, the woman sighed contentedly, as if one small sweet could block out the experience of a new car. Checking to make sure the Oriental urn was sitting comfortably in the passenger seat (it was), she flexed her fingers against the wheel and began the drive home.

9:12. The mint had just lost its flavor, and she took a deep breath as she emerged from the car, ignoring the stubborn open-door dinging to gasp into the night. It was as if she'd completed a triathlon, had just stepped over the finish line and was allowed to slow to a stop and inhale. Geraldine smiled, relaxed, and ducked back into the hated car, stretched out to grasp at her new ornament. She held it close; fit it into the crook of her arm as she wandered around the side of the house, retreating to the back yard with the car still bing-bonging in the driveway.

Smoke still drifted lazily overhead when she went around back. Geraldine busied herself there for a while, moving to the shed, closing the door, having a mint, as per her usual preference. She left the plastic garden shed an hour later, still clutching the urn, whistling something Bach she'd heard on the radio on the drive home.

She'd gone through a whole tin of mints as she sat through the night, waiting. With some hesitancy, she'd taken the bronze-plated purchase and set it on the mantle, as if it were a trophy some snot-nosed brat had earned by tripping up court in juvenile basketball. She'd never wanted children, but looking at the urn now, she felt as strongly toward it as many mothers felt for their offspring, snot-nosed or otherwise.

Her sister-in-law knocked around 11. Geraldine moved to the door, brushing off the front of her dress, fluffing her hair.

"You said you called in sick today," the other woman—Maggie—said, raising her brows at Geraldine as she entered the house. "But you look fine."

"Sick, yes," Geraldine repeated soothingly, settling back in

to the worn, leather armchair. He'd always sat there, before; maybe it was this chair that had driven him toward the damn leather car. It was hard to say—well, impossible, really.

"Oh," Maggie remarked, noticing the painted urn, a new addition to the otherwise stagnant house. "Look at that! What does Cole think about it?"

Geraldine thought about her answer for a while as Maggie reached to examine the piece, face very close to better take in the intricate designs.

"He likes it," Geraldine replied finally, her mouth fairly dry and dusty. She slipped a hand into her pocket, retrieving the new tin of mints before popping one into her mouth. This time, it didn't eliminate the taste, and rather, mingled with the sooty sort of texture. "You can take it down, it isn't heavy."

It was heavy. Maggie clasped the twisting, beautiful handles, and miscalculated. The urn was raised into the air, but with a brief noise of surprise from her sister-in-law, Geraldine watched as the beautiful thing slipped and landed in a number of ornate pieces on the rug. She watched as it settled amongst a cloud of ashes that rose like smoke from the urn, a small mushroom cloud of grey remains that lifted and settled around them like a secret.

"Gerrie!" Maggie exclaimed, looking stricken, "You should get a refund—buying an urn with someone already in it!"

Geraldine tried not to think about the little cloud of ashes or the smoky smell that was wafting in from outside or the sooty taste in her mouth. Those things were so unpleasant, needed to be wiped away, purified. Burned to nothing with the sting of a red-and-white sweet.

Clang, clang. She held up the tin.

"Mint?"

STRANGER

by Blake Lubinski

Leaning against the rusted metal railing, I peer down at my cell phone. “It’s 7:23,” I think to myself. Not too much longer now. On this humid summer night, the light rail station is mostly empty. A mother holds the hand of her small child by a sign advertising one of the city’s most famous restaurants, Ellington’s. Sitting on the wood bench by the ticket booth, an elderly man rests his tired eyes. A few teenage girls chatter amongst themselves by the vacant tracks. But I stand by the railing and take in my sacred moment of solitude. A few minutes of my treasured bliss—my thinking time—is all I need, all I could have for now, as the slight breeze signals the approaching train. Before I know it, the teenage girls are boarding the train, so I follow suit.

“Welcome and thank you for using the official light rail of Virginia’s Transit Association. Please take a seat and keep your ticket in hand for your departure,” says a voice over the intercom system. Gripping my ticket, I scan the train for an open window seat, but to my dismay, the only seat is one bordering the aisle. With no choice otherwise but to stand, I sigh and take the bag to it. I place my bag beneath my seat, situate myself into a comfortable position and begin to mimic the ways of the elderly man near the ticket booth.

“And how are you today, young lady?” speaks an unfamiliar voice. I open my eyes and look to my right to see a man, perhaps thirty years old. His russet locks escape through the holes in his Yankee’s cap. His lips are still moist from the last drops of the whiskey bottle nestled inside, but poking out of his jacket pocket. His eyes are dilated with mystery.

My timidity gets the best of me: I tell myself that he’s not talking to me, but I can’t believe my own lies. Before muttering even the simplest response, my shy finger points to myself, and he nods.

