THE OFFERING

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

2018
About the Literary Society

The UMass Lowell Literary Society publishes the annual campus literary magazine, *The Offering*, which features poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art submitted by UMass Lowell students, alumni, staff, and faculty. Each fall, undergraduate student members may apply for editorial positions on the magazine, a process coordinated by club advisors in cooperation with active club officers.

Anyone in the UMass Lowell community may submit work for consideration for publication in the magazine, with submissions open generally from early November to mid-February, and the magazine appearing in print in April. The club organizes an annual public reading event to launch the magazine each spring.

The club keeps students informed of literary activities on campus through Collegiate Link and its Facebook page. For more information, or to request submission guidelines, write to offering@uml.edu or contact the club advisors, Professors Maggie Dietz and Sandra Lim.

See also:

https://umasslowellclubs.collegiatelink.net/organization/literary-society/news

https://www.facebook.com/UMLLiterarySociety/
About the Name

This journal’s name pays tribute to *The Lowell Offering*, a pamphlet published monthly between 1840 and 1845 whose content—including essays, stories, poems and ballads, letters, editorials and humorous pieces—was written exclusively by female workers in Lowell’s textile mills. Founded by Abel Charles Thomas during his three-year pastorate at the Second Universalist Church in Lowell, the magazine was subtitled “A Repository of Original Articles on Various Subjects, Written by Factory Operatives.” In an editorial printed in the first issue, Thomas explains the aims of the publication: “to encourage the cultivation of talent; to preserve such articles as are deemed most worthy of publication; and to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills.”

In 1842, Harriet Farley and Harriot Curtis, both mill workers, became co-editors, and produced the magazine until its final publication in 1845. Charles Dickens, who during an 1842 visit to America famously visited and extolled the city of Lowell, also admired the enterprise of the women who wrote and “duly printed, published, and sold” *The Lowell Offering*. He writes, in *American Notes*: “Of the merits of the Lowell Offering as a literary production I will only observe, putting entirely out of sight the fact of the articles having been written by these girls after the arduous labours of the day, that it will compare advantageously with a great many English Annuals.”

The Editors find it fitting that the name of the University of Massachusetts Lowell’s literary magazine reflects the city’s rich cultural and literary heritage, and hope that work among these pages honors and contributes to that legacy.
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The Offering
They Say the Maintenance Man Never Leaves

One time he said he had to feed his cat, but everyone said it was dead. He shuffles in and out of his cave where he keeps secrets and has two faces. There are more faces in the cave, and on the ship, but they don’t breathe like him.

One time he asked me how I breathed, and sucked in his stomach and exhaled. He told me that he was practicing. Muttering, he scurried back to the cave so he could take care of the others and become one of them,

but he still likes to practice.
Big Owl gathered up all of the arrows and war clubs. He ate the men he killed and smiled at their dying terror. Big Owl’s fury created a storm that spread across the plains and up the mountains. His laughter was in the sky as his talons shot to the earth in bolts of lightning. Coyote woke to Big Owl’s noise, and knew his brother needed to be stopped.

“Fucking Injun tried to sell me bird shit!” the rabbit-faced man said, sticking the barrel of his .44 in the center of Snake Oil’s face.

Snake Oil’s dark skin stood out in the crowd of pale ranchers. They gathered out on the only road of the little Arizona trading post. “He’s lying, sheriff,” he said, waving a handful of bills in the air. “I sold it to him.”

“I’ll kill him!” The man’s yellow teeth revealed themselves in his sneer as he looked over at the old sheriff in his dusty bowler hat. “I swear I’ll do it!” he said. His eye twitched back to Snake Oil.

Snake Oil’s black hair flowed out under his top hat and around a grimy and torn United States Army scout duster that smelled of booze and dried sweat. His appearance won him looks whenever he stopped at a new trading post. Everyone wanted a bit of his “Injun magic,” and Snake Oil was happy to give it to them. Selling bottles of water and bird shit was his favorite. He had told the rabbit-faced man that, “Drinking Bird Essence will increase stamina and virility, so says Big Owl, watcher of the skies.” The White-Man will believe anything.

Snake Oil stared wide-eyed at the man. “Kill me, see what happens.” he said and extended his tongue out.

“Settle down,” the sheriff said, half concerned with the whole ordeal. “We should lynch the Injun!” a voice screamed from the crowd.
More yelps came from the gathering of men and women eager to see an Indian hang. There was a single tree with a noose tied to it right at the entrance of the little trading post. Snake Oil wondered how many Indians had swung from that tree as the townspeople cheered. He understood, he loved to watch the White-Man die. But he would not be lynched today. Snake Oil held his hands up and looked towards the sky, summoning the three gunshots that rang out a moment later.

“No lynching that one, he’s federal property,” said the Arizona Ranger sitting atop his horse. His smoking revolver glistened gold as it rested in his hand.

Snake Oil smirked at the rabbit-faced man, who slowly put down his weapon as he and the rest of the gathering crowd looked over to the mounted ranger. The ranger walked his horse forward, cutting through the silent rabble into the center until he stood mounted next to Snake Oil. His wide rim hat kept his eyes from the noonday sun, but Snake Oil could gather that he wasn’t happy with him.

Snake Oil didn’t much care what the ranger thought of him. The ranger couldn’t kill him, or let him get lynched. Which was what mattered. Snake Oil spent the rest of the day in a cell while the ranger talked to the sheriff about who they were trying to kill, and why Snake Oil was important. He got to keep the money the rabbit-looking man gave him. He threw it into the filled shit-bucket in the corner of his cell. He didn’t need the White-Man’s money the way they did. They clung to those pieces of paper and bits of metal the way squaws held their children. It was the way to a White-Man’s rage, to steal his money. Snake Oil liked to see them angry, because then they knew how it was to be him.

Long ago he loved the White-Man because he hated the Yuma more. The Yuma killed his parents and made him a slave along with the rest of his Apache brothers. It was the Americans and their white flesh that broke into the Yuma camp, with their horses making fierce noises and their guns creating evil sounds. Snake Oil felt safe in the arms of the

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American Cavalry as they rode back to their territory. That was where they left them. The soldiers abandoned Snake Oil and his brothers, and left them vagabonds.

