

mangrove





FALL EDITION

2015

mangrove

mangrove

*Created by the Creative Writing Program at the University of Miami.
Sponsored by the English Department.*

Editor in Chief Chantal Gabriel & Cassandra Ruiz
Managing Editor Jonathan Harrington

Art Editor Anahita Mohtasham
Fiction Editor Annissa Omran
Nonfiction Editor Amira Al-Khatib
Poetry Editor Jalen Eutsey

Faculty Advisor Jaswinder Bolina

Readers Alyssa Bolt
Carla Botha
David Colbus
Daniel Gizachew
Annie Louk
Diana Rodon
Aaisha Sanaullah

Mangrove is the University of Miami's undergraduate literary journal, publishing quality fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art from current undergraduate students from a variety of majors and universities. Mangrove is edited and designed by an undergraduate staff and is sponsored by the Department of English and advised and managed by its MFA students and faculty. For additional information, please visit mangrovejournal.com. printed in the United States. Cover art by Natasha Ruiz, Hollow..

© 2015 Mangrove. All rights reserved. No reproduction or use without permission.

COVER ART

Hollow
Natasha Ruiz

FICTION

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 5 | The Fall
<i>Timothy Schreiner</i> | 36 | A Breexe
<i>Hannah Long</i> |
| 7 | Maybe
<i>Miranda Winger</i> | 51 | Sculptors
<i>Heidi Billy</i> |
| 10 | Outsider
<i>Eleanor Stelter</i> | 61 | The Same Message
Twice
<i>Ryan Inkley</i> |

NONFICTION

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 47 | Negligence
<i>Paul Ashton</i> | 77 | Elements
<i>Heather Wilson</i> |
|----|---|----|--|

POETRY

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 33 | Ode to Obsession
<i>Nikole Jewell</i> | 60 | Operation Enduring
Freedom, Somali,
PFC A. Shaw
<i>Nicholas Finch</i> |
|----|---|----|---|

The Fall



Timothy Schreiner

I'm sixty stories above the ground. I have climbed to the roof of the tallest building in the city. Cold wind surfs over the rooftop, chilling me. The cold, I can handle. I grow dizzy as the wind gently nudges me and beads of sweat form on my forehead. An enormous yellow crane extends from the roof. I climb the ladder and carefully crawl out across the walkway on all fours, trembling the whole time.

I'm hugging the metal walkway. My head is swirling. I make my way to the edge, still crawling. I lean out and look down at the traffic below, barely visible. I'm in the clouds. No man should ever reach this height. Maybe I've simply grown too comfortable on familiar terrain. Perhaps I simply don't trust myself to not make mistakes. My throat burns as a bit of vomit travels up, but I swallow it.

I get to my knees and grab the yellow rail bordering the walkway. I slowly lower myself off of the walkway, now hanging above the city with just one hand. I look down and my vision goes black. I start shaking. My palms are sweaty. I imagine the fall, suspended in the air for some indefinite time, then the world comes rushing at me, refusing to let me go. I close my eyes and hang here, yet I still sense the eerie displacement. Height is more than just a physical displacement. It's a state of mind. A state of being, perhaps. I feel sweat shoot out from my armpits and trace its way down my sides. I manage to pull myself onto the walkway again. Unable to move, I lie on my back and look at the sky, into the the expanse of gray clouds. Looking up is just as sickening as looking down. The wind blows and I firmly grip the railings.

Maybe



Miranda Winger

The lights flickered, sending shadows dancing across the paint-peeled walls. A small boy that had been there far too long sat alone on the moth-eaten cot he shared with two other boys that had been there far too long. The room smelled of mold and dirt. And his pants were too small and his shirt too big and his bare feet hung over the side of the bed, barely skimming the surface of the dark carpet that was rumored to have once been white.

Any other day he would have been running around with the other boys, playing tag or doing other things that young boys do. But not today. Today he sat alone. Today he told his friends he didn't want to play, and they knew why, so they left him because they knew he remembered what it was like not to live there.

The boy leaned against the wall, counting the cracks in the ceiling, wondering if it would ever cave in. Maybe the whole place would come down and he could go somewhere else. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe he would stay there for the next ten years until they would kick him out anyway because he was no longer a child.

In his lap sat a small package, just larger than his hand. He pretended it didn't exist. But when he looked down, it hadn't gone away. He had said he didn't want it when they brought it to him. That's what he always said, but they never listened. He looked at the box. It was wrapped in plain brown paper; nothing special—just like him. And he already knew what was in the box, so he really wished it would go away.

Or maybe this package was different. Maybe he didn't know what was in it. He dreamed of candy and pastries from the bakery down the street. He had never tasted one, but they had to be good—everyone smiled at the bakery. His package did not make him smile.

He thought of the people outside his window and watched the carriages go by. He had been in one of those the night he came; not knowing it would be permanent. She said she would come back, but he had long since stopped waiting and stopped trying to remember her face. But maybe today would be different. Maybe today someone else would come in a carriage and take him away. Maybe he would go to a big house and sleep in a real bed.

The boy fumbled with the package. But maybe he would stay here for another year until he got another package. He got one every year on the day he was left there. They told him, it doesn't really matter what day you're born. So each year he got a package on a day that wasn't his birthday. It was meant to make him feel special, but it just reminded him why he wasn't. It reminded him that he wasn't good enough to keep and that, for another year, no one else had wanted him either. But maybe, just maybe, they had picked the right day.

Gently he moved the package between his hands, deciding whether he should open it or not. Sighing, the boy placed the package next to him on the bed.

"Jack." The door opened. It was Ms. Weston. "We have a new boy, it's his birthday too."

Jack looked and saw a young boy, maybe age five, clutching a small suitcase. He stood behind Ms. Weston, eyes wide and unsure. Jack recognized his own face on the day he arrived, scared and alone. The two locked eyes; maybe today would be different.

Outsider



Eleanor Stelter

When Maka talked about art, he was pretentious and used terms I didn't understand, like screenprint and acrylic and lithograph. It was awful. Gold leaf was another big one. He was always talking about how some guy named Clint was famous for using a gold leaf in his paintings. Thanks to him, I have seen endless thumbnails of art— thousands of Google searches that turn up hundreds of the same image in slightly different sizes and colors. He took me to the glass museum one weekend, and talked about how boring the exploitation of blown glass was; how Dale was turning it into an impersonal and repetitive medium. Who was Dale? The glass was pretty and I think he was right about it: despite too-long titles, it felt like nothing. But he was beautiful, and when he wasn't talking about art, I loved the things he said.

His paintings were wonderful, colorful and representational in a way that made me think I knew what he meant by them.

We were two poor, queer, post-college scumbags sharing what we had of love and life in the rented ground floor of a tiny house in the worst part of Tacoma. It wasn't a bad neighborhood, but most days the wind blew so we caught the worst of the paper factory's stench. I would've taken a high crime rate over that any day. I had Maka. He was full-blooded Samoan, six-foot-five and built like a brick wall; he frequently lifted me up and set me down again in a different place. He did it the most when he was painting me – he'd always make some comment about the light, and then when I turned the wrong way he would say, "Here, let me," and simply pick me up and turn me around, or he'd grab me and whatever chair I was sitting in and move me slightly closer to or farther from the window. It was cute. It was a little demeaning. Whatever. I didn't really care. I loved Maka. I think he loved me.

He was an artist, obviously— no one else could ramble so eloquently about other peoples' paintings while covered in paint of their own, and he wore the ever-present smudges of color that collected under his fingernails, on his forearms, in his hair, and on his clothes as proudly as his traditional pe'a tattoos.

We drove all the way to Seattle one weekend to go to the big

museum up there that was four stories tall and had a huge permanent collection. He wanted to see the exhibit on the evolution of modern art. The whole two-hour drive he kept talking about Andy Warhol and how he changed art forever.

“Wasn’t that the soup can guy?” I asked at some point, and he shot me a look that said I was better off keeping my mouth shut. I was here to listen, and learn. It wasn’t as though I knew anything about art: I was just a third-grade public school teacher. I smiled despite my own ignorance. Luckiest twink in the world— that was I—with a steady relationship right out of college. Some days I woke up hardly believing any of this was real. But there was Maka, smiling into the sunlight that glinted through the windshield, driving us north.