“Just fine, thanks,” speaks my familiar voice.

He looks into my eyes and stares. I try to stay calm but I’m full of panic inside. “Your eyes,” he begins with a whisper, “your eyes are quite brown for green eyes.”

Baffled, I think to myself, I guess the whiskey’s settling in for the night. I smile at the thought but realize that he’s

waiting for a reply. “Oh, well, thank you.” I pause to search for the right words. “You’re very kind.”

He relishes in the idea of receiving a compliment, but after a few minutes of silence, round two begins. “So, where are you headed this evening?” My clammy right palm clenches my clammier left palm. I feel uneasy; I pretend not to hear him. He catches on and repeats his question, “Where are you headed, young lady?”

What is he looking for here? A cheap thrill? With any luck, my stop will come soon, I think to myself. “I’m off to the movie theater,” I say quickly, hoping he takes note of my short answers.

“I see, I see. I was thinking about going tonight.”

I nod my head, count the seconds until my stop.

He inches closer to me. “So what film are you seeing?”

“I’m not sure,” I mumble before biting my bottom lip and moving closer to the aisle.

“Well,” he pauses to cough into his sleeve, “maybe I should join you. We could see that new comedy with—what’s his name, uh—”

Terrified, I pretend to take a call: “Um, I’m getting a call. Sorry, I have to take this.”

Without hesitation, he responds, “Who is it? Your boyfriend? I bet a beautiful girl like you has the boys lining up and down the street,” he says with a laugh. His laugh is dry; I wonder who it bothers more.

I ignore him and begin speaking to the invisible identity on the other side of the phone conversation. “Oh, hey, I was waiting for you to call me back. How have you been?” I listen to the sounds of silence and, every once in a while, I ask another question. “I heard you just got back from a trip—how’d that go?” As the silence begins to share her story of a trip to the beach, the identity in the seat to my right remains patient. I glance at him from the corner of my eye, and he smiles. His teeth are painted yellow, probably from years of cigarettes, and his breath is stained with a cocktail of drinks mixed beyond distinction.

“How much longer?” questions the man.

I shrug my shoulders—my only resistance against his persistent ways.

Despite my efforts, he inches closer and places his sweaty,

left palm on my thigh. My breathing stops, my speaking stops, but my heart beats faster. He stretches his right arm across my back and, with his hand, forms a tight grasp around mine and my cell phone.

I'm numb. I'm frightened. I'm petrified.

He slowly closes my cell phone, ending my call with silence. I'm trembling inside and out. He strokes my thigh—his attempt at keeping me calm and quiet. Frantically, I search for help in the crowd of passengers, but fear blinds me—I must fend for myself.

He opens his mouth: "Let go of the phone." Without hesitation, my fingers collapse, and my cell phone falls into his lap. "Now," his raspy voice struggles to get the words out, "was it-t that ha-ard?"

I don't answer. I can't answer.

He draws his arms back and subtly returns to his starting position. Still bewildered and confused, I look into his eyes. His eyes, once dilated with mystery, are now dilated with satisfaction; mine, with trepidation.

"So, how about that movie?" he questions gingerly.

Powerless, I give in with a simple nod and a forced smile.

BORN IN WINTER

by Ryan Mattox

Winter charged across the flat, dormant fields, trumpeting loudly below the pale moon. It waged war on all living things, killing crops and animals, driving men into their homes. Fear of the season gripped at the villagers with the same ferocity of the cold itself. One can only wonder what has driven a man to stand outside on this freezing winter night.

Cries of pain came from cottage behind him, filling him with greater dread than the winds of winter ever could. He cursed his cowardice, he cursed the wind that clawed at his humble clothing, he cursed the cold that had gripped his ears like a vice, but most of all, he cursed his luck.

In every house along the village, husbands and wives huddled together with their month-old children, who graced the world at the height of the summer when the nights were warm and the sun shone long in the sky. They were eased into a world of plenty and warmth, with fruits and fields of grain to feed them. Fall had eased them into the cold of the frosty season.

Now this man's child would die, freezing to death on the first night of his life. The man had fled the room, even as his wife called to him. He could not watch her lose their child. He was a coward for it.

The wind picked up and played winter's victory song. Snow was on the air and would start falling any minute. Then he would have to go inside. For now he waited, for either the falling snow or the wails of grief he would hear from his wife. He gripped his elbows and huddled into himself. The wind berated him, making his teeth chatter.

A thrill ran through his heart as the wind grew louder, drowning out the labor of his wife, wrapping a whirlwind around him. He could not scream; his lungs felt frozen for it, he could not weep in pain or his tears would be icicles. Flecks of cold started to pelt him, thin icy snow, quickly soaking his clothes. He considered wandering off into the fields to die.