He spent the day resting on the straw mat in the corner of his cell. The dry Arizona air sat still over his skin and the smell of hot shit snuck into his nose. It wasn’t bad, as jail cells went. Snake Oil had spent many nights in cells like these, too many of which were much worse. The metal bars were all rotted out, and hissed when the door opened. “Get up,” the ranger said, “Sheriff’s letting you out.”

Snake Oil sat up, groaning as he did, and rested his head against the concrete wall. “Wonderful.”

“Told him you are helping me look for your friend,” the ranger leaned his shoulder against the rusting door. “They say he’s been causing lots of trouble ‘round here and the surrounding homesteads.”

“What kind of trouble?” Snake Oil asked, rolling up to his feet.

“Three rapes and two murders in the last couple weeks.” The ranger adjusted his leather riding gloves.

Snake Oil knew they were lies. Maybe the ranger just made them up, or maybe it was the townsfolk. These were not things his brother would do. “Sounds like a good story,” he said.

The ranger shook his head. “Got some proof this time.”

“What kind of proof?” Snake Oil secured his top hat over his long hair.

“Settler by the name of Ed Clark, ‘bout 10 miles west of here, claims he saw an Apache and his squaw riding up to his house at night.”

“Another great story.” Snake Oil rolled his eyes.

“Difference is, he killed the squaw and put a bullet through the Apache,” the ranger lifted himself off the door. “Think you could identify her?”

“Doubt it. Kid loves women too much to only have one.” Snake Oil grinned as he pushed past the ranger out the door. “If that man shot
him, Kid is as good as dead. No one will treat him.”

“It’s my job to make sure it’s done,” the ranger said, walking up behind him. “Don’t you forget, Snake Oil, he killed two lawmen to escape custody.”

“It was the others who killed them and Kid’s the reason the third one lived.” Snake Oil bit back as he paced down the hall. “I’m helping you kill him, but don’t try to fool me into thinking I’m doing the right thing, ranger.”

Apache Kid was the last of Snake Oil’s vagabond brothers. They had been captured by the Yuma together, had begged on the streets together, and had served in the United States Army together. Apache Kid always said it was his duty to repay the Americans for saving him from the Yuma, and he was their leader, so where Kid went, his brothers followed. Back then, they didn’t understand that this meant they were no longer Apache in the eyes of their people, and that the Americans, their new people, hated them like enemies. Whether it was by Apache hand, or by American, all of Snake Oil’s brothers had died. He and Apache Kid were the last. Kid would have died for any of his brothers. Snake Oil did not share his brother’s convictions.

The night Coyote woke, he climbed Big Owl’s mountain. At the top was Big Owl with his bow. “What are you doing?” asked Coyote.

“Hunting men of the low gap,” Big Owl said, looking down the mountain.

Coyote walked next to Big Owl. “Let me help.”

Gold blinded men. That was the one truth Adolphus Fredericks could count on. It stole his father’s eyes when he took his family from their native Saxony to the edge of America. California would be where his father would work as a gilder, making treasures out of the worthless. It didn’t take long for his family to discover that California was itself a
gilded land. By the time Adolphus buried his parents under the sun-cracked earth, he knew there was nothing in this land for him. The gold-plated revolvers he kept on his side reminded him of who he was. He’d used them to make his name out in Arizona, shooting the outlaw Texas Red before he could even clear leather. Before that he’d masqueraded as an Arizona Ranger, but the bullet he put in the outlaw made him a bona fide lawman. Now he wore a gilded star on his jacket to match his guns, and all he had to do was kill for the state of Arizona.

Adolphus knew they were close to Apache Kid. The outlaw had been clever and quick, but he trusted too much. Snake Oil knew all of his brother’s hideouts, and his life depended on ending the Kid’s. Adolphus would be glad when it was all done, but he had to admit he would miss traveling with Snake.

“You know,” said Snake Oil as he stuck his fork into the tin can, “These are disgusting.”

The two had been riding about five miles before Snake Oil started begging for food. “Shut up and eat,” said Adolphus. The sun started to creep its way behind the brown dusty hills.

“Excuse me, I wasn’t talking to you,” he said, as he sniffed the contents of the can and looked at the horse underneath him. “What do you think, Nag, how is it that the White-Man fucks up beans?”

The Indian loved that horse. The thing was old, with mange across its grey coat, but he insisted on taking it with him on their treks. When the trail became filled with the silence of night, Snake would make conversation with his horse. Adolphus never spoke to Kaiser, but he and his black stallion had a bond, too. Kaiser was the first and only horse Adolphus would break himself. That horse had been the closest thing to family Adolphus had had since his parents died in California trying to find gold. People saw the stallion, the golden gun, long oiled mustache, tailored suit, and spit-shined boots, and thought Adolphus must be royalty. Wherever he went whispers floated across tavern tables that he
must be a German Prince. Nobody knew that this prince’s home was his horse and his wealth was what he wore.

“Alright, that’s Clark’s ranch,” Adolphus said, pointing to the small house with a long stable running behind it. “Try your best not to scare him.”

Snake Oil spit out some half-chewed beans. “I’m pretty sure me being Indian will be enough to scare him.” He let out a little chuckle. “It is for most of you.”

“Well just try not to be so Indian,” Adolphus shot back with a smirk. “Ok I’ll just powder my face like your women do. I warn you, though, I’m going to need a lot of it.”

Snake wasn’t lying, he was dark as Adolphus was white. His whiteness made Adolphus feel strange, when he dealt with Indians. Here he was, a man born a world away in Saxony, who didn’t belong here. He was almost entirely a stranger, yet he was the one in charge. Snake Oil’s ancestors may have lived here since creation, but he was the prisoner in his own land. Adolphus had these thoughts more often than he’d like.

“Stay by your horse,” Adolphus ordered, as he tied Kaiser to the hitching post out front and walked up the creaking steps to the house.