The whole damn exhibit was boring as hell. All of it was some statement on materialism; all of it was everyday-objects in bright pop-y colors. As he talked about a 15-foot-tall painting of a pink moose with some post-punk looking kids, I started wandering through the other galleries. I found huge airy rooms full of what my mother had always called art. This was even worse: it was twice as boring, and it reminded me of my homophobic mother and the reason I’d left Montana. I started playing a game on my phone, walking around idly. Suddenly, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. There, in the wall, sat a man. His back was to me. He was painted the same color as the wall. I thought he

was painted on the wall until I was right up next to him. But no—it was a sculpture, the full 3D treatment. I went around the other side of the wall and there were his feet sticking out, hands resting on his knees, feet resting on the floor. He was submerged in the wall. This man with no face, no name, no title card, no history; obtrusive, surreal, jarring, this man was crying out in pain. I can't explain it but in his silence and stillness I could hear his voice, and at the top of his white plaster lungs he was screaming.

I found Maka back in the modern art exhibit. “Hey, babe,” he said as I approached, stretching his hand out towards me. I must have had a look on my face because his grin melted and he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing – I – nothing’s wrong,” I fumbled. “So what’re you, uh, what are we looking at here?”

Maka gestured towards the installation before us. “It’s a commentary on youth and materialism,” he said. “See, it’s all about consumerism, consumption, self-obsession over compassion and self-expression.”

He rambled on for a minute about symbolism and pop culture before I cut him off. “Hey, do you wanna go downstairs and see some of the other exhibits?”

“I guess.” Maka shrugged. “I don’t really – I mean, I hadn’t really thought about it. What’s there to see?”

“Uh, there’s the permanent collection,” I grasped for a worthy description. “And there’s one that’s like, Indian modern art, I think?”

“Indian as in from India or as in Native American? Because you know how I feel about you white people saying Indian when you don’t mean from India...”

“No, no, from India Indian. Ghandi and curry and all that.”

I was joking but he gave me a warning look anyway. “Yeah, all right. I’ve seen pretty much everything up here. Just give me a second to get another collective look and feel of the place. You’re not allowed to take pictures you know. This might be the last time I’m in the room with a real Barbara Kruger.”

Knowing Maka, I seriously doubted that. He hunted down art wherever he could, especially the rebellious and the definitive, as he called it. I don’t know what it was, but he loved queer artists and artists of color more than anyone I’ve ever met. It made him feel like they shared something, I think.

Like they really had something more in common than just being two sensitive and well-meaning inhabitants of Earth. Well, he probably wouldn't have said well-meaning. He liked anger, passion, the crude and the wild, the strange and the brave. I admired that about him. His own paintings were soft, gentle, and light, not what you'd expect from a massive Samoan activist. There was a series he had done of flowers from the South Pacific that he called "Talofa," which just meant hello, but he had explained that it was a sort of welcoming people into his world. He didn't want to be seen as exotic. He was normal, just from a different place.

**You can't drag
your money
into the grave
with you.**

Maka met me by the entrance of the exhibit. "Here, I got this for you from the exhibit shop." He handed me a postcard with a picture of a pair of loafers on it. It read, *You can't drag your money into the grave with you.*

"Kruger again?" I asked, and he smiled. Finally I was getting the hang of this whole modern art thing. I put it in my pocket.

Holding hands, we descended the escalator and went to look at the other art that was there. Maka walked me through the classical collection and the collection of indigenous art. He was beaming that there was so much of it, and such a wide variety.

“This one’s called *Leaves*,” he told me, and gestured to a huge painting that took up a whole wall. It didn’t look like leaves; it looked like the white water of a river— white brushstrokes on a navy background, none overlapping; each taking up its own space. It was easy to get lost in the static detail of each stroke, but stepping back, it looked like it was flowing and moving. I said that out loud. He laughed. “I’d trust the artist on this one, babe,” he said, and we went on.

Finally we reached the screaming man in the wall. He was louder now. He was yelling out a warning, a siren that echoed through my head. It fixated me. I stopped walking when we were directly behind him.

“Steven, come on,” Maka said.

“But look...look at this sculpture. The man in the wall.”

The man in the wall sat, back to us. Did he have a head somewhere that stared, eyelessly, at nothing? Did he have a mouth that would open up when they tore down the wall; that would let everyone else hear his voice? This was the first time I lost myself while looking at art, I think, and I mean really lost – I had so many questions about him, about where he came from, about why.

After a minute, Maka sighed. “Honestly? Not terribly

interesting. Not very...I don't know. Not very Indian.”

Who was he to say what was Indian or not? Whatever. Whatever. I could still hear him screaming, even as we went on through the rest of the museum. He screeched in the cup of coffee I had at the museum's cafe. He yelled at the top of his lungs as Maka and I left Seattle and headed south on I-5. What was he saying? What was he trying to tell me?

I got home that day and I had something inside me that hadn't been there before. It felt like it was clawing at my insides: an image, a feeling taking form. If I didn't let it out I was sure it would find its way out anyway, and I the worse off for it.

I spent the next weeks sneaking around Maka, working quietly in the corner of the extra bedroom. As I gathered what I needed and built out what was in my head, I was pushing us apart. I held him at arm's length, I held everything away from myself so that I could observe and measure and construct what I needed to.

A month passed. “You're acting weird,” Maka told me one morning as I woke beside him and turned away almost immediately. He was twice my size and easily could have pinned me to the bed if he'd wanted. But he didn't. Now, I think that's why I was with him in the first place; there was great strength and great self-control in

that man. I've never been strong. I've never had self-control. I still don't think I do. In observation of my life, I have found that I'm entirely impulse-driven, which surprised me. I spent so much time convinced that I was rational, that I did things for a reason, but it turned out there was no reason but this feeling inside me that I couldn't contain. I had to let it out. I had to.

“So, what have you been working on?” Maka cornered me at the breakfast table one morning to ask.

“What?”

“Don't act like you haven't been working on something. I see you hiding yourself away behind that door. We haven't been to a party in almost a month, which is crazy. You love your parties.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I guess I do.” Usually, at parties I laughed, drank, and sang till the world was spinning gloriously. But what about the people who threw up quietly in the upstairs bathrooms? What about the ones who had to stay sober and sat on the rooftops and talked through the starlight until the moon was gone and the sun started blushing in the East? If you weren't looking at things from where you were benefiting from them, you could see how everybody else suffered and celebrated, and how little you really had to do with other peoples' lives.

I got up and carried my dishes to the sink. I must have walked right past him, still wondering, still dazed. I don't know how far away or worried the look on my face was, I wasn't paying any serious attention to the physical world just then.

"Hello? Spaceman?" he said. I ignored him. "Ground control to Major Tom?" He started to sing. "Can you hear me, Major Tom? Can you hear me, Major Tom? Can you heeeeeeeaaaaarrrrr -"

"Yes! I can hear you!" I boomed over his singing. "Good God, let a man do his dishes in peace, will you?!"

"Shit, Steven." He got that look on his face that spoiled kids get when they're about to throw a tantrum. But he didn't say anything more.

The dish soap made bubbling swirls as I cleaned. It was so beautiful. The sunlight on the trees outside the kitchen windows was golden and steady, even in March; already a strange and lovely day was upon us. Insult and injury forgotten but unapologized for, I finished up the dishes and started off to take a walk.

“Am I invisible or something?” Maka asked from the closet door.

“You look just fine to me,” I said, and chuckled to myself as I pulled jeans over my bony ankles, knees, and checked boxers.

“Steven.” Maka grabbed both my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Stop for a second. We have to talk.”

“What do we have to talk about?” I asked, buttoning and zipping my pants without looking down.

“You know.”

“I really fucking don’t.” Maka’s hands were too heavy and too warm. “Babe, let me go.”

“No.” There was thunder in his voice. “No, Steven, we’re going to sit down, and we’re going to talk about this, because you have been making me feel like I’m taking crazy pills.”

I rolled my eyes at the ancient idiom. He snarled. I gave in.

I told him almost everything. I talked about distance and about sunrises and about walking into an art museum and feeling

like a child being asked to engineer a bridge. I said things like you wouldn't understand and I just need some space and how I was so tired of not being included in his world. I didn't lie to him but I didn't tell him what I spent all those hours off in the corner doing. I think that part of me wanted it to be a surprise and part of me felt like he really wouldn't understand.

The room swelled with silence, full of everything I'd just set free, and he didn't look at me and I didn't look at him. There were clothes on the floor in the closet. I stared at them, at the mountains and valleys they made, and wondered if we were as simple as a wrinkled shirt, if I could just iron it out, hang it up for the night, and all would be well the next morning. I hadn't stopped loving Maka, and I wanted everything to be as it had always been, but he had to know that I wasn't in the same place he was in all the time.

“Fine,” he said finally. “If that's what you really want.”

“What? What do you think I want?”

There was a long breadth of air between us. From the other side of the rift I had carved between us I watched his tears fall, fat and in the strangest way, still full of quiet strength. Just like him. I started thinking about tears flexing tiny watery muscles, little watery arms reaching out and curling to show off how much they

could bench, and I almost started to laugh, but I made myself focus on the moment. I forced myself to look at his face, to feel the weight of my skin, to feel my heart beating, my toes digging into the carpet on the floor of the closet.

“Maka?” My voice shuddered. I wasn’t expecting that. “Maka, what do you think I want? Tell me, please, because I don’t know.”

“You,” he said, shaking and red, eyes wavering beneath blankets of tears, “You want to leave me. You want air and light and time and space and you can’t have that if I’m around.”

I started thinking about tears flexing tiny watery muscles, little watery arms reaching out and curling

“No, I –” But by the time I could form a response he had risen and walked away, and a little while later he came back into the bedroom but it was just to grab some clothes and throw them in the old, heavy suitcase he always insisted was practical.

“Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

He didn’t look at me. “I don’t know, but anywhere is better than here.”

“Maka, I don’t –” I sighed. “Maka I don’t want you to go anywhere. I don’t want to leave you, or for us to take a break. I want you to stay here, and I’ll cook for us, and we can go to the movies later, and...” I ran out of breath. My face was too warm and suddenly soaking wet.

“Maybe you don’t want to take a break.” His eyes were a dry and infinite brown. “But now I’ve thought about it, and I do.” His skin was smooth and perfect. He lifted his suitcase without even thinking about its weight.

When he was gone, really gone, the whole world was a much bigger place. People seemed meaner. Everything was harder. There was no one to reach the top shelf without climbing on the counter, no one to unstick the finicky windows without pulling a muscle, no one to kiss me goodnight. It was like moving out of my parents’ house ten years too early. It was like living in a cave after years in the sun. Part of me was relieved, but most of the time I felt like I was going blind without someone to guide me and protect me like he had.

I went through all the phases: the loneliness, the sluttiness, even a brief stint of clubbing. I poured myself into the secret art I had been making while I was breaking Maka’s heart. Initially, I had wanted to build something that expressed how I’d felt that day

in the museum: awkward and misunderstood, but not comforted by the presence of someone who was supposed to be there for me. It turned into a sculpture, made from various bits and pieces, knick-knacks and trash: paperclips and tacks dug up from the bottoms of drawers, strips of cloth torn from old dishrags, jars fished out of recycling bins, used paper, candy wrappers, packaging, cardboard, whistles (the people of Tacoma throw away a surprising number of whistles), sunglasses, broken dishes, old silverware, clothespins, buttons, pins, gum, torn-up cat toys, bread tags, old action figures. I later learned these were called found objects. I'd turned these found objects into a miniature art gallery with no roof; standing outside, leaning in, there was a giant, a shameless representation of myself, and inside, a clothespin-and-paperclip man stretched a tentative hand towards me. At first I thought it was hilarious, because I didn't know what it was like to be large and be loved by someone small: that was Maka, that was us but flipped around, and that was hilarious. To me at least. Maka might have smiled.

After I finished that, I made more. And more, and more, and I made them for six months, and I worked two jobs – as a third-grade teacher and a weekend gas station attendant – so that I could keep making them. One evening, Aaron, this guy I'd been seeing, the only good leftover from my clubbing days, came over for the first time. At that point, the apartment was flooded with them,

them, these sculptures that grew in my head and my fingers gave life to, and he said, “You know, Steve, these are actually really good.”

I couldn’t believe I was dating someone who called me Steve.

“I have a friend who runs a gallery on the other side of town, she’s looking for something to put in this summer.”

“What?” I asked, almost dropping my wine glass. “I mean, what?”

“Yeah, you know, just a small place, but they let you put your own price tags on the stuff, and they only end up with half.”

“Uh, I don’t – I don’t know how I’d make this, uh, make this cohesive enough to put in a gallery,” I stammered. Let alone sell them, I thought. I was the only person these sculptures had ever meant anything to. It was all commentary on my own life, my life as it had been with Maka— obvious self-insertion and no sense of purpose. There were men like armies in various states of decay, buildings collapsing into themselves like the classrooms where we’d first met, there were books whose pages I’d torn out and filled with sharp things for no reason other than the fact that books were what had made me feel less alone and now they couldn’t help

me shake that feeling. The worst and largest was a cathedral, a church like those my mom used to take me to, with a smiling bride and groom (someone's used, discarded cake topper I'd been so lucky to snatch up) and "NEVER" spelled out in those refrigerator letters. Somewhere deep in me, I knew that I wanted them to fill peoples' heads with noise the same way that man in the wall had mine, but what would they hear and what if no one heard anything at all?

"Come on, Steve." Aaron looped his arm around my waist. "I'll tell her you're interested, send her some pictures, you spend the next couple of months throwing titles and descriptions on these bad boys, I'll help, we walk away better off and clutter-free! Plus, some publicity will be good for you. Who knows..." he stooped to kiss my neck, "...you might even get out of that gas station gig you've got going."

Aaron was an English teacher at the local middle school, a very persuasive English teacher. He helped me write my first ever artist's statement and put into words everything I meant to say with my sculptures. His friend who was a gallery curator, Morgan, was elegant and young and had bright blue hip-length hair. She wore it in beautiful knots or braids as it swished around her like water. She helped me, too, because I'd never done anything like this before. "It's fine," she'd always say when I didn't know how to do something on my own.

Once when I was being finicky about the lighting she told me, “I think you’re having trouble with this because you know what you want but you’re embarrassed, but just choose, and worry about it later.”

On the night of the opening there was music and there was wine and there were street tacos from a local truck. I showed up underdressed, in sneakers and jeans and a t-shirt, and felt like one of my trash-pile pieces. But it must have been obvious from this that I was the artist, because people kept coming up to me to say, “really reminiscent of Rodin,” or “I love the Gauguin colors.” Who was Rodin? What was a Gauguin color? There were so many compliments that night that I didn’t quite understand. It brought all my memories of Maka flooding back: every time someone used one of those pretentious terms he had exploited, I heard it in his voice.

Who was I that I once loved parties so much? I wondered to myself as I tracked down another glass of the Pinot Noir. There was a laser beam in the eye of everyone in the room and they were all trained on my forehead, all night. It began to give me a headache, so I excused myself from a conversation to find the bathroom. On my way there, Aaron sideswiped me for an introduction, which turned into five, and by the time I was finally done shaking hands with suited women and bejeweled men, the bathroom wasn’t going to be enough.

So I slipped into the staircase and followed it all the way up to the roof. to the roof. I propped the door open so I knew I'd be able to get back in. I stood on the edge and stared out at the Puget Sound glistening to the north. Behind me, the door swung open and creaked gently shut.

“So,” a thick Samoan voice sang out from behind me, “this is what you were hiding from me.”

I turned. It was Maka, obviously, but some part of me was hoping it was anyone else. “Yeah,” I said. What else was there to say?

He laughed. “I guess...well, I'm glad it wasn't drugs.”

I smiled and stared into the depths of my wineglass. “Me too.” I looked up at the stars. “It wasn't worth breaking up over, though.”

But maybe it had been. I kept staring up, but I saw that great distance between us that now would never close: we were universes apart, and we always had been.

A sound split the air, breaking my profound silence. Maka had farted. “Oh, my god,” he whispered. “Excuse me.”

“No, it’s okay,” I hope I smiled at him. I don’t remember. “It was the tacos, right? They kept telling me it was a great idea to have street tacos, and I said, but what if someone farts while they’re admiring my art? Then they’ll be too embarrassed to buy it!”

Maka laughed awkwardly, then with actual mirth, and I stepped forward toward him, and then we were hugging, and it was strange and platonic and things I didn’t know I was carrying left me in a great cloud.

“You know, everyone’s talking about your art,” he said when we separated.

We began to walk towards the edge of the roof together. “Well, what else would they be talking about?” I joked.

“It’s a bad opening when they’re not talking about your art,” he said. “When they talk about the wine, you know it’s bad stuff. I didn’t hear anyone talking about the wine.”

“Thanks,” I said. It was late June. The stars were in full bloom, and the wind was blowing in from the north, off the Sound, carrying salt and promise of adventure. “It’s a beautiful night.”

“It is.”

We stood there and didn't look at each other. We watched the cars on the roads below us. We watched ships blink in and out and across the port to the east. We talked about nothing. I told him I was still living in the old, shitty apartment we'd lived in. He told me he was in love with Morgan, the gallery's curator. "Who wouldn't be?" I asked, laughing. "If I had a straight bone in my body, I would be too. I think I already am a little bit."

"Hey, now," he said. "Don't go trying to pick up my fiancée."

"Fiancée?" I almost choked. "Holy shit, Maka. How long have you known this girl?"

"Long enough."

"Sure, but – but we were together for like four years, man!" That was a huge exaggeration, but it had felt like a lifetime. "You've been with her, what, nine months, max, and you're gonna marry her?"

"Well, you know..." He took a deep breath. "She's, you know, she's the one."

Christ, I wanted to scream at him then. I wanted to say, you were my one. Your leaving tore me to pieces. But that wasn't true,

and I knew it, and I locked that self-pitying lie away. I'd made it here without him. His leaving set me free.

I swallowed hard. "All right, then."

He looked me in the eye and held my gaze for a long time before saying, "Look at you, though."

"What do you mean?" I laughed bitterly and gulped at my wine.

"I mean, look what you've done. You're an outsider, and you've..." he placed a giant, too warm hand on my shoulder. "You've made it."

His smile was reckless and huge and I shrugged, trapped under his single palm. "I, I don't..." I looked up. "Yeah. I made it." I'd wanted him to make it, but here I was instead, being congratulated and celebrated, a trashy, bottom-feeding pseudo-sculptor with an education degree and two stupid jobs.

Me. Not Maka, who knew every painter from every other, who went to every gallery in his every free time, whose paintings were so painstaking and colorful, who actually knew proper art terms. He turned to go, nothing more to say.

“Wait – wait, what did you mean by *outsider*?”

“You know, no real training.” He laughed again and slapped me on the back.

I smiled. I didn’t ask him what else he was up to. We went back through the propped-open door, back down the stairs, back into the cavalcade of light and sound.

Morgan was wearing her hair in long curls and they flowed and bounced as she reunited with her lover. Of course she was the one. I set my wineglass down on the counter of the bar and left my own party. Aaron started to follow me out, but I said goodbye to him and told him to stay. This was the kind of thing he lived for.

Maka was right: I made it, at least the first step. When I’d left, more than half of my pieces had sold. It was strange, though; it wasn’t anything I’d dreamed of when I was younger. It was like living someone else’s fantasy. It was like I’d fallen apart and rebuilt myself. But that didn’t matter any more. I was the only person I’d spend my whole life with, and all that was left was to create, all that would matter in the end was what I had made.

Ode to Obsession



Nikole Jewell

Thick yellow,
the underbelly thrum
of a vacant office building—
affiliating and
 disaffiliating.

The street light
perking before the sun
sets, the wobble of the moon—thick
yellow, the underpinned
 hum (perhaps you haven't
heard—you're heaped
so with valves and muscles,
pulses and hatchet rays of light—
you may not have gotten
 the chance). Watch grasshoppers
molt in mid-

autumn for as long as
you can manage it. Pinch yourself
through silence so deep it
becomes a feedback loop.

Everything:
mirage, object, trauma
—unfurling in front of you as
if through an augmented
peephole. Projections of
tar, clouds, or
contact, pick anything,
really, no discrimination—
but muddle it into
the essential, the fixed.

Get it down
to cast bronze, glass, or ink,
any medium in as dense
an arrangement as it
can endure, then divide

one more time.
Place the grains on your tongue
crack them firm against hard palate—
don't swallow. Or, bring the

live and minute, thrashing
as much as
evolutionary
reduction will allow—swallow
it whole—don't taste it. Feel
 it sizzle and bulge back
up as just
a pop, a cluck, a tic.
Meting out these syllables suggests
it is less frantic than
 this bright orb burst in
my stomach,
but they (the syllables)
are the cure, aren't they? Thick yellow
—affiliating and
 disaffiliating.

A Breeze



Hannah Long

The fan wakes her up, though ironically, she cannot sleep without it. Not in the summer, anyway. A ripple of smooth air brushes across her eyelashes, the tip of her nose and her lips like cold silk. She blinks and peels the backs of her thighs off the leather couch.

The apartment is quiet, which means it must be the afternoon. The thick curtains covering each window blankets the room with darkness. The smell of smoke is faint, which means her mother has been asleep for a while now.

She yanks down her pajama shorts and adjusts her bra straps, padding on plush white carpet down the hall to her mother's door.

She pushes it open with a fingertip. "Mom?"

“Hi, baby.” The figure beneath red satin sheets rolls over and squints one eye open. Frizz around her scalp flutters in the breeze from the bedside fan, and one long brown curl picks up its weight and tumbles across her forehead.

“You have to be in at eight tonight?”

Her mother rubs the closed eye vigorously. “Yep. I’m about to shower. What time is it?”

“I think the kitchen clock said five-thirty.”

“Is your sister home tonight?”

“I have no idea, I’ve been asleep.” Part of Lauren wants to sit at the foot of the bed and lean on her mother’s legs, to touch her mother like she always does after she’s been sleeping through the morning and most of the afternoon and working all night. She sees two cashed joints on the small ceramic tray next to the fan and a glass with remnants of dark liquor.

“She’s probably at that boy’s house,” her mother says, rolling away. “Right, baby?”

“I don’t really know where she goes, Mom.”

“Well, she’s old enough to be where she wants, I suppose.”

Her sister is seventeen, eighteen months older than her. “Throw these out, Mom, it’s gross,” she says, poking a finger at one of the joint butts.

“Throw what out, Lauren? I can’t see you. If you’re going to complain about something in my room, throw it out yourself.”

Lauren does not. She leans over, kisses her mother’s cheek, and leaves the cashed joints there. “Be safe tonight.”

“Love you, Brat.”

“Love you too.”

“If you see your sister, tell her I bought that phone so she can use it. Not so it can be dead or so she can ignore my calls.”

Her sister’s room is at the end of the hall. She opens the door on her way to use the bathroom, but she knows she’ll find it empty. The bed is made. Her sister is the neat one. Comforter folded once to display the reverse floral pattern, pillows stacked two-by-two, fan on the desk turned to low, windows cracked open with blinds halfway shut. Some stray clothes on the foot of the bed. Golden

evening light falls in shaky stripes across each surface, and the rustle of the plastic blinds is the only noise the room allows.

She saw her sister in here the day before, getting ready to go to work. Yellow polo with the logo “Dave’s Ice Cream Shoppe,” khaki shorts, and her favorite pair of dirty white Converse. They didn’t speak, because it was morning and they rarely spoke in the mornings—her sister was too functional and she had never been a morning person.

The kitchen is tidy, empty liquor bottles removed from the counter and hidden in the trash, ashtray crumbs swept off the linoleum. Her sister must have cleaned it before she left. The refrigerator is empty, though, except for some drops of milk and leftover Chinese cartons. Her stomach grumbles in response. She could throw out the food that she knows has probably gone bad, but she leaves it just as she left the joints and feels a pang of satisfaction as she pictures her mother wearily discovering the inedible contents and having to clean them out herself. She notices that the kitchen is relatively spotless but her sister didn’t touch the refrigerator, either.

It seems this is what it has come to, acts of love strained by acts of rebellion and possibly the faintest murmur of hatred.

The kitchen clock reads 5:42 p.m. She hears the shower sputter

to a start down the hall.

Once, when Lauren and her sister were in elementary school, her mother brought home a man whom they had never seen before, but who touched the small of her back as if he had known her for a while. They were seated on the same leather couch, her sister with homework perched on her lap as they watched Disney Channel. It must have been about eight p.m. on a school night—she remembered a dusky glow seeping around the curtains and a couple of rays of the fluorescent streetlamp light glaring across the television screen.

The man had fallen onto the couch between the two of them, his rough arms splayed across the backs of their shoulders and his t-shirt smelling of cigarette smoke and beer, a smell that had become familiar but was still intangible and somewhat unknown. Her mother switched the radio on to a slow reggae song that softly muffled the noise of the television.

“Mom, I can’t hear now.” She reached towards the coffee table to pick up the remote. The man grabbed her wrist.

“This is classic, baby girl. Much better than this garbage you’re watching. As a matter of fact, cut the TV off, Ellen.”

Her mother switched the television off and turned up the stereo. She began to sway, her maxi dress loose around her breasts and her bare toes peeking out from below the hem. “Come on, girlies, let’s dance.”

Her sister put down her pencil and stared blankly ahead. The man shifted his weight a little more heavily onto their shoulders and took a deep breath, blowing sour air under their noses. “Yeah, girlies, let’s dance.” He picked up one of her arms and began to move it around to the rhythm of the metal drums.

Her sister stood up and picked up her folder, tucking the pencil behind her ear and pulling a blanket from the couch.

“Monica, put your homework down and come dance,” her mother said without slowing. Her sister turned and walked toward the hall.

In one quick movement, the man grabbed the back of her shirt, stood, and heaved her over his shoulder. “Didn’t you hear your mother?” he grunted as her sister’s folder fell from her hands and papers scattered across the floor.

Lauren felt a cold trickle in her arms and the pit of her stomach

as her sister squirmed, and she sat quietly on the couch as it began to pulse through her body.

Monica said, “Put me down,” five times as she squirmed. Eventually her scrawny ten-year-old legs bucked and kicked and her fist connected with the man’s lower back.

“Fuck,” he roared. He dropped her immediately and she landed on her back on the carpet, where she lay sprawled as the man growled in rage and wound his leg back before kicking her hard. His foot connected with the side of her body and she broke out in a hoarse wail.

Lauren remembers finding herself hunched over her sister with her face in the crook of her neck, where hot wet tears and fearful sweat soaked her hairline. She wrapped her arms over her sister’s body, curled in a fetal position on the floor.

“I hate her,” her sister whispered through gasps of tears and struggled breathing. “I hate her, I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.”

She doesn’t remember if her mother could hear, but she remembers seeing her on the edge of the couch with her head in between her knees, sobs racking her body. She doesn’t remember how the man got out, but she likes to picture her mother’s fists

following him to the door. At one point she raised her head and looked at her daughters wrapped around each other on the floor and her legs moved as if she were going to touch them, comfort them, but she got up and walked out of the room. walked out the room.

She remembers thinking she would lie there forever with cramping arms, the stench of sweat, beer, and smoke, and the rug scratching her knees if it would take her sister's pain away.

The fan wakes her up again a couple of days later but this time it is morning. The kitchen clock reads 9:24 a.m. She opens her mother's bedroom door; the bed is empty but her purse and black stilettos are splayed across the ground.

She follows a trail of cigarette smoke down the hall to her sister's room, where the door is cracked open. She pushes it with her toe. A figure is leaning against the desk in a cloud of swirling smoke that rises with the breeze from the window and falls with each gust from the fan.

It's not her sister, it's her mother. She has one hand resting on the desk, hip cocked to the side, cigarette in the other hand.

She has on her sleep shirt but her hair is still tamed and her lips stained with crisp red lipstick. Her mascara is still intact.

Lauren doesn't want to ask what she's doing in here.

“Did you just get back?” she asks instead.

Her mother turns and looks at her. The expression on her face sends a ripple of cold through Lauren's veins. It is blank, the corners of her mouth are turned down, her eyes slightly warmed when she sees her daughter behind her at the door. It takes her too long to reply. “Yeah, long night.”

She crosses her arms. “You look pretty.”

“Thanks, baby.” Her mother exhales deeply, gray smoke hissing from her mouth.

There is a moment of silence.

“Remember when your sister got so mad at me,” her mother says slowly, struggling slightly to get the words to move from behind her teeth, “and she said she was running away, but she just spent four nights at Arie's house, and she told you not to tell me?”

She wanted me to think she was really gone. But you couldn't keep a secret for more than two days." She forces a quiet chuckle.

Lauren shifts her weight. She doesn't laugh. The cold is still there, lingering on her collarbones and the veins in her wrists.

"She's always been dramatic like that," her mother continues.

"You do things that could make anybody that mad, Mom."

Her mother pauses, the hand with the cigarette hovering midair. "And you've always been critical like that." She takes a long drag. "I wonder what I did this time."

Lauren doesn't want to say what comes to her mind but she does anyway. "I don't know where she is."

Her mother squints and wrinkles her nose. "I guess this time the joke's on you, too."

The cold in her veins erupts the tiniest bit into a hot flame. She wants to say that she's wrong, that the joke will always be on her mother; that in the end, it's always been them against her. Always.

And she loves that curly brown hair and the sad eyes and the long, delicate fingers and the way her mother tugs her hair and kisses her temple whenever she leaves at night, with the possibility of hot bagels in the morning. But sometimes late at night she sees her sister bruised on the ground by the man who should have never been in their home and their mother several feet away, not where she's supposed to be. Not where she is supposed to be. She sees her own small arms trying to hold her sister together and all she can think is that they are not big enough.

She looks around, at herself and her mother standing in the empty room with the clean bed and the dirty smoke, the agonizingly loud whir of the fan and the stark quiet of human silence, and she realizes why they are here and why they don't know what to say.

And she really wonders where her sister is.

Negligence



Paul Ashton

Assess the scene.

I woke to a pot's shatter. Harsh voices I'd thought were a dream became one voice's grief-ridden screams. The window was three steps from my bed. The shouts were farther. I stared at the blue curtain, feeling like the glass behind it, still and silent under my blue comforter.

If the subject fails to respond to stimuli, call 911.

I stood up, tall and fragile – seventeen. The window drew me forward, naked feet tiptoeing across the floor, and I pulled the curtain aside. Two men, sharp in the orange porch light were a window and a street's width away. One lay still on the driveway, arms pulled up to his chest. The other pirouetted in the driveway, wailing through limp hair and the thin lines between his fingers. The still man was too far to see the blood on his forehead. The

light was too weak to see the shattered pot on the driveway. My knees pressed into the blue carpet, eyes shining like the window as I settled into that space like the body across the street.

Check the subject's ABCs: Airway, Breathing, Signs of Circulation.

The scene clotted the steady pulse of the cul-de-sac. Memories came slowly. The two men lived across the street. The wailing man had a little girl that he walked around the cul-de-sac in cotton candy pants. The still man was her grandfather. The wailing man snowplowed our sidewalk during the Valentine's Day snowstorm. The still man answered his door with a smile. The men in the light and my memories beat two separate rhythms, out of sync. A shadow appeared, trotting across the street.

Open the subject's airway by tilting the head backward; then provide two five-second rescue breaths.

Dad knelt by the man. My knees pressed harder into the carpet. Dad bent toward the man. My back stayed straight. I didn't see Dad pat the man's face, tap his shoulder, call his name. The driveway was far, far across the street, but the long gasping yells of the wailing man pulsed close against the window, shattering the night's quiet.

Administer CPR until medical professionals arrive.

I watched Dad push on the still man's chest. Too slow, big shoves with little shakes – twelve beats to two breaths. Compressions should be energetic, a bounce, like a human defibrillator. I didn't run over to correct him. Ambulances arrived, red and blue lights flashed through bare windows, lighting the empty living room. For a moment Dad was pumping in the lights, blue then red then blue. Paramedics took over. They tried to still the wailing man. Don't tell me to calm down, my Dad's dead. I killed him.

Report to the manager and perform necessary paperwork.

Mom, Dad and I stood at the window. I said I'd watched through the window upstairs. Dad said it didn't look good. Mom said the whole thing was terrible. That night, Dad didn't sleep well. The next morning, Mom found routine strange. The next day, I said nothing. I should've done 30 compressions to two breaths, breaking ribs with the force of the compressions. I should've tasted cigarettes as I pushed my breath into his lungs. I should've watched his stomach bulge from its force. Instead I knelt quiet, still, not saying a thing. Maybe it was because I'd just woken up, or because it didn't seem like an emergency, or because I felt like I couldn't leave my room. Or because I was timid, or because the street was far too wide and dark, because Dad got there first,

because the man was dead before he hit the ground. because I was scared because I was small, because I couldn't be a hero, because I was nothing, because I couldn't answer, because the most transparent answer was somehow the most complicated. I still don't know why I didn't leave the space behind that window.

On the night I should've been there, I returned to my room, laid myself in bed like a thin pane of glass, whole and clean, and found that stillness had never left.

Sculptors



Heidi Billy

Miranda sighed and shoved her phone back into her pocket.

“So, are we going—?” her boyfriend Chet asked. She sat still for a moment, staring at her knees, and then nodded, “Yeah, we’d probably better.” Chet nodded and turned the truck around.

The town square, or rather the odd star-shape between the art museum and the library surrounded on three sides by streets, was pretty packed. Three ice sculptors were going at it with their chainsaws and crowds of people were watching. Chet had to drive around the square three times to finally find a place to park his truck. When they got out, they were blasted with the negative-ten degree chill and Miranda shoved her green and pink scarf over her face, clutching Chet’s arm. They made their way onto the square.

The three ice sculptors were in a friendly contest, the prize being a pot of chili donated by the Ladies' Club of the town. One was making a train, another was making a Chinese dragon, and the third was making a man, of sorts, standing with an arm out in front of his face. It wasn't detailed enough yet to make out. It was towards this third sculptor that Miranda began to tug Chet.

"There he is," she said, pulling Chet along.

Yas Begay looked older than his forty-five years and didn't talk much. What he didn't say with words he said with a saw, though, unless he was talking with his daughter, and Miranda knew the man better than anyone else— better than her cheating mother, better than anyone in his life.

Miranda still didn't feel completely ready to approach him yet. The cuts from their fight the night before still burned inside her, though she knew deep down that the cuts were justified. She sidled up to the rope barricade that separated Yas from everyone else.

"Dad," she called. Over the buzz of the chainsaws, of course he couldn't hear her. His hearing wasn't that good anyway. "DAD!" She said again, waving a mittened hand. He still didn't acknowledge her, but she assumed he was concentrating on the statue.

Miranda cupped her hands around her mouth. “Shizhéé!” At that he stopped and noticed she was there. He raised a hand to her, and returned to his work. His expression didn’t change, nor much of his posture, but she felt good that he acknowledged her finally. Sometimes he could carry a grudge.

She sat and watched him for a while. Chet’s feet got cold in his sneakers and he went inside the museum to get coffee and warm up, but Miranda was hoping for one last chance to catch her father, before, well, before too long. But by the looks of his sculpture, he would be busy for another couple hours. Watching the saw push into the ice like a peg into a hole, spraying white dust, fascinated her every time she watched him do it. Nothing else about sculpting appealed to her, but she did like watching him cut into the ice. It was like a meditation, almost. A letting go. She liked that idea, of letting go.

Chet returned after a while, holding a steaming cup. Miranda popped the top off and began to drink the already-cooling liquid inside. The man was taking better shape. She saw the edges of the clothes, some kind of long shirt tucked into pants, soft-looking shoes and hair pulled back. The right hand was curled against the chest, the other one was still extended, but no defining details had been added yet. Her dad continued swiping, cutting away decreasing sizes of pieces, stopping every once in a while to assess

his work and then moving forward. After a while, Miranda's feet were growing numb and she began to bounce. She waved to her father again.

“Shizhée!” She called to him. “I need to talk to you!” He waved at her again and continued. Her anger flared again, but Chet wrapped his arms around her from behind.

“He still mad then?” She shrugged. He pulled her tight against him and then kissed her cold cheek.

“You're beautiful, you know?” This produced a smile, which he returned. He kissed her again. “You know you ain't leaving him, right? Not like she did?”

Miranda pulled away a little at that, not really, but just enough to get her point across. Chet pulled her tight again. “He may think so, you may think so, but you're grown now. You know that when we get back there will be plenty of time to talk. He'll have plenty of time to get used to things.”

“Crumbling, like the corn pollen,” her Dad had said the night before. “If you go, it scatters me to the wind. It is a blessing but

what will be left of me after?" She had hugged him tight, willing him to be quiet.

"You will still be left, Dad. Just because change happens doesn't mean that you are going to float away like corn pollen."

"Crumble," he'd said. "I said I would crumble, I am crumbling." Fighting with him was like fighting with a sad dog. He stuck claws into you on accident, and trying to hurt him was like trying to hurt an oak tree with a penknife. Sure you could do some visible damage, but you couldn't know if your little swipes were really getting to him.

"Shizhéé, you aren't crumbling. You just have a hard time coping. We'll be back. The wedding will be on Sunday and we will be back by Wednesday. It will be like we just went on vacation and came back."

"But you'll stay with him, you will move-" he stopped. "You always floated around. I hoped, I hoped-"

Chet's family was paying for them to come to Montana for the wedding and had offered to pay for Yas to go as well. He'd refused. He had work, he couldn't take time off or he'd lose his job at the wire factory and his savings wouldn't save him. The only reason that Miranda wasn't more stung by this was because she knew it was true.

“Dad— shizhéé —I wish you could be happy. For me. I wish you could be happy and for me.”

“By the time you get back, I won’t be anything anymore.”

Watching him work, it was hard not to wonder what really did make him happy. Sculpting ice became how he coped, not what made him smile. He’d taken it up after her cheating mother left when Miranda was fourteen. That was eight years ago. He was really good at his chosen hobby, his way of incorporating the cold of northern Minnesota into his life, making it his own, but it never made him smile.

Miranda left with Chet after a while to walk around, to warm up and to see what else was going on at the New Year’s Eve celebration the town was throwing. She wanted to stay close to her dad, but Chet wanted to see a couple of the live bands and eat off a food truck. After an hour and a half had passed, Miranda realized that they were supposed to be hitting the road soon and she still had not fixed things with her dad. Her heart twanged in her like a breaking guitar string.

“Chet, please let’s try to talk to him again.” She pulled him up. He looked pained. The band was playing an Eagles cover, and

Chet loved the Eagles. Miranda dropped his hand. “Okay, stay here, come find me when they are done playing. I am going to try to talk to him, grab him for a minute.” Chet smiled and kissed her.

“Good luck, Mirandy,” he said.

The contest was winding down. The train was finished, the dragon was gleaming and the man was standing, now clearer. It was a Navajo chief, distinguishable to eyes that knew because of the way the hair was pulled back in a string, along with a bandana around the head, the necklace, belt buckle and the small pouch that he held. Her father was almost done, and Miranda could see the judges watching him as he finished up. He was working with a Dremel with a large drilling head, standing on a table so he could reach the seven-foot tall man’s hands. The sculpture was nearly finished, but the hand was still an indiscernible block of ice.

Miranda called to him once more and waved. He looked at her, nodded, and continued carving. She stamped a foot, crossed her arms tightly, swallowed and looked at him again. She was tired of waiting for him and the frustration led to anger, which led to a resigned sadness. All at once, he shut the Dremel off and looked at the small crowd that had gathered to watch him.

“Some of you know that I am not really from here,” he said,

his voice croaky from the cold, lack of use, or maybe even emotion. “I came here when my daughter was born so my wife wouldn’t be alone. My wife didn’t stay, but I stayed here where my daughter was born. I am from New Mexico, one oif the diné, or Navajo people. We have a ritual, a prayer, supposed to be said in the mornings. A prayer of beauty and balance, and the corn pollen was scattered in the four directions. Hózhóogo naasháa doo. I walk in beauty.” He demonstrated pinching at imaginary corn pollen and scattering it, mirroring his sculpture, but stopped to cough into his hand. Then he looked right at Miranda. “Corn pollen is hard to gather, and to bless every day, you must gather a lot of it. So, I hope you like my chief here, who will bless this town and send on blessings.” He continued his work without further word or further glance. The people there appreciated her dad’s remarks; after all, if they were the type to turn out to open art museums and live local music, they tended to be rather more open-minded people and getting a culture lesson from a bona fide Native American, even if he wasn’t in his native region, was still worth listening to. Miranda was just surprised that he’d said so much to so many people.

Chet came a while later. Miranda was trying not to cry. She really felt hurt now. He was completely ignoring her and he knew they had to hit the road to make their plane.

“I’m sorry, Miranda, but we need to go now.” Her lips were trembling, tears formed in her eyes. Her dad was willing to bless this town, but not his own daughter?

Chet called to Yas Begay but was ignored. After a few repeated attempts, Chet took Miranda’s hand and began to lead her away. Night was falling and the judges were working out their decisions. It looked like either the Indian Chief or the dragon would take home the chili, they were just waiting on Yas to put down his tools.

As they began to walk away, Miranda heard the Dremel power down. She turned to look over her shoulder as Yas Begay leaned over to look through the hole made between the carved fingers and thumb of the extended, sculpted hand. It seemed like he caught her eye. Then, he blew through the fingers, releasing a puff of ice dust, like corn pollen, to float over her and the crowds of the town.

Operation Enduring Freedom, Somali, PFC A. Shaw



Nicholas Finch

Before the Corps, Adam built boats. Deployed—
The dick-stick and Ka-Bar become the same
two useless tools for fucking. There's no war,
just hands pierced onto branches, hung like
small bloodied flesh ornaments for décor.
Kids beg, gesturing stubs. Soldiers put small
holes in the hulls of boats, slits down the masts.
The boats soon sink. Marines watch until
the sails look like white flags, half-mast at sea.
Before the Corps Adam built boats. On leave—
He can only take those same boats apart.

The Same Message Twice



Ryan Inkley

“Where is my car?” I’m talking to myself. Again. And you would too if you couldn’t find your car. It’s surprisingly dark and chilly outside of the full stadium where I can still smell weed and hear music playing. My sister texted me saying it’s an emergency and I need to go get her. She’s over-exaggerating about boyfriend crap but the tickets were from work, the concert sucked, and I generally hate people sometimes. So who cares?

But now I swear I’ve been in this lot for twenty minutes looking like an idiot with my key above my head or under my chin because people say that your head acts like some sort of antenna strengthener. Look, I don’t know the science behind it so don’t judge me. And what sucks is there’s not even a benefit of wandering through all these cars without any nice ones for eye candy. I’d say this day couldn’t get any worse but there’s no wood around to knock on. Plus it’s not even that bad. You know how you

get in those frustrated states where every feeling is multiplied. I pull my hoodie up over my head to hide my face and keep it warm.

“Where did I park?” I stop moving, close my eyes, and click to see if I can hear it.

Beep beep.

“Hallelujah.”

I follow the sound until I get to the car. Some other guy decided to bounce early too. I can see him coming from the other side of the lot walking in my direction, head down and bundled up. My phone buzzes. It's Mel and she's freaking out. I can tell because she forgot how to use periods. And the appropriate number of exclamation points. I tell her that I'm on my way.

I look up to see the guy is still heading toward me as I unlock the car. The flash of lights distracts him from his phone. My phone buzzes again. Mel informs me that my phone is sending the same message twice. I go to open my car.

“Hey man, what do you think you're doing?”

“What are you talking about?” I try to be friendly without looking at him. “The concert? It sucked.”

I keep my head down as I open the door. He pushes at my hand. This guy needs to step back.

“No, I’m not talking about that. I mean get away from me.”

I talk slowly, staring at the door. “Get away from me. This is my car.”

“What? No. This is my car.” He holds up his keys and presses down on the pad, flicking on the inside lights. The brightness of the open car finally reveals his face, his clothes, and his posture.

I’m looking at me. And by the way he’s looking at me, I can tell he’s looking at him.

We stare at each other in silence for several seconds. I open my mouth to say something, but his voice breaks through.

“Are you seeing-?”

I nod.

“What’s your name?”

“Danny.”

“Danny Belstead?”

I nod again. I reach to touch him as unawkwardly as possible and he lets me. He lifts up the bottom of his (our) identical black hoodie. I understand what he’s doing so I do it also. We see the same birthmark that somehow resembles an inverted Alaska just to the left of our belly buttons.

He breaks the silence in a sing-song, “Hi my name is Danny Belstead—”

And I continue, “1-3-0-1-2 Cabaret Ct.”

And we sing together, “Santa Ana, California, 9-2-”

I stop.

He slowly finishes, “-7-0-5.”

What the hell is going on? I decide to ask him. Cuz maybe he knows. But wait a second, “What were you just thinking?”

“What the hell is going on? And then I wanted to ask you the same question,” he thinks for a moment. “Type any number in your phone.”

We pull out our phones and tap.

“Hold it up.”

We both lift our phones. 63084.23. Exactly.

We go back and forth asking birthdays, why we were leaving early, and what we had done that afternoon. All identical. Even to the McDonalds we had both hit up that afternoon. Twice. And we both have identical receipts. Down to the minute. And then things went to hell when both our phones buzzed with messages from Mel.

I throw my phone down into the driver’s seat. Gently.
“Dude, what is going on?”

I see him clench his hand into a fist with his thumb tucked between his middle and ring fingers. Just as I do.

“What is going on!”

His eyes are wide but he’s blinking uncontrollably and in awkward spurts.

“Look, this is a little weird, but we can handle weird.”

He’s right.

“Movies and graphic novels have taught us how to approach this situation.”

“First we question our sanity.”

“Then we question how.”

“Then we question why.”

“Then something else weird happens.”

I nod, realizing how awkward my voice sounds in person, “And we—” I look at him and then point back and forth between him and I. “I have wanted weird stuff to happen.”

A new voice calls to us, “Hey what are you guys doing?” It’s security, holding a flashlight. We both snap our heads towards him. He switches his flashlight back and forth between us, sucking on some gum.

“You guys twins or something?” He’s laughing.

“Yes,” we chant. Normally we’d be sarcastic and say “No” but for the first time, the sarcasm would actually be true.

He blows a bubble. “Why are you guys out here?”

“Concert was boring.” I’m letting him talk.

The officer smiles as he chews away, “Yeah... So have you guys ever hooked up with the same chick in one night to see if she noticed? That’d be hilarious.”

We shake our heads, at the same beat, but then abruptly stop when we realize that we have done exactly that. We know each other a little too well.

He raises an eyebrow. “Well, you guys are weird, so have a good night.” He salutes us casually with his flashlight and keeps walking.

We turn to each other. “So what do you think this is?”

“Hallucination...?”

“Dream...?”

“Drugs...?”

Like I said, I can still smell the crowd all the way over here. “I know I didn’t do anything tonight. And we weren’t in there long enough for any secondhand effects.”

“So... Rift in the space-time continuum...?”

“Well I hope not because you already touched me and that would send the whole fabric of the universe into disarray.”

We laugh in sync and then stop. I go to clear my throat but to avoid any more awkwardness, I wait. But we end up clearing our throats at the same time anyways.

“What about... Infinity mirror...?”

“Cloning machine...?”

“Magic spell?”

“Governmental science experiment...?”

“A plot twist...?”

“A plot twist, for sure.”

A voice interrupts, “Hey what are you guys doing?”

Another security from the other direction. We turn to him. It’s the same guy. We’re not the only ones with a plot twist. He stares at us, chomping with an open-mouth, letting his lips droop into a frown when his mouth closes.

“Is there a problem over here?” He’s holding the light up by his face, keeping it trained on ours. “Hittin’ something hot, boys?”

He steps towards us.

“No, sir.” I let him talk, again.

He blows a bubble. “Can I see your licenses and tickets?”

We look at each other.

“I have mine.” I dig through my back pocket before adding, “sir.”

Other me just stands there, “I lost my ticket and I didn’t bring my wallet.”

The guard looks over, his mouth hovering between chomps and then rolls his eyes and surveys my license. “Danny Belstead, huh?”

“Belstead, sir.”

He steps towards me, taking a raspy breath through his nose and trying to seem taller although he’s an inch or two shorter, “Who do you think you are, kid?”

“I really don’t know, sir.” I’ve never been more honest.

He holds out the card and then without even looking drops it over my hand. “If you guys are gonna stay, go inside. If not, get out of here.”

We force a smile and he walks away.

Even after he’s gone about fifty feet, we stare at each other before talking.

“What just happened?”

“Well we’re not the only ones. And something must have happened to one of them that set something wrong, amiss.”

“A severe case of good cop, bad cop.”

“What if they ran into each other?”

“Could be funny.”

“But what do we do?”

I bite my lip. I see he's biting his, so I quickly unbite mine.

“What can't we do? We can do what we've always wanted and switch off on work and girls and stuff.”

I imagine going through seasons of shows online while having to do only half the work. Or going on a roadtrip by myself. Or learning the guitar. But we'd always be hiding something. From everyone.

“No. No, I don't want that. From a rational perspective, we'd be paying twice as much for two people. And then what? We perform magic shows? We pay the other to break up with girlfriends? We try killing each other with the exact same tactics? Let's skip the hope for a happy ending and realize that it eventually won't work.”

“Life, nonfiction, isn't about happy endings.”

“Neither is fiction anymore. So either way, we know how this ends.”

His head tilts, but not in confusion. I get a sense that he knows what I’m going to say next.

“You already know what I wanna say.”

He nods. Alaska sounds nice. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Well, we have. Well again, I have. I’m sure this is what he wants too. I mean, we were born with it on us. I know I’m just being romantic, but it’s almost destiny. And maybe I’m the only one committing to it. What have I done here? Rotate around parties and friend circles just because that’s how social gravity works? Go to my job because I went there yesterday? I can be alone in Alaska and figure things out with a more realistic me, myself, and I. I mean, it’s Alaska. Home of the nothing. And this could be my excuse.

“Yeah but it’s freezing.”

I know, so I stay inside all winter.

“What about the cost of living?”

Very expensive, but what’s the cost of staying here?

“And the long days or long nights?”

I stop him, “I know, I know. We’ve been through this already. You don’t have to tell me. I don’t care, at least not right now. You’re as tired as I am. You’ve given up on certain types of people. And I’m done with trying. I’m done with wondering what I could be doing. I’m done with thinking about Alaska.” Just talking about it is pumping me up, as if my thoughts were too quiet before. I wonder if he would be feeling the same way if he had begun ranting what he was thinking.

I go hunting. I save the polar bears. I freelance and make whatever the hell I want. And my friends and family won’t miss me. But if I miss them...

“If you miss them, come see them. You’ll do freelance work and we’ll deposit into the same account, as usual.”

Always thinking about money.

“Hey what are you guys doing?”

No way. A third security guard, from a third direction. And as we anticipated, the same guy.

“You guys alright?” He points the light, but then lets his arm drop into a slouch, ruminating on his gum. I don’t think he’s seen us tonight.

“Yep,” both of us say together.

“Well drive safe tonight, don’t be stupid, remember who you are, blah, blah, blah, I’m not your mother.” I don’t need my mother right now to tell me that. He switches the gum to the other side of his mouth. A voice echoes from his walkie-talkie.

“We’ve got someone suspicious over in Lot D4.”

He responds and drifts in that direction.

Once he leaves, I speak back up, “So which one of those guys is real and authentic do you think?”

“What is real? This isn’t some philosophy class, Danny. You can read into this later.”

“But who would he have been if this never had happened to him?”

“I don’t think what a person chooses is planned, although a cop usually has quotas. Gotta meet those expectations.”

“I was talking about the gum, man, chewed differently by the three same men.”

“Well we would have to take into account flavor..”

“Now that’s something we need to discuss.” We laugh. Did I hear one of my chuckles offbeat of one of his?

Yelling erupts from the direction that the third officer went. And the second. And the first.

“That moment, that moment when they...duplicated...and split up in different directions... Do you think it was a conscious choice? As in the splitting up.”

“Let’s you and I get out of here.” Because staying put isn’t getting us anywhere.

We’ve got a good point, we think.

I don’t want any quotas. I don’t want to keep secrets about another me, in every sense of the phrase. I need Alaska more than ever and if it sucks, I’ll come back.

He tries to be reassuring nonetheless, “I’m not gonna judge you.”

“God, I’d hate to find out what judging me would be like.”

I let him drive as he takes me to the train station. I want to hear his side of the story starting with him saying to himself, “Where is my car?” but I’m guessing it’s pretty similar so there’s no point in even asking. While getting out of the car and deciding what I would say to myself, I consider hugging him. He just shakes his head. That may be the last thought we’ll both share. Without this concert, one of us would never have existed. And even though we’re getting just about as far away from each other as possible, I assume a mirror won’t be the last time I see myself. There’s probably some symbolism in this moment.

As I’m sitting in the train station, my phone buzzes. It’s Mel, asking where I am. I decide to let other-me send it. No need to send the same message twice.

At 10:03, I’m on the train and he’s driving home, both wondering if we are doing the right thing.

Elements



Heather Wilson

Wind

We used to run in the summertime, long games of tag that never seemed to end, just picked back up the next day. You know we ran in the heat, quick on our feet, and then it got cold— as cold as Arkansas can get – and we kept running, whipping off the clothes mama wrapped us in, taking pleasure in singed cheeks, singed fingertips. And when it iced, we took more care, a little more care on our feet trying not to slip, whipping around the poles of the swing set dashing the length of the complex parking lot, skirting black ice, still quick with careful feet till spring came. Everything wetter, dry grass now mud. Bushes newly green flooded with bees we chased each other through, waiting for hotter weather so we could turn on the sprinkler and sprint through the mist to heat. Then it was hot again and we were running in the summertime.

Fire

We used to run in the summertime, then we got scared when Emily died in the hottest month. Mama explained it like this: she cracked like a ceramic pot heated too long then put into cold too quick. Emily was my age – nine. We still ran but then when beads of sweat marched down our necks we found darker places in the bushes, under trees, behind buildings. The sun craned above us. I could hear dropped soda spilling, liquid hissing on sidewalks, grass so dry it crooned. It was like this: You're it—no I'm not—you're it—shut up—you're it—you're it—you're it—no I'm not—shut up. Mama told us not to worry. Emily ran in the heat for two hours, three hours, then took a cold shower straight after. If we didn't do that we would be all right. I kept thinking she cracked like a pot, she cracked like a pot, she cracked like a pot. We crack like pots.

Water

We used to run in the summertime, hot skin grateful for any kiss of liquid. Now we hooked up the hose, set up the sprinkler in the grass, but no one ran through. Water cupped air, hit the earth uninterrupted, and the earth groaned and stretched. It was like this: at night I came home dirty, always caked in the

filth of play, scuff marked by day, reek of grass in my hair. I sat in front of the fan, feeling my body cooling, waiting for my body to cool while mama cooked liver and onions in the cast iron pot and boiling water for pasta in the kitchen. Then I'd bathe. Then I'd think. Of Emily standing in the tub, skin glazed, ripe, freckled, red like mine, water pouring down on her packed earth body. The water slipped around the angles of my body like a blanket, turning murky with my filth. I did not crack like a pot like I feared, like I feared, like I fear I would.

Earth

We used to run in the summertime, packing earth and grass beneath our heavy trampling feet. Sometimes we cut through the garden, the one out in front of our apartment that mama tended, raising roses gentle in the fierce summer, and she'd yell after us – wishing thorn cuts on our naked shins for cutting through her roses gentle. After Emily died, Mama cut the roses – all twelve red blooms unfurling or half unfurled – and tied them with string. She gave them to the mother, poor like the rest of us. We didn't go to the funeral. They must have thrown the flowers in the ground with the nailed up coffin and the cracked pot body. Mama made me weed the garden all summer long and I thought about gone roses and gone me, and I thought about running in the summertime.

Contributors



Timothy Schreiner is a junior at Westfield State University in Westfield, Massachusetts.

Miranda Winger is currently attending Brigham Young University and will graduate in 2015 with a degree in Family Studies.

Eleanor Stelter is currently an undergraduate student at Azusa Pacific University in California. She's from Seattle, Washington and her work has previously been published in *The West Wind* literary magazine and *The Bastion* literary magazine.

Nikole Jewell is a student at the University of Hartford and has been published by *Aerie* on three occasions.

Hannah Long is a freshman at the University of Miami from New London, Connecticut.

Paul Ashton is a Chinese major at UNC Chapel Hill set to graduate in May 2015. UNC's Creative Writing department has offered him a chance to explore language in new ways, through performance art, fiction, and creative non-fiction.

Heidi Billy is set to graduate from Brigham Young University in August 2015 with a B.A. in English.

Nicholas Finch is the assistant editor of *Neon Literary Journal*. He was raised in England and South Africa before moving to Florida. His major influences include Ernest Hemingway, Ben Lerner, Raymond Carver, John Keats, Flannery O'Connor, Rudy Wilson, Cormac McCarthy, Bret Easton Ellis, and Akiko Yosano. Finch has pieces published or forthcoming in *Haiku Journal*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Catfish Creek*, *Foliate Oak*

Literary Magazine, Pioneertown,
Gravel Mag and elsewhere.

Ryan Inkley is a BYU student graduating in 2015 and has plans to write for advertising.

Heather Wilson is an English major at the University of North Carolina. She is currently the Junior Thomas Wolfe Scholar. Aside from writing for on campus literary magazines, she does freelance work as a family historian. In her spare time she does improv and writes stand-up and sketch with the False Profits, a comedy variety troupe.