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“The Cabin Into Time” appeared previously in issue 12 of *Kill Author*. All other stories and poems appear here for the first time.

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*noah*

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# blond(e)

amelia blevins

The bass from a passing car pulled Jake along the crumbling sidewalk like a lifeline attached to his own heartbeat. Wind ruffled his hair and he liked to think he could smell the bracing salty water of the harbor carried inland. Tonight was his chance to see her again. The Girl: The One. Word on Facebook was that she'd popped back up in Baltimore again after touring with Darkness Sustained on their west coast tour. And this time, her friends said, she was staying for good.

No sooner had Jake stepped off the lightrail than the smell of wet garbage and choking exhaust bombarded him, alien scents that told him he was far from the suburban utopia of Gallinsbury. His sister Charlotte had always been the one who planned on making it big in the city, but here he was, the first one to get there. It's not like it was far to go. Baltimore really was only a hop, skip, and a jump (through one too many cornfields) away from Gallinsbury, but to Jake it felt like another world. For once he wasn't just a visitor; now he was one of their own. Charlotte would tell him he was being melodramatic, that simply changing location wouldn't make him a member of some secret club. She didn't understand though. She'd remained home, face down on their mother's sofa, telling the world she was depressed.

Jake wasn't depressed; in fact, he was so far from depressed that he couldn't really understand the concept. He hated sleeping almost as much as he hated things that made him cry, so it was really a lose-lose situation. Charlotte would tell him he was being emotionally ignorant, but that wasn't true. Jake knew all about peoples' feelings. He was a songwriter for Christ's sake. That was the whole point of his existence. He'd come to the city for music. One hundred percent music, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. He'd been crashing on a friend's couch in Charles Village for a few days and was still waiting to hear from another about a place in Hampden that he could afford. These guys were the academic sort, studying bioengineering and economics at Johns Hopkins because their parents told them to, but secretly playing in garage bands when they needed a break. After a semester at community college, Jake had decided he didn't need it. He'd come to the city because it looked like a place he could call home. And once he'd heard that The Girl would be there too, nothing could stop him.

Tonight's destination was up ahead, a party in a rowhouse on Guilford Avenue (not unlike his current landing pad) where the speakers were so loud



they made his teeth rattle in his mouth like spare change. This was The Girl's place. She was friends with one of Jake's ex-girlfriends who had sent out messages to everyone she knew and all the bands she followed, telling them to hit her up when they decided to make it big. She was everyone's inspiration. Long blonde hair she ironed flat every afternoon when she woke up with smudged kohl raccoon eyes... Fragile bird-boned wrists that she covered in too many jangling bracelets and rubber bands. Jake couldn't remember her name and he wasn't sure if she was Kaley's friend or Monica's, but it hardly mattered because just the fact that she was there had to mean something.

He would find her inside and she would recognize him—he'd stick out of the crowd because she'd remember him from that one show he'd played at the 8x10 where he'd totally killed that last breakdown in the encore. He remembered her standing in front, pressed against the stage. Her doe eyes were wide and she screamed incoherently. When he walked in the front door, a wave of sweaty hands engulfed him. A current of constantly cycling bodies pushed him further and further inside, where a makeshift bar was set up — a couple coffee tables stacked on top of each other and hidden beneath a piss-colored sheet that had seen one too many spilled beers. Jake took a plastic cup from the kid tending bar.

He said, "Thanks, dude," and downed half the contents in the space of a few seconds. Then he was off to find the source of the music. It thumped with a heady beat and, as if coming from on high, shook every piece of furniture, every scantily-clad body, and every forgotten drink, equally.

Perhaps it came from an integrated sound system with speakers set all throughout the house. That was Jake's dream—to infuse his entire house with whatever he was listening to, until it was positively dripping, oozing, sweating the sound. Across the room a commotion rose above the music and Jake turned to see a blond head whipping above the rest of the crowd. His first thought was that it was The Girl, but if she'd cut her hair off that short, then he'd eat his sneakers. It turned out the hair belonged to a gangly guy kneeling on the coffee table banging his head in time to the beat. As Jake moved forward and the crowd parted around him, he found himself standing directly in front of the blond, whose hair was dripping sweat onto the grimy tabletop as he played erratic air guitar.

Jake couldn't help but grin—this was what he was looking for. The guy's eyes were shut tight and whatever music was emanating from his fingers could only be heard in his head because the sound system was emitting heart-stopping dubstep with no trace of guitar to be heard. Jake backed away to avoid being hit, or possibly even kicked, by the man's flying limbs and re-entered the throng of bodies.

He moved out of the living room, down a hallway and into another room, this one dark and cramped. A light flickered in the corner, illuminating a pair

of heads bent close over a glass pipe, one a sallow-faced, owlish boy and the other a redheaded girl with pale eyes. There wasn't a blonde strand in sight and Jake was tempted to ask them if they knew where the host was—hell, if they even knew her name. But the window was open and one of them said something directed toward Jake—probably “Close the door, man.” It was lost on a burst of cool air that ruffled their hair and wafted the smoke in a lazy circle. He couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he closed the door and stood leaning up against the wall – the image was such a familiar one. Just replace the back room of a Baltimore rowhouse with a Gallinsbury barn, and the party was almost identical. Was there really just this universal social code that didn't change from place to place? Had his parents done the same thing thirty years ago? It made him want to go back in, light up, and see what was going down.

But he couldn't shake his need to find her—that blonde mystery girl who he was sure he'd recognize if he could just catch a glimpse. So he meandered back down the narrow hallway. The music had changed to a lo-fi song, mellow and lovely, but with a bass current running beneath it so richly electric Jake could feel it racing up his legs and wrapping around his ribs. A high giggle echoed down the hall, disturbing the woolly beat that stuck in his ears. It was accompanied by a thin girl with a banner of blonde hair, ironed flat judging from the burnt smell that clung to her entire body. Jake froze and watched her run down the hall and out into a brightly lit room that turned out to be the kitchen. And suddenly it was so obvious that he would find her there, that she would be right at the heart of things, right where the DJ would set up shop, in the center of the building, where everyone seemed to move in perfect harmony around an axis of turntables. Jake almost expected them to back up and stutter when the DJ scratched a record. But they didn't.

He wound his way through more bodies, letting each movement carry him forward, toward The Girl. Just when he could reach out a hand to touch her on the shoulder, the crowd surged in the opposite direction and pulled him back. He fought through, elbows connecting with faces and ribs, but he didn't care. He leapt forward and practically collided with her. His hand wrapped around a bony shoulder and he turned her toward him.

The joy he felt at finally having found her was replaced with a dull thump in his chest—it may have been the bass from the speaker set up right behind him, but it felt less familiar, something that his brain registered as disappointment. Because this girl, whose pale bare skin rested beneath his hand, wasn't her. The face was all wrong—nose too round, eyes not nearly the bright shade of blue he remembered them being, and surely no one's hair actually looked singed when they straightened it, right?

She smiled at him, eyes slightly unfocused in the dim light. “Hey, I recognize you,” she said, peering at him closely. Jake recoiled. The voice was all

wrong too, like a poorly dubbed movie.

“No, no, I don’t think so.” He stumbled back, but couldn’t get far due to a wall of bodies that surrounded the kitchen table. The high pitched tap of ping pong balls didn’t jive with the bass.

“I totally do, though,” the girl insisted. “You’re from Gallinsbury, right?”

Jake shook his head and wasn’t sure why he lied, but it felt like the right thing to do. “Nah, I’ve lived here all my life. You must be thinking of someone else,” he said, and he thought that maybe he could grow to believe it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake saw another flurry of blonde hair and he dove forward without another glance at the strange imposter still staring at him beseechingly. He tried to run toward the screen door rattling on its hinges but got tripped up on a mess of scattered plastic cups. There were just too many people in such a small space and all of them looked so alien.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he snatched it up, eager for contact.

It was a text from Charlotte: *You left your movies here. Did you plan on coming back for them?*

The image of her face-down on the sofa rose to the front of his mind again. If she could see him she’d be looking at him with narrow eyes, disappointment radiating from the way she dipped her eyebrows together and pursed her lips like she was about to blow a bubble. The one time he got her to come to a party, she’d trailed after him, narrow shoulders hunched, hands in pockets like a lost, angry mutt. He’d stopped inviting her after that; it bummed him out too much to see her like that. Now it seemed like she might actually miss him; she never texted him out of boredom.

He made his way to the ratty screen door and stepped out onto the porch. It sagged beneath his feet from one too many years’ worth of water damage. Though it was far from urgent, he tapped out a response to Charlotte. *I’ll get em eventually. Watch whichever u want b4 then.* Before he could stop himself, he added: *at my first party in the city. you’d probably b8 it.* As the message was whisked away through the ether, Jake thought it probably hadn’t been the best idea; if she’d had any interest in talking to him before, she probably wouldn’t now. But if it made her angry, if it woke her up out of the Prozacked stupor she’d fallen into, then maybe he could consider it a success.

When Jake looked up, he realized that at the other end of the porch was the blond head he’d seen bobbing through the crowd. It belonged to the head-banging dude from earlier, no longer playing air guitar but talking on his cell phone.

“You’re not hearing me, Jules,” he said, running a shaky hand through his sweaty hair, making it stand out like a scarecrow’s. Even his rumpled clothes and grimy fingernails looked like they belonged in a desolate field rather than a packed party. “I don’t need it—the meds are what’s making me crazy!” He shut his mouth with an audible snap (or maybe Jake’s mind simply supplied

it) and frowned hard out into the night. Whatever he heard on the other end had the man whispering heatedly, “She gave *me* the prescription because they’re for *me*.”

It had begun to rain while they were inside and a foggy mist hung over the yard, if you could even call it that; a patch of scrubby grass that hadn’t been mown all summer was accompanied by a few errant pots holding nothing but dirt. The streetlights sent the light into fractured swaths and the damp streets panted with condensation.

Jake’s phone buzzed, a frantic little jingle that made the blonde boy glance up, startled. The new text message read: *congratulations on stating the obvious. enjoy yourself; don’t get into too many brawls*. Charlotte was the only person Jake knew who used a damned semicolon in a text message. Hell, he hardly spoke correct English in his, let alone used punctuation. He couldn’t tell if she was drugged. It was times like these that she was either one-hundred-percent, stone-cold sober, or thoroughly trashed on meds. He wondered if they made her feel better about anything, or if she preferred not to be on them. And which was actually helping her? He sighed and glanced down the porch to see the blond boy still on the phone. He was hunched over with his arms crossed, looking like he didn’t like what he was hearing. Jake almost wanted to know what he was hearing, wanted to know if he could help, anything to distract him from thinking about his sister. He’d left Gallinsbury so he wouldn’t have to think about home, so that he could start a new life, whatever that meant.

He leaned against the porch railing and idly bit his lip, wishing he had a cigarette and wondering if he should reply to Charlotte—but no response was forthcoming. Suddenly, a cigarette blocked the view of his phone. For a second, Jake thought he’d voiced his desire for a light out loud. The boy had crossed the porch and now stood leaning against the banister grinning at him with his phone cradled against his shoulder and lighter held close to the cigarette dangling from his own lips. The quirk of his eyebrows said, *Want one?* Jake took it and nodded thanks.

“Christ, how can you tell I’m smoking? You sound like my fucking father,” he muttered into the phone while he lit Jake’s cigarette. “You wonder why? Because you put me on edge, is why. Jesus.” The boy rolled his eyes and covered the bottom half of the phone with his fingers. “Sorry, he can go on like this for hours if I set him off.”

Jake simply chuckled quietly in understanding. His mouth fell a bit, though, when he realized that Charlotte used to do that, too. If she were sober she’d be railing him, telling him to stop smoking so much pot and get a real job. Stop being such a damned idealist, she’d sneer. And then she’d go back to being miss perfect, straight-A, Dean’s List prom queen. Why the fuck was she so depressed, anyway? He blinked and shook his head.

“So you live here?” Jake asked the guy; he’d slumped against the banister

with his eyes closed, only moving to take a deep drag from his cigarette every now and then.

“Nah, down by the harbor—Light Street—with this one,” he said, opening his eyes and pointing a finger at his phone. “He teaches at Hopkins, but refuses to move anywhere north of Mount Vernon. God knows why.”

Jake didn’t know where Mount Vernon was and suddenly he hoped Charlotte wouldn’t text him back; he probably couldn’t even tell her where he was right now. Uptown, downtown, east, west, it didn’t matter. It was new and exciting and most importantly, *not* Gallinsbury. All that not knowing would probably freak Charlotte out. If she were here, she’d drag him out into the asphalt and search out street signs, all while looking up directories on her phone. Right now, Jake couldn’t even say whose house he was at or if he’d actually been invited at all, come to think of it. Even with the strange image of The Other Girl lingering in the back of his mind, Jake didn’t let anything bother him just now. Standing here next to this guy, this not-so-strange stranger, he felt like maybe that was all there was to it: just a bunch of people running into each other, sometimes seeing them and hearing them, other times not so lucky.

Jake pulled out his phone one more time, sending Charlotte: *bold down the fort while I’m gone; don’t do anything I wouldn’t do*. He sent it, feeling satisfied at his own use of the semicolon. Across the porch, the other boy was back to pacing. He swung the phone in a wide arc, as if he were about to pitch it to a batter. Then he changed his mind and let it land with a dull thwack against his cheek.

“You realize I smoked a whole cig while you just had to say that, right?” He mocked the man on the other end of the line and threw a glance toward Jake that was meant to show camaraderie, but really Jake thought he just looked hurt and more than a little tired. “You know what? I’m leaving now—I’ll be home in a half hour, so you’d better...Yes, I will...I love— ... *fine*, yes, alright. Bye.” He mashed a key and shoved the phone into the pocket of his hoodie.

“Whatever you do in this town, don’t ever take a Lit course at JHU with Jules Whit,” the boy said to Jake. “He’ll make your life miserable, in class and out of it.” He shuffled his feet against the warped wood floor and swayed a bit, as if gearing himself up for danger.

Jake watched him take the steps down onto the concrete sidewalk and start to walk away. Then he stopped and spun on his heel to look at Jake. His eyes shone in the misty lamplight, a bright cerulean that looked photo-shopped onto his face. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead wiped his hand across his face and gave a tiny salute in farewell. Jake held the cigarette between two fingers and lifted his own hand in a wave. “See you ‘round,” he said.

For some reason, that made the boy smile, a radiant innocence that startled Jake. It seemed to take his mind off everything else he'd been thinking of—all that talk of medication and school. Jake would have loved to see Charlotte smile like that just now. Then the boy turned back around and walked away down the empty street, whistling a song that had played earlier in the night. The sound echoed off the dark buildings and Jake thought he looked like the only other man left alive on earth.

The unforgiving hardwood floor beneath his cheek felt as painful as Jake might have imagined it would after sleeping on it for eight hours. But it couldn't have been that long. He cracked his eyes open and peeled his face away from the floor with most of his day-old stubble intact.

The room was deserted and trashed, the debris of last night's party strewn across the furniture, spilled on tables and overturned chairs. Jake cast his mind back to see what he could remember. He hadn't actually drunk that much, but his memories of the night were blurred and hazy. When he sat up the world didn't spin; the only thing that hurt was his face. He rubbed thoughtfully at the bruise on his cheekbone. All that came to mind was blonde hair.

He stood carefully and tiptoed across the floor, dodging puddles of stale beer and questionable sticky smears. The place really seemed empty; his footsteps echoed loudly off the bare walls.

That was when he heard a sound. Like tissue paper in a gift bag, a soft snuffling was coming from the room at the end of the hall. The door was cracked and watery sunlight edged out onto the hardwood. When he pushed the door open, Jake couldn't have said what he expected to find. Perhaps a sleeping rhinoceros with a head cold. Or an alien with a mild Earth allergy. He shouldn't have been surprised by the straggly brunette sitting at the end of the bed, snorting a line of coke off a flimsy plastic table that wobbled under the weight of her elbows.

She looked up at Jake, eyes unfocused but somehow still piercing.

"Yeah?" she asked.

Jake said the first thing that came to his mind.

"Have you seen—" He was about to ask her if she'd seen The Girl: The One. Perhaps she was tucked snugly between the pile of tousled comforters on the bed. Or maybe she was under it.

"You're looking for \_\_\_\_\_, right?" Her lips moved to form The Girl's name, but Jake only heard The One playing like a chant in his ears, a bass drum thudding behind his sternum. "Yeah, she's at work."

"Oh, right." He couldn't remember where she worked or if he had ever really known. His first thought was a record store – the kind where regulars show up at their usual time and ritualistically flip through the stacks in search

for new stock. She'd stand behind the counter, looking bored, but really she'd be entranced by whatever record was playing. "Where...?"

"Fed Hill – that crummy old bookstore that won't give it up." Oh, right. A bookshop. That would have been Jake's second guess, or maybe third. The girl gave him a look that was meant to be shared. One of those, 'you know the one' looks that neighbors and roommates and fellow-residents of the same city could give each other for a moment of fleeting solidarity. Unfortunately the only bookstore in Baltimore Jake knew was the huge Barnes & Noble on the water that for some reason resided in an old electric plant.

After a blink of her eyes, she dropped the look and reached for a napkin on the bedside table. She pulled a thick black sharpie from the pocket of her jeans and scribbled something down. She then stood up to hand him the paper but promptly landed on her face in the center of the comforter nest. A throaty chuckle rose from its depths and she flopped over onto her back, revealing a bright purple crystal bellybutton ring that peaked out beneath her tank top.

"Here," she said, holding up the napkin again. "Take the circulator. It's fastest."

Jake couldn't say what the circulator was, but he thanked her and bade a hasty retreat.

Outside it was muggy and wet. It had just rained and wasn't done yet, simply taking a break. Steam rose off the pavement and Jake felt the sudden urge to run his fingers through his hair, anything to keep it from sticking to his scalp. Around him the world was slowly waking up to a groggy Sunday morning. Few people made eye contact as they passed and Jake felt like the only kid on stage who hadn't memorized his lines. The air of mystery had vanished with the night, and in its place everything felt dirty and overused. Not predictable, because Jake didn't know the first thing about living in a city, but uninspired.

He pulled out his phone. A quick google search would get him where he needed to go. Or maybe he should just call her. Hell, he should have thought of that in the first place. But when he thumbed through his contacts, The Girl's name was nowhere to be found. His inbox was full of texts from his sister from the night before. She'd continued texting him long after he'd stopped replying. Things like *The docs upped my dosage. Haven't told anyone bc theyll probly think I'll kill myself lol.* Then much later, after she'd taken the time to weigh his silence, *sriry that wasn't funny. Things are better I think. For now.* And then one last text early in the morning, after she'd slept and woke to the regret of saying anything at all, *too much of a fucking coward to do it anyway.*

It was too late for him to send anything back; everything he thought



of sat gritty on his tongue. Charlotte wasn't the type to want to off herself, Jake had always known that. Not because she was cowardly though. She was stubborn. She was tenacious, really. A pain in his ass when they were in high school – with her honor roll shtick tracking her straight to the top, she was bound to become some fancy corporate something or other. But that just wasn't Jake's thing. There had never been answers that he knew for sure, no grades that could tempt him to study something he had no interest in. She'd always tried to pull Jake into her track, pleading with him to just try harder, to study with her, to talk to his teachers, but he'd been stubborn right back, too, and had eventually fought her simply out of spite.

But as he wandered down the street, taking in the dog walkers and skateboarders, Jake knew that something had changed for Charlotte. He'd been too busy avoiding her academic propaganda to realize that she'd stopped preaching at him a long time ago. No more attempts to teach him to find symbolism in Victorian novels, juxtapose protagonists, or whatever the hell she'd done in all her Lit classes.

The thought of lit classes sent a ripple through Jake's memory of the night before, but he couldn't put his finger on it. *Don't ever take a Lit class at JHU*, someone had told him. Why would anyone tell him that? Maybe that was Charlotte again, back on her soapbox. But wouldn't she want him to take classes? Maybe not anymore.

Jake felt a growing warmth against his back and turned around to see the sun peeking through the clouds above the blocks of tall office buildings. He had no idea where he was anymore; he'd walked beyond any streets with names he recognized. At the end of the block sat a graffitied bus stop with a map on the side of it. It was hard to imagine that his little farm town was less than thirty miles from here. He felt like he'd fallen down a coal mine into a world he thought he'd love, into a world that he'd thought all his favorite songs were about.

He sat down and looked hopelessly at the map. His hand itched to take out his phone, but he couldn't think who to call or what to say. This must be what Charlotte meant when she said she felt lost all the time.

A bright purple bus crawled up to the curb. With its large side mirrors sticking out it resembled a large boxy caterpillar on wheels. Plastered across its side in bold letters were the words *Charm City Circulator*. Jake stood up quickly, anxious and relieved to have found what he'd been looking for. He stepped across the crumbling sidewalk and waited for the doors to open. When they did he was met with the back of a blond head and shoulder that crashed into him, almost knocking him to the ground. But before he could land, a hand wrapped around his arm and pulled him up, bringing him nose to nose with a vaguely familiar face. It wasn't her, not *The Girl*; no, it was the boy from the night before, the one who Jake now remembered smoking



and talking anxiously on his phone, his voice agitated and bruised from the other side of the conversation. He'd smiled at Jake once, but it didn't reach his eyes; hell, it barely reached his mouth. It was more like the thought of a smile. And then right as he'd left he'd grinned so widely Jake thought his face would break in half and burst into cheery white flames.

Now, he wasn't smiling. He looked almost horrified at having knocked Jake over and apologized profusely as his thin fingers brushed at Jake's shoulders, swatting away imaginary dust and grit.

"Take it easy, man, it's okay," Jake said, pulling his feet more steadily beneath him and stepping away.

The horrified look melted off the man's face and suddenly his eyes lit up just as they had the night before. "Oh hey. 'See you round' was right, I guess." He laughed and peered at Jake closely, as if cataloguing the differences he could see from the night before.

"Yeah, I guess so," Jake returned, feeling suddenly awkward and unsure of what to say. "Um, you know how this thing works?" He gestured at the bus which was slowly filling with young mothers and their toddlers and old ladies doing their grocery shopping.

He stared at the Circulator and then back at Jake. "The bus? I'd say gasoline, but it could be some sort of hybrid. Not quite sure..." He looked around them and up into the sky.

"No, sorry," Jake mumbled. "I just meant do you know the routes. I need to get to this bookshop in Federal Hill. There's this—"

"Ah, fuck the bus. You don't need to waste your money. I'm only taking it because *someone* threw my bike off the stoop just as the goddamned garbage man was coming by. Completely mangled it, poor thing. Such a bastard..." He looked about ready to go on a long tirade, opening his mouth and sucking in a hard breath. Then he just let it out, deflating his chest and closing his eyes.

"Ah, well I don't have a bike, actually," Jake muttered, stepping toward the bus, which was ready to leave if the irritated driver was anything to go by.

"It's just this way," the boy said, pointing a wayward finger in the opposite direction. "You don't need to take the bus. C'mon, I'll show you."

With that he turned on his heel and walked in the opposite direction, not turning back to see if Jake was following; Jake could do nothing but chase after him.

"People just drive around this city and never really get to know it. The only way you can know something is to experience it and that's not gonna happen at 40 miles per hour. You gotta walk it or bike it if you want to live it." He talked with his hands as they walked, gesturing at passing cars, at gulls gathering beneath park benches.

"It's not what I was expecting," Jake said before he could think about it

and keep his mouth shut.

“I’m Kieran,” said the boy, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk and holding out his hand. “Now did you expect that?”

“Um.”

“Well if you didn’t expect it you’re at least not too surprised by it, right?”

“Sure.”

“That’s your problem. You met me before you knew anything about me so you can take what I throw at you. You’d only ever heard things about the city, seen it from afar, but never met it in its element. She’ll throw you a curve ball if you’re not looking too closely. Might just knock you on your ass.”

“She?”

“Yeah, her. That one,” Kieran said, and nodded his head over Jakes shoulder.

Jake spun around, and there sitting on a stoop outside a broken down shop called The Bookery sat The Girl: The One, tossing a softball up and down pensively before writing on it with a magic marker. He had forgotten she played softball, but he could see now that the muscles in her arms were toned and strong. She blew on the ink to let it dry and held the ball up to the sun, where the black words caught the sun. It was too far away for Jake to tell what they said.

Her eyes moved past the ball and met his, and he still couldn’t tell what color they were.

“It’s a damn shame,” Kieran said, and Jake turned away from the Girl. “Some things just weren’t meant to last.”

Jake looked back to the stoop, and the girl was gone. “Wait, what?”

“They’re closing this place down. Small town shit never makes it here anymore.” Kieran looked across at the shop, its crumbling façade and dusty windows. He looked older now. Not the boy from the night before, but a man who had lived long enough to see things change. He blinked slowly for a few moments and then turned away, looking at Jake.

“So who’s this chick?”

“Oh just some girl I used to know.”

Kieran nodded but seemed to lose interest. “What’s her name?” he asked.

Jake stared across the street at the Bookery where The Girl was probably stocking shelves or reading to little children. He had finally found her, but he couldn’t say where she was for sure. The sun was shining now and the glare on the windows blinded him. What was her name, again? Jake thought. Surely he’d known it last night. But nothing came to him.

“Her name? I can’t remember.”

# the cabin into time

arthur s. halsey, jr.

We're on a train. Shirley Temple is here. Everyone is quiet. The program is to go back to 1939 to make a film called *Cosmopolitan*. Shirley Temple will be young again—she's seated here right now up near the front, in black buckle shoes, a pleated above-the-knee skirt. The others are similarly dressed and everyone is ready: we are going to go back on arrival. We will find ourselves in the old time. We will revisit our youth. The process is still new—this is just after the first test rides—so we're all completely quiet, remaining focused, hands at our sides. The train claps and rumbles through the old countryside, forcefully, as if it's burning out a trench in the land. It is very late in the night, and we've been told that by dawn the wide circuits will have finished, that all will be done.

*We remember fishing out in the woods. At the cabin. When Dad was there. The place was idyllic. There was a great silver mirror, a lake. Pines ringed the far end. The air was always so moist—and clean, as if it came out of the ground. We stayed in the cabin. Most of the long summer nights there were cool. You could hear crickets. Dad wore red flannel shirts. I was so young. Life would not end. We took pictures there.*

This is what presently happens: hours go by and I am not moving. Shadows roll high on the ceiling and walls. I just know that in time my life will begin.

In the dim fog there are pines that stand out like sentinels, that appear as the view quickly whips past, that stand frozen alone in the half-hidden dark of the land. I keep wondering when someone will talk. My mouth and the land are both dry. We are on a slight steady incline. The train keeps pushing forward. Out there on the land there's occasional rocks—I can see them—but otherwise the ground remains red-brown and dusty and barren. There are dark lonely pines, sometimes alone, sometimes in small clusters, occasionally grown heavy in green-blurring groups. We pass a small station with smeared white-tile walls, a few empty wood benches all rotted and sagging beneath the low overhang—there's no electricity, the place is abandoned, there's no one around. The train does not stop. I think it keeps moving. We are emerging now from the fog. I can feel a great pressure, a dull nudging ache, the rest of me lightweight and fluid. I'm living in hope. In just a few moments the dawn will have broken, and I will be young.

# zenith

melinda dubbs

I'm slamming the car door  
of your '65 Mustang  
spotted with rust stains,  
as we walk in the school  
parking lot at five a.m.  
We lie on the asphalt, still cool  
from the evening, though it will  
shake with mirage sometime  
this afternoon.  
We lie inside parking lines  
on the marching band field,  
our bodies laid out like dark stars,  
making tar angels.

We don't speak,  
as we watch the pink of sun  
erase black.  
I feel its heat press on my face.  
It lights the linked chain lot,  
shadows growing on our skin.  
As I turn toward you,  
hair melting into the ebony  
concrete that surrounds us,  
your small hands conduct  
a symphony,  
sheet music in your head.  
I feel us rise off this ground,  
fighting gravity,  
bodies intertwined  
like a treble clef,  
wings to the mind,  
leaving this world on a C-scale.

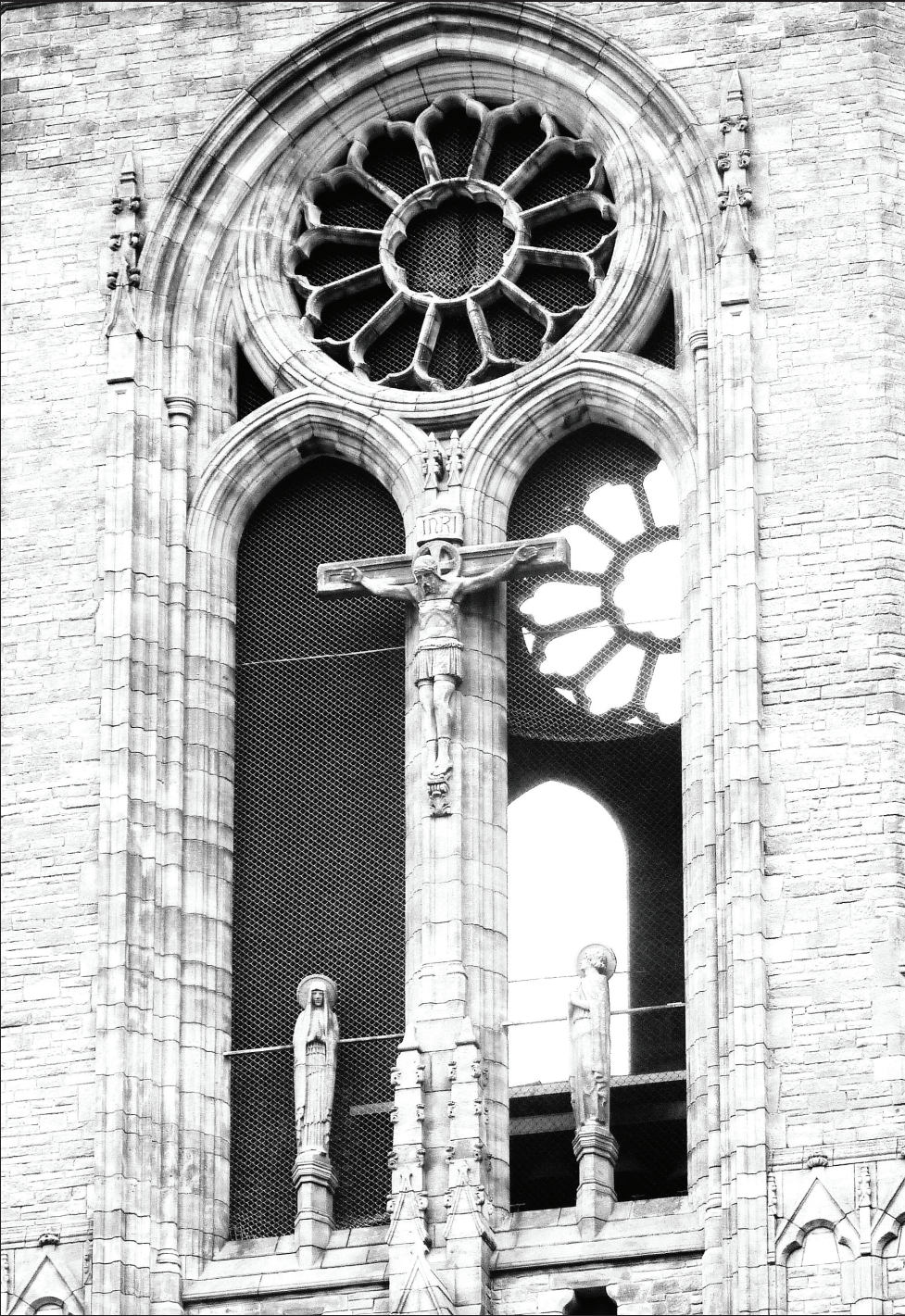
# distilled

melinda dubbs

I am driving down 37,  
windows down,  
the cool air against my face,  
trying to keep my eyes open.  
In a blink  
all I see is her shadow slip under  
my car; my tires lurch  
upward and forward.  
A human speed bump.  
I ease to a stop,  
her form encased in my rearview  
window. My breath is hot and  
sour, palms gliding over the steering wheel.  
I think I see her move,  
but it's in my head.  
She's now a permanent  
fixture on the asphalt,  
blood like glue.  
I fight with myself, street lights like God,  
but my foot hits the gas  
and then I'm in bed, naked,  
blinds and eyes shut.

I see her sometimes, in the mist  
of a glass of Everclear,  
her figure curled and sloshing  
like a fetus in a womb.  
Whenever I see her,  
I like to walk home.  
I sling myself across her roadside cross,  
white plastic with multicolored  
fabric roses, flecked with mud.  
I like to crawl into the street,  
body laid across the concrete,  
waiting for headlights to brighten  
this broken frame.





# a poetic history of glass as bottles

s l wallace

I

In the beginning, glass was made by the Gods. During high summer, drunk on the humid heat, Zeus and his brothers hurled lightening bolts down onto the earth. In the barren, sand-covered places, the white hot electricity melted the dirt into twisted shapes that hardened into place. From their mountain top, the Gods looked down to see who had cut the longest, most jagged scar into the ground. For many centuries this went on; the Sahara and Gobi were littered with grey-green glass. The easy trophies of August storms. At first, Man was afraid: were these demons turned to stone and banished from Heaven? But just as Prometheus had convinced Man of fire's virtue, the high priests of Mesopotamia taught their followers this god-made glass could be tamed. They had heard stories of sailors from the West who, lacking stones to support their cauldrons, cooked on lumps of nitrum from their cargo. Soon, the sand around their fires was running with tiny rivers of liquid glass. When the rivers cooled, the sailors realized what they had created. Word spread: Man had conquered the Heavens once more. The priests held up cuneiform tablets with the recipe for this God-stolen treasure: sand, alkali, lime, and heat. The secret was out, and the Gods cried with anger.

## II

Bottles from glass started out small and grew, and in this way, its evolution was nothing short of animal. As single celled bacteria gave rise to the giant oak, a single layer of molten glass gave rise to the indispensable bottle. Man became good at gathering all the ingredients he needed to make glass, and so the tiny perfume bottles of the Egyptian priests became ancestors of the much larger emerald green decanters of the seafaring Phoenicians. Sometime between Sumer and Babylon, Method began to replace Madness in the crafting of glassware. It was simple enough:

Cover a metal rod with packed down mud and the rags of old cloth. (This would be the core, the cold earth-and-metal shaft that would keep the center of the bottle hollow.)

Dip the core into a blistering bath of liquid glass, slowly turning the rod so all parts get a fair and even coating.

Repeat until desired thickness is achieved.

Let cool.

Pull out the metal rod, and shake the loose dirt free from the newly formed bottle.

Methodical and maybe even mundane, the repetition of dip, roll, repeat. But still swelteringly beautiful was the molten movement of glass over glass, the slow growth from one layer to three to seven, nothing into something. The first bottle makers understood this. They knew the stories, how they had stolen glass from the Heavens and how their forgery's heat held all the Gods' wrath. They remembered to pray to Nin-Agal, god of the forge and the craftsman, to keep them safe. It wasn't until much later that Man forgot.



### III

One century before Christ was born, a Syrian bottle maker discovered that his own breath, when blown through a hollow pipe, could form a solid ball of molten glass into a vessel. Mud and earth were not needed to make the bottle a bottle, and men started to feel their power. Imagine how this Syrian must have felt at his discovery. With only the air from his lungs, he could form dozens of glass bottles in any shape or size imaginable, all he had to do was breath more or less, faster or more slowly. Bulbs of color grew and stretched at his will. God had blown life into mud and made Man, now men's own breath could create a similar beauty. Of course, it wasn't the same. But for men, it is easy to forget the differences between Life and life, Beauty and beauty, Breath and breath. Soon after glass blowing had spread out of Syria, glass craftsmen started using molds to control the exact shape and dimensions of their bottles. By the time Christ was born, a single forge could make 240 glass bottles a day: bottle making now fit snugly into the strict requirements of industrialism. More than sacred perfumes and ceremonial wines could be stored in glass bottles. Olives, ink, medicines, cured meats, fermented fruits, water, milk, salted fish. Bottles became commonplace; the prayers to the craftsman god Nin-Agal ceased; instead prayers to gods of trade and fortune were heard echoing in the temples.

## IV

Science moves quickly to unravel Mystery.

When forged using only the sand-alkali-lime Trinity, glass is a lush green-blue when cooled. But even those early craftsmen, who became so skilled at manipulating glass' shape, sought to manipulate its color as well.

Blue was no longer sky, sea, bird, but cobalt.

Green was no longer grass, leaf, beetle, but iron.

Yellow was no longer amber, lemon, bee, but selenium.

Red was no longer tulip, berry, fox, but gold oxide.

The color was even stripped from glass bottles altogether: the right amount of manganese oxide does the trick. But leave these colorless bottles in the open air, and the sunbeams will stain them amethyst. Leave them naked and exposed long enough, they will bruise purple-black. Nature is not so easily defeated.

## V

For a millennium, the glass bottle changed little. They were cheap and easy: qualities which, for the industrial man, are paramount. Bottle making expanded with the Roman Empire, and crossed the Atlantic with the English colonists at Jamestown. Glass bottles were the first advertisers, the billboards of our forefathers:

*HOSTETTER'S CELEBRATED STOMACH BITTERS. One wine-glassful taken three times a day before meals, will be a swift and certain cure...a powerful recuperant...an agreeable and wholesome stimulant.*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, towns were born around glass bottle factories all over the Western Frontier, in the name of Industry and Manifest Destiny. But, as all things born to this world, these bottle-towns eventually returned to dust. Ghost and tumbleweed and red clay dust towns. (Many years later, rich tourists from the coasts flock to these dead places for pleasure. They find broken bits of whiskey bottles, the brittle bones of Progress. The ones who know where to look will find whole bottles of blue and brown and green. These hold the ghosts of their makers, but the tourists just smile at their find.) In 1903, a fully automatic machine capable of producing one million glass bottles a week was patented, and the already frayed and thinning chord tying men to the crafting of glass bottles was finally cut.

## VI

These are Modern Times: wake up and smell the coffee.

Excess is Success.

God is dead, or God is Industry. Take your pick.

We have washed ourselves of the dirt, the sweat.

Liberation is the white collar, buttoned to the top button, holding our heads in place.

Looking straight on always, to the future, to progress, to more, to modernity.

## VII

Industry, Man's own creation, made Man obsolete. The man who once pushed air from his lungs into a bauble of colored glass to make a bottle has been replaced by a series of fully automatic machines. One needs only to push the big green button and a thousand translucent clones will come out the other end. No fire, no grease, no sweat, no dirt, no prayer, no life. And yet, men, who so easily forget, seem still to have a small piece of the memory left. The light is not all dimmed behind their eyes. Men may have left the birthing of glass bottles to machines, but at their death, men are present. Bottles at the end of their lives are thrown into mass graves, separated by color. Segregation is easier, cleaner, some still think. The empty green corpses, piled high on top of each other, make people nervous, so they created a way to bring the bottles back to life. In colored coded, white hot baths, the bottles are melted back down into a liquid, and poured into new molds for their reincarnation. One 12 ounce beer bottle, melted down, will produce another 12 ounce beer bottle: the ultimate conservationist. This rebirth, though without the sacred incense and proper prayers, is holy. Somewhere in the twisting labyrinth of our minds, we remember how it was the Gods who first made glass, and how the earth bore the scars of their power, and later the scars of our own callousness. To give a glass bottle many lives is to leave one less scar in the earth. To heal our earth, to relinquish our God-stolen command, to loosen our grip, if only just a little.

# quarter century turn

mx golebiowski

“Beautiful,” you thought,  
 how the sun had risen behind me  
 and my back, arching, became lit  
 by holy hues of red, orange, and yellow,  
 the outline of my face illuminated,  
 as though I was your one and only savior,  
 eyes closed, smiling wide,  
 rocking back and forth upon you,  
 you within me,  
 in the name of you,  
 myself, and the open field that had chosen us,  
 our very own garden of Eden.

This is where  
 your hands took vacation  
 from writing equations,  
 mind paused from your intense study,  
 to settle on the indentations of my waist.  
 Your eyes attempt to focus  
 but relinquish to a satisfying blur.  
 My own hands release  
 from their usual manic grasp  
 on my throat,  
 to a soft stability on your chest,  
 rising up with anticipation,  
 and back down with absolution.

“This must be Glory,”  
 I thought,  
 how perspiration was swept away and skin cooled  
 by the drizzle of a morning sun shower.  
 Glory can only be found by those who have been searching,  
 a quarter century,  
 until they realize they never knew what they were seeking,  
 give up on childhood longings,  
 and turn their backs  
 only then will Glory warm with her presence.

A swig of sangria and a kiss melt away  
whatever traces of armor we were wearing,  
soaking through the towel beneath us,  
nourishing the grass below,  
until our insecurities reach the hell neither of us believe in.

The blades sing as we take turns  
being massaged by the ground,  
though the night begins to fall asleep.  
We finish, sit naked, insist on being free  
until the flashing lights of America—  
red, white, and blue—  
come to pour out our sangria  
and tell us to get lost,  
when we already thought we had.

She's made of eggshell –  
a rare find, buried in sand  
three miles from the nearest station

[gas, train – you choose]

Her lips are bleached white  
by the iniquitous sun  
that reigns over the skies with a lazy whip

[it beats the earth]

Her lashes are stuccoed  
onto her lid, blue  
from being dipped into ink

[there is no water here]

Her irises are yolks  
that have hardened in the heat;  
cracks are showing at the edges

[she has no tears]

I put her in a bag of cotton wool  
and tie it up, to take her home.



# yoga in mysore

kate r. canter

I've been in India for over a week now, specifically Mysore, Karnataka, in the south. India in the fall is hot by American Midwest standards, except in the early mornings when I walk to my daily Yoga lesson. 5:30 am is the latest I can manage to rise. With Yoga at 6, it takes ten minutes to get up the big hill separating the classrooms from the dorms (without running), ten minutes to get ready, with time to look for lost items or shower, if necessary, and 10 crucial minutes to lie in bed and think about how I don't want to go to Yoga. I do though. Every weekday morning at 6 am.

Our Yogi Guru is Ramesh Kumar, though his students simply call him Yogi-ji. Yogi-ji is a short man with a small belly. His salt and pepper hair is cropped short around his dark, leathery face which always seems serene. Yogi-ji did not introduce himself on the first day of class; I only learned his name after the first week of classes when he handed out a packet of illustrated Yoga poses. He starts class the same way every morning: sitting down on his mat, legs crossed and intoning with us.

“Ooooooommmmmmm.”

Intoning is the only word I can think of when Yogi-ji begins the class. He's singing but he's not, and our lackluster imitation pales in comparison. Beyond “Om,” “Namaste” and “Yogi Na,” we are unsure of exactly what he's saying so at times our voices fade into confusion after a particularly long mantra. Yogi-ji remains unfazed. He's intoning: the sound comes deep within his throat, long and steady. The rest of us, ten middle class American college kids, follow along as best we can, with our eyes closed and hands resting on our knees. Eventually, we bring our hands together and stand in the Namaskara pose.

Yogi-ji uses the Sanskrit names for the poses. I enjoy learning the real words, as I always felt silly in previous classes when told to go to “downward facing dog” (Bhujangasana) or “tree” (Vrikshasana) or “mountain” (Tadasana) pose. When Bhujangasana is referred to as “Snake Pose,” I feel like a little kid referring to the toilet as a potty. But since we don't know all the words in Sanskrit, after a few moments of blank stares when we're told to take the Dvipada position, Yogi-ji sighs and murmurs “plank posture.”

Yoga is hard. Much harder than I expected it to be, possibly because the only experience I'd had previously was a Yoga workout video cassette my Mom sometimes used, called *Yoga for Dummies*. It involved a young woman in

her early 30s, lightly tanned and blonde, wearing a black sports bra and form fitting shorts. She'd instruct viewers to breathe for 6 counts and then relax. There was no intoning, except for a brief Namaste at the very end which was clearly said, not intoned. The poses were tree, mountain, dog, and the like. Viewers were supposed to watch the video every day and practice the poses that the host described. I found it incredibly boring.

Yoga is hard. Yoga strains both my muscles and my mind, but it's rarely boring. The sessions are never quite the same, though they always begin, after the intonation, with stretching our arms and legs, including the toes. Then we stand and bend backward in Urdavasana before stretching forward to Hastapada. It'd be pointless to list all of the poses we've done by name. The class lasts about an hour as Yogi-ji wanders around the room, correcting our postures whenever necessary. I have a problem with bending my lower back in Urdavasana; you're supposed to put your waist forward which feels impossible with your shoulders back and neck curled at the same time.

My favorite pose is Utrapasana, which is raising your arms above your head with your palms closed together and bending your knees. Utrapasana is one of the few poses where one is encouraged to bend the knees. Not being my knees is about the hardest thing I have to do, other than lifting myself on my arms. During Utrapasana, Yogi-ji wanders around the classroom, talking to us.

"Sit doooowwn." He says. "Siit down. You are my guests, please, sit doowwn." As if there is a chair beneath us.

Yogi-ji is funny. We laugh through the pain. When we laugh, he tells us "control your bodi."

Control your bodi has become a repeated phrase/joke/mantra among my class. When breakfast does not sit well, control your bodi. When we're tired from class, control your bodi.

Yogi-ji has a distinct vocal pattern when talking that has lodged in my head. When someone's feet are too far apart, he says "together your feet". When my head is not high enough, it's "take back, sir, your neck." Yogi-ji calls everyone Sir.

*Together your feet.*

*Take back, sir, your neck.*

*Sit down.*

*Control your bodi.*

*Control your breek.*

*Control your mind.*

My least favorite pose changes every day. One morning, we learned Vastisana, where one arm is lifted into the air while the other is planted to hold up the torso, facing the wall. Only the feet, stacked on top of each other, and one hand touch the floor. I could not hold the pose for more than five

seconds. I nearly swore at Yogi-ji when he suggested it but the fun part about yoga is how little I can talk after doing it for a while. Breathing becomes a feat in itself.

Vasistana, Dwipada and Bhudara are the worst for breathing. I still have trouble with them. Dwipada is holding a pushup with your arms extended (I still cannot do a push up) and Bhudara is the same, only your butt is in the air with your head upside down. I don't know how westerners got "dog pose" out of that. I improve but I still break these poses more often than I can hold them; my breath grows haggard as the class wears on. Most poses are repeated three or four times per class. Once I get to the second or third round of Dwipada or Bhudara, I start to shake. A lot of us start to shake, bringing more instructions of "control your bodi" and "control your breek" until the idea seems ludicrous. I can control my bodi, my breek, or my mind. I can't do all three, not yet anyway.

At some point in every class, Yogi-ji instructs us to control our minds. I'm never certain of what that means. In the beginning, I tried to think of the cosmos, the universe and how I fit into it, but that eventually degraded into how much my shoulders hurt or how flexible the person next to me was. After a while, coherent thoughts are drained and I'm left with only the stress of the pose and my own sweat. It's difficult not to turn the class into a competition, either with myself or my classmates, or not to focus on pain or how much I can't do whatever pose I'm in. I try to avoid thoughts of pain or embarrassment. I can't ignore the pain, but I try to accept it as part of the experience. I try to focus on my breath. The hope is that stillness will replace thoughts, and I'll be able to achieve inner meditation despite my lazy American body screaming at me.

Yoga is hard. I am getting better though. After the class ends, I'm always glad I went, glad of the exhaustion in my muscles and the sweat in my hair. I am getting better. My heels almost touched the ground like they're supposed to in Bhudara, and I can touch my toes in Padahasta and Hastapada. The trick is to realize that you're bending your back, not stretching your arms. Try to touch your face to unbent knees (still hard to keep from bending) and your arms will be low enough to touch the floor.

Yoga always ends the same way. We sit down cross legged, grateful and breathing heavily, with postures improved out of habit. Yogi-ji sits in front of us, smiling.

"Okay," he says. "Today, I am finishing my class. Tomorrow, same time."

He intones again, a short farewell.

"Naaaassteee... Haarihoome."

We repeat in tired voices and Yogi-ji says "Now take Shavasana."

Shavasana, according to *Yoga For Dummies*, is the corpse pose. I find that depressing. We lie down flat against the floor and slowly close our eyes.

Yogi-ji instructs us to observe our bodies, our breath, and minds; to take stock of what we have, how we feel in our muscle, joints, bones and blood. He speaks as a disembodied voice, telling us to let go, no longer control our minds, return to regular breathing and relax our bodies. We obey him gratefully and Yogi-ji leaves us on the ground. We're meant to stay there as long as necessary. I stay until my body stops aching in a certain area, either my kidney or my shoulder. Soon enough, thoughts of breakfast at 7:30 creep into my head and I rise.

At 7:15, I'm usually back at my dorm. I shed workout clothes, check my email, dress, clean as much as necessary, and try to resist my bed's siren call. At breakfast, there's usually one person who says class was easier than before, that we'll go to bed early and be better prepared in the morning.



# portland april

mark harwood

Cobalt above the salmon  
streetlamps lingers—

flat, square  
tufts of Astroturf sprouting  
in spring mud.

A pickup parked  
so high on monster wheels  
that I could crawl beneath it,

a grown man. A boy bobs by  
quietly and reeking of ash.  
A woman, a blur,  
a sibilant noise of grocery sacks.

She a silhouette and he a silhouette,  
and the truck, and the cars under the trees,  
  
and the trees.

Turning on Columbia, I too am black,  
leaving the dark park blocks  
for the overpass ahead, and home.



# turning blue

jesse james dillon

Fields of hysteria  
 nurture the peasants not as fruit  
 but in luring eyes of the insane:  
 I follow lines of logic across the subway's third rail—  
 standing at the edge  
 of Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, I am cracked with eggs  
 and struck by a blind dance down  
 to the river.

Hands raised in prayer from nascent pews offend the pulpit,  
 selling austerity to strip fingers of their skin.  
 Footing regained,  
 the preacher trades missile hearsay for distinguished visions  
 of stock market trending  
 toward heaven—  
 the tollgate subsidized by err of conscience.

Drowned prostitute, her vaccination-caked leather bootstraps.  
 as she slips out she places a treaty on the dresser.  
 Who won the war? Who cares?  
 Even in sleep, blinking machinery disassembles hours spent  
 leaned on bars. She outsmarts herself in a translucent dream:  
 player piano shouting chord changes over timorous din--  
 slaves to the staff,  
 notes abandon rhythm for cheap harmonies  
 buried below miner's reach.

These mines steal irony like prophets of industry.  
 The Asiatics, sick, plotting a fix,  
 pawn your golden-toed boots  
 and meet the retailer underneath crumbling bridges,  
 supermarket shelves still empty of wholesale weaponry,  
 supply lines twisted into circles—  
 every man for his Other self.

# shook ones

dustin michael-edward davenport

He couldn't run any faster. He tried—he stretched, he balanced his breath and pushed his body forward, but the pain came like a wall. It felt as if he were sinking, each stride deeper into sand that rose up his legs, his waist, his chest, until the earth was a collar closing around his neck, and he lost his breath. He had to find somewhere to hide until everything was over, and in the morning to get on the bus and go to school, not saying anything, not raising his hand...

While Bailey practiced his graffiti tag in a sketchbook, and Caleb watched over his shoulder and suggested what colors to use, the two brothers, Adam and Travis, argued over who was going to sneak into their mother's room and steal her keys.

"Get off me," Travis said, his head locked under Adam's arm.

"Go grab 'em."

"You go."

Adam jabbed his thumb into Travis's spine until he yelled and twisted out. "Quiet," Adam said. "You'll wake her up."

Travis mumbled "chump" under his breath.

"What?" Adam lunged, and laughed when Travis flinched. "Go get the keys."

Travis went upstairs and was quiet about closing the door.

"I like it," Caleb said. "The red looks good with the black."

Bailey tore the page out of the sketchbook and handed it to Caleb.

"Keep this one to practice with."

"I have a hard time getting the letters right," Caleb said as he folded the paper and stuck it in his back pocket. "No one can read 'em."

"As long as *you* can decipher it," Bailey said, "then that's all that matters." Bailey capped his marker and gave it to Caleb. "This'll help you carve the lines. The edge makes it easy."

"Thanks."

"Just don't try and rush it," Bailey said. "It'll come."

Travis came back downstairs, jumping past the last few steps, and tossed Adam the keys.

"Was she awake?"

"No," Travis said. "She's out. She's not waking up."

"Let's go."

Adam put the van in neutral and guided the wheel while Bailey and Caleb pushed from the front and Travis stood in the middle of the street watching for cars.



“Go,” Travis whispered, waving them back. “No one’s coming.”

Bailey had on a white tank top, and the curve of his muscles flexed when he put his hands on the hood and pushed. Caleb, considerably smaller, his thin, undefined arms covered by a black sweatshirt, pushed as hard as he could, throwing all his weight into it, but when he slipped off for a second and saw how the van continued to roll he realized that Bailey was doing all the work. He kept pushing anyway, making the same strained sounds and sighs as Bailey, and once the van was in the middle of the road they all three ran around to the side doors and jumped in.

Adam turned around in the driver’s seat and said: “So where are we going?”

Black, oily, bowl-cut hair, black stringy mustache and goatee, empty brown-black eyes.

“Let’s just drive for a while,” Bailey said, sitting in the passenger seat

Travis leaned forward from the backseat to grab the CD case but Adam, looking away from the road, stole it from him and gave it to Bailey.

“Watch the road,” Travis said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Bailey put in Mobb Deep’s *The Infamous*. They drove, listening and talking and laughing for a long time. Travis and Caleb would occasionally look over at each other with I-can’t-believe-we’re-doing-this eyes, both of them waiting for the night to be over so the next day at school they could tell everyone about what they’d done. Caleb knew every street in the neighborhood, the short cuts through the alleys, the time it took to get from his house on the corner of Sherborn and Vance to any of his friends’ houses from south of Hobson all the way to the bridge at Drexler – he had walked the streets on a paper route (not *his* route, his friend Seth’s) and slid down every stairwell on the pegs of his bike, ridden on the school bus and in the back of his grandpa’s car—but as he looked out the window of the van at the passing streets he felt as if he had been standing behind a pillar all his life, and that now, a tourist in his own town, he had finally taken one step to the left.

“Doesn’t your girlfriend live around here?” Adam asked Caleb as they drove over the bridge into Drexler—cobblestone streets and rundown, historic houses with names like Gilford House and Patton House.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “She lives off Willis up here on the right.”

“What’s her name?”

“Robin.”

“Do you know if her cousin’s gonna be there tonight?”

“Which one?” Caleb asked. “She has like six.”

“The one with the red hair and the scar on her eye,” Adam said. “Car-men.”

She doesn’t have a scar, I don’t think.”

“Whatever,” Adam said. “Is she gonna be there?”

“Probably,” Caleb said. “She stays there all the time.”

Adam took the right onto Willis and parked on a side street. The headlights shone underneath an empty tree onto a pile of dead leaves. It looked like the leaves had fallen into a pile instead of someone having raked them that way.

“Robin’s house is the one with the big porch over there,” Caleb said, pointing to a large brick house with cellophane stretched over one of the empty windows and a row of rocking chairs set out front.

“I’ve been here before,” Travis said. “Her cousin Maxine used to live in that room with the plastic on the window.”

“*That’s* the one with the scar over her eye,” Bailey said. “I watched her kick the shit out of some girl right here in the middle of the street.”

“Maxine doesn’t live here anymore,” Caleb said. “They took her to Crossroads Corrections a couple weeks ago.”

“That’s where Nate is,” Bailey said.

“Still?”

“He’s never getting out, man,” Bailey said. “That kid is hopeless.”

“Call up Robin, Caleb,” Adam said. “See if her and her cousin’ll come out.”

“Not yet,” Bailey said, nodding with the music, the soft glow of his cigarette flashing in the dark. “Let’s drive some more. Those chicks’ll still be there.”

Bailey was the quiet captain of the group. He’d dropped out of high school to help his mother raise his younger brother and sister, taken two jobs, bagging groceries and fixing cars; during the summer he sold weed on the side. He was famous for blacking-out during fist fights, never afraid, no matter how big the other guy was, or how many people were with them, and as far as anyone knew, or wanted to know, he had never lost. His knuckles bloodied and bruised, sure, and maybe his shirt would tear, but his feet were the ones that stayed on the ground. Afterward he would reach down and, with the same hand that had just blacked the other guy’s eye, help him up if he deserved it, if it was a clean fight and the other guy hadn’t tried to swing a switchblade or get his friends to jump in, but there were only a couple people who ever talked about that.

They were driving past Glenbrook Mall on Coliseum road when Bailey, turning down the music and flicking his cigarette out the window, told Adam to pull into the parking lot. Adam pulled into a space and turned off the engine. He left the headlights on to shine across the lot, a handful of abandoned cars parked outside of an empty building that used to be a bookstore. Caleb said “Ghost Town” under his breath and unfastened his belt.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Adam asked. “This place is closed.”

“Let’s let the kids try and drive,” Bailey said. He turned around between the seats. “Have you guys ever driven before?”

Travis and Caleb looked at each other. They couldn't wait for school.

"No," Travis said, watching his brother's black eyes in the rearview mirror.

"His feet can't even reach the pedals," Adam laughed.

"Shut up," Travis said, staring down at his legs dangling off the edge of the seat.

"What?"

Adam, his black eyes hollow and narrowed, reached around the seat and swung at Travis, but Bailey caught Adam's arm before he could connect and held it back. Everything was quiet.

"What about you?" Bailey asked Caleb.

"Once, with my grandpa," Caleb said. "I almost gunned the car into the tree in our yard."

Bailey smiled and told Caleb to climb in front.

"I want out anyway," Adam said, jumping out of the van. "Just don't wreck it."

Caleb sat in the driver's seat and clipped the belt across his lap.

"You ain't gonna need that," Bailey said.

Caleb nervously laughed as he unfastened the belt.

"You have to turn the engine on first."

"Right." Caleb turned the keys and felt the engine vibrate under his feet. He put the van in gear and let it crawl forward out of the space, idling past Adam standing under one of the tall lamps that illuminated the lot.

"Open it up," Bailey said. "There isn't anyone around."

Caleb pushed his foot down too quickly and the van jumped forward and shook.

Adam stood under the lights, laughing.

"Easy, easy," Bailey said. "Don't rush it, man. You got this."

After another shaky jolt Caleb found the right pressure on the pedal and relaxed his hands on the wheel. Bailey put in *The Marshall Mathers LP*, while Caleb guided the van around the parking lot, first in concentric, self-conscious circles and then gradually enlarging the radius until Adam, the nucleus, was seen only as a silhouette. If Caleb had been comfortable enough to look in the rearview mirror, he would have seen that Travis was smiling. Travis wondered if his brother would sit in the passenger seat when it was his turn to drive. They got along fine when no one was around.

"Cut between these here," Bailey said, and pointed ahead to a slalom of evenly-spaced lights grounded in concrete columns.

"That's alright," Caleb said. "I should give Travis a turn."

"Go for it, man." Bailey demonstrated the way it was done by making a snaking motion with his hand. "It'll be easy," he said. "You got this. Travis will go after."

Caleb thought about his grandpa, back at the house. He wondered if he

left the light on in the kitchen, and if the pills were on the counter next to the lemonade. What if Grandpa woke up in the night and wondered where I was? Was the light on? Was the door locked? Caleb pressed hard on the pedal and gunned it for the first light. About five feet from the first light Bailey had to reach over and yank the wheel. Caleb recovered and took it back, maneuvering through the second and third lights at twenty miles an hour, tight curves around the concrete, until the confidence-expanded circle had been whittled away, his foot peeled off the pedal, and they were roughly back to around where they started.

“Alright, alright,” Bailey said. “That’s enough.”

Caleb guided the wheel while the van coasted to a stop next to the light where Adam was standing with one hand on his head and the other twisting at the stringy hairs on his chin.

Travis watched his brother run toward the van and open the door.

“That was nuts,” Adam said. “What were you doing?”

“Sorry about that,” Caleb took his hands off the wheel and shook his head.

“He’s alright,” Bailey said. “Get up here so Travis can go.”

“Forget that,” Adam said. “Let’s bounce back to Robin’s.”

“Come on,” Travis said. “I want to try.”

Caleb climbed into the back and let Travis take the front seat; Adam traded with Bailey; Bailey jumped in back with Caleb. Travis had to stretch his legs down for the tips of his shoes to touch the pedals, and then he wasn’t able to see over the wheel. Adam lit a cigarette and laughed.

“You’re done,” he said. “You can’t even see.”

“Let him try,” Bailey said from the back.

After a minute or two of stifling stops and starts, Travis, heckled by his brother, dejectedly parked the van under one of the bright lights and crawled in back with Caleb.

Adam took the driver’s seat, adjusted the rear-view mirror. “We done fucking around?”

“Chill out, Adam,” Bailey said, directing a neat line of smoke out the window.

Travis and Caleb had been sharing a pack of Newport Kings all during the ride – their lighter sparking flint, the flame singeing their eyelashes – and by the time they crossed the bridge to Drexler and stopped at a convenience store a block away from Robin’s house there was only one left. Caleb had smoked the majority trying to keep up with Bailey.

Adam left the van running while he and Bailey went into the store.

“My brother’s such a dick.”

“I wish Bailey was my brother,” Caleb said, feeling a little funny after he said it.

“Me too,” Travis said. “I don’t know what Adam’s problem is. He only

acts like that when Bailey's around."

"It's alright," Caleb said. "I almost crashed the van into that light."

"That was crazy," Travis laughed. "And Bailey didn't even get pissed, see? My brother would have busted my eye if I did that shit. He's such a dick."

"Man, I can't wait until school tomorrow."

"You don't have to wait until tomorrow," Travis said. "You'll see Robin tonight. She's gonna love it. Have you even felt her up yet?"

"Come on."

"You haven't, right?"

"Don't worry about it," Caleb said. "You look pale."

"Adam would love it if I puked."

"I don't feel good, either," Caleb said. "I don't know how Bailey can smoke so much and not get sick."

"Breathe through your nose," Travis said. "That helps."

Adam and Bailey ran out of the store and jumped in the van with their arms full of cigarettes and energy drinks. A young Indian clerk was chasing a few yards behind them, shouting about the cops and cursing. Adam swung the car around and raced over the bridge.

"What the hell guys!" Travis whined.

"Don't worry about it," Adam said. "People hit that place up all the time."

Bailey tossed two packs of Newports into the back seat.

Caleb watched Bailey calmly crack open his drink and light a cigarette. He picked one of the packs off the floor and knocked it against the heel of his hand. He asked Travis for a light.

"Are you serious?"

"Come on," Caleb said. "Give it up."

"You're gonna puke, man," Travis handed him the lighter. "Just don't do it on me."

With the first cool, minty drag Caleb swallowed away the nauseous lump in his throat.

Adam turned off the headlights and parked in the alley behind Robin's house. Down past the right edge of the alley was the river, separated from the alley by a ditch with six-foot-high posts sticking straight up in a bed of loose gravel. The caution tape threaded through the posts whipped in the wind. Adam leaned against the steering wheel and looked over at the house.

"Did you call her?"

"I tried," Caleb said. "Her mother hung up the phone before I could say anything."

"Go knock on the back door and tell 'em to come out here." Adam rolled down the window and, using the side mirror, twisted a few more ratty spikes into his goatee.

"I'll go with you," Bailey said. "Come on."

Halfway between the alley and the back door of the house, Bailey lunged

toward Caleb and pushed him into a pile of leaves. Caleb lay there in the leaves looking up at Bailey, the moon resting just over his shoulder, a half-smoked cigarette hanging from his tough smile. When Bailey reached down to help him up Caleb tried to pull Bailey down with him into the leaves, but one of Bailey's muscle-knotted arms was stronger than Caleb's twiggy two, and after a brief comic struggle Caleb gave up and let Bailey lift him from the leaves.

"I'll get you back," Caleb said, brushing away the crisp leaves from his black sweater.

"Just knock on the door so Adam can shut up about Carmen." Bailey put his hands in his pockets and looked back at the van. "I don't get why he's so hung up on that chick. I tried banging her last week but she was so tight I couldn't even get it in."

"Robin told me."

"You didn't say anything to Adam, did you?" Bailey wasn't concerned, just curious.

"No," Caleb said. "I wouldn't do that."

Bailey picked a stray leaf from Caleb's shoulder after Caleb had knocked on the door.

A light came on in the basement just before Robin's eyes peeked through one of the windows next to the door. Laughing, giggling, footsteps. Robin cracked open the door, just her face showing in the thin space. Caleb had never seen her without make-up, unannounced, and he liked the soft pale of her skin, the color flat from her cheeks to her chin, and how a few long curls of hair wrapped around the door and clung to her chest.

The first time they had kissed—the first time Caleb had kissed anyone—was outside of school in front of the buses. His friends watched from the behind the bus windows, jabbing the glass and making faces, and afterward his lips felt tight and powdery like they were sunburned or had been dusted with sand. She had been eating a donut and had left some of it in his mouth. He was still chewing when he walked onto the bus.

Robin stared at Bailey, smiled. Her eyes followed the threaded muscles of his shivering, goose-pimpled arms to where his hand was secured on Caleb's shoulder. She recycled the smile she had showed Bailey and offered it to Caleb. He didn't seem to mind. He liked having Bailey's hand on his shoulder, liked being a part of one of those nights he heard about at school.

"Is Carmen in there?" Bailey asked.

"Yeah, but she doesn't want to see you."

"I don't want to see her either," Bailey said. "Adam's in the car. He wants to talk to her."

"Who else is out there?"

"Just Travis?"

“How’d you guys get here?”

“We took Travis’s mom’s van,” Caleb said casually. He felt a slight grip on his shoulder.

Carmen appeared next to Robin in the narrow gap between the door and the jamb. For a moment their two faces shared the same space, cheeks touching, and Carmen’s straight, reddish-orange hair meshing with Robin’s natural curls. In pictures, Robin reminded Caleb of a witch.

“You just took it?” Carmen said, staring at Bailey, his scarred knuckles, his blue eyes.

“I tried to call,” Caleb said to Robin. “Your mom hung up on me.” He wanted to lean forward and give her a kiss but there was Bailey’s hand, still on his shoulder.

“My mom unplugged the phone,” Robin sighed. “She’s being a bitch.”

“Are you guys coming out or what?” Bailey said impatiently.

“Wait a second and we’ll be there.”

Robin closed the door and drew a curtain over the window.

“What are they doing?” Bailey took his hand off Caleb’s shoulder and banged on the door. “We’re not waiting around here all night. Come on.”

Robin came out wearing a black down jacket and slipped her hand into Caleb’s.

“Walk with me to the car.”

“Where’d Carmen go?” Bailey, not waiting for an answer, nudged the door open.

“She’s in there getting dressed.”

Bailey went inside and closed the door behind him.

“What’s he doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Caleb said, moving his thumb around the outside of her hand.

Adam had his arms crossed and was leaning against the van when they walked up. Travis was knelt next to him with his head in his hands, staring down at his feet. He didn’t look good.

“Where is she?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” Robin said, wrapping her arm tighter around Caleb’s. “Bailey went in there with her and closed the door.”

“What?” Adam looked at the light behind the curtain, the silhouettes inside. “That fucking guy didn’t even want to come out here.” He threw open the van door and jumped in.

“Bailey’ll be right out,” Caleb said. “Let’s wait for him.”

“I’m out,” Adam said. “Get in if you want a ride home.”

Adam started the engine and turned on the lights.

“Stay with me,” Robin whispered into Caleb’s ear.

Caleb kissed Robin until he could feel the soft powder on his lips, the

wiry coils of hair brushing his cheek, and then helped Travis to his feet and got in the van. Caleb watched Robin out of Travis's window as they started to drive away, how she tucked a chunk of hair behind her ear and wrapped the heavy coat around her body as she walked back toward the house.

"Slow down," Travis said. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up and sit back. Fucking Bailey, man. I knew that kid was a bitch. I knew it."

The headlights illuminated the six-foot posts, swept across the wind-rippled ribbon of caution tape. Adam gunned the van over the loose layer of gravel in the alley. The ditch inched closer to the tires and the van began to fish-tail. Adam cranked the wheel but it didn't do any good, the tires couldn't grip the gravel. The headlights flashed on the ditch, the posts, the ditch...

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

"Fuck!"

The first deep drop of a roller coaster, no breath, suspended in the air, a weightless capsule hanging in the night; the frozen moment when the van spun off the road and crashed onto its side, the poles in the ditch like a pit of spikes, the windows erupting in gravel and glass.

Everything was quiet. Only the squeaking of the driver's side tires rotating on their axels.

Caleb lifted his elbow from the shattered window to brace Travis hanging above him, still hooked into his seat belt, his shirt covered in puke, his face pale, the same black eyes as his brother. Adam's hands were still on the wheel, stuck there, and after a moment he reached up and pushed open his door. They heard the sound of sirens coming across the bridge.

"Travis," Adam mumbled. "Travis, Caleb, you guys alright?"

"You're a fucking asshole!" Travis cried. "I fucking hate you!"

"Caleb," Adam said. "Caleb, you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm alright. I can't hold Travis anymore. You gotta grab him."

Adam climbed on top of the van and slid open the side door and unfastened Travis's belt and pulled him out. Bailey running, shouting. Robin and Carmen crying, holding hands as they ran with Bailey toward the van. The flashing lights reflected off the windows of the houses that lined the alley, and the siren was close enough to cause the people inside them to start coming outside to see what was going on. A cop car appeared at the end of the alley, rolling over the cobblestone, thump-thump-thump-thump-thump, swerving into the alley, lights flashing.

Carmen and Robin left Bailey in the road and ran back to their house.

"Flood out!" Adam screamed, and jumped down from the van.

Travis booked off after his brother down the alley, leaving Caleb standing on top of the overturned van when the cop car skidded to a stop where the van had begun to lose control. Two cops stepped out of the car, hands over



their holsters and slowly started to creep toward the van. Caleb watched the shadows of his friends recede down the street.

“Freeze!”

One of the cops stepped close, fingering the snap on his holster.

“Don’t move! Stay right there!”

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” Bailey jumped out from behind a tree and started running toward the cops, kicking through piles of leaves. He ripped off his shirt and shouted: “Over here fuckers!”

Between the flashes of red and blue light Caleb watched Bailey slip into his famous blacked-out trance. One cop unclipped the gun from his belt and aimed it at Bailey. The other cop kept an eye on Caleb, standing on top of the overturned van. One of the tires was still spinning.

“Do something!” Bailey yelled at the cop with the gun, tight aim right on him. “Fuck you! What! What!” He stopped ten yards from the cop car and put his hands in the air. When the other cop turned away, gun drawn beside his partner, Bailey nodded to Caleb and then Caleb leapt from the van and started running down the alley. “Go! Go!”

One cop ran over to Bailey and put him on the ground, knee on his back, cuffing his hands, while the other cop took off after Caleb. Obscured beneath the repetitive whine of the sirens, Caleb heard the echo of Bailey shouting: “Go! Go! Go! Go!” But that sound was soon replaced by the breathing, the panting, the quick feet crunching gravel of the cop right behind him, and coming closer, closer, the gun holster clinking up and down, the rattling cuffs.

“Stop! Freeze!”

Caleb’s crucifix pendant hit him in the face as he ran. He tucked it under his sweatshirt and kept going: running down alleys, crunching glass, gravel, jumping over fences, across streets, behind buildings, running more alleys, cutting through yards, sliding between musty garages and sheds, crossing the bridge by the convenience store, all the time listening to the sound of the feet chasing him, never turning around to see the cop’s face because he knew that would make it too real and his legs would fold and the pain in his chest would pinch tight and the weight would come down on him like it had come down on Bailey. Go! Go! Go! Go!

Everything was quiet. The only footsteps were his own. No sirens, no lights, no cuffs.

Caleb wasn’t sure how long he had been running, how far. When he opened his eyes—he hadn’t realized they were closed—he was standing at the corner of a deserted street. He looked up at the intersection and didn’t recognize the names. As in a dream where faces are familiar but don’t have names, family faces, friend faces, he felt the names of the streets were supposed to mean something and was confused when they didn’t.

He heard someone whistling across the street. Not the urgent whistle of an alert but a casual, walk-in-the-park whistle, one that he recognized as part

of a familiar song.

“Travis,” Caleb whispered. “Travis, you there? Adam? Bailey? Who’s there?”

Caleb quietly hurried across the street, carefully placing his feet between the scattered leaves, and followed the sound of the whistling until he knelt down behind a tree in someones front yard. Except for a dim glow in the window, the house was dark. He crawled over closer to the window and saw that it was open, and that the whistling was coming from inside, louder the closer he crawled. He raised his eyes above the windowsill and saw that the glow was coming from a TV, and playing on the TV was an episode of the Andy Griffith show, and in front of the TV, in the middle of a room, was a reclining chair that’s back was turned toward the window.

Caleb knelt down and leaned back against the house. He breathed deeply through his nose. The sick menthol mixed with the cold autumn air, the frost, the dead leaves and the earth. Slowly, the alien, runaway world of a dream began to look familiar: the front porch across the street; the row of wooden wind chimes hanging from the awning; the yard next door with its weather-rotted junkyard of cheap toys and shoddily-built playhouses; the tall tree he had hidden behind that’s branches hung over the street, and where in the summer and spring, when he rode his bike under the bright canopy of leaves, he imagined someone was hiding up there and would pounce on him if he didn’t pedal fast enough to get into the open and under the sky.

He never thought to ride on the other side.

Sirens circling, tires screeching, lights flashing from around the corner.

Caleb looked through the window at the back of his grandpa’s chair, the withered hand holding the remote control, and on the floor next to his chair saw the green oxygen tank. Caleb was always getting tangled in the tubes. He had to be careful not to pull them out.

A cop car turned onto his street and stopped in front of the house.

Caleb watched from inside, from behind the window. The door hadn’t been locked.

He waited for the car to keep going but then one of the officers stepped out and started walking toward the house. When the officer stopped onto the sidewalk underneath the tree, Caleb closed his eyes and wished that his young fear were true, that something would pounce on the officer, a shadow, a deep shape, to steal him away.

Shit, he thought. Shit, they’re coming. They’d got Travis and he’d ratted. Or maybe it’d been Adam. Bailey never would’ve told. Bailey didn’t do it. Adam, or Travis. Black eyes. Brothers. Shit.

Caleb closed the curtain and locked the door. His grandpa was asleep in the chair. One of the oxygen tubes had come out of his nose, the air seeping out. Caleb gently adjusted the tube back into his nostril. He smelled the

menthol vapor rub on his grandpa's chest. The smell was usually a comfort, reminding him of being tucked in beside his grandpa in the chair watching the rodeos and old game shows, but the sickness of the Newporters resurged, and he had to run into the kitchen, hand over his mouth, and throw up into the sink.

The light was on. The pills were next to the pitcher.

He just wanted to go to sleep, to have this be a bad dream. To change everything. Nothing happened.

The red and blue lights flashed through the curtain. More doors shut, voices, footsteps through the leaves. The sharp beam of a flashlight penetrated the curtain, touching the back of his grandpa's chair, his hand, sweeping across the room. Feeling a second sickness in his throat, his hands shaking, Caleb quickly reached into his pocket for the sketch paper and pen Bailey had given him. He unfolded the paper—Bailey's name bleeding through in red and black ink—and wrote a note on the back:

*Grandpa,*

*Stayed at Travis's - Be home after school - Don't worry*

*— Caleb*

He slid the note under the pitcher and ran out the back door. The screen slammed shut behind him. He heard another car stop in front of the house, could see the red and blue flickering lights as he sprinted toward the far end of the fence that bordered the alley. But within a few yards of the fence, as he was stutter-stepping for the right timing, just as his body was poised for the jump, he tripped over a pile of leaves and fell to his knees. While Caleb lay on the ground waiting for Bailey to appear out of nowhere and offer his hand to help him up, and while he listened to the cops opening the fence door—it, too, had been unlocked—he turned over on his side and threw up on the grass. Someone nearby was burning leaves. That was his favorite smell.

As the officer escorted him across the yard, Caleb looked up into the branches of the big tree, searching for something in the pitch-black web, and knew that nothing would swing down and save him.

Travis was in the back of the cop car when the officer lowered Caleb onto the hard plastic seat. Bailey was there too, his head leaning against the window, eyes closed, red and blue lights flickering across his face. Travis stared down at his legs hanging off the edge of the stiff, slippery seat while Caleb asked him about Adam, and how the cops found his grandpa's house.

"We'll be out by morning," Bailey said, and turned from the window, the light leaving his face. "At least you guys will have some crazy shit to talk about when you go back to school."

# contributors

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