He knocked on the splintering door and waited on the porch. He glanced down at his boots and noticed a film of dust on them. When he got the chance he’d have to clean them. A voice called out from the dimly glowing house, “You a lawman?”

Adolphus looked at the windows to either side, and then noticed a small crack at eye level on the door.

“Adolphus Fredericks,” he said, removing his wide-rimmed hat to reveal pomade-thick hair. “Arizona Ranger. Sheriff Brown said you had a run in with Apache Kid, and have his squaw’s body. I’ve got an expert out here to examine it.”

“You mean that fucking Prairie Nigger?” the voice said, and there was a moment of silence as Adolphus felt his back tense. “You can come
in, but I don’t want it wandering around here for long.”

The door opened and the smell of rot wafted over Adolphus. “Ed Clark?” he said, looking at the squat fat man on the other side of the doorway.

Beads of sweat clung to his face and glowed orange in the fire light. He had bottle in his hand. “Stinks doesn’t she?” he snickered. “She’s in my backroom.” He started over to the room.

Adolphus motioned for Snake Oil to come to him. He could see the rage coming up in him and had no doubt he had heard the exchange between Adolphus and Clark. “Lets be calm here,” he whispered.

“We will see,” Snake Oil said.

Ed Clark let the two into the back room, and the smell of rot burst out the door as the rancher opened it. It was the kind of smell that sat still in the musty air as a warning to men that they should stay away. This room was where he seemed to keep all of his food and alcohol, along with the body of the Indian woman. She was rolled up inside a burlap sack stained with red off in the corner. “Listen, you’ve got five minutes, savage,” Clark said.

Snake didn’t look at him, and made his way over to her. Adolphus turned his attention back to the rancher, “Got some questions to ask you.”

“Alright,” he said leaving the room, “Want a drink? Figure you might want one riding with that thing all day.”

“I’ll take one,” he said, digging his nails into his palm.

He led them over to his little table in the center of the room with his Winchester repeater sitting across it and poured them both a shot of whisky. Adolphus knocked it back, feeling the bite tingle across his head. “So do you know why the Kid was so close to your ranch?” he asked.

“Wanted some of my horses I guess,” he said before he drank his shot. “Heard them thundering up well after midnight. So I pulled my Winchester out and started firing. Put three bullets into the squaw’s
horse and she went down with it. Hit the Kid with one in the side.”

“And he ran off?”

“His horse got real spooked, started making for the hills to the north. Kid was hanging on the beast with one hand,” he paused, pouring himself another drink. “Got him good. Wish I could have added another to my collection though,” he said pointing above the fireplace.

Eight scalps hung nailed into the mantle. One was fresh. Adolphus didn’t like this, not at all. “So she died when she fell from her horse?”

Clark laughed. “Oh no she was alive.” he gave another grin before he knocked back one last shot. “Had some fun first, of course.”

Snake Oil emerged from the room, ready to kill. “I have seen the cruelty of the White-Man before,” he sneered and started on a slow pace back and forth. “I have watched him kill my people, steal our children, rape our women. But in that room…”

“What are you going to do to me you, dumb Prairie Nigger?” Clark smirked. “Maybe me and this ranger here will have fun with you, like I did her.”

“What did you do to her?” Adolphus looked to the rancher.

Snake Oil stayed silent behind them as Clark’s smile turned into a scowl at the ranger. “What do you care?” he said. “You ain’t no Injun lover, are you?”

The three stood in a triangle in the little cottage. Adolphus wanted to pull his gun and blast this fat bastard in the chest. Or maybe send one in his kneecap and let Snake Oil finish him off. Be fitting to have a man like this ended by a shrieking Apache taking his scalp. It would be easy, really. A simple pull of a trigger, and Snake Oil and that squaw lying dead in the back room could have justice. Clear leather, knock back the hammer, and pull the trigger. He felt his hand on his six shooter. One. Two. “We’ll be leaving, Mr. Clark,” he said, placing his hat back on his head. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Snake Oil’s eyes widened as they darted between Adolphus and...
Clark, before he burst his way out the door. Adolphus chased Snake Oil out of the house, nearly knocking into Ed Clark.

Snake Oil spit onto the porch on his way out. “If an Indian did what that man did to one of your white women,” he said, practically ripping Nag’s reins off the hitching post, “you’d send your army to kill an entire village of us!”

“I’m sorry, Snake,” Adolphus shook his head and whispered, “I’ll put out a warrant for his arrest as soon as this business with the Kid is done with.”

Snake Oil laughed as he mounted Nag. “Arrest that man, and they’ll pin a medal to his chest for the amount of scalps he has,” he said. “Don’t kid yourself, ranger.”

Big Owl gave Coyote his great bow and the two brothers looked down the mountain. Coyote saw men below cowering, awaiting their death. Coyote shot the arrow and killed one. When Big Owl saw this he laughed and flew down to pick up the dead man. When he came back to the mountain top he starred to eat the body with a smile. That was when Coyote turned the bow towards he brother.

The pond water slid through Snake Oil’s hands, as he slowly destroyed his moonlit reflection on the other side. They’d set out for hills where Apache Kid was hiding right from Clark’s ranch. It had been a two-hour ride and Snake Oil led the way so he didn’t have to look at the ranger. This little pond in-between the hills was familiar. Snake Oil had been here with the Kid before, though he couldn’t recall when. Trees grew around the watering hole that Snake Oil knelt beside. He liked it here, because as he looked around at the trees, he could see no sign of the White-Man. He knew he wasn’t alone, but still, he liked to pretend.

Snake Oil hummed a song in Apache, yet he had forgotten the meanings of the words and only mimicked the sounds as he recalled
them. “Tl’iish-shik’isn,” a voice called out from beyond a tree.

That was his name, his real name. Not Snake Oil, the name the White-Man had given him. The name they snickered at and thought themselves clever for devising. His name was Tl’iish-shik’isn, Snake Brother. The name the White-Man corrupted, the name he’d forgotten. “Haskay-bay-nay-ntayl?” Snake Brother asked to the voice.

