Spectrum Literary Arts Magazine

Fall 2009



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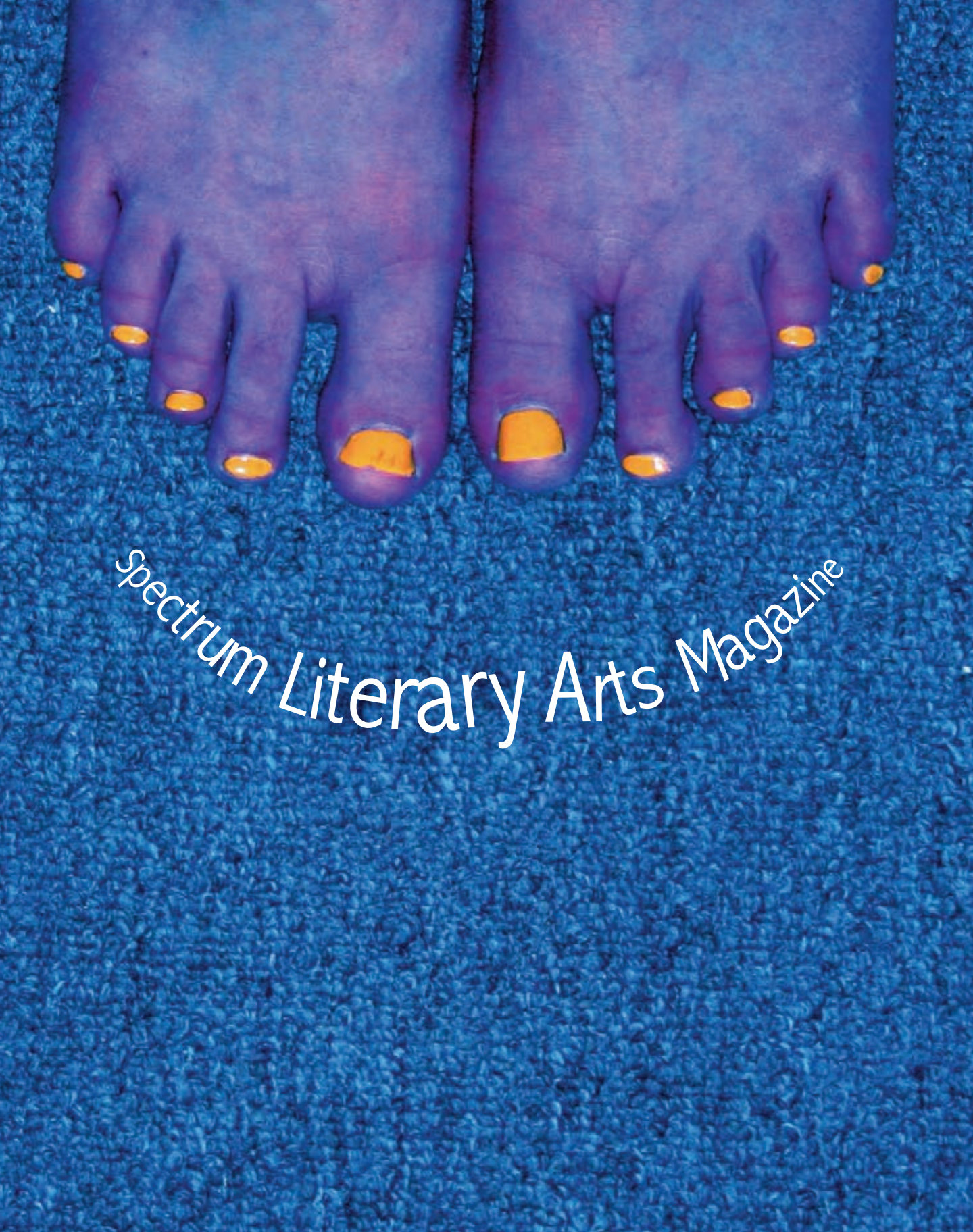

Spectrum Literary Arts Magazine

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Spectrum Literary Arts Magazine showcases the talents of the writers and artists at Northeastern University. All members of the Northeastern community are encouraged to submit works of original poetry, prose, and visual art. For more information, please visit www.spectrum.neu.edu.

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Cover and theme art adapted from "Feet" by Ryan Tucker and "Individual, Indivisible" by Sierra Smith, found within this issue of Spectrum.



From the Editor

You're not reading the coolest version of this issue. Driven by an odd obsession with feet and floor imagery, we printed this issue with two different covers. Both of feet. Both provocative. And the other one's better.

The artwork in the following pages is themed around the textures of floors, carpets, and surfaces—the things we walk on and by every day. We aren't sure why or how this happened, or even what it means. All we know is that we like it. And we hope you will too.

Thanks for reading,

Josh Olejarz

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"Feet" by Ryan Tuck

Isolation Intensifies Everythi

Isolation intensifies everything.

I often go for aimless walks,
inventing fictive destinations
just to get outside and breathe my thoughts,
inner monologue audible without chatter.

Cooking alone,
I savor the sharp knife
slicing squash crisp and even.
I heat meat various ways,
the grill sizzles and sputters,
or I stir-fry up a storm,
and bake things to warm the very heart of me
with taste.

I soap the fridge interior,
sponging dirt no one else thought to look for,
checking jellies' dates;
it's a strange victory when I discover rancid food.

But I eventually need
to again bask in the presence of people
and try to live out my daydreams.

Abby Zorbaugh

ing

Iris

Jessica O'Neill

I wish all love was limitless
and every day the aroma of it saturated the air
and emanated from every person's pores
to float up forming molecules of love and cloud the skies,
to rain down upon burning cities, burning with the fires of love—
burning, burning flames engulfing structures built with love—
and the tears of love tearing apart freckled cheeks
would fall to the loving black asphault
to be loved by the soles of filthy shoes,
the souls of filthy men, to be loved by fearless women
whose perpetual love would fill the burning buildings with fuel for the fire...
unstoppable fuel, never to be staunched by earthly water,
only by the rain and tears of that love emanating from those pores—
those poor,
fragile hearts
broken.



The Reason for the Season

J.M. Olejarz

the most wonderful time of the year is December,
our month-long submersion in xmas,
the mass waterboarding of the population
with a torrent of holiday cheer. goodwill is converted into
truckloads of snowflake and gingerbread garbage
that gets littered, inches thick, around the country.
it snows not weather, but white and red potpourri,
as if the plumbing burst in the xmas factory,
spewing candy cane vomit and reindeer guts
up against the walls and all across the floors.
it's wrapped up, then, and shipped out worldwide—
gifted to children who learn to love the yearly boxes
of soggy goo that puddle beneath the sludge-choked tree.
carolers sing, slogging through the stuffed santa claus
dolls that clog the gutters, and parents shopping for presents
kick and wade through knee-high grinning elves
in hats green like dollar bills. the country becomes a
boggy swampland, a hazardous scumpond of
predators quick to cash in on the people mucking through it.
and when the calendar strikes January, the whole mire is
sucked up and stored in monstrous large vats somewhere—
lurking, scheming, licking chops waiting
for its inevitable release next year.

"Hustle and Bustle" by Gina Bollenback

Abby Zorbaugh

Nonchalance is His Allure

Party boy makes me breakfast omelettes
after sleeping sweaty and naked.
I pad around the messy room in his plaid pajama pants,
not wanting to retrieve my discarded (now pot-scented) jeans from his floor.
He's a hippie in the worst way,
bragging nonstop about musicfests;
passionate he loses himself as the bass throbs.

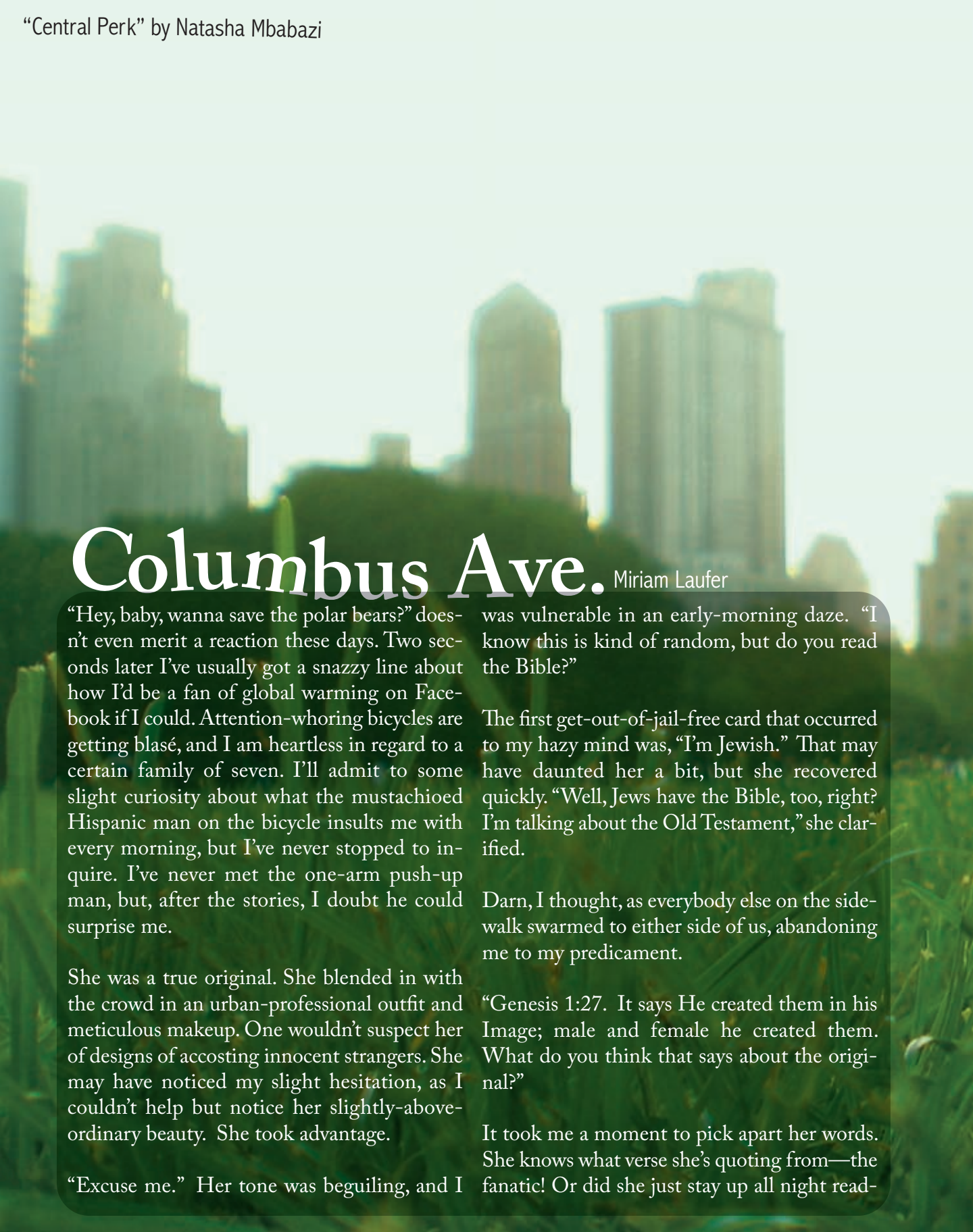
His shit-eating grin
says he usually gets what he wants.
A friend writes his paper,
freeing his time for god knows what.
Connecticut-bred politeness tempered with "dude" and "yo."
Though less ambitious than I wish, I can't resist:
he sure knows how to have fun.

His hands are golden,
strumming me guitarlike,
foreplay unforgotten.
Drunk me begs like never before:
words women coo into phones
only when paid by the minute.

I crack when he calls me sexy;
I'm well aware I'm not:
cute maybe, sexy never.
This rebellious mystery might be lying,
but I enjoy every minute.



"Hunted" by Carolyn Meers



Columbus Ave.

Miriam Laufer

"Hey, baby, wanna save the polar bears?" doesn't even merit a reaction these days. Two seconds later I've usually got a snazzy line about how I'd be a fan of global warming on Facebook if I could. Attention-whoring bicycles are getting blasé, and I am heartless in regard to a certain family of seven. I'll admit to some slight curiosity about what the mustachioed Hispanic man on the bicycle insults me with every morning, but I've never stopped to inquire. I've never met the one-arm push-up man, but, after the stories, I doubt he could surprise me.

She was a true original. She blended in with the crowd in an urban-professional outfit and meticulous makeup. One wouldn't suspect her of designs of accosting innocent strangers. She may have noticed my slight hesitation, as I couldn't help but notice her slightly-above-ordinary beauty. She took advantage.

"Excuse me." Her tone was beguiling, and I was vulnerable in an early-morning daze. "I know this is kind of random, but do you read the Bible?"

The first get-out-of-jail-free card that occurred to my hazy mind was, "I'm Jewish." That may have daunted her a bit, but she recovered quickly. "Well, Jews have the Bible, too, right? I'm talking about the Old Testament," she clarified.

Darn, I thought, as everybody else on the sidewalk swarmed to either side of us, abandoning me to my predicament.

"Genesis 1:27. It says He created them in his Image; male and female he created them. What do you think that says about the original?"

It took me a moment to pick apart her words. She knows what verse she's quoting from—the fanatic! Or did she just stay up all night read-



ing it? It triggered something in my memory, a thought I had once about humans created in the Image of God, male and female….but what about the original…what?

I hoped my expression conveyed my confusion accurately and we could just nod and move on with our lives. She was persistent. (Aren't those types always?)

She repeated her question: "What do you think it says about the original?"

That memory was back. A memory from a person who used to take God and his Word seriously. I knew the answer she wanted.

"That the original…must be both male and female." I felt the relief like when a professor smiles and nods heartily to let you know you're on the same wavelength. This woman was searching not for an ultimate truth, but for a similarity of thought with another human.

She nodded emphatically. "That's what I was thinking," she added in a (dramatized?) tone of deep reflection, "thank you." And, with that, she finally glided out of my life.

I couldn't stop thinking about her all the way home and all that day. I found the exact verse on the internet; her eerie precision was a strike against her. Her face, though, the earnestness of her brown eyes, the fact that she was walking just like everybody else—she only stopped for me—made me wonder.

I'll never know what motivated that woman to ask me that question. Whether it was a random thought that occurred to her in an instant, another moment in a lifelong search for a God that looked like her, or an outreach of feminist evangelism, does it matter? A stranger affected my day, and isn't that the goal of all those people out there? Maybe an ambiguous difference, like an androgynous God, is something to hope for.



"Water Works" by Natasha Mbabazi



"Train" by Ryan Tuck

Red Brick Anonymity

Natalie Schack

The city is red brick gardens
with streetlight trees,
enveloping the pedestrian
in sheets of intimacy.
The ivy walls are closeness, pressing
firm, like swaddlings,
cool like absentminded breezes
coming off a faraway shore,
filtered through someone's woods.
Cupping the bay in one hand
and arching her back
to the vastness of the west,
she cradles the lives and lives
twisted around each other
in the crannies of her bosom,
in the unending apartment buildings.

In the city, my fingers
are entwined around everyone else's,
my feet jostle for space
with everyone else's,
my eyes hold conversations
with a thousand everyone elses.
There is no prairie of low-lying
sun-bleached homes
that stretch themselves flat and exposed,
revealing you as their blemish,
their child and stranger,
the uncertain paint spatter
on it—faultless white canvas—
as you pivot and slide directionless:
either a coy modernist expression,
or an artist's clumsy mistake.

Tailor Made

J.M. Olejarz

full orange at sunset are the colors of a common autumn—
it drapes silken from the sky, and velvet down the city walls
like a curtain, like too much fabric left to bunch in circling, pillowed folds
—it slowly turns the leaves to match—
oranges by default, yellows that haven't quite yet,
deep reds that drift from trees to river, land and floating on the surface.
they join the sunset's sparkling waterlights—an embroidered sapphire tapestry of
diamonds and opals, all set gleaming in the intricate nautical arrangement;
all raw materials waiting to be used.

a small sailboat drifts lazily,
gently nudging a path between the gems
like an indiscriminate jeweler picking through his vast collection
—jib and main raise casual claim to the surrounding riches—
the mate and captain recline on deck, lifejackets for cushions,
surveying and appraising the surrounding natural showroom. they gather in
the bolts of fabric, reach down and scoop handfuls of liquid thread,
to pencil mark the dimensions of the skyline, to fashion their own existence:
craftsmen, they are, who take the varied textures of the season, and snip
trim stitch them into something somehow personal, a chance individual fit.
craftsmen, both, they are innate tailors, born to the task,
who can cut the living world
to suit them.



"Leaving Ground" by Lauren Chapman

Well It's About Time

They laughed when I died.
I told them they would.
I jumped out naked, so shield your eyes and giggle.
I forgot my parachute, or ripped it out when no one was watching,
I can't remember which.
But the fall was clear as day and no accident.
I fell and fell and fell and fell some more,
And reached the grounds of the Barbary lions.
They're still alive, I swear!
But I'm not, for they mauled me.

The whole scenario was an act,
Read through but never rehearsed.
Razzle-dazzle, hula hoops, and even circus lions!
Oh how spectacular the show was,
And for the grand finale I spewed blood
Like communist communist communist confetti,
And still in the nude.
I had some pearls but Sylvia Plath stole them.
They were mine first, honest.
I don't want them anymore.
They say she got 'em all sticky…
…Skank.

Anyway it was like the echo in a grand ballroom made by a mute—
The laughter,
The humor found in death,
The entertainment provided by the black plague,
The sold-out shows for the holocaust.

I was still somewhat of a star when my curtain closed—
Less than thirty, more than ten—
Not old enough, just like I promised.
I went out without a wrinkle,
For most bow looking like those cute Shar Peis.
I'm not a dog.
The personality of a female, perhaps,
But human as far as the eye can see,
And I died young and glamorous.

I'm dead now and past lovers leave tears at my grave—
Tears of joy, silly!
At my funeral, the orchestra played "Barnum and Bailey's Favorite,"
And the parlor had more vibrancy than a San Franciscan gay pride parade.
But my splendid crowd smirked and smiled, hollered and hooted, clapped and cheered and roared and giggled and…
Laughed.
Oh how they laughed!

Seagull

Anna Westendorf

I know this road. I have driven it countless times with you—windows down, music up. Casual California summers always seemed so fresh, so new—so alive... Time is fluid as memories rush over me. I feel them flooding the car and I am overwhelmed as stagnant nostalgia is replaced by an understanding of this new world I must adapt to.

I know this road. But I have not turned down that side street, taking the slow curves, anxiety building as I round the last one. I have not before seen this peaceful and eerie expanse of grass stretching before me in the parking lot. I glance up at the clear blue sky and silently curse the cruelty of a beautiful day in March.

I sit in my car for what seems like hours (or perhaps only a fleeting second) before I realize I must get up (pick myself up again, move on). I catch my reflection in the window and swear I can see my heart nearly beating out of my chest. I feel the sun warming my bare shoulders as I reach for my jacket.

I narrate my motions in my head. Inhale, exhale. Close the door. Deep breath...release. Repeat. One, two steps. Hesitate. Here lies a truth I am not prepared to face. Whispering to myself to the rhythm of my slow, painful footsteps—why, why, why...

I am not surprised by how loved you are. I recognize the faces, but do not process their presence. I feel alone in a mind-numbingly silent world. Everything is a surreal dreamland, and I am floating.

I can feel myself choking as I reach you too soon. Now taking slow, shaking breaths, I look at you for the last time. I become dizzy with the reality I can no longer ignore. Lightheaded, I slowly step away from you, each tear a moment, a memory.

I try to remember to breathe (I wish I could for you) and voices hover in the static air, fading in and out of my consciousness. They close the lid. I close my eyes. I am aware of someone holding me, but I have to struggle to feel something other than this unfamiliar heaviness in my chest.

I take a flower. It is so bright...the way you had been. With an unsteady hand I reach out to drop it. I let go of the stem, but can't seem to convince myself to let go of you.

I remember one chilly December night on a friend's back porch: a few friends, a few drags off a clove, a few drinks. I remember your arm around me, keeping me warm as my head rested on your shoulder. I remember I settled into the comfortable and familiar happiness that comes with being home (home will never be the same), letting the laughter and chatter wash over me. I remember. I will always remember.

It's late—you need to go home. Another cigarette, another hug, and you're gone.

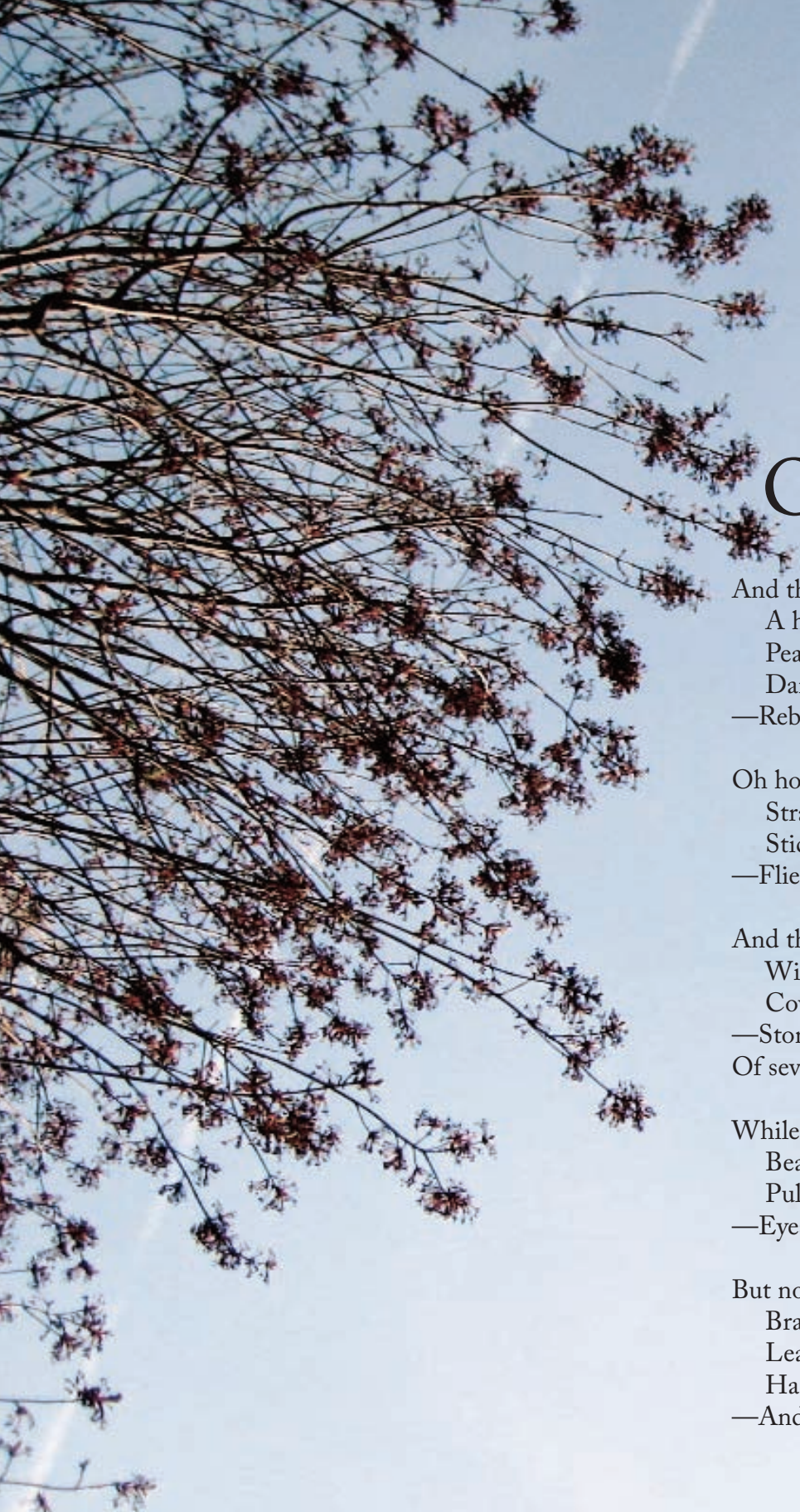
You're gone.





"Flight" by Ryan Tuck





Jake Stains

On the Farm

And the way the girl moves—
    A hippie dreamer,
    Peace believer,
    Dancing naked
—Reborn; free.

Oh how her hair—
    Strands of gold honey,
    Sticky with sweat
—Flies through the heavy air.

And the feet—
    With ten long toes,
    Covered in brown
—Stomp to the rhythm
Of seven brass horns.

While the band grooves and sways—
    Beats from the soul
    Pull marionette strings
—Eyes follow that girl.

But now the song's over—
    Brass band offstage
    Leaves thick silence,
    Hanging
—And the dancer is gone.

dear dr. Anxiety, dance

Jason Jedrusiak

& always remember the time
we burned
sugar.

you said "squeeze the flame & Bite Your Tongue."

oh! that dark aroma playfully explores the body
of my throat; its sweet lust clutches blood

thy Mood looks past the turquoise gray clouds
& bathes in the candied bouquet of Envy

the garden whispers: taste taste taste
I listen.

paradise
we howl at A waxing moon Of fire
thorns of pleasure fever thou skin

I escape Again

until morning devours
our delicious
sordid
Fancy?



"The Clash" by Jessica Moog

Trainwreck

Addya Bhowmick

How many times
Can the pieces be put
Back together
Before the seams refuse to heal?

Is it better, then,
To run screaming,
Scared,
In the direction from which you came?
Away from what could be either your
Salvation or
Undoing?

Or quite possibly,
As it always is,
They are two faces to the same coin.
So let's flip—

Heads,
You stay,
You love,
You win.

Tails,
You run
Before you can shatter.

So why cut and run
When you've never been more happy,
When you have not felt so light
In so long?

Because in the pit of your stomach
Sinks a stone of doubt and truth
That will never allow you to float too high
And will always,
Always,
Keep you down.



"Looking Through" by C. Benedix

Stain of Blackness

James Cucchi

Sirens whirred by outside as Thomas Jackson lay on his bed He just lay there, silently watching the blades of a cheap ceiling fan slowly go round and round. It had been a rough day, he thought, raising his hands and staring at the blackness that stained them. This blackness, he reflected, had ruined his life and dashed his hopes. The empty white plaster walls, decaying carpet, and wobbly table were the least of his worries. If he could change one thing in his life it would be the blackness. As the wail of the sirens passed nearby, Thomas turned on his MP3 player and thought back on how the black stain had affected his life that very night.

It all started on Columbus Avenue. Thomas was trudging home after a day trying to eke out a living. He was currently subsiding on welfare checks, but they couldn't always make ends meet. A man like him couldn't get a job, even in the city of Boston—people took one look and had seen enough. He couldn't keep track of the times he'd heard the phrase, "I'm sorry, these are tough times," or, "We don't think you would fit in here." They sounded considerate and made sure to come up with a likely story, but it was all lies—he knew the real reason they didn't hire him.

A yellow school bus rumbled by, full of youths coming home from the suburbs. Music blared out of the windows and a cacophony of rowdy voices echoed loudly as the brakes brought the bus to a screeching stop at a red light. If only he could be one of those kids again, Thomas thought, and go back to a time when he didn't have a care in the world and had not yet been jaded from years of menial jobs and unfulfilled dreams.

As the bus drove onward, Thomas walked past windows plastered with advertisements for Coca-Cola and Marlboro cigarettes and entered a small convenience store. As he pulled the door open with a ring, the stench of smoke smacked him in the face. He noticed the source almost immediately—the Italian proprietor, Giuseppe, was stocking packs of chewing gum and other assorted candies into the racks behind the stained wooden counter, and smoking a large cigar. He did not look up as Thomas came in.

"Giuseppe's" was a neighborhood institution. Thomas remembered a diverse array of kids flocking to the store in droves during the summertime to take advantage of the dusty old air conditioner in the back window and a variety of hand-scooped Italian ice—lemon, cherry, or blue raspberry. Likewise, an older crowd, all Italians, congregated near the meat counter along one wall. They sat there talking and admiring the marbled salamis, bolognas, and even a whole smoked codfish hanging from the ceiling. At this hour, though, the store was empty.

Thomas wandered down the middle aisle, careful to avoid knocking over a teetering magazine rack with his coat. Although he had walked past the store countless times over the past month and a half since moving into the neighborhood, Thomas had only gone inside once or twice. Tonight his legs were too tired for the walk down to the supermarket after the

day's hectic events, and he was in need of a quick dinner. In the back of the store, amid racks of potato chips and cheese snacks a month out of date, he noticed several stale-looking sub sandwiches beneath a sign that read "Made Fresh This Morning." Finding one that seemed edible, Thomas brought it up to the counter.

Stooped over behind the counter, Giuseppe was busy placing fresh rolls of lottery tickets into the dispensers lining the back wall. A gruff voice emanated from an old black-and-white television in the corner, telling of a daring bank heist that had taken place only hours earlier in a nearby neighborhood. Giuseppe did not even look up as Thomas placed his meal on the counter with a loud thud.

"One second, one second," Giuseppe called out as he slid the last roll of tickets into the holder. The thick Italian accent fit the man so well that Thomas couldn't help but smile to himself. He doubted that he could find someone more Italian in any part of the city, including the North End. Giuseppe's large, pointed nose, which gave him a somewhat patrician air reminiscent of Caesar or a wealthy Medici, leaped out at Thomas as the man rose to serve him.

"That'll be three-fifty," said Giuseppe as he reached for the register to ring in the purchase, still not looking at Thomas.

As Thomas placed the money on the counter, Giuseppe glanced up at him and froze. His eyes locked on Thomas's hands, slowly made their way over his jacket, and finally settled on his face. Giuseppe's mouth opened, but no words came out. As redness crept into his face he stammered, "Get out...get out of my store."

"Hey, I'm just trying to buy some supper, chill out," replied Thomas, taken aback.

"No, people like you ruined this neighborhood!" roared Giuseppe, now once again in possession of his faculties as he reached under the wooden counter.

Seeing Giuseppe's movement, Thomas grabbed the sub and ran for the door. Once outside, he sneaked a glance back and saw Giuseppe standing in the window with a short wooden club in hand. Thomas dashed around the corner, wiping sweat off his forehead, and jogged a block or so until his heart finally stopped racing.

Thomas couldn't keep his mind quiet. Thoughts of "What does this mean?" and "What should I do next?" popped into his head as he replayed the incident over and over. Once he looked back and thought he saw the old Italian following him from afar, but when he looked again the figure had turned down another street. His mind was playing tricks on him. Clearly, Thomas thought, he couldn't continue living in this city that he just recently had begun to call home. He couldn't stay, and he had to get out as soon as possible. He made his mind up on the spot to leave the very next morning. His aching back and legs, sore from a long day, were the only things preventing him from leaving that night. The move would be nothing new: Thomas felt more at home on the road than he did anywhere else.

He silently slipped into his building's laundry room through the back door and creakily as-

cended the stairs to his room. He flung his backpack into the corner, went to the sink, and began scrubbing his hands. "Why won't this blackness just come out?" he thought to himself, almost sobbing. He held up his hands to the mirror and stared at the darkness that would not budge no matter how hard he scrubbed.

Thomas threw himself down onto his bed as the sound of sirens a few blocks away reached his ears. A little sleep might do some good, clear the mind, he thought as he closed his eyes.

When he awoke, the beam light from the street lamp was shining against his wall, projecting the gnarled shadow of a black tree branch against the pale plaster wall. Thomas sighed, turned on his music, and lay pondering his future. The skyscrapers of New York City, which towered over anything Boston had to offer, seemed to be beckoning him to new heights, new dreams of grandeur. In New York nobody knew him—he would blend in with the multitudes of people, get a job, disappear into society, and maybe even live a normal life—one that he could not live in Boston.

The sirens had by now come to a halt, and Thomas heard doors slamming on the street below. Removing his headphones and peering out the window, he saw four squad cars parked on the street and about a dozen officers disembarking onto the sidewalk. His blood froze.

Thomas leaped out of bed, knocking his new cellular phone to the floor, and ran to the sink. He stared at his face in the old mirror—it was as pale as a ghost. He attacked his hands again, scrubbing futilely at the black ink. As footsteps thudded up the stairs, Thomas dashed to his backpack and opened it, frantically ripping out bundles of ink-stained bills and stuffing them under his mattress. He had almost finished by the time the door was smashed in.

The End





"Portrait" by Cait Madden

She Thinks Her Middle Name is Danger

Abby Zorbaugh

I hear about her face before I see it;
his punches must have been painful.
Was this a mere mosh pit casualty,
or did her belligerence spark concertgoers' violence?

Not till midafternoon does she amble out
squinting and groaning,
brown bathrobe hanging limply from her naked frame,
dead-eyed.
Her curly hair reaches new heights:
it's matted and tangled like Edward Scissorhands—
near the movie's end, when he stops trying to fit in.

The lock clicks on the bathroom door.
We count the minutes she showers,
afraid she'll pass out in there
again.

Leaving our apartment would require explanations,
so she doesn't.
I hear her lie on the phone,
saying she's fine
but worries she has a concussion.

I have places to be, but feel guilty leaving:
her immaturity makes me protective.
She meets inquiries with one-word responses
or teen angst, depending on her mood.
A volatile mess, she's not the first I've wanted to fix.
I've got to stop clutching fireworks.



Grass



Because of the warm sun
and the evening air

we held class outside
on the dew-damp grass,

my students' books and bags
transversed by little insects

intent on the completion
of insistent secret tasks—

The wet grass seemed to
grow beneath stained denim

and wet cotton, heavy limbs
making strange beds

of the green fibrous blades,
which pointed in all directions

and sometimes down to earth
where under grass and sod

lay a cemetery of children
long asleep beneath the living—

Impressions

Timothy Strange

Tonight I recall the
sounds of uncorrelated words

my students shared in that
grassy twilight Babel

while for 200 miles down
gravestones of lost children

rose in mournful clusters
of marble and forgotten words,

the voices of the children
murmuring in dark graves

of the searing sweetness
of waking on summer mornings

to the din and delight of
a thousand thousand hours

wasted joyfully while supple
hands turned into cold stones—

And when they went back
to tiny rooms and cots,

leaving behind strange impressions
in the green-bladed yard

like monstrous, deformed grass angels,
ghosts of their hour spent there,

all I could think was how
nice to go home and sit

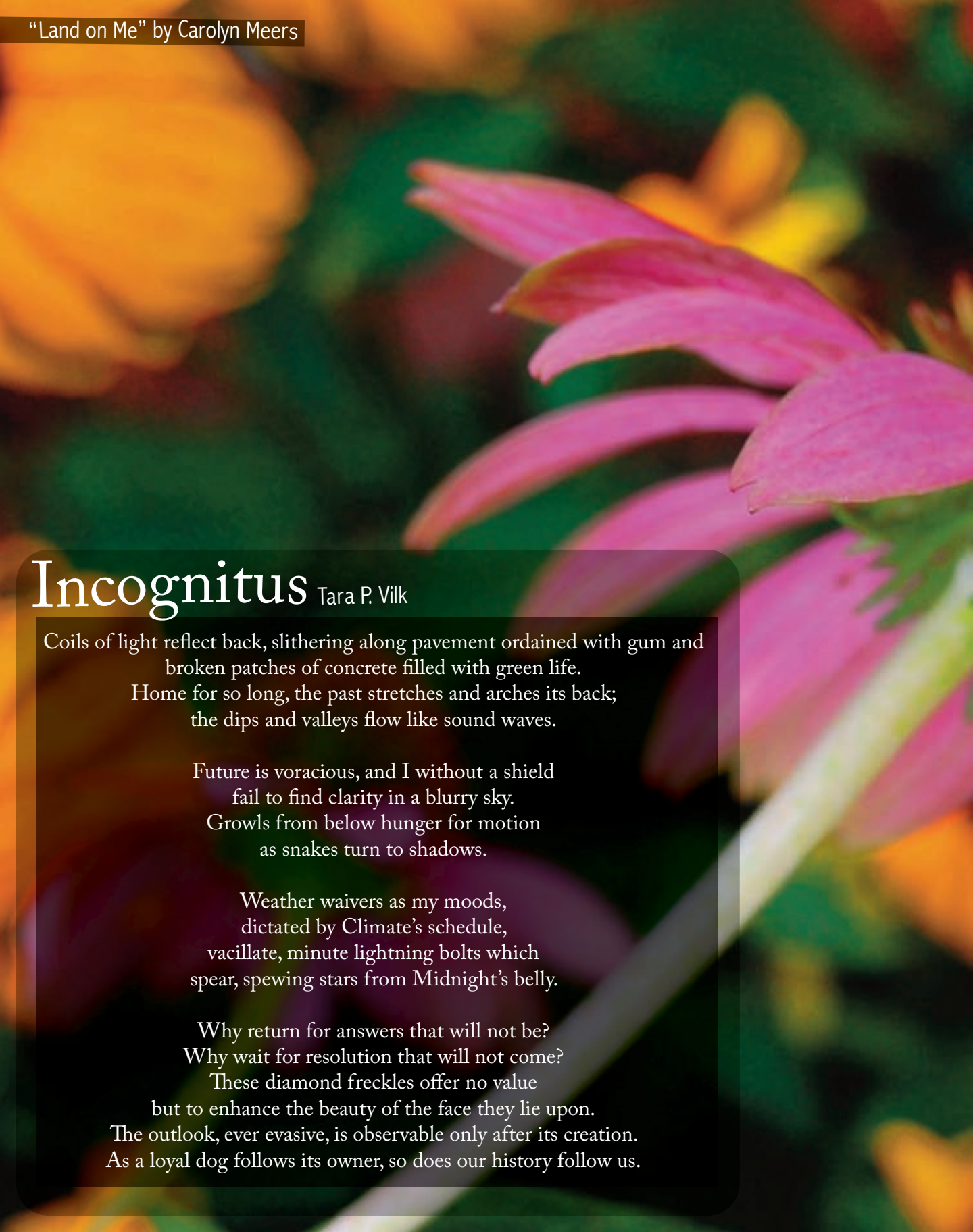
in half-light, drinking coffee
while the sun disappears,

holding back the trickle
of terror that has welled up

into the cellar of my brain
while that field of grass,

emblazoned with the impressions
made by unwary youths,

holds down the rising stones
of children's graves underground.



"Land on Me" by Carolyn Meers

Incognitus

Tara P. Vilk

Coils of light reflect back, slithering along pavement ordained with gum and
broken patches of concrete filled with green life.
Home for so long, the past stretches and arches its back;
the dips and valleys flow like sound waves.

Future is voracious, and I without a shield
fail to find clarity in a blurry sky.
Growls from below hunger for motion
as snakes turn to shadows.

Weather waivers as my moods,
dictated by Climate's schedule,
vacillate, minute lightning bolts which
spear, spewing stars from Midnight's belly.

Why return for answers that will not be?
Why wait for resolution that will not come?
These diamond freckles offer no value
but to enhance the beauty of the face they lie upon.
The outlook, ever evasive, is observable only after its creation.
As a loyal dog follows its owner, so does our history follow us.





"Shatter" by Jason Jedrusiak

working title

Caroline Steuernagel

The little self-worth that I have has been shattered. Who do I think I am? I can read a poem. I can write a paper. I can watch a bird dip and dive through a cloudless sky and know the true meaning behind it, or at least relate it to something of substance.

I have optic nerves and opposable thumbs. I am not a writer. I am a human who can see, think, feel and articulate. I am not saving children in Darfur or creating means of sustainable energy. I am simply watching evolution day after day and putting it to paper.

Anyone can look out their own window and see a girl bicycling or a vagabond begging for change. Anyone can feel the reactions to these images. Anyone can pick up a pen, write them down, add a date and call it poetry.

Where do I go from here?

Life Doesn't Fit in a Spreadsheet

Rebecca Payne

life doesn't fit in a spreadsheet
every aspect quantized
minutia-ized to the nth decimal place.
there's never enough time to
gather data
consider options;
choices are forced. rolling deadlines
leave estimates in vital variables
and some can never be filled at all
(is love on a scale of one to ten?
what is the square root of family ties?)
a haphazard experiment:
no control group
no multiple independent trials;
impartiality's fiction—each run built on the bias before

trying to offset these influences with
methods and protocols that define interactions,
from holding a fork to searching the net
from courtship to stages of grief,
is an effort at standardization of the
inherently unstable process:
an ultimately failed attempt to
subdivide knowable parts
from an infinite whole

The Art Professor

Ana Roth

I planted your thoughts in my burial plot in the memorial park under the sign that says "Curb your dog; keep off the grass." I drew you a map out of my forgotten notes, my drafts, my dreams and research, and my favorite book that you can't remember. It's been so long since the last time I followed you now and sent a panther to look for you in a desperate way that you live on the tenth floor and it couldn't fit in the elevator. I saw your lights, I found out your inspiration wasn't anything more than a busy street full of rich people and overpriced merchandise, and your music selection for the soundtrack of your failures was something you illegally downloaded from the discount rack next to the register and the can of pins on sale for a dollar that tell you to "Fuck off" and "That's what she said." Your people-watching skills aren't enough to pay the rent on your expensive hole-in-the-wall so you pick up a pencil and pass it on and hope someone cares, but when someone does you don't know what to do with yourself.

In a way, it's the saddest thing that's ever happened to you that your mother didn't buy you from a department store with the money she saved from her private enterprise to put to good use her knowledge of what privilege buys from the right people. Someday you'll meet the right person and think that you wish you were young again because now you are too old and your canvases are starting to shrink. In the cavern of your inspiration you'll wrap up nice and neat and tidy the thoughts you were too afraid to live for and pretend that they don't exist, it didn't happen, and in the end you'll know, I'll know, he she it they we *all* will know what you really meant to do with your time. You keep a box of paints as a pet and know you never really did anything too risky but you're better off than anyone who did because at least you're happy, you tell yourself, because you knew from the start that it was all just a bunch of bullshit, you tell yourself, and you needed something to distract yourself so you bought a book, you took a class, you spent a little too much time alone with yourself and smoked a little too much of something you couldn't afford and waste not want not. Dig a hole in your father's trust fund and get comfortable because it's gonna be a long winter, baby. I remember that you had a plastic tree in your overpriced apartment and it matched your cheap shoes that you owned and bought and paid for and you couldn't remember what you were doing so you did something else. I hope you did enough to keep yourself satisfied.

Someday you're gonna find the one and say, "Baby, you're the one, let's get married, let's start our lives because these last few decades were only a practice run. Let's tie our lives together, let's spend all the time in the world, baby, the world is gonna end and it's gonna be too soon. Let's go on a honeymoon, let's go on a cruise. Let's have kids, let's settle down, let's live in the suburbs, let's remember what it's like

to be young and in love while we do nothing like it. Baby, I love you, you're the only one for me."

In your exotic island of faraway plans and joint checking accounts and matching the drapes with the rugs and picking out your faucets to clean the dishes that pile up at your Hanukkah dinners and pretending not to notice how your world is shrinking you will stop and look around and say, "Baby, nothing's wrong." I hope your new corporate job supports you enough, buys you a new car to park in that garage paid for with your money and freedom and independence you worked for so hard and these past few decades were just a practice run. Don't forget to put your ring back on, check your face in the rear-view mirror for lipstick that she left when you left her and when you left yourself back in the city all these years ago when I knew you inside a single building and you gave me more than I asked for and you didn't know what to do with yourself. Your inspiration was a busy street with rich people and expensive stores and you paid too much rent for your tiny apartment and you lived with your sister and you worked your freelance and goddamn you had your freedom and your integrity and the world was a big bright place full of opportunities to come knocking on your bolted chained door you decorated with sketches and stickers from bad shows you saw in college with ugly girls and drunk guys because you didn't want to do your homework. Your heart, your house was full of your paintings and your favorite people you saw on your busy expensive street. Their faces bought you your house in the suburbs, your new shiny car, your kids' college education and the hotel rooms you used to cheat on your wife and your electric toothbrush and the way you say good-bye in the morning with a smile and a kiss and maybe the hope that things will get better because, God knows, they can't get worse. Crack open a cheap beer and fire up the grill and kiss the cook because your reign of mediocrity is just beginning and, baby, it's gonna be a long summer.

Remember your honeymoon and remember that cruise your momma's money bought you next to the flatware and the blenders and the monogrammed towels and the tacky albums and the thousands of signatures and photos and memories of varying degrees of pain, and your wife got sick from the all-you-can-eat buffet on the main deck and your boat hit an iceberg and your cabin filled with water and you couldn't find a lifeboat, and here you are all these decades later from the second honeymoon you find yourself stranded in Sweden with a casket and a story to tell your kids over ice cream from the drive-through, and they'll cry but you can't find the room in your soul overcrowded with the memories of your professional people-watching and illegal downloads and expensive streets and bad paints and old canvases and fake plants and dirty sneakers and worn backpacks and bad coffee and the afternoon you spent in the park dreaming that life would be better than everything it turned out to be when you turned around and said, "Baby, you're the one for me."

Aubade

Timothy Strange

A Saturday morning,
spring, 1977,

I awoke to the music
of swingset chains
before the sunrise—

Katie Earnest was up
before the light,
launching herself
again and again
on rusty chains
into the purple air—

(What was she doing
out there so early?)—

For no reason at all
I was sad,
thinking
of her waking before dawn,

cold and sleepy
and descending the stairs,
moving into the yard

across the field from
the muddy Red River,

sitting on the white
plastic seat,

launching herself,
launching herself
at nothing.

Papyrus

Natalie Schack

The colors are beautiful, visceral.
Gold hurled against orange,
in a motion like a murderous fist crushing
an object of hate,
blending flesh with bone,
bone with blood:
an ecstasy of color and texture.
Its delicate rice paper is kept crumpled
to artistic tenderness,
filmy edges torn for avant-garde appeal
flutter posthumously,
exposed fibers waving softly
from the AC—deadcold, robot air—
while pasted-on glitter plunges painfully to
the floor.
All up for sale:
another whore on the block.



"Let it Rest" by Cait Madden





"Thought I'd See You One More Time" by Gina Bollenback

Orient Point

Athulya Aravind

Dear N_____, as if by some nameless god's command,
I've remained shackled here for some time.
Mother calls me Bertha, some crazy lady in the attic,
The self-sentenced prisoner.
Only you know (don't you?) that the thoughts
Of you have rendered me immobile.

Do you remember (tell me you do!)
The night at Orient Point?
We played trespassers on someone else's
Intimate haven, feigning abandon we never possessed.
A starless sky, the roof over our heads,
We coveted the miniature block houses
Scattered like Lego pieces across the field.

Some distant church bell strikes eight,
The sun beating on my face, my night has just begun.
You must be sprinting up the subway stairs,
Your face flustered with concern at
That coffee spill on your tie.
The creases on your forehead deepen.
You are quite the serious man these days.

Darling N_____, I am a mere shade,
My tiny grey particles bonded
By the memories of your scent. I think
Of Orient Point, muster the strength to think some more.
The way the universe, the silent spectator, hushed its spirits,
The way you stared, fixedly, at nothing—and I, at you—
As you slowly buttoned your shirt.

Thoughts swirl about my shadow brain like
Whirlpools of cream in black coffee.
And in these thoughts I see your face,
Grains of sand, your five o'clock shadow,
Prickle my fingers as I trace them along your chin,
Across your chest, around your navel;
With the contours of my name I draw myself a path.

You've been busy, but I wish you'd write.
Don't you remember, N_____, don't you, don't you
Remember, I used to lie beside you.
Maybe I have become just a blip on your mind-map.
Yet I write, even if the recipient is some elusive space, even
If my words are swallowed by some harshly indifferent vacuum,
I write to you.



"Specula" by Carolyn Meers

Jesus and White Dresses

Natalie Schack

In the back of my closet is a dress that has hung there motionless for half a decade. It's too sweet, too small, and too white for me. Yet it stays there and I cling to it the way people cling to the past and to the future and to the slightest possibility of talent. I wore it once, in an ecstasy of childish delight and excitement, wearing white in a gray world. We were clean, clean white slates, white as our clothes, which were new and bought especial for the occasion.

Being Catholic used to mean church and cookies on Sundays. It meant seeing my cousins and listening to stories and laughing with Father Mack. It wasn't sacrifice and it wasn't love. It wasn't religion. Then again, what was, when I was seven?

The church is circular, not rectangular like most chapels. The worshippers radiate around the altar, and suspended from the ceiling is Jesus himself, hovering on his cross in midair, halfway between the pinnacled ceiling and the floor. Sometimes I would contemplate him while the priest was speaking of sinners being punished. Up there always, forever attached to that block of wood, with his ribs jutting out awfully from his abdomen, so much so that if you laid him horizontally and poured water on him, he'd have little tide pools in his tummy. I can imagine him watching us try it, as curious as we are about the outcome, and then laughing with delight at the little pools and fishes, his own aquarium right in his tummy. When he laughs his eyes are closed, and when he opens them you can see the melancholy that clouds the back of every expression: the eternal sadness even when he is laughing at tide pools in his tummy.

I'm confused at this paradox of emotion in his eyes. He accepts that there will always be wood attached to his back, that he died to save the world and people are still murdering their wives and raping children and waging crusades. I can imagine that if I were him, hanging from the ceiling from a clear thread (to look like he was floating), I would feel as if I had given up. He always looked so haggard. I wonder if he thought it would change everything when he died, that he was saving us from ourselves. Now, 2000 years older and wiser, he can only plead with sad eyes, resisting the despair that centuries of horror have sown in him.

On the day of my communion, he hung there as usual and no one noticed. How many times had no one noticed? How many days did he sit there quietly, how many nights after the door was locked so thieves couldn't steal any more of the Stations of the Cross did he hover in the dark, motionless, waiting for the next batch of sinners?



"Wedding Day" by Natasha Mbabazi

We were a river of flowing, chattering, white-clothed girls and boys with hakus and ti leaf leis and no idea what we were doing, no idea what we were committing ourselves to. No idea that our soul was at stake, no idea that we were pretending to have learned, in a few years, something it takes a lifetime to know for sure. And like obedient little souls we marched marched marched up to the priest and had wine ("...ugh...") and the flat bread with the flavor I just can't put my finger on. Our eyes were fresh and our minds were as fresh and pure as that dress in my closet. Our white dresses gleamed all the way down to the altar, like a bride, marrying herself blindly to a belief. I remember pride at having the prettiest, finest communion banner, with a silk Sacred Heart and floral cross and roses and gold braid. I remember not wanting to say anything about it because church is just not the right place to brag. And I remember the red punch after, always, motivation to be a good girl.

Now the dress is stowed in the back, along with black and white and along with childhood and along with Sunday School. It keeps company with playing outside and having birthday parties with piñatas and it goes to sleep with ballet and karate and my other childhood memories, my other experiments. I'll never fit it again, and it will never mean the same thing to me. But I can't throw it away and I don't know why.

Wonderland

Rachel Zarrell

Sprawled out on my dirty, sheetless mattress in white denim shorts and a bra,
through my windows hot light reaches spindly towards my body
as the mice squeak and sputter, racing across linoleum tiles.

Summer.

I am sprinting downhill to Jimmy's apartment on Darling Street.
Jimmy doesn't believe in phones, or keys,
(or bank accounts)
so I shout his name from the parking lot below his window
until he steps onto his balcony
and looks down at me,
smiling,
a wine glass clasped tight in his hand.
Jimmy loves boys like I do, but since he knows what they want like I never can,
and since he is 21 and I am 18,
I know I would do absolutely anything for him,
and probably have,
so I break into his building with my credit card and run upstairs.

During the nighttime I waste away on Newbury Street,
serving overpriced pizza to rich tourists from Italy, or Paris, or Hong Kong,
with their boxy, expensive purses and fingers that point to the things they want.
after, my hair rich with garlic, I'll collapse from the steep uphill walk
into my shoddy apartment,
six hundred a month but I somehow plead my dad into paying half.
He doesn't know I live with six tall boys and an empty fridge,
the scummy white plastered with German magnetic poetry left by the tenants before us
that we push together into foreign nonsense phrases
then look up late at night on the internet.

we have known each other all of two weeks, my new friends and I,
and so are infatuated with the heady restlessness of being attached,
of how easy it is.
we count and coddle the days that stretch out before us,
each one lazy and sticky, like candy.
one night all of us crowd into a dirty bi-level, wedged behind a Burger King.
Eli takes my hand as we walk through the drive-thru,
and I peel a stamp off our shared fries that says we won fifty dollars,
which he pockets and promises to mail and split with me
when I get back in the Fall.
(I never hear about it again.)
and I overhear him, later, talking sloshily about liking me,
which I try to ignore and he forgets entirely by noon the next day.
but, despite myself, I can feel that I Iove him already;
all of them, painfully,
an aching only boys can inflict, wanting to hold them or mend, when all I can do is

make pasta at 2 am, or let them spin me, earnestly,
while we ballroom dance drunk in a living room.

and it's three or four in the morning now.
we're all fuzzy-headed and cold, walking to a Chinese restaurant someone swears is only
one more block, one more block,
and Jimmy yells into my phone at his best friend home in Georgia,
or else he's singing showtunes in the restaurant at dawn,
uncaring to the dirty looks and snapping when I try to tell him,
and Eli probably hums to himself or smiles at me;
and I hide my grin and think how we'll be neighbors in the fall,
but it's too far away to wrap my head around.
and in the moment I think,
falsely,
how nice it will be to see each other all the time,
and even let that thought slide me into a deep sleep,
too many warm nights to count.

but it's still Summer.
I am leaving in one week to be a camp counselor
for cynical 13-year-old girls.
I get fired from the pizza place so I retreat to Wonderland every morning instead,
a sad little beach that skirts the poorer areas of the city.
on the T the tan men stare at my brown bikini straps,
sometimes asking me foreign questions in smooth, coalescing Portuguese.
once there, I swirl white vanilla ice cream onto my tongue,
then pose as there's a flash of the five of us, our arms around each other's waists,
ankle-deep in the foamy yellow surf that's crowded with pollen.

We drink too much, always, and get restless,
so at midnight, my last night, we hike to the park up the hill,
up past the tire swings and the glinting metal slide.
while the boys talk quietly on the boulders about things only boys know
and I never will, their voices muffled just out of my reach,
I stargaze alone and collapse into
long, cool grass,
content and not caring, like I should, that this will all end soon,
how coats and scarves will bring with them the disconnect,
the anxious, hasty meetings in the dark, aimless attempts to get back to this place we had,
and then the truth: about all of us,
about how being alive is just easier in the summertime,
how the buzz of warmth will peel away and leave only hurt,
even if I spend the whole season denying it to myself:
none of us will remember how to love people like that by the time the cold sets in.

Drive

Megan Varanyak

Jarett, coarse hair, wide smile, and those cowboy boots. He likes to say:
"Hello."
The time, the place—it doesn't matter.
Walks up to the counter at the corner store and always says:
"Hello."
Tuesday nights we meet. Holding clippings in my left hand, one large Starbucks coffee in his right. Right across the table he will catch my glimpse. Crossed-legged, a sitting Indian chief.
Orders the tuna and California roll to share at Bonzai—he likes sushi. Tries to use the chopsticks, but his fingers can never seem to grip. Stumble between their structures. Tries twice. It works. Resort to a fork? No, not him.
Jarett is always inspired. The stars of last night's meteor shower, soaring from some unforeseen destination, he would say, changed his life.
Replay that song. Track 5, with the soft melody:
So what if now is all we have?
Live as if you never knew
what it was to lose.
Grinning, Jarett will claim he has been enlightened from lyrical prose.
Capture the world is what he does through a lens. Blends the chemicals in the dark with the scarce light being one small bulb overhead. It is almost as if he is lost in the dark of night, only the hanging moon illuminating his path.
Lost.
Well does anyone ever know where they are going? he asked me one warm night.
No, I said. No. But it is good to have plans, make plans.
No, just live, simply enjoy, he said.
Into the city one August day, we took the metro downtown. It was rainy, miserable. A summer day when the heat sticks to your skin. Pushed up against strangers, I grimaced. Unplanned.
Jarett, with his coarse hair and wide smile, held my hand.
He looked forward, met the eyes of an unknown man:
"Hello."
The businessman, stiff, eased:
We need more friendly faces on a day like this one.
The stop was reached. Jarett's cowboy boots clicked off the subway. You don't know, that just made my life, he said. His stare was deep.
I sware, you don't know.

"Dawn Looks to Dusk Looks to Dawn" by Carolyn Meers



"Individual, Indivisible" by Sierra Smith



For more artwork by:

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