A figure emerged through the winds and the snow. The

man nearly cried out in fright at the monstrous being. At first, it seemed to be a gigantic dog. Then it morphed into a great winged figure, and then a giant wearing a cloak. As it drew closer, the clip-clop of hooves won out over the wind, as did a creaking sound.

Drawing up before him was an old man. He had a thin white beard, and that was the most that could be seen of his face. He sat atop an old black wagon, empty in the back save for a white tarp. The horse was thin and bony looking, to the point of sickness, but its hair was an immaculate snow white.

The old man looked out from underneath the wide brim of a beaten gray hat. His look sent shivers down the younger man's spine. The world become even colder. He felt all at once compelled to speak and to flee for his life, but was caught in a limbo of awed inaction.

"I'm giving you a chance," the old man said suddenly. His voice was gentle and quiet, but it still sounded over the deafening wind. The younger man nodded dumbly, his heart ached, as if trying to retreat further from the old man's voice.

"Do you want the child to live?" The moon grew dim, his wife's cries reached a fever pitch in the cottage, and tears were leaking from the younger man's eyes. The wind and the snow were piling around him.

"Yes!" he cried, "Yes! More than anything in the world!" The wind roared in his ears and buffeted him against the cottage wall.

The old man lifted his head. Pale blue eyes shone like stars. They stared into the younger man and saw his soul. His lips moved silently. The world went black, the younger man cried out in terror and joy.

Suddenly it was gone. The snow fell gently in fat, round flakes. The wind blew soundless and soft. The moon peeked through the clouds and shone over the quiet winter world and from inside the cottage, tiny cries welcomed it.

The villagers had to burn the father's body since the ground was too frozen over for a plot in the cemetery and spring was a long way off. His wife had managed to appear, exhausted as she was from her ordeal. In her arms their little

son didn't cry from the cold as the other infants would. He smiled and laughed with joy with snow landed on his tiny bald head. His impossibly blue eyes stared curiously at the smoke that rose from his father's pyre.

They'd found him with his eyes wide and his mouth gaping. He was frozen against the cottage wall. There was no telling why he'd remained outside even when the weather had turned. What madness had driven him? There was no clue to be found, save for some fading prints in the snow, the hooves of a horse overlaid by long thin wheel tracks, and the tracks of cart, carrying something heavy in the back.

NEPTUNE

by David Zack

My brother hit the water with a cannonball splash and a yell that hung in the air after he went under. It was a fullthroated roar, one that ripped right out of his chest. The end of the rickety dock still wobbled with the force of his running jump. I couldn't swim, so I stayed laughing, mostly dry, feet dipped in, sitting on the grassy bank. When the ripples reached me, they were almost nothing, the disrupted lake righting itself. It lapped at my ankles and tickled the hairs of my legs, but could not drag me in.

While I waited for my brother to resurface, I coveted the sun. On my back, I laid in the grass and tried to take in its warmth and the life and everything it touched. I breathed deep and sank into the earth. My brother and I stole these days like treasures and nobody could put a stop to us.

"It all used to be ocean here," Grandma told us. "Bury your claws in the sand and you will find seashells and bones of coral, ghosts of fish." We took her word as law for such things. We hadn't gone digging but we knew she had knowledge of what came before us, so a doubt of the old sea did not trouble our hearts. Grandma may not have been there to see the oceannomore, but my brother and I figured she'd seen its footprints and she'd patched them into her quilted memory.

Small critters with their bones outside themselves crept across my features and their weightless itch brought me back. I blinked my eyes with the corners of my fingers and saw that the sun had changed places; it sat on the edge of the sky, creeping behind the mossy trees and busy overgrowth. It flickered a darker orange through the gaps in the leaves and the rays colored all the land a rusty sawdust, the lake a reflective grey and unknowable. All my limbs still halffeeling, halfstuck in the jaws of sleep, I stood slowly, teetering.

I peered through the fading light, the coming and settling of dusk, trying to catch a glimpse of my brother. The water was still, its

surface a flat but softly shifting crystal picture of the world above turned upsidedown. My brother did not swim in the water, no ripples came to find me, to lead me to him. I heard the call of hidden frogs and the chirp of the many insects, but I heard no answer when I yelled his name.

I looked around the bank, as far as he might have walked while I had melted into the shore. He wasn't there. I did two circles around the lake and by that time the sun had well departed, its warmth leaving in waves, all at once. I kicked at the earth as I puzzled over where my brother had gone. My big toenail knocked against something more solid than the soil that had eaten it, so I dug with my hands in search of it. Everything could be a clue.

The thing from the dirt caught the moon's glow and it glinted a soft silver iridescent. I rolled it in my hands for a moment before deciding that it was a seashell. It wouldn't tell me where my brother had gone, but I still pocketed it, a souvenir of the old sea.

He had gone back to Grandma's. My brother had left me to slumber on the edge of the lake and gone home without me. As I began to pick up my feet and run down the winding dirt path leading away from the lake, I wished he had shaken me awake. Now I would draw the ire of Grandma, that rising soft heat, the words that stung with the reminder of better things you could have done, the disappointment of someone who does not love you less for your misdoings. She would remind me of my casual foolishness as I let the darkness set in and I came home in it. She would not deprive me of dinner but she would not offer dessert.

My breath picked up as I dashed down the widening path, coming to the roads. I thought of what Grandma would say to my brother, coming home without me. We were both responsible for each other—he gets my back, I get his. I knew Grandma would scold him for his departure and though I wished him no harm, I was glad we'd be even.

After dirt turned to asphalt the bottoms of my bare feet reddened,

slapping noisily against the pavement. Grandma would demand that we shower after a shoeless day at the lake and we would begrudgingly oblige. The hot water carried by the pipes into the old porcelain vessel was nothing to swim in and cleanliness was not one of our pursuits.

As I reached the edge of Grandma's land, I slowed and let my lungs catch up to me. The grass of the yard, cool with its living wetness, soothed the raw feet I pretended not to have. The porch light flickered on and I heard the screen door creak as it granted passage to someone who was masked by the house's geometric shadows. I knew who it would be and picked up my pace to face her.

Grandma wore her stern look and my eyes had to dodge hers; they were sharp and inquisitive and had more of life behind them. She didn't scan my face for long before she cast her gaze around her property. Where is your brother? I was sure he had beaten me home. Where is your brother? Where is he? He is not home. Did you leave him at the lake? And the world spun around and around in circles and blurred and left me until I found myself in me and my brother's room again, alone, the space too large. I was shivering even though I felt no cold.

Until the door to the room opened some brief infinity later, I occupied myself with my seastone. Its iridescence cast less of a spell under the bright white of the bedroom light, but the souvenir gave me shelter from thoughts unwanted so I took refuge in it and let the shivering diminish. When I closed my eyes I thought I could feel the old sea coming back, arriving in waves, flooding the oversized room and setting me adrift.

When the door opened it was Grandma and daylight. The deep lines in her face bore all the water from her eyes and she shook with a visible sadness. She held me close and rocked me back and forth and told me of the men with flashlights and dogs who had not found my brother last night. She told me of the divers that had come and combed the lake tirelessly. They searched for hours, they could see and breathe underwater and they did not find my brother.

My brother was not in the lake, and not in the woods, and he was not at home, and Grandma cried and cried that he was gone.

I did not understand the language of gone. It was what Grandma had called Mom and Dad after the last time my brother and I saw them. She told us of a blue van and a drunkard coward that had fled in it after driving it on the sidewalk. She told us we would not see Mom and Dad again but she did not give us their whereabouts. They were only gone.

Time did not make my room grow smaller. The removal of my brother's bed stretched the emptiness until it broke and I could no longer spend waking hours in the cavernous place that was left behind. It reminded me of him, my brother, gone. The empty space told me that hair would grow and bones would shift but only my pencil mark on the doorframe would move upwards.

The lines on Grandma's face had deepened, canals carved by the passage of tears and time. On most days she would sit on the porch and look beyond the land, and she would sigh sighs carrying the weight and wind of one who has been robbed of too much. I did not have the words to give to her that would right it all, that would put everything back in its proper place. I did not know if such words existed. So I would sit and sigh with her, and cry with her on the days it all broke, and I would wonder where my brother was gone to.

The day I asked her where my brother was Grandma's lines lessened, and a small but warm smile grew out of not happiness but love and understanding. Behind her eyes, softened now, the edges of her memory came together and she prepared the words she had for me, out in the front yard flowerbed.

He is here, she said. She pointed to the flowers and again said he is here. When I understood, she grabbed them with her hands and pulled them from the earth and pointed to the holes they left behind and said he is here. The yard and the neighborhood, the trees and birds and the things they produce. The invisible

heat and air. Water. He is here. I ran barefooted to the lake and threw my souvenir as far as I could, as hard as I could. Splash. I sat on the end of the rickety dock and cast stones and grass tufts into the water and watched the ripples from them be born and die. I called the name my brother had left behind. He could hear me, he was here, he was the lake. He was stone and grass and shell. He was hidden beneath the water, he crawled the bottom and what I threw sunk to meet him. He swims the lake and he is waiting for the ocean to return, when all will be water again.