Apache Kid stepped forward from the tree, summoned by his true name. His black hair, ragged and dirty, was tied back with a cloth headband to show his cracking face. He stood before his brother bare-chested, with what must have been his shirt acting as a bandage over his abdomen where Ed Clark had shot him. The Springfield repeater that rested in his hand was the same one he’d had when they’d traveled together. He’d always loved that gun. Snake Oil started to his feet upon seeing his brother.

“No, no,” Kid said. “Don’t get up, I need to sit down.” His brother sat down, slow and deliberate, guarding his wounded side.

“I’ve missed you,” Snake Oil said, rubbing the moist dirt near the pond into his fingers.

Kid tugged at Snake Oil’s Army scout jacket, as he put the Springfield repeater between them. “Still wearing that old thing?” he asked. “Smells like you haven’t washed it since I saw you last.”

Snake Oil sniffed the arm of the jacket. “Probably not,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve been making a name for yourself out here, brother.”

“Not a good one,” his brother looked straight ahead into the pond. “That’s why you came here, with him. Isn’t it?”

He looked at Kid’s face. It had aged so much since he saw him last, his skin cracked like the sun baked dirt of the Mojave. He carried the worry of ten men, and Snake Oil knew he was tired. “The ranger will take you in,” he assured Kid. “He can hand you over in Phoenix, you’ll have a fairer shot at freedom there.”

Kid laughed in his face. “I’m wanted for killing their lawmen. I’ll
get no fair treatment by any white man. No they’ll put a rope around my neck and string me to a tree. I’d rather your ranger’s bullet in my head.”

“I have no love for this ranger,” Snake oil said in a sharp whisper as he leaned close to his brother. “I want to help you.”

Apache Kid shook his head and spit. “Help me? You brought this ranger here to arrest me for crimes I did not commit. You’ve killed me.” He said and stared into Snake Oil’s eyes. “What did they promise you?”

Snake Oil looked down, unsure of what he could say because he could not tell the truth. He could not tell him that he was here because of a drunken night where he had boasted of all his thefts to any ear that would listen. That by noon the next day he had been charged with two dozen crimes, and was to be hanged at dawn. That he pissed himself scared, claiming he knew where the infamous Apache Kid was hiding out in order to save himself from the rope.

“I’m sorry,” is all he could manage.

“I knew it would be you, in the end,” Kid said, his face solemn with disappointment. “I will die tonight, but tell me something first. Tell me what happened to my squaw.”

Snake Oil was not ready to look back at that memory, he didn’t think he’d ever be prepared. “We don’t have much time,” said Snake Oil, as he looked past the trees around him. “The ranger did not give me much time to talk to you.”

“Then you should start talking soon,” his brother said and put a hand on his Springfield.

Coyote shot his brother in the chest.

Big Owl stumbled and flew to Coyote, his mouth wide and ready to taste his brother’s flesh. Coyote loosed another arrow and killed Big Owl on top of that mountain peak. Then he began to feast.

Adolphus had been watching the two Indians by the waterside and listening to the seconds on his pocket watch tick by, but he was still
thinking about Clark and putting a bullet in him. He felt as though he’d let Snake Oil down. They weren’t friends, probably never could be, but he respected Snake enough to know that letting Clark go had been wrong. This kept him in his own head until he heard the sounds of frightened horses behind him. He made his way through the brush back to where they’d tied Kaiser and Nag figuring it would give Snake Oil a couple more minutes alone with this brother. Both horses knocked their hooves against the dirt and whinnied their nerves. Nag was known for being easily startled by the surprise jackrabbit, but even Kaiser was spooked. “Hush you two!” Adolphus gave a sharp whisper to the two beasts.

Then he saw the coyote in the distance. Its tan coat so much like the dirt it walked on that it seemed more like a part of the earth. Adolphus half expected it to turn tail and run at the sight of him, most of those little scavengers did, but not this one. This one looked at him, its black eyes staring into his own. These eyes didn’t look at him the way Kaiser did, they stared at him the way one man does to another. Adolphus felt tempted to talk to it, as though it would understand him like a man. The coyote walked toward him, its paws moving silently as it closed in on him. The horses cried louder and wrenched back and forth, begging for freedom. Adolphus pulled out one of his six shooters and pointed it at the coyote.

A single gunshot echoed through the forest behind him.
She told me her name was Emma, and later, Kateryna. She told me her favorite city was Chicago, but it was too cold to imagine living there. “Colder than the Ukraine?” She told me yes. She told me about a man who couldn’t stop shaking. She didn’t notice I had been shaking too. She told me I was younger than she expected. Younger than her 24 years. She was kind, and gentle with me.
Travelling in Silence: Memories of a Year Abroad

According to the collegiate records, I went to Jerusalem for nine months to study Arabic; but in reality, when my friends’ mothers ask me where I’ve been and what I’ve been doing and I respond with “studying Arabic in Jerusalem,” I am lying. Within my attempt to pursue a degree in Peace & Conflict Studies, I wanted to go somewhere where I might see and live and touch the impact of the latter part of the field. Nine months in the Holy City would ultimately take my youthful conceptions of war as a grand display of metaphysical heroism, and break them down into something much colder in its fundamentality. Jerusalem allowed me to live in a place where peace is not felt to be the end of a conflict, but is solemnly accepted as the long eerie silence in between explosions.

When I was a small child I often thought about being in a war. I remember being on a top secret mission in the woods behind my house with my big brother and two of our loyal comrades. Our objective was a pile of rusted scrap metal dumped between two large boulders on the perimeter of a field where the grass grew undisturbed. The position was heavily fortified with bad guys and my brother explained to us all that there would undoubtedly be casualties. Armed with a grey plastic revolver tucked into my belt and four pinecone hand grenades, I volunteered to lead the charge and descend myself into the mortal perils of glory. I ran forward through a maze of thorn bushes scraping against my cheeks as my new velcro-fastened shoes became weighted with
muddy water. My brother yelled “sniper!” from his position and I let out a pained scream.

“I’m hit!” I cried out as I ran forward with my left arm hidden behind my back. As my legs drove me onward and my head bobbed swiftly to dodge the thorns, I made the sound of bullets hissing through the breaks in the air around me. As I approached the perimeter of our objective I fell to my knees while grabbing my stomach. The enemy had managed to gun me down, but not before my brother and our fellow soldiers were able to gain the advantage and conquer our military objective, a forgotten metallic mound. Lying in the mud, writhing in agony while I pretended to be mortally wounded, I sneakedily opened one eye and glanced over as my brother mounted a stick with a rag tied to it upon the scrap heap which we had now conquered. We had won the war, and I was the hero.

There is something fundamental, even hauntingly spiritual, about the nature of war within the human condition which has always served to illuminate the darker and more curious corners of my imagination. I went to the Middle East because it is the geographic embodiment of political instability and is seen from my small corner of the world as an incomprehensible monsoon of swirling conflicts. Oddly enough when I finally found myself dwelling in a region of the world where wars are ingrained into the fabric of people’s identity, it was not the violence that captured my mid-lecture daydreams and insomniatic ponderings. In Jerusalem it was the trees, for they are rooted in the city’s divisions. Jerusalem is a city at the center of the world, in both the literal and metaphorical senses. As with all centers, it is a reflection of the corners or the extremes from whence it derives. Jerusalem itself is a living, breathing, sometimes gasping, conflict. It is as if everything within the city is somehow at odds with a counterpart. It is the architecturally inhabited embodiment of a clash between religions, peoples, politics, and civilization itself. Even the land upon which the city sleeps cannot find peace, as sand always seems to clash with soil while the evergreens
of the city’s west do battle with the spikes of the eastern palms.

While in Jerusalem there may dwell the oldest conflict in the Middle East, it is by no means singular in its occurrence or in its tragedy. Whether in Syria, where half of a country with a population of twenty million people has been forced from their homes while hundreds of thousands have died beneath the rubble of their own possessions; or in Egypt, where the angelic hopes of a revolution have been swept into an abyss of despotism which has proven inept in the wake of a growing terrorist threat, it would seem from the periphery that conflict is intrinsic to life in this part of the world. Puzzlingly, in my memories of my travels to these places, it is the seemingly mundane which lingers still in my thoughts.

On a road trip to the Israel-Syrian border, I found myself falling into various wonderings about the flowers on the side of the road. As we drove along the Golan Heights on our way to hike Mount Hermon, the charred tanks left to rust along the side of the road and the perpetual “caution: landmines” postings almost seemed to blend into the ecology of the landscape. Just over the border were a series of towns where ISIS and the Syrian regime have been bound in battle for nearly five years, and where swirling plumes of smoke were often catapulted into the peaks of the sky. Yet when I now search the valves of my memory for glimpses of the Syrian border, I still see bushells of sapphire and violet and amber nestled together next to a “caution: landmines” sign. They seemed so fragile and yet forever unyielding in their depth into the soil. When cars drove past the petals of silk and velvet, each flower bowed in the wind, sending off travelers with a salutary respect.

From the top of the hill in Al-Azhar Park in the center of Cairo, you can see the residential happenings of ten million people. Dozens of minarets poke out towards the clouds from amongst dense bushels of concrete and stone. When looking eastward you can see the mighty citadel of the sultan Saladin who conquered Jerusalem from the
Crusaders in the 12th century, with the light blue glass domes of the Muhammad Ali mosque reflecting the glimmer of the Egyptian sun. The Al-Azhar Park is only a short walk up the street from a famous mosque and university of the same name. Along with centuries of scholars and thinkers, Al Azhar mosque was also once the place of worship for Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current emir of Al Qaeda. I went to the mosque to see the centuries-old white marble columns and then relax barefoot on the carpet where I could close my eyes and hear the echoing of a chanted faith vibrate through the stones.

Walking within the park along the meticulously tended pathways flanked by lavender bushes and and wild berries, I tried to analyze the cosmopolitan conglomerate walking around me. There were women in black burqas covering their skin from head to toe pushing their children in neon green strollers, and there were young girls in jean skirts with dyed blonde hair sitting together but enjoying the communal solitude of their smartphones. There were young boys listening to rap music and smoking hookah and there were old men wearing traditional robes with wooden canes. As I began to walk back down the hill at the end of the park I saw an image that will never escape the conscious of my mind. A man and his wife were walking a few yards ahead of me, holding hands and whispering to each other. The man wore jean pants and a sports jacket and the woman wore a full black burqa, making her eyes the only visible part of her anatomy. The woman tugged on the man's wrist and playfully whispered something into his ear as the two of them walked onto the grass in front of a large blossoming rose bush. The man took out a gold iphone 7 and handed it to his wife, who held it stretched out with both arms in front of her and tilted her head in alternating directions as she took selfies of her and her husband.

A wise man in Jerusalem once told me that the opposite of conflict is not peace, but rather it is harmony. Peace can be negotiated and crafted by those who rule, only to then be shattered by tear gas or
suicide belts. Harmony, on the other hand, is drawn from a conflict like poison from a wound and is the exhausted residue of coexistence which lingers after the hatred and violence have finally run their course. The first terrorist attack to occur in Jerusalem while I was there awakened me to the realization that I may have been living in a place which had attained a level of peace since the dark days of the early 2000’s, but was still a long way from achieving harmony. During the second week of my semester, an administrator, looking flustered as she aggressively grasped her clipboard, shoved her head into my Arabic course and asked, “Is everyone here? There has been a terrorist attack at Ammunition Hill.” Ammunition Hill was the closest train station to my apartment and was used by myself and all of my friends to go to and from school. A Palestinian on a motorcycle pulled up to the train station during the morning commute, and opened fire on the crowd with an automatic rifle, killing a 70 year old woman and a police officer. Within 12 hours the trains returned, the shattered glass was gathered from the scene, and the stains of blood were cleaned off the road before they had a chance to dry and leave a marking of sorrow. People grieved for their dead and debated security measures in the parliament, and within a day the city had returned to peace. All was quiet once again.
Darlings, I’ve miscrafted
my O’s, they look foolish,
like G’s—the worst letter!

Now I’ll never be properly understood.

I should have been more
careful, came correct—eaten
a balanced breakfast, worn deodorant
instead of smoke, appropriately
apostrophized the graffiti
in the bathroom stall—but I stalled, cracked
my gearshift at the base
like an As-Seen-On-TV garden hose—

I haven’t been hydrated since the summer morning
we gave the bum talking of Mark Twain a dollar
and he went literally cartwheeling away
into the thunderstorm opening from above.

Darlings—let’s get high
in a hotel bathroom while the shower’s
dragon breath makes us fear for the paint
on the walls, one last time,
while there’s still some before left in us. Before
the Debussy statue we forgot to steal walks off,
humming through a new moon. Before the pipe
breaks and our youth floods with pond scum
and other misplaced fluids. Before the lights come up, and we forget the lyric the last song opened on, and how we felt like criminals singing it softly, only for ourselves.
There Is No Bowing

Go: to the movies
to school
to bed
To: home. America, behind our backs,
do you call us kaddish, elegy, forty
first sacrament, do you call us child?

Why does our name sound like the dead people’s?

Auld lang syne, america, aaron copland wrote us

our funeral song

he didn’t leave out the firing sounds.

But you knew that, distant parent. All sunburnt, all sexless,
all limp and forced into fruition, all slow changelings, all of you statuesque—

You call me a ghost! You hand me a shovel! Why are all our characters invisible?
We have been digging our graves, we cannot go outside without falling into one. we cannot go into you, without deciding which thing to lose.

On earth you are unfinished. In heaven you are a gun.

Arms dealer, dad, can I call you?
can I take out a loan, to watch my little sister grow up> what about my daughter?

<insert pre requisite for loss>

Can I call you, if I can not touch you· Can I ask you, to keep me floating?

Why do you hunt the dead? We are already facing the ground.

Go: to the movies
to school
to bed
to: home, to—meet you, halfway between death and prayer, hold us,

hold us, hold.

for auld lang syne, For auld lang syne, my dear,
'O'er the land of the dead and the home of the dead'
Kale Connerty

African Violets

My mother’s new detergent pods
won’t dissolve, just clump against the
washing machine’s sides, build up as gunk.

In a 4-pint Pyrex full of hot water, my dad
pre-dissolves one, yells, “Ready.” So I step through
piles of laundry waiting on the floor, always

waiting. This house feels familiar like a signature,
like drawing a star in the margins: always leading
to a few points. I wake up to fold, pack and leave

the next morning. My mother is washing dishes—
always something to wash. She drinks tea, asks
if I want a cup, puts the water on. I’m pulled
to the fridge, open it and see the Pyrex, full of coffee,
sitting on a note from my brother—don’t drink,
for the week—next to my dad’s note—Did you thoroughly

wash that measuring cup? My mother pours the kettle
over a cup, gives the teabag three bounces
then takes the washed pots to stack in the
too-small cabinet. Kneeling on the floor, she pulls
out potless lids and tries to find their matches, reaches
her arms into the back, finally discovers the lids

are from my grandmother’s pots that she’d thrown
She leaves the room. I sip my tea. She comes back

with a plant, says Nana gave it to her:
an African Violet. “It doesn’t grow well here.
It needs east-facing sun—no, or was it... I don’t know.

I thought you and your roommates might want it.”
Off fleshy stems its round leaves, all facing the same
way, grow bigger like waves the farther from

the root, and are covered in a layer of short down.
I take it from her, thank her, and tell her we love plants,
balancing it on my laundry on the way out the door.
I brush your hair from the bottom up
like backtracking through backlogged clogs,
pools of chakras opening, oils
as energy spreading, and feel your voice
humming through the wooden spine. I brush
your hair while we talk about our mothers
and fathers, about being colorblind
and men and having one-track minds,
our perceptions, how the way we treat
our friends says more about us than they do,
about all we could do and all the studying
always to be done. I use the brush
I bought you when you said you didn’t have
one, while we sit on your bed and for once
I don’t think about posture, nor about counting.
No brush. No time to care for your hair
or shower, for sleeping or eating, for running,
for drinking, for sitting outside and reading—
no time, perhaps, for this.
Kale Connerty

Detour

I sat on the bench waiting for you to return.

I looked out at the graves, the smell of expired Christmas decorations venting from the melted snow.

I chewed on French fries and over how cemeteries were once considered picnic spots, places to taste Nature. I watched a bird pick at a seasoned wreath and thought about what I was missing in Spanish class: the past tense - what used to be, what was. I sprawled my body off of the bench, shoes spread into the brewed grass, relaxed into that fluid space between
death and life,  
felt either completely seen  
or completely not. You  
returned, sunlight 

sponging your teary 
eyes, and we  
went on to Boston.
I shuffle through the door on leaden legs, and the floorboards creak beneath me. The moonlight gleams upon your skin, and our room smells like fresh laundry. Your head is heavy and your eyes are tired, but you smile when I whisper your name.
The southeast side of the island
is all rocky crags and cliff faces,
surging slate gray waves that smash up
against the white-gray outcrops.
The chasm where we sit for the morning
is called Devil’s Den: big rising rocks
on either side. The faulted, weathered granite
makes little spaces where gulls nest and hide. In July, the young can run and shriek
but are clumsily incapable of flight.
We chase the little birds, jumping
from rock to rock across tidal pools
and little coves, diving to grab them,
the screaming, frightened young
as their parents circle and swoop, swoop,
circle, and dive.

We band them, placing dull malleable
metal bands on the left legs; large, colored plastic
bands on the right. We put them inside
long cloth bags so they can’t see,
we work quietly on their protruding
legs, reptilian scaled with feet still warm
from running across the heated rocks.

I am kneeling over a Herring gull, 50 days old,
holding it in place, pressing its useless wings
against its body, trying to ease its panic. My sister
moves with quickness, pliers lined up beside her.
“Shit,” she says, assessing a gap in the metal band, looking for the tool to close it. She uses the slip-joint. I watch it slip, snap mostly shut. “Good enough.”

The first step the bird takes after release reveals the injury. The pressure pushes the fractured bone through its reptile skin. Its wings flap against the faulted rock cubby it’s run into, and I turn back to where my sister sits.

“We broke its leg.” My voice is quiet and guarded from the rest of the group. “It’s open. We need to - “

“Come on,” she says, motions with her hand for me to lead the way. I take her to the spot where its still flapping, trying to fly. The white and hollow bone protrudes. My sister places a hand on its back, pressing its body against the granite as we stand over it. “I can,” I say, putting my own hands on hers, taking her place as she pulls her folding field knife from her pocket. She puts a hand across its head and bends it long sinuous neck a bit, palpating the ridges of its vertebrae and whispering to it, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

The cut is quick and deep and I feel its wing push hard against my hands, its tiny nails scratch the rocks beneath as it tries to stand. “It always takes so long, why does it always take so long?” My sister’s hand is sticky and red, and the young gull blinks. She turns to me to avoid its eyes, for a moment. Looking back at the young gull, she says “It’s ok little buddy, it’s ok,” using the name she calls her two young sons when they are being very brave.
Different Roads

Two little girls in their winter coats
are playing groceries across the street
from the cemetery when I park
to get a high that tastes like vinegar
in the back of my throat.
One little girl pushes a pink plastic carriage.
The other drops an empty cardboard box in
and I fall asleep. When I wake
up the sun is pushing
against the edges of the buildings,
laying pink bright hands on them
like fingers over a flashlight,
blurring the edges in hazed red.
The little girls have abandoned the carriage
and are leaning against the fence
like tired workers, exhausted from imagination.
Running alongside this road
there is another, perfectly parallel,
where I have died and these girls
find me, slumped and blue-lipped.
They watch me as I pull away,
heads tilted, pink sneakers kicking old snow.
Mary Everett

Nothing Stirred

I.

It was day 32 when Kiara killed and ate her first gull. She was surprised at how long she held out, how hungry she allowed herself to become before trapping the gull under a heavy box of rebar and chicken wire, pulling back the mesh stretched across the top to reach the bird, smashing its head with a rock in a blow that spattered blood across her face. The pattern of its spray reminded her of standing on the island’s coast before a storm, but the hot blood didn’t soothe her sunburned cheeks the way the cold gray water off the rocks did. She wiped it from her cheek with the dirty arm of her shirt and pulled the cage off the gull, grabbing it by its legs the way her father would pick up ducks when he took her hunting. He would swing the lifeless bird by his side while their dog, a golden retriever named Trapper, loped behind still sniffing at the thing, wagging his tail at a job well done. She wondered if her father would be proud of her.

II.

32 days before, Kiara had woken up in her bunk room to discover her roommate was already gone. An hour and 25 minutes remained until breakfast. She strolled down the rocky path from the dorm to the rest of the research island’s campus. The buildings were dark. From an open window on the second floor of the staff dormitory, she saw a curtain
flutter out, then fall against the outside sill. She looked out from her high spot down to the gully on the North end of the island, where the songbird banding station was. The light above the door that signaled ongoing banding was off. *Maybe they’re all at the misting nets, she thought. Maybe they’ve got a good one.*

As she worked with the large, aggressive gulls on the island, Kiara always welcomed working with the delicate passerines stuck in the misting nets, tangled and inverted in its silken threads. She enjoyed watching as the song bird banders carefully extricated each one, placing it in a paper bag which they would clip to their cloth aprons with a wooden clothespin; it was maddeningly gentle work, wordless and soft and in complete opposition to her own loud and screeching daily tasks of monitoring baby gulls, defended by parents that swooped and dive-bombed overhead.

As she descended the stone staircase to the trail, she named each bird she had seen in the nets, one bird per step: *Setophaga magnolia, Setophaga petichia, Vireo olivaceous, Coccyzus americanus, Coccyzus erythropthalmus.* She noticed the door to the paint shed, swung open. There were several 5-gallon plastic buckets of paint in various states of disarray by the door—one with a lid off, the other tipped over, leaking thick gray paint onto the grass. Another bucket was off to the side, a paintbrush and wooden stirring stick placed on top, ready for use. Kiara thought it strange, this one bucket, spilling its contents onto the ground. The engineers were careful and precise.

She stood staring at the scene before a gull screamed down a warning call at her from the roof of the shed. She stepped towards the door, beginning to wonder if perhaps something had happened. *Don’t be stupid,* she told herself. *It’s just a little spilled paint. No use crying over spilled paint,* she thought, and smiled. She thought about her field mate. How she would have said that aloud to her if she was here. “No use crying over spilled paint, Addie,” she’d say. And so, she did, to no one at all.
III.

The skin of the gull was thick. She had decided that she should skin the bird rather than pluck it. Her father had told her once that some birds that fed on fish stored the flavor of their diet in their fat and had to be skinned. Having seen gulls regurgitate plastic bags and soiled diapers with frequency, she did not desire such seasoning. She set herself to task, palpating the bird’s breast to find the sharp ridge of the keel. Using a scalpel from a dissection kit she found in the marine biology lab behind the student dorms, she sliced along it, pulling the skin to each side. She had decided to roast it, since the oven in the kitchen still worked. It tasted strange and acrid, but Kiara could not tell if it the flavour was real or imagined.

IV.

On day 57, she heard the fog horn of the lighthouse blast once, then never again.

V.

It was when she spoke out loud, there in the paint shed with the tipped over bucket of gray paint just outside, that she realized she was alone. It was when she heard her words reverberate off the walls of the darkened paint shed, echoing back to her ears with a singularity that sank her stomach deep, like a stone slicing through water to the ocean floor. She stayed there, standing, peering into the darkness of the shed, trying to name the feeling she had. If she could name it, she could know it, like a songbird. After a few minutes and no answer, Kiara stepped out of the shed and headed for the songbird station. The mist nets were hung in the bushes; she could see them waving in the air.
Opening the door of the station to find no one did not come as a surprise, but her heart quickened when she realized that she would need to take down the nets, and any birds in them. She was used to the large tarsi of the gulls, their thick bodies and seemingly unbreakable bones. She was afraid that, without the knowledge of how to properly remove something as small as a sparrow, the muscle memory of her hands would snap their necks or break their wings. But when she got to the mist nets, there were no birds. Thankful that she did not need to free anything, it wasn’t until she returned to the station, folding the nets as best she could, that she thought of what the net’s emptiness might mean.

VI.

At the end of day 1, Kiara sat on the deck of the dorm building, watching the lights from the mainland. She had tried the radios. She had tried the internet. The telephones. A satellite phone she found tucked away in the infirmary. The lights of the bridges and buildings along the coast flickered as they always had. Without a way to reach it, the mainland was meaningless—a series of flashing lights, a diffuse brightness on the horizon, and nothing more. She had walked to the dock earlier, where the boats were tied up, only to find that the large vessels were not moored there. She had thought she felt tears in her throat then, a hard lump like the stone from her stomach bouncing back up to the water’s surface. But no tears came. Instead, she started up the trail to the mess hall to take stock.

VII.

By day 27, she had run out of leftovers, canned goods, dried goods, and fresh foods. She had rationed after day 2, when she had eaten a large breakfast in preparation of a day’s work in the field. She at first felt silly
donning her hiking boots that morning and taking her field notebook out with her, but she pushed through anyways. She recorded re-sights of gulls banded in previous years, noted behavior, checked nests.

When she returned to the office, she looked up every bird’s history in the project database. Having always cursed the rudimentary database for being somewhat archaic and not available via an online system, she was glad for it off-line quality now. It was a comfort to have something singular like that. She methodically entered each re-sight, noting when the bird was banded, at what age it was first captured, whether it had been monitored since then, whether it had been seen off-island.

In the days following, before the electricity cut out on day 48, she would sit each night and enter every bird that she had seen that day, savoring the data and the connection it offered to another human being, however remote its history was to her present position. She would read the names of people who had banded the birds, re-sighted them, recaptured and re-banded them when their large, bright colored bands became so weather worn that their letters and numbers could no longer be read. She imagined the praise she would get, when her project manager came to save her and saw that she had continued her work. She had purpose at first, and a little bit of faith. When she killed her first gull, she stopped imagining being saved.

IIX.

On day 67 Kiara went out to the colony, armed with her rebar and chicken wire trap and her notebooks. No longer able to look up birds in the database, she had decided to start a database of her own. In the meantime, she intended to trap a gull. She was becoming efficient at killing and skinning, and was getting used to the somewhat fishy taste of gull meat. She lugged the trap up the steep walls of the cove to the ridge where the gulls nested. Her feet were tired, and her shoes had lost
most of their support and cushioning, the soles wearing down to thin slivers of rubber, making the jagged rocks a source of discomfort as she climbed. She threw the trap up before her and stepped hard onto a thin sheet of granite, attempting to use the leverage afforded her to push up and over the ridge. But the thin sheet gave way, and Kiara’s leg slipped down, slamming her knee against the rock face as she slid, down and over, onto the rocky shore below.

She felt the pain first in her lower back, and knew that she was bleeding. She felt the wetness pooling beneath her. She looked up at the cove above her and saw her trap sitting on the edge. She tried to roll herself over but discovered that her collarbone wouldn’t allow it, the arm was unmovable. She reached with her other hand behind her, searching across her back for the wound. Her hand touched rock, embedded into her flank. She weighed her decisions, wondering if the bleeding would intensify if she managed to roll herself off. How deep could it be?

She tried to push herself over, but failed, skidding her hand across the rock, cutting her palm. She stopped struggling, and lay, still. Two gulls drifted down from the cove, landing on a rock above her. Still, they watched her. Kiara closed her eyes. The gulls descended.
I took myself to the mist and let my body decay there. I turned to flowers on the slopes. They sang of mountains and forests. They sang of the horns that curled from my head. They called me the ram and asked why I didn’t stay the stars. I turned my petals to the sun. I did not reply. Perhaps, in due time, I would melt back into what I’d been: an apparition that did not heft swords, that would not heft swords. This was before they shot arrows through my chest and said, “You bear the name of a god. War stains your skin. Pick up the sword and fight, child. Pick up the sword and fight.”
Fruit on the Subway Floor, Rotting

i.

A blind man with a cane, swinging it back and forth and asking me what was happening. “What can you see?” he asked, his voice old, cracking, pillars in a storm. I looked around at the tracks and I saw nothing. I looked at the ceiling and saw fissures in the cement. They spelled out a warning, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Bast was smiling at me from the top of a pyramid, Ra above her, a boat below them. I watched them all row downstream as the train came past. Even the pyramid. Even that.

ii.

A blind woman came to my door, sunlight in the cradle of her hands. “Please,” she said, “I’ve been carrying this.” I watched her leave it on my doorstep. “Please,” she said again, “I can’t keep carrying this.”

iii.

I took the train home. On the subway floor: fruit, rotting. Flies flew in formation. A blind man waved his cane and said, “What do you see?” I looked at the fruit and I looked at the fruit. I looked for a long time. I missed my train, the one that came afterwards, the one after that. It was just me, the blind man, the fruit. “What do you see?” he asked again. “I see fruit on the subway floor, rotting,” I said. “Look harder,” he said, and I peered into the fruit until I was peering at myself. A pool of water in a hidden grove. The clouds in the shape of my father. I looked up and I looked up, but I could never remember who I was. He ran across the sky in constellations. I chased him on the ground. He never looked back, only told me, “No matter where you go, there you are.” I collapsed
in the grass and sobbed into my hands, for days. Trains came and went. The fruit rotted. The blind man swung his cane. Finally, finally, I got up, took the first train home. Sat on my doorstep and looked at the sunlight. Looked and looked. My father, the clouds, and me. My father. The clouds. Me.
She fastened her seatbelt and put her seat in an upright position as the nose of the aircraft started dