

REFLECTION

**GONZAGA UNIVERSITY'S
ARTS AND LITERATURE JOURNAL**

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REFLECTION STAFF

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"You still sure this is a good idea?" Don's head rested against the frame of the passenger door. His arms were folded and his boots tapped methodically against the dashboard. A cigarette dangled from chapped lips.

"It's an idea, at least." Chuck clutched a bag of sunflower seeds with one hand and adjusted the brim of his Mets hat with the other, then eased the garbage truck into fourth. The great green behemoth stammered and spat-tered as if wounded, but continued forward, a slave to the pedal and the wheel. "What's 'good,' anyway?"

"Saw a sign once: Damn Good Coffee."

The barren landscape plowed past, and hot, dusty air crashed in through half-open windows. Chuck squinted into the rising sun.

"And was it?"

"Dunno." Don closed his eyes. "Sign made it look like it."

"Missed opportunity, that was."

"Unlike now?"

The truck hesitated over a pothole but barreled on. Chuck spat shards of sunflowers into the wind.

"This one's not missed."

"Tell that to Mom."

"I mean the opportunity. We're grabbing hold of it, not letting it slip."

Don took a drag on his cigarette.

"Everything slips." He drifted off as "Tucson: 132" flew by.

...

Don awoke to the gnashing of mechanical teeth.

“Remind me again what was wrong with the Civic? Too quiet?”

Chuck scratched behind his ear, then lifted the squeegee from the pocket in the door. He extended his hand out the window and haphazardly loosed the fly corpses from the windshield, tending the steering wheel with his other hand. Don watched from the corner of his eye.

“I think water’s supposed to be involved somewhere.”

“You see a lake, let me know.”

A fist-sized bumblebee suddenly splintered with a thud across the glass in front of Don. A starburst of brown and red now blocked his view of the emptiness.

“Hand me that when you’re done.”

Chuck struck the squeegee against the outside of the truck to free it of loose legs and abdomens, then pulled it inside the cab and handed it to his brother.

“Wonder how much one of these costs.”

“I’m sure they won’t miss it.” Chuck flipped on the wipers to clear away what was left.

“Dammit, Chuck!” Don had been scraping unsuccessfully at the bug remnants when the wiper blades engaged, flinging the squeegee from his grip. Don craned frantically out the window in time to see the handle disappear into the dirt 50 yards back. Chuck watched its trajectory in the side-view mirror.

“There goes our only cleaning supply.”

“Did you not see what I was doing?”

“I was watching the road. Or do you want to end up like that?”

Chuck pointed at what was once a bumblebee. The splash of backlit bug remnants leaked down the pane.

“Stop.” Don was still leaning out the window.

“For a squeegee?”

“She’s behind us.”

“She? Jesus, Don. If I’d known you were so attached—”

“Mom’s coming. Pull over.”

Chuck blinked, hesitated, then eased in the clutch before guiding the truck onto the sand-spangled shoulder. Before they had stopped Don flung open the door and hopped out. He stood motionless on the roadside, peering intently back the way they had come, the asphalt scalding the rubber bottoms of his boots.

“She was just there.”

Chuck, tired and parched, unbuckled his seatbelt and reached beneath the cushion for the lever, then slid his seat back. He stretched his legs, yawned, scratched his bulging belly, and opened a new bag of seeds.

“We don’t have time for this, Don. Next stop we’ll refill the canteens.”

Don lowered his eyes from the liquid horizon and flicked his dwindling cigarette onto a clump of sagebrush, then stammered back: the bush burst, flames crackling and spreading to nearby twigs and grasses. Don fished out a fresh cigarette, lit it with the flames of the fiery vegetation, and leapt back into the cab.

“Didn’t think the desert could get any hotter. Just goes to show that—”

“You’re an idiot?”

“Was that a question?”

“You should use your head. The middle-of-nowhere garbage truck is conspicuous enough.”

“Relax, man. Brush fires aren’t so rare.”

Chuck flung his second bag of sunflower seeds out the window

fire. Don propped his feet back up on the dash and closed his eyes as the soft orange glow melted into the landscape behind them.

“That’s a non-native species, you know.”

“You’re a non-native species.”

Don smiled like it was a compliment.

“Soon enough, brother.”

•••

“Why’re we stopped?”

“We need water. You need water.”

“We need gas.” Chuck eyed the fuel gauge: quarter full. He shrugged, then tossed Don his canteen.

“Drink this until you can see again.”

“You think I was hallucinating?”

“Mom’s wheelchair doesn’t exactly have NOS, that’s all I’m saying. If you saw her, you saw her.”

“Shouldn’t have told her our plans. She’ll worry.”

“She’s been worrying for 65 years.”

Don slammed the empty canteen down on the console.

“That’s damn good water.”

•••

The truck, motionless and imposing, heaved and rumbled like a dragon breathing deep. Chuck’s knuckles were white. Don reached halfway for a cigarette, then decided against it, opting instead to wipe away the bead of sweat sneaking down his brow.

“You know, I think there’s a reason more people sneak in than out.”

“To make room for us?”

Don stared ahead, unamused.

“They don’t call it the land of opportunity for nothing. Maybe we

should stay.”

“A land is a land of whatever you make it. Warm, sandy beaches, a new language, and 11.3 million dollars sound like opportunity to me.”

“The teller said 11.2.”

Chuck dug into his third bag of sunflower seeds and shoved a fistful into his mouth, then kicked in the gas pedal. The truck, insulted but obedient, grumbled and bellowed into movement. Don inhaled.

Chuck managed the gearshift with dexterity. The wild beast gained speed, tires popping over shrubs and stones while the engine wrestled with inertia. Don clutched the sides of his seat like a first-time flyer as the truck sped brazenly away from the road, over the desert, and toward the fence ahead.

The fence was there and then, after a short, shrill shriek of metal against metal, it wasn't. Don exhaled. Then the truck followed suit: a shard of the fence had tumbled under the floor and lodged in the gas tank, and the needle quickly sank from barely full to empty. The truck crunched to a halt 200 yards into Mexico.

Don jumped out. “Guess we'll take what we can carry.”

Chuck spat his mouthful of sunflower seeds into the ground.

“Guess so.”

Each brother grabbed three black duffel bags, then started walking. Dark, doughy thunderclouds unfolded behind them. Chuck glanced with satisfaction back into the distance to see a garbage truck-sized gap in the tall, flimsy barrier.

“That's why we didn't take the Civic.”

PLANE

PATRICK NICOLL

20,000 feet... I should have asked the flight attendant for wine instead of coffee. The blood in my veins is so much like a hot iron pressing deep, searing merino wool, that I can almost smell the burning fibers. 17,000 feet... dusk has arrived and a dimming sun spews bobbing sesame seed beads of light onto the underside of my tray table – “up and locked...bags stowed under the seat in front of you, seat in upright position.” The nose of the plane teeters and dips down, now at an impossible angle of 65, maybe 70 degrees. My brain registers how screwed we all are as these specs of light fade into nothingness. 10,000 feet... I struggle to reach the light above my head. When I finally do my attention is inexplicably but immediately drawn to the garish pink, purple and orange textile patterns sewn into carpet covering the cabin’s aisle. Welcoming the distraction, I wonder who designed the interiors of this plane and if that designer had once aspired to fashion such hideous patterns. Maybe it had all been some kind of nefarious plot against humanity – they had doodled these triangles, squares and kaniza cubes with neon highlighters in their elementary school notebooks, and - at night - they dreamt and schemed about where in the world these patterns would travel, who would notice them and how their colors would fade wonderfully into a mess of muddied browns and grays. In the future randomly selected people would gaze for hours trying to make sense of these Euclidean figurines that disappear into infinity – into the pilot’s cabin and that mysterious area of the plane, behind the curtains, where flight attendants gossip about the abrasive

ness of “travelers these days.” Surely no one would ever be able to truly grasp the complexity, the “simple yet elegant beauty” of these grotesque triangles and squares until that inspiring moment just before their jet careens head first into the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. Thinking about it all brings the designer a sort of maniacal glee, but to me the shapes, the hazy sunlight, the darkness, the caffeine, turbulence, shrieks and cries, tears and prayers makes me uncomfortably ill and I vomit onto the leather jacket hanging onto the back of the seat in front of me. 5,000 ... white caps below duel each other with swords of white foam. I fear for the unsuspecting sea life whose existence will suddenly cease. Schools of fish, pods of whales and independent swimmers interrupted, eviscerated, incinerated. At least I am aware of my fate - that my ashes will fashion shifting patterns into the sediment at the bottom of the ocean. And that one day, maybe, when the sea dries up and the silt hardens and cracks under the sun my pattern will have taken shape and be one of intriguing permanence.

GILT

MEGAN DUBOS

You wouldn't know it to look at it, because you probably wouldn't look at it. But she used to be beautiful. Marquee winking bold and bright, highlighting the black letters of the night's feature like the silhouette of a beautiful woman. That was when Georgie had started working there, in the glory days. People used to dress up to go to the theater then, men in their best suits, women in their dresses, elegant and teasing in that revealing of a little shoulder, a little bosom, a little leg. White smiles and red lips and arms linked to their men for love or lust or warmth or protection.

Saturday evenings Georgie would take extra care to look his best, meticulously shaving his face and slicking back his hair, ironing his white shirt and red jacket and inspecting for lint, creasing his slacks just right, polishing his shoes. Then he would don his uniform, go to the theater, sweep the floors, make sure everything was just so, before taking his place in the booth, where he would smile as the tickets were exchanged for cash and say, "Enjoy the show."

Over the years, he kept taking the tickets, and still dressed as sharp as ever, though the clothes rested on a bigger, softer frame, jacket drooping over the stooped shoulders of age instead of outlining the square shoulders of youth. Hair paled and thinned, and now, no one cared if he smiled or told them to enjoy their show. No one smiled back. No one dressed up. It was not couples who came to movies very often anyway. Theaters filled with angry teenagers there for violence or sex or at least the chance to make out in the dark away from their parents, or with hag-

gard mothers tugged along by demanding children, remnants of sticky sweets or salty junk sticking to their faces and fingers and staining their clothes. But that was all at the megaplex now anyway.

From his booth, Georgie saw mostly bums and drunks who had managed to scrounge up the change for a ticket, or break the lock on the side door and sneak in, caring less about the movie and more about a place to shoot up, nurse paper-bagged bottles of alcohol, or sleep in the dim of the matinee. Some of them talked to themselves. Some of them stared. Some of them never stared, eyes always wild and restless. They all looked as broken and haggard and weary as Georgie felt.

Officially speaking, the city had condemned the theater for demolition. Notices papered the window of Georgie's booth and the flaking gold and red double doors. But notice after notice, the date of her funeral was always being pushed back. It seemed she was always someone else's problem, not forgotten exactly, but not quite seen either – a mess you caught out of the corner of your eye and told yourself you'd clean up later. Georgie resented the drunks and the junkies who filled her seats now, staining the red velvet chairs, spreading their disease over her floors and walls, unfit company for the likes of her. He used to close his eyes and pretend it was like before, sharp-dressed men with their hair combed back, women with white teeth and white gloves, but it only made things worse when he had to open them again. So he took to drinking too, hiding bottles of mediocre vodka under his desk, taking swigs in his long hours of solitude, trying to console an ever growing sense of futility. But every ticket sold to another broken soul, every afternoon spent scrubbing graffiti from her majesty's blanched walls, every unreturned smile, every jeer from the pierced faces and tattooed bodies of a generation he could never seem to understand, they all made that monster a little harder to kill. Georgie began to slip.

It had started small, some days ago, or maybe weeks. Georgie was taking a lint brush to his once-red blazer and noticed a thread unraveling along the left lapel. "I'll trim it later," he told himself, but he never did. That night, halfway through sweeping the theater floors before closing up, he stopped using the dust pan. Instead of sweeping up the refuse for careful transfer to the garbage can towed behind, he swept it under the seats, stale popcorn, crumpled contraband beer cans, candy particles, needles, Georgie pushed it all aside and told himself he would get it later. Each day, the infractions increased in magnitude. Wednesday, he didn't iron his slacks. Thursday, he didn't clean out the popcorn maker, leaving popcorn to stale and the butter topping to separate and streak the glass with grease and yellow-orange chalk. Friday, he didn't shave or put on a collared shirt, shrugging the linted blazer over a thin, off-white undershirt. Saturday, he left the side door unlocked.

Were Mr. Zobranski still alive, Georgie would be ashamed of his negligence. But Zobranski was years underground; one of his kids, a daughter maybe, had inherited the theater, and Zobranski's children had their own affairs to see to. Whoever owned it now had left it to the wild, and Georgie could feel her growing feral, the same way he could feel something inside him growing with it; something all the gin and vodka and whiskey in the world could not sate. It was waiting, at first quietly, but now pacing, preparing.

Next Monday, Georgie didn't even go to work. Waking at 6, he lumbered rheumatic and bleary-eyed to the narrow bathroom. He washed his face and lathered shaving cream over his patchy white beard. But when he brought the razor to his face for that first stroke, something dark flickered behind his eyes. He could feel it daring him. Go on, it said. Try it. Georgie closed his eyes for a long time, still holding the razor almost to his skin. When he was in control again, he dropped the razor, wiped

went back to bed. Tuesday went much the same. But by Wednesday Georgie began to worry. He really shouldn't have left that side door unlocked; and who knows what kind of obscenities would be painted on her walls, or which fixtures would be broken or stolen, or if there would be anything left at all.

It took him half the day, pacing, arguing with that thing. He must go. He must wash off the graffiti and clean out the popcorn and sweep the floors and lock the door. He had to fix her. He ironed his uniform and starched a proper white dress shirt for the occasion, but it was done sloppily, leaving double and triple lines along his slacks, across his collar, down his sleeves. He filled a flask with gin and tucked it into his breast pocket, a little liquid courage for insurance. In the twenty-seven minutes it took him to bus and walk his way to the theater, the flask was empty. He fell into the ticket booth, forgetting all about the stale popcorn and dirty floors, checking the re-serve bottles under the table for something more to fill his flask.

A cough interrupted his search, and Georgie hit his head on the underside of the table in his haste to stand up. It was another waster, maybe a regular, but they all looked the same, so he couldn't be sure. Rubbing the back of his head, he asked "What do you want?"

Dirty fingers uncurled and laid change on the table. "Ticket," the waster said, in a voice rough from disuse, like it hurt him to make such a sound so loud.

Georgie steadied himself in his chair, but the world kept moving, turning the waster into a greasy army-green blur.

Georgie pointed at one of the flyers, with the demolition date listed six months ago. "Closed," he said, or maybe something said it for him.

That dirty hand pushed the change closer to Georgie, through the

hole in the glass, invading. "Ticket."

The sound jackhammered into George's skull. "Alright," he said. He pushed the money aside and began digging around for a roll of tickets. He found a cardboard ring with one ticket left and tore it off, shoving it back. The man scooped it up. He had kept his eyes anywhere but the booth, but now he raised them for a peripheral glance at Georgie.

"Well, go on." Georgie said. The man lingered a bit longer, and Georgie felt his clothes come alive, itching him, constricting. "You've got your ticket. I said go on." Georgie thought the man mumbled something as he walked past, but he couldn't be sure. He decided he'd best draw the mini-blinds so he could go back to his quest for vodka in peace.

When the search turned up empty, he realized he'd have to go into the theater, to face her, and hopefully to find a bottle of something stashed somewhere. The concession stand was dry, Georgie knew it would be. Anything there was easily pilfered. He found the theater dark and entirely silent. The old projectionist had left when Zobranski passed, and since then, the position had been filled by a string of college students, insomniacs, and anyone else who was willing to work on the cheap, but even that string had ended a year ago. Oh well. Maybe in the mess Georgie had swept under the seats he'd find a bottle with a little something still in it.

But what Georgie found instead was a body. With the only light breaking in under and around the side door, Georgie didn't even make out the silhouette until he was right next to it. At first Georgie thought he was passed out or dead, to be sitting in an empty theater with no movie playing. But the silhouette moved, turning toward him. Part of Georgie thought it was something else come to life, come to claim him, until he remembered selling the ticket. The figure waited. "I forgot," Georgie said. "We don't have a projectionist anymore. I'll have to start it up."

Georgie had no idea how to work the digital projector, but that didn't matter because someone had already stolen it. The old one though, was intact, kept safe by age and the camouflage of old reels half burying it. So he dug it out of the corner, and old reels to go with it. An old short warning teenagers against gangs and half of some B-list creature feature from the 50s. He also found half a fifth of Jack Daniels hidden under the desk. Not his favorite whiskey, but it would do, and he'd need to stick around to change reels anyway.

This pattern continued for some days, and Georgie began to feel that he had regained control over himself. He drank as much as ever, both he and the theater growing ever shabbier in appearance, but it was, he told himself, a decay he controlled. The theater was in use again, even if he couldn't actually find a whole film. Georgie had even taken to sitting in the audience with this new patron, but not before covering the seat with black plastic. They passed bottles in the grey light until the screen went white and it was time for Georgie to put on another reel. Other times Georgie didn't bother with the projector at all, drinking in silence and dark. Weeks passed and he almost looked forward to seeing the theater; he thought he might even light up her marquee like the old days, but never did once he got there. He would open the ticket booth at noon, sometimes later, and sit smiling out at the world. The smile was born of a drunken stupor and nursed by a bottle of Seagram's, but intoxication lent sustainability to the illusion that it was almost like the old days.

Then, as the vodka ran low and the sunlight faded, so would Georgie's smile and something else would wake up. You didn't think you were really in control, did you? It said. It laughed at him, cackling at the broken-down fool of a man. You're mine it said. You have always been mine. Georgie shook his head, telling himself if he could shake off the alcohol he could shake off the darkness, and things could go back to

the way they were. He had a job to do, and he was going to do it until the theater was demolished or until he was underground. You call this a job? It teased. Ha. What job? No one comes to this place anymore except to tag it with piss or paint. Georgie thought of the green army jacket with dirty hands. He'd come, he'd surely come and Georgie would be here to run the projector and maybe even sit down in the audience with him for a while. Georgie could learn his name and together they could drink their way back in time. But the thing, the monster, would have none of this. You're doing this for him? It asked. This place used to have a dress code. This place used to have class. And you let them turn her into a drug den and a brothel. You did it. No, Georgie thought. That can't be. He had kept her alive. He had washed her walls and swept her floors and kept her screen filled with sound and light. He'd saved her. You call this saving? The monster asked. Look around. You think she ever wanted to become this? She would've rather died young and beautiful than age like this; a worn down hag for the world to point at, half in ridicule, half in pity. You didn't save her. You made her sick. You filled her veins with poison and turned her into a whore. And now it's time for me to clean it up.

Georgie said no, screamed no. He'd saved her, or he'd tried; the whole world was just meaner, dirtier. It wasn't his fault. It couldn't be helped. But the monster just laughed. It was already in control, walking Georgie into the theater, up to the projection room. We'll start here. There were matches next to the projector. They looked new, but Georgie didn't remember putting them there. That's because I put them there.

No, no. Georgie told himself. Alright, I'll do it. No, I won't. Alright, no. But even as his mind teetered between resistance and surrender, his trembling liver-spotted hands struck the first match and tossed it onto a pile of tangled film. Then Georgie found himself in the back row of the theater with a rag and half a bottle of paint thinner. Had he been holding

the bottle the whole time? It didn't matter, he was holding it now, and the monster walked him through it all step by step. It's alright, it said. We'll do it together. Stuff the rag into the neck of the bottle. Good. No need to be nervous. Now, tip the bottle; tip it careful, enough to soak the rag but don't spill. Georgie fumbled, spilling some across the back of his hand anyway and cursed. It's alright, the monster said. It'll be alright. Now get the matches. Quickly, we must work quickly. And you must stay calm. Now, just like before with the matches, and give it a toss.

Flame roared out and up with a violence that drowned the sound of shattering glass, and the monster smiled. Yes, it said. Yes. You have done well. Fire danced across the the floor, over moldy food and empty bottles and used needles; it jumped over the stained cushions splintered frames of seats, turning it all to ash, clean, purified ash. Georgie found himself smiling, laughing. In the warm glow, she was even beautiful again.

But the glow had already grown into something else, something that made Georgie avert his eyes. It was too hot and too bright, and the theater looked ugly again. Cracked walls, paint and wallpaper charring in the east corner, peeling in the north, hit by heat but not yet by flame. Cracks and stains and graffiti hyper-illuminated in the bright white heat. Then, Georgie saw it. Army coat, on the outside of the third row, near the side door. Had he snuck in after all? Had Georgie forgotten more than just the matches? Georgie panicked, and ran along the wall to his friend. Friend? He didn't know if that word brought relief or revulsion. Well, whatever he was, Georgie could not leave him there. Georgie covered his face and clung to the wall, most of the flames still busy with the center. Georgie tugged on the dirty green sleeve, screamed, pulled, heaved; smoke was stinging Georgie's eyes and clogging his lungs, and he could hear the support beams cracking, ready to give any second. He tugged, pleaded

again, screams turning to coughs. But whether unconscious or already dead, the man couldn't be roused, and Georgie wasn't strong enough to carry him out. Leave him, the monster said. Leave him or die with him. Beams were caving, crashing down and spearing the floor, but Georgie was frozen. The monster panicked. Leave him, it screamed. Leave him and save us.

Then a beam falling inches in front of Georgie made the choice for him. He could not reach his friend anymore; he could only slide along the wall and out the side. He sucked in his gut, closed his eyes and held his breath against the smoke. He inched, slowly, painfully along the wall feeling his way to the door. Five feet felt like five miles. The door, it has to be here, he thought. More than once he felt he must've passed it, and debated shuffling back just to be sure. But the monster pushed them both forward, and when his sweat-slicked palm finally slid over the door frame and down to the knob, he lunged at it like a wild animal, falling into the outside air as it gave way. Rough blacktop cut into his palms and knees. Lungs drank up air in gulps. Tears left pale, glistening streaks down his soot-smudged face.

From across the street, Georgie watched the theater fall, fingers of flame enveloping her slowly, taking her away. He thought thought about the graffiti and the filth and the rot, wondering if he had saved her at all, if he shouldn't have gone with her in those flames years ago. He blurred his sight trying to see her as she had been, and found he couldn't remember. She must have beautiful once, but he just couldn't remember. Georgie turned his back and reached into his pocket for his flask. The pocket was deeper than he remembered. And green.

Well,
When I said there is a cup of water there,
I mean there, on the edge of the stoop steps,
where the zigzag backbone of cement planks
lets fall the foot's oblivious thunder into effortless
grace. The landing of it. As logic does
to words. As the saying of it, there, I'll
say it: water in a cup soft and clear,
it's the momentum tumbling over
your lips. The offering of it.
But it's cut, the rock of the stoop,
chiseled and wedged until only right angles
were left, and the warning of it,
so jagged, the saying of it, there: your foot not to trip
the glass, which falls as pebbles do,
grasping the cliff face for an exposed root or even dust.
How to stumble the spirits of rain?
The condensation and evaporation of words?
Water, it doesn't land as a foot does. And
one foot cannot substitute the other.
Let the thunder clouds strike where they may
but I need to say, this, maybe all this,
is neither here nor there. That sharp crease
of cement. That zigzag. That I need to say
there is a cup of water there. At the edge
where it never lands, I mean
it's flooding the lips. The offering of it.

I know these highways of the Western United States
by muscular instinct, and grabbing a handful of flowers
my veins flex on the fistback
showing flesh's soft mortar and pestle
palmcrushing
the Narcissus Windflowers. Knuckle stretched skin
sprawls purple veins, roads blackening lines
across the map, whose page crumples
around a ball
of petals, uprooted stems protruding
their ends from my knuckle cracks.
My tanned fist is a ball of brown paper, package
wrap squeezing its gift, as the plant-matter
liquifies into a dye
inside
which squeezes its whimper out
surrounding my fist in a glove of purple green,
as a single drop of its ink
drips
from my wrist, and falls
towards the dirt,
and folding me into blossoming.

NEEDING THE GREYHOUND STATION

WENYU ZHANG

The woman in the sweats with the Prada bag
dangling from her pocket tucked wrist like a golden medallion
on the grey backdrop of her hips, she's fabulous.
I'd call her my oblivious duende doll, except I'd feel too conquest-
ing
about it all. So I'll just walk up escalators,
outpacing the metal current under my feet.
An old man in a tweed suit is shouting
at the Big Buck Hunter arcade game and a child is
wildly swerving the plastic Sega steering wheel.
Star wars X-fighter laser sounds abound phew
phew. I'd like to pretend it's a call and response
but I don't go to church and am still brooding
over my lost love I texted an essay last night.
That was before I woke up at five with nothing but a sore
that doesn't ache, and solitude the size of a quarter-filled cafeteria,
but that's nothing because look at the man in the scarf
huddled over his Ipad and the Vietnamese couple
who own the under-priced we-serve-everything Teriyaki place
and these tables that are both dusty and sticky, my no idea how,
and all the arrivals and departures.

Inspired by “Audubon Ballroom” by Lupe Fiasco

I sat there in the Audubon Ballroom, shocked.
Wondering as wood splinters and blood floated in the air
if I could’ve dove in front of those bullets.
Or at least screamed, yelled, or something,
anything to maybe save you. But I didn’t.
Instead I’m rushing your bleeding body
through Harlem streets screaming,
“Move! Don’t go brother. We need you brother.”

I ask what I could’ve done differently but
sometimes you have to lose before you gain.
Which is why that day in Memphis a few
years later I stood outside the Lorraine Motel,
eyes glued to the balcony, wanting to scream,
“Move! Don’t go brother. We need you brother.”
But I can’t. The levee of my eyes broke and balled
fist shook as a single shot shattered silence.
“I’m sorry” I whisper, knowing I could have
dove in front of bullets this time. But knowing
I can’t.
For this had to happen.

STRAITJACKETS

REGINALD LIGGINS

Mine itches, would you mind scratching for me?
If my hands were free I'd do it gladly.
Unfortunately I've been diagnosed with seeing ghost
and only this snug jacket to hold me close.
But where is the line drawn? Such a fickle,
Dancing between the mad and genius mind.
Beethoven's Ninth certainly compares well
with the maddening howling in my neighbor's cell.
We're all mad you see. Sanity is the ideal
but insanity is the real that we feel
and I appeal you to sense others without sight.
And loosen your jacket for it's tied too tight.
It's too late for me, the illness of being sick,
bound over the fire of the devil's rotisserie stick.
You may view me as cursed and yourself as blessed,
until you realize your jacket is like mine made of flesh.
But believe what you want and declare yourself sane,
while I keep rocking back in the padded walls of my brain.

Can you Slam between the confines of blue lines?
Will my rhymes still shine as I tattoo my mind
that cerebral ink being stroked onto this page,
Does it belong solely to the ear? Or also the gaze?
Why does my Slam never seem to be wanted here?
will you still hear how my meter makes your mind steer?
can you read the percussion of my voice or sway
to the shape of my words in this vernacular ballet?
and who's to say my pen belongs on a dim lit stage
when my words are capable of breaking this blue cage.
My Slam is worthy to share space up on your throne,
so can you please finally call my Slam a poem.

CAN SLAM BE DONE ON PAPER?
REGINALD LIGGINS

STREET PACE, A SONNET TO THE STREETS

HANNAH COOPER

Engine revving signals it's time to go
begin the game, the blue blood war of bones
shadow targets whisper and taunt, get low
a part of backseat leather, I am unknown.

Driving by the dull of day, we wait,
for thens and whos and yours to run the night
to cross the lines we've drilled without a gate—
iron borders unseen in LA light.

Sirens whip the wheels, a dose of speed—
we breathe in blurs of time, past memories
Fifteen years old (I rode for past and creed
to hunt the board, stone gray, my only me)

A look aside, I catch my carved out face,
a hard-earned look, a portrait of street fate.

Tweet tweet brief little bird, the egg comes first.
Emerge with witty hashtag. Go. Converse.

Trend-Setter revels as her numbers rise
up. Higher they fly, faster. Fleeting cries
to find those who will follow, this modern
age Prophet speaks in parables that earn
no glance, faces, or speech embracing past
a cursory “haha!” that can’t outlast
the feed that eats her thoughts. Recount the day
one-forty max, disjointed word array.

Such brevity breeds scant quips of curdling
milk, bald professors go profess ailing
texts, awkward walks slide through the grip of their
frail handlers. Reverent bowed head, eyes stare
down to her tiny golden idol screen,
Return to nest, so service can convene.

BULL FIGHTER

MOLLY KEARNS

She steps out of the shower
And
Fwips her towel out across the room.
The matador's flag
Beckoning.

The Washington rain outside the window is easy to ignore
As she sweats under the Spanish sun flickering.
The bathroom fan bellows and steams,
But she cannot hear it over the wild cries of Madrid

The fogged up mirror clears
As she stares
Face to face
With the bull
Ready to charge
Magnificent.

she was the type of girl
who could drown in her pea soup at dinner,
and not have anyone notice
until the bill needed to be paid.

THE IMPRESSION THAT I GOT
MOLLY KEARNS

O sweet London Morning Robin,
Your round marble eyes inquisitively hold my reflection.
Timid bravery, modest salutation.
Irresolute imposition.
Orange-throated, orange-breasted.
Grasping my breakfast plate with delicate thread-toes,
Nibbling at my toast.
Loneliness momentarily dissipates and I sit in comfortable
company.
No one likes to eat alone.

Your head cocks, releasing thread-toes.
Wings beat in a low hum like the fridge.
Landing then softly on a high branch and bursting into song.
12 notes; sharp and sweet.
Then away you flit,
Stomach full of bugs & strawberry jam.

NAPOLEON AT SAINT HELENA

JAKE SHEETS

A few crates on top of a stone outlook. Nearby is a beach of wild grass and sand.

Night. The spring of 1819.

A sentry stands, on duty, looking out across the ocean. After a moment, Napoleon enters and tries to quietly sneak by without alerting the sentry. The sentry notices the man sneaking by.

Sentry: Oi! You there! What do you think you're doing?

Napoleon: [*Stops dead in his tracks.*] Me?

Sentry: Oh! It's you, Napoleon. What brings you out at this hour?

Napoleon: Um-uh?

Sentry: Are you escaping?

Napoleon: Me? No! I'm-uh-I'm just on a little walk-about. Couldn't sleep.

Sentry: A bit restless, eh?

Napoleon: Yes. Well, I must be going.

Sentry: No, no. Come over here.

Napoleon: No, really, I should be on my way ---Just getting some fresh air.

Sentry: What, you got plans? Meeting someone, are you? Planning to escape?

Napoleon: I am not! Just getting some fresh air. You know— [*Takes a deep whiff of the air.*] —taking in that old ocean breeze.

Sentry: Then why are you in such a hurry? Here, come on over. I've got a game we can play — Might help pass the time.

Napoleon: No, really. That's nice of you to suggest. But I've, uh — I've to go check my garden. Think I may have under-watered.

Sentry: Nonsense. One game and then I'll leave you be.

Napoleon: [Begins to walk away.] Sorry!

Sentry: Oh come on. What, are you short on time?

Napoleon: [Stops in his tracks.] Fine! One game. [Hurriedly walks toward the sentry.]

Sentry: [Arranging some crates for the both of them to sit on.] Great! What'll it be?

Napoleon: [Sits on a crate.] I don't know. It was your idea.

Sentry: [Sits on a crate.] Alright, alright. Just thought I'd be polite, that's all. Ever play twenty-one questions?

Napoleon: Sure.

Sentry: Well have you?

Napoleon: I have!

Sentry: Alright, alright. I'll ask the questions, first.

Napoleon: I'm ready.

Sentry: Well that was rather swift. Ok, first question. Is it a person?

Napoleon: Yes.

Sentry: Is the person dead?

Napoleon: Yes.

Sentry: Is it Julius Caesar?

Napoleon: Yes! Very good. Now if you'll excuse me. [Checks his pocket watch and stands up to leave.]

Sentry: Oi, wait a minute. That's only half the game. Now it's your turn to ask the questions.

Napoleon: Agh! [Sits down on a crate.] Ready?

Napoleon: Is it a person?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Is it Alexander the Great?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Is this person dead?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Is it King George the Third?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Is the person a man?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Is he on the island?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Has he ever been to the island?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: [*Getting antsy; checks his pocket watch.*] Is he French?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: [*Starts rocking back and forth.*] Is he British?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Is he a general?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Is he an admiral?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: [*Stands up and starts pacing.*] Absurd! How can you expect me to know British personas as well as you?

Sentry: You mean to tell me you have no understanding of British personas?

Napoleon: Only of my militaristic foes. And even for that I have a special committee to inform me.

Sentry: And you don't have a special committee to inform you of other

Napoleon: [*Stops pacing.*] No. What am I? A British-studies student? I am a conquerer!

Sentry: Alright, alright. Just thought I'd ask. Next question.

Napoleon: [*Checks his pocket watch and sits down on a crate.*] Is this man known for his art?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Is he known for his writing?

Sentry: No. What other special committees do you have?

Napoleon: What is this, an interview? Can we get back to the game?

Sentry: Just curious, that's all. I'm just as exiled as you are.

Napoleon: [*Stands up and starts pacing.*] I have special committees for matters in propaganda, wardrobe, art, and food. Have I ever met this man?

Sentry: No. What's the special committee on food for?

Napoleon: They are in charge of catering events and providing me with buttery sauces, rich soufflé, and croissant.

Sentry: Well now that takes the biscuit!

Napoleon: Pardon?

Sentry: I mean that special committee beats out the rest of the lot.

Napoleon: Yes. It was always one of my favorite. Now, would I recognize this man's image if he came to the island?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Is this man rather large?

Sentry: Um— Well, I don't know.

Napoleon: Well, then how can you say I'd recognize his image if you can't even confirm what his image is?

Sentry: It's his size I can't confirm.

Napoleon: If you, to an English man, don't know his size, then how can you possibly expect me, a French man, to know his image?

Sentry: Because this man is well-known.

Napoleon: Yes, I'm sure he is to English man, being an English man himself. But I'm no English man and so how can you expect me to recognize his image if he came to this island?

Sentry: Because he is well-known.

Napoleon: Well-known to an English man. But see here I'm a French man and your country's familiarity with this man is completely relative.

Sentry: Who's to say it's relative?

Napoleon: I am.

Sentry: But that itself is relative, is it not?

Napoleon: No, it isn't. It is an objective statement in defense of relativism.

Sentry: But relativism is subjective, and subjectivity implies that there is no objectivity.

Napoleon: Subjectivity implying that there is no objectivity then implies that there is a universal rule about subjectivity.

Sentry: So then where does this leave us?

Napoleon: I want my last two questions back.

Sentry: Can't do. Question seventeen.

Napoleon: Agh, what's the use? Forget it. Question seventeen, you said?
[Checks his pocket watch.]

Sentry: Yes. Now it's eighteen.

Napoleon: Eighteen? What are you talking about? You can't count that last one as a question for the game.

Sentry: I know, I know. I'm only kidding. Go on. Question seventeen.

Napoleon: [Begins pacing; in deep thought.] Let me see. If the English man would recognize this man's image, then...Is he of nobility?

Sentry: No.

Napoleon: Well if he's not a military figure or someone of the arts or even someone of nobility but he'd be recognizable to the public then he must

be a member of Parliament, is he not?

Sentry: Yes. But he could have been a scientist, too, or perhaps a philosopher.

Napoleon: [*Under his breath.*] Bentham!

Sentry: Ha-ha. Yes, I suppose he would have made for a good one. But your man's on Parliament, remember that.

Napoleon: Parliament, you say. Let's see, what's that council on Parliament I always forget? Ah yes! The Privy Council. Is he a member of the Privy Council?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Then here's where we are. If this question proves positive then I believe I have you bested. Is he an Oxford man?

Sentry: Yes.

Napoleon: Then my man must surely be Lord Holland?

Sentry: [*Stands up in excitement.*] No! He is not!

Napoleon: Agh!

Sentry: Robert Jenkinson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom!

Napoleon: Jenkinson! How could you!

Sentry: I win! You lose!

Napoleon: [*Walks away by a few paces; checks his pocket watch.*] Well. I am going to go now. You have bested me. But I will return again.

Sentry: Right. Ok. Enjoy the rest of your stroll.

Napoleon: I'm just going back to bed.

Sentry: Not up for a stroll anymore? C'mon don't be a sore loser. It was a good set.

Napoleon: It's too late for a stroll. I missed my chance.

Sentry: What's that, now?

Napoleon: Nothing. Let's just say I'm no longer in the mood for a stroll.

Sentry: Ok. Oh well. 'Till tomorrow.

Napoleon: [*Storms off the stage in defeat.*]

Sentry: Little bugger. Didn't mean to disrupt his midnight stroll. [*Hums "Rule Britannia."*]

Curtain

L'ARTISTA

ALIVIA NORWOOD

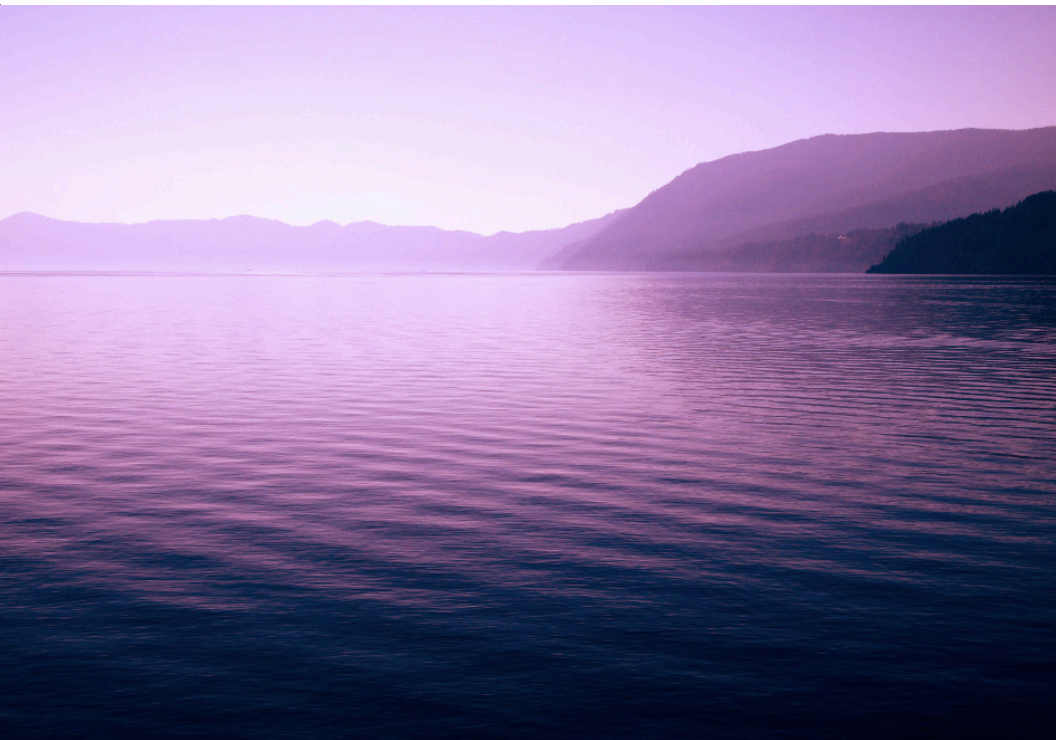
CANON XS, 50 MM



OLYMPUS EP-1

IDAHO

TIEN BUTTS



FROM THE EARTH

EMILY LUSE

CANON REBEL XT, 50 MM LENS



UNTITLED

BENJAMIN WALKER



SOLITARY SWIM

BRETT BOLLIER

NIKON D90, TAMRON 10-24MM LENS





NIKON D90, TAMRON 10-24MM LENS

BRETT BOLLIER

CASTLE STROLL

NEW MEXICO

TIEN BUTTS

OLYMPUS EP-1



SHADOWS OF GIANTS

BRETT BOLLIER

NIKON D90, TAMRON 10-24MM LENS



FORGOTTEN MEMORIES OF THE BOSTON UNDERGROUND

BRETT BOLLIER

NIKON D90, TAMRON 10-24MM LENS



STAR SWIRL

NIKON D90, TAMRON 10-24MM LENS

BRETT BOLLIER



SPOKANE BRIDGE

TIEN BUTTS

OLYMPUS EP-1



ALLEY ART

JACQUELINE MCNULTY

CELLULAR DEVICE



NATURE'S PAINTBRUSH

JACQUELINE MCNULTY

CELLULAR DEVICE





DEUS LUX MEA EST - GOD IS MY LIGHT
BLAIR KELLY

VENEZIA DAL MARE

JAKE SHEETS

OIL ON CANVAS. 12" X 24".



CINQUE TERRE

Oil ON CANVAS. 16" X 20".

JAKE SHEETS



URBAN LANDSCAPE

LINDSAY WALTNER

WOODCUT INK ON PAPER



FEEL THE FORM FRAY OR FROLIC
ACRYLIC PAINTING

CELINA OH



THE LEMON

OIL ON CANVAS

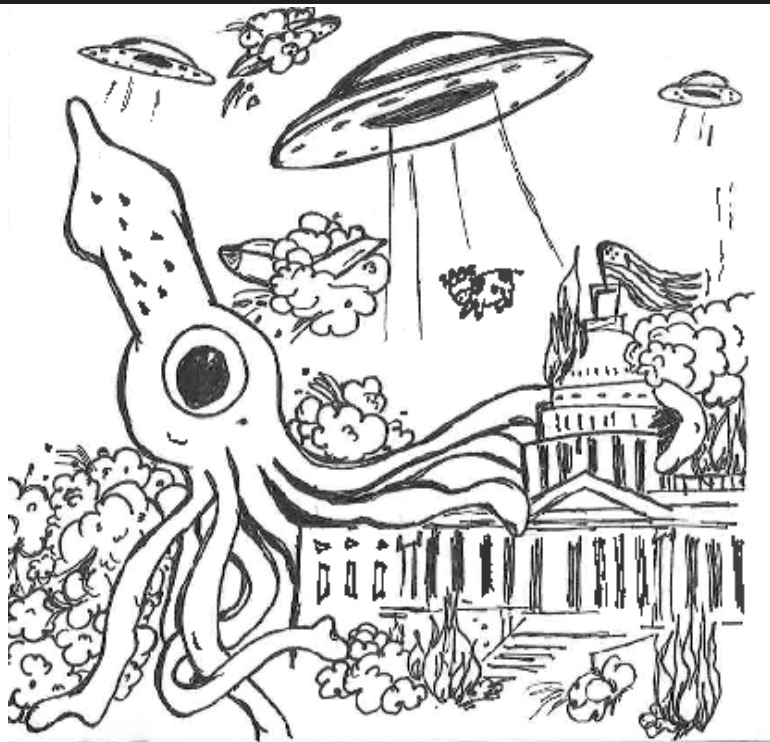
JAKE SHEETS



WHAT MY 5-YEAR-OLD NEPHEW TOLD ME TO DRAW

MADISON BUSH

PERMANENT MARKER



MICHAEL & GAIL GURIAN WRITING AWARDS

Poetry

1st place winner
Honorable Mention
Honorable Mention

Julie Garbuz
Jacey Fink
Jonna Mary Yost

•••

Fiction

1st place winner
Honorable Mention

Ian Houts
Jonna Mary Yost

•••

Non-Fiction

1st place winner
Honorable Mention
Honorable Mention
Honorable Mention

Emmanuel Bobby Weke
Haley Swanson
Ian Houts
Julie Garbuz

BECAUSE IT'S A WESTERN NOVEL, EVERY- ONE KNOWS GUS WILL DIE IN THE END

JULIE GARBUZ

I dreamed of you again last night: you rasped
into your ventilator I reached out
and you vanished. The next time I saw you
I crawled under your starched blankets
to bind you to your wasted ribs.

How will I tourniquet my mind from losing you to lines
recited from your favorite parts of *Lonesome Dove*?

I wake up cold, pressed into phantom side rails
and you didn't leave a note.

I'm sorry for not answering your question:

I wanted you more than you wanted my reply.

Let me try now: When I see a red truck
pull up beside me, its pulse cuts my throat.

When I strike your box of letters to burn out the past,
your left-handed scrawl smokes from my skin.

Let me try harder: Sometimes when I dream you
I replace her, lying on my back beside you in the bed
of your pickup. I trace your nose, your jaw,
your neck's unflinching trust. In that crisp impossible wild
we build a fire, a feast, and when the embers die
suspending judgment, we fit into each other
under the glitter of old wishes pasted to an unremembering sky.

HERE AND AFTER

IAN HOUTS

She's fingering the produce and I can't remember the last time I ate a vegetable. Days like these are mine alone. The town stews choked in a swelter and Lengel keeps the front door propped with a milk crate to allow an imaginary breeze to flush out how stale we are. People move slower in heat, their brains all marinating, and there is a buzz in the air like faint television static. Flies love me.

She is strutting the aisles in the back of the store like a highborn picking slaves, her handmaidens in tow. She touches everything, grazes and caresses with long slender fingers, bonewidth fingers that glide. They run the lines of cans of beans and trace Hostess cartoon characters, thumb cardboard corners and crinkling plastics. Nothing holds her interest long. The other two are in awe of her; one fat girl in a two-piece green swimsuit stumbles more than walks, so eager to keep up; the other, taller and dark, looks down her pointed nose in embarrassed condescension. They are all in bathing suits and their skins exposed. Sunburned and pale, polemic antipodes, patches here and there but so much flesh it all evens out. A law of averages. The Miss is wearing a taupe suit peeled down off her shoulders and she looks at any moment to step out of it altogether. The straps hang down like suspenders after work. Folks in this town are scandalized by less, and as she brushes the top of her chest with those pianist fingertips, the other patrons take notice—the old women bemoaning the loss of their own beauty and the old men like me feeling happy dirty inside, each disguising it with scorn.

I chop down and blood spurts bright across my gut. It spatters the starched white apron like my blood in the snow and I quarter the meat and wash it all and stick a hog head up on the counter as a mascot. The snout is agape and the bloated tongue lolls from sharp broken teeth. Bristled hair grisly with dried blood clumps together with a wilderness. I feel barbarous and vindicated. There have been orders all morning and I've been busy. I wrap the meat and blood and legs and breasts of the whole pantheon of animals up in paper and twine it for Mrs. Houlihan, Mrs. Mitchell, Mrs. Dwyer. Lengel, who has been reaming a couple boyos in the delivery dock for a wilted cabbage, who believes breaking a line of sight makes one soundproof, assumes a face of composure and reenters the store. He makes a lap to check and restore order, then retreats to his office marked **MANAGER**.

Less than half a minute later the door opens again and Lengel comes storming out, face barely contained. He rages to the meat section, flips the swing top counter and moves oppressively close to me. His mouth and eyes are twitching. He grabs my elbow and tries to rough me toward the meat locker but he is a small man and I just follow him.

"You get that goddamn thing off the counter," Lengel growls through his teeth. Lengel is short and good looking and I am tall and ugly. I look down at him with a mixture of sympathy and amusement; I haven't spoken since the war so he thinks I'm a half-wit. "I told you not to bring things from home. This is not your personal slaughterhouse. You understand me? These folks go through enough looking at you."

It's hot and the flies love me. They tick about my face and hands, indiscriminate of meat. Lengel hates them and flails his hands wildly in yet

another battle in his protracted war against the insects. Adhesive paper accordions down in strips from the ceiling and serve as mass graves for victims of the genocide. Lengel hates coming behind the counter, into hostile territory, and for that I love the flies. Enemy of mine enemy.

I smile at the man and nod. He looks sick and I remember not to smile. He watches anyway as I lift the carcass off the countertop and satisfied, he returns to the loading dock, but not before replacing the scowl with a pleasant expression. The charlatan Catholic, the consummate family man salesman. Lengel was good at his job. He was so good, in fact, that he believed that's what he was.

I put my hog away in a cooler and bring out the anemic pigs they get from the A&P distribution center in Jersey. I don't like the pigs and I don't know where they come from, but it's my job to make them look tasty. This is where my philosophy butts with Lengel's. Wild things taste better. A boar speared with ruder tools has something better in its blood. The cleaver comes down. All this red on me is water.

“Scuse me where's the herrings?”

She has a throaty, erotic voice not at all clever. It's the Miss flanked by the fat girl and the tall girl, each with a delicate hand on the waist of its swimsuit. Bare knees are bent outward and all of them are staring at me. I have eyes only for the Miss. Everywhere she is sensual—the curvature of the hip and her foot bones and bare toes curling, a mouth like a fig and eyes like almonds. Everywhere she is budding and yes from her chest, but beyond that she is absolutely blooming, emerging imago from beneath the loosed confines of the straps.

I must have looked something awful because they are cringing a little at me. After wiping a slither of drool I point toward aisle eight.
“Eight?” the Miss asks.

I nod and pat my mouth dry. They leave quickly, their bare feet slapping the porcelain arrhythmically until they disappear behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches.

I feel their shame with the glee lecherous old men create. We are profane alchemists, transducing our hate into anodyne lewdness. Days like these are mine alone. Old men do better in heat like this because it levels things. Everyone and everything is buzzing and wavering and I lose my disadvantages. There’s uniform isolation on days like these. Then Sammy and I make eye contact.

The kid Sammy and I share an aisle and we try not to look at each other most days. I know he’s looking sometimes and he knows I do too, and we both know what we look at when young ladies come in the store. He’s a pimple-faced kid moon-eyed and scrawny and too tall for his trousers, but he’s got a good youthfulness and a good family and a healthy fear of the Soviet Union. I have my acne scars and a pucker in my cheek where a Mauser fired through my open mouth. We both look at the Miss hungry.

She touches everything without moving it, she touches things without ever being there, but so lasciviously there can be no doubt what she’s done. The way she holds the herring snacks is so mundane, so quotidian that I can’t believe it’s giving me a hard on. It’s the way she holds it with only two fingers, maybe, with the rest dangling off and flaring out. She is making a beeline for Sammy’s till and I can see the kid’s shaking with her

cleavage and I think he's just going to melt. I find myself silently rooting for the kid not to shit in his pants, even though I don't particularly like him—I want him to ask for her number and wait up in the night for the courage to call and ask her out and go cruising down the boulevard late through washes of neon or to the beach where they can swim and smoke some dope and fool around.

Lengel crashes in and tells the girls something I can't hear. His face is the stone carving of an austere angel. The fat one blooms red through her pale skin. Lengel points to the Miss' straps hanging limp around her ribs and then to the door and the girls halfheartedly protest but Lengel is a man who believes in laws and words and points more forcefully. I catch the word "indecent". The Miss and her barefoot beauties hurry out of the store. Watching them go is an illness, and I wonder why the manager is trying so hard to kill everything I love.

The kid Sammy takes off his apron and folds it and hands it to Lengel. I quit floats tinny down our aisle. The real Lengel flashes across Lengel's face for a moment and then he closes his eyes and nods toward the door. Sammy rushes outside after the girls but I think he might be too late for his gesture to be appreciated.

The flat white glare of the day swallows the youth.

I wait until my erection fades and I come around the meat counter and walk up to the front. I walk up to the register where Lengel has filled in for Sammy and I set my bloodstained apron on the counter.

McMahon?

I look in his greasy eyes.

The world's going crazy, he says.

I been around longer than you my eyes say. The world has always been crazy.

This is what my eyes say and he knows it:

The natural way of things is chaos. Order is an invention, and man and everything manmade got a limit. People move in cycles. They build and they destroy, and I been around long enough to see the baseline of things. What's natural is at the bottom, what we build from. Time and again we have to go back to our root, listen to the base. People born in the building are going to lament the collapse, and those of the fall tend to suspect structure.

I forget when I was born. I've been dead and awake so many times I hardly know up from down. I'm a salaried man in a supermarket and I'm a boy with a jaw blown off in the snow.

Lengel tells me to get back to the butcher knife and I tell him where he can put that knife.

LESSON LEARNED

EMMANUEL BOBBY WEKE

Dear America,

Do you remember December of 2008? Sad December?

Bad December of 2008.

It was a crazy year. Death comes in threes and this was the first. I traveled to Nigeria with my dad so we could bury his brother and somehow I came back an African and a better black man. On that dingy plastic white chair, I sat. Thinking it would snap in half, under my weight, I sat. Watching my aunt hand wash and dry my clothes on the line, I sat. Eze ran up to me and caused the goats to stampede. Fearful of peril, and becoming dinner for the evening, they scurried off, leaving us alone. We sat, and he asked me random questions about America. Of the many, my favorite was, "Bob, what does Fuck mean?" Do you remember? Of course you do. I was there, but you were clung to my skin like Vaseline in the wintertime – thick, but needed during times of change and irritation. Remember how quickly I whipped my neck around? Wide-eyed and expecting the beating of my cousin's life, I looked at my aunt as she continued with my laundry. I told him he couldn't say that. "What about Nigga?" I laughed at his pronunciation of every syllable. His thick accent blended primal village tongue with the faint tone of British colonial twang, still residing from imperial times. I'd never heard it sound so foreign before. I told him that Fuck was a bad word and Nigga was a word some black people say to each other. I compared it to a colloquial native word I had heard them use around the village. I knew better than to leave it at that, so I went into the history of the n-word and told him to quit barraging me with F-bombs. "Where did

you get these words from?" I asked. He had gotten it from you, America. "Your people say it on TV all the time. Black people are funny." He left me with that and ran up to his mother and older sister. "Mama...Fuck you." – He would surely get it this time. She turned and let out a hearty laugh. His sister joined in, and before I knew it, we were all in tears of hilarity.

That was the day, maybe one of the saddest. The day of realization. "Black people are so disorganized. We can never get our stuff together." I thought this was the code of the urban community. I thought this gospel was solely preached to Black D.C. and Maryland (Calverton, New Carrollton, and Hyattsville). I was wrong. So naïve. But my dear America, I learned. On the day of realization I learned. America, you planted these images all over the world. Even in Nigeria, we, the black community, were the "funny" people. You exploited us and made us the butt of every joke. Lesson Learned.

Sistahs:

Elementary, middle, and high school education gave me street smarts: The pretty girls were the light-skinned ones with the long flowing hair like Pocahontas and the ugly girls were the overweight, dark-skinned girls that "couldn't grow hair to save their lives". You never gave us a middle ground. Where was the in-between? Aunt Jemima or Jezebel. Tyra Banks or Precious.

Winter of 2010. Bitter winter.

I held my stomach from the aches and pressure of my unceasing laughter. She gave me a stern look, and I realized she was jokingly serious.

"Bob, I've gotten a lot lighter," my sister said.

"Girl, you're dark," I said. "Get over it."

"Mom, tell Bob I'm getting lighter!"

My mom turned around at the use of the L word and placed a look of sheer confusion upon her face. I glanced from my mom back to my sister's hopeful expression of eager and long waited approval. Uncontrollable laughter crashed through my jaw and spilled from my mouth. I was back on the floor.

I laughed then, but I can't now. You told her she wasn't good enough. Something was wrong. Wrong with her. Wrong with us all. You held a cracked mirror to her face and told her to find the white. Whites of the eyes and teeth weren't good enough, I guess.

Poker face she stood, wanting and wishing to be accepted. You reeled her in with the guile of gambling and told her she wasn't enough. She held out losing hands in a losing game and stilled played, unaware. We (black men) thought we wanted to run our fingers through their hair without having to worry about it getting caught. We wanted them to have the body of Beyoncé and her hair too. So they resorted to the long flowing assurance of fake hair and extension pieces. They traded in natural curls, loops, and braids for the hair that looked like willow branches billowing in the wind. They wanted hair that would reach far past their backs, flipping and tossing behind any indication of ancestry. And you stroked their ego. You patted hair that wasn't theirs. You combed through and brushed out truths so they could forget. Truths – that they were much more than black Barbie dolls with big lips, breasts, and butts.

But they forgot.

How could they be comfortable in their own skin? Everything about them was ugly, evil, and flawed, you said. Loud. Ghetto. Angry. Sex Toys. This was all they could live up to. You showed them this. Sitcoms and parodies mocked our culture and exposed generalities. Like black face. 1848 had never felt so close.

1848.

When white men covered with color, painted pastels of black animals. Black face and red lips. The modern day Cirque Du Soleil. Come watch the beasts roar and dance on stage! Happy Sambo, Quimbo, Coon, and Mammee!

Melanin.

That's what took away power and placed us in this situation. Melanin. Who would think that a single cell would be the determining factor? Single cells of color. Melanin: dark brown or black in color, is produced by special cells called melanocytes which are located under our outer layer of skin. Black cells hidden under skin. We are kin, Melanin and I. Black like me. Dark like me. We can't help but be what we were designed to be.

And as a black boy, I saw no worth to black girls other than what their black curls and black curves could offer. I saw no depth, because to plunge into the depths of another is to go deep down and discover their darkness. You scared me. Afraid and ignorant of myself and my own unknown. My own blackness. I dared not discover another's. So instead of exploring, you critiqued and convicted them. You nailed wooden boards to their exterior and covered them in caution tape. Condemned. They were useless, wastes of space. Beware, you bellowed. Watch out, you warned.

But there was nothing to fear, except you.

Mamas and Brothas:

It's like we are pinned against each other. We wrestle and fight amongst ourselves. And it's ridiculous, but we've all become accustomed to it. It's the truth in why we, say, "You can't have too many black people in one place without something going wrong". To despise the congregation of one's own kind, textbook Jim-Crow. Just like how you passed that law in December. Cold December.

Old December of 1833.

The Act stated that “no person of color, whether free or slave, shall be allowed to preach to, exhort or join in any religious exercise, with any persons of color, either free or slave.” We were taught we should not worship God together, either free or slave. So it’s not surprising that even with choice, we choose to be put back in those same times and despise our own kind, either free or slave. And now I’m left to worry that in being pinned, we are stuck without knowing what we are...either free or slave.

But are we pinned, nonetheless, because the pinnacle of our existence was always to survive? In the fields and in the home we labored to survive. We lived and fought to live because our lives were in the hands of a white man. When he opened his white hands and took out his white wallet, he didn’t pull out green dollar bills. No. He fumbled over black faces. He pulled out Mammee and Coon when he wanted tickets to the theatre. He traded Buck and Wench when he no longer needed them, and fancied the idea of Sam Smith and Emily Walker on auction.

Conniving commoditizers. The only value placed on us was that of monetary gain. We were property, branded and tagged liked cattle. We fell into your trap and laid dormant in your conditioning. We fought for titles as the best slave and the sellout slave, not noticing that they were all the same. Slave. A slave is a slave. But we didn’t see that then. We fought for the house and dreaded the field.

From dawn till dusk, the sun tongue-kissed their skin and left them black from tilling fields and toiling with all other works. Field slaves. Stacked in shacks of substances similar to the tin of shanti towns in Africa. Stacked shacks that stood scooted off kilter from Master’s home. Master’s home. That’s where they hid. Those house slaves never came out to the sunlight. They were the cooks you stole from our kitchens. They turned pork intestines into delicacies. But you took them from us. You

no longer ragged down. It was white smiles she doted upon with bleached hankies. You separated us. You told us there was a difference. You put value on one and called the other a barbarian worthy of nothing, but ownership.

And now you pin us again. Brothers against brothers, you prize his being because his complexion says his parents made love to the stars and mine screams of raped shadows.

You spoke and I listened. I listened and I learned. I learned to hear the whispers that traveled through the air dancing against the metaphysical lake's refraction of an ominously dominant moon. I listened to the ripples as they waved upon my shores as showers of mist graced my face. I heard you say the definition of a man was to never cry. And I felt you also say the definition of a black man was to never cry while being black. You never said this? You don't remember? Well let me remind you:

First week. Hot August of 2011.

The sticky hum of heat and humidity lingered all around me. It stole all substance from the air and replaced it with moisture. I walked through the entrance and placed the transparent bag, carrying today's lesson plan, on the conveyor belt metal detector. I traversed tall metal doors, like skyscrapers, and waited to be patted down. I outstretched my hands ready for crucifixion. Once searched, I entered my classroom and waited for boisterously rebellious black faces. Placing their binders on their desk as they came in,

"Take a seat.", I said.

"No.", they said.

Of course.

But they knew me, and I knew them. Eventually they sat and I stood. Ready to teach. I taught that one lesson. Remember? Man-hood. I scribbled script on the white-washed board in blue marker. "What does it

mean to be a man?" I asked them. "What do you think?" They asked back. I shot back my own answers and they soon joined in.

You taught them well – too well. Those quizzical looks of confusion, told me they didn't agree. They regurgitated your bile: You gotta have money. And you gotta have a main bitch and a side bitch, and put both of 'em in they place. You gotta make sure nobody can mess wit you or step to you. You gotta be able to do whatever you need to provide. Having heard enough, I intervened. "Who taught you this?" I said. "TV and the old heads from the hood", they said. I blame the old heads, not that TV isn't also to blame, like village elders they were supposed to train up the new generation, but like abused victims they were merely mimicking the conditional rules and laws that their conditions conditioned them to. They taught them, what you taught them. And the cycle continues.

And I tried. I tried to reverse the tide that centuries of brainwashing had produced. Eroded ego and black pride. Sadly, I don't know whether my 60 minutes of education can reverse your 100 years of degradation.

Tell me. Tell me that you didn't teach them. Did you never read, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise?" You continue to pin. Pinning my brothers against proper education. Pinning them against me, as if I am the enemy. Pinning.

Tell me. What hope do we have, if you continue to incorrectly educate the future of the black man?

Fathers:

As a male, you made it hard. As a black male, you made it even harder. You prescribed who I should be. I believed you, believing that the only people who could be anything they wanted to be was them white folks on TV. I was given no ultimatums. Given no choice. No choice to the directions: Swear profusely. Smile seldom. Be the brute. Indulge in anger in-

nate. Victor of sexual virility and drug lord husband to my welfare queen, I was told this was my fate. The fates had deemed it true. Snipped a thread they had already sheared.

In my neighborhoods of urban DC and Maryland, we had a lot of males, but true men were hard to come by. Biological fathers were scarce and so we settled for single mothers and step dads. Step dads that only wanted to fuck, eat good food, and sit on our couches kicking up their feet until Ma came home with this week's check.

I thought my family was the exception. My dad wasn't the best. He wasn't always there physically or emotionally, but I thought he was the exception. He stopped being the exception when mom told me he gave her a STD. He stopped when mom showed me the bruises on her back. And I was finally forced to realize.

With hard hands, shaky voices, and tears, my little siblings woke my older brother and I. We rushed to her room. The door was locked. She wanted to keep him from leaving. She was waiting for the police. But the blue and red lights were late to splatter our windows and walls. We unlocked the door and shoved our way through. He tried to push her down. And when he did, we leapt over the bed with all speed and strength our mom used to push us through the womb. We pushed him back and wrestled him down until the police came. I looked in his eyes. He was no exception. He was no man.

I wrote him off. Where could I turn to feel the strong and masculine glare from a proud father? I had no one. I had no image, no mirror to show me what to sculpt myself into. I looked around and saw no one. No one but the thugs, hustlers, fornicators, bums, and friends were left to me.

So in my younger years I underwent the transformation, and my friends did too. We left our belts at home and let our pants sink low,

just as low as our hopes of real men. We traded our grammar and clean tongues that mom had spent years building up, for the filth of the streets. We reveled in slang. We tossed aside our clean tongues like unused condoms. It was taboo, but it felt better. We were the up and coming generation of males in our neighborhood.

There were a lot of us: Keith, Gian, Davan, Jovan, Allan, and Wayne. We looked up to the generation ahead of us. We talked about how Corey slept with Sophia in the park. Both their parents kicked them out and now she was giving him head on the slide. We talked about Michael. He whipped his dick out on the afterschool bus and told this girl to suck him off. And she did. Right in front of us. These were our men, the ones we celebrated back then. We lifted them above our heads and carried their names through the town.

When we got to high school, I saw other men. Different types of black men. Our teachers and coaches, they were kind. But we were suspicious. They patted us on the back, they dapped us up, and some even hugged us. I didn't tell anyone, but you fooled me. I longed for them so I thought I was gay or something. Here I was, all along without these men and all of a sudden you teased me. I wanted to be them. I wanted them. I wanted Mr. Henry to pick me up over his shoulders, pat me on my head and say those three letter words I had heard in movies. I wanted Mr. Lewis to take me from my home and teach me how to play the piano. I wanted Mr. Daniels and Mr. Oceans to see me as their little brother, cousin, or something. You showed me the images of strong jawed, muscular, and responsible onyx gods.

I wanted to be close to them, until you came around and whispered in my ear. On the six o'clock news, you said teachers were being arrested for molesting little boys. I convinced myself. That was it. That's who they were. Wolves in sheep's clothing. They fooled me. You fooled me.

A little bit of me died that day. You were my Brutus and you took no caution as to which way you shoved silver through spine. Surprisingly. I made it out ok. No thanks to you. I fought to get here and I prayed. I wish I could say I prayed everyday but still blinded by your lies and stuck in mourning I wasn't that dedicated. America, for what its worth, you did this to me. And I sit back and watch as you continue to confuse and contaminate the young minds of our bright black future. You held cracked mirrors to my sisters, you pinned brothers, abused mothers and eradicated every idea of a father.
America.

Me:

I am black and I'm aware. So beware. I've plunged into my darkness and have found the treasures that lay dormant in the recesses of my mind, body, soul, skin, eyes, lips, and hair. I am black. You are black, and we can be amazing, if you let us.

Sincerely,

A black man and future black father

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To be considered for publication in our Fall 2014 edition, please submit poetry, prose (3,500 words or less), and visual arts such as etching, woodcut or screen prints, drawings, photographs, collages, and ceramics by emailing them to reflection@gonzaga.edu. Please contact Reflection if you are concerned about submitting your visual artwork. We will provide a representative to photograph your work upon request.



Reflection looks forward to hearing from all Gonzaga University community members, including undergraduate students, alumni, graduate students, and staff from all areas of the university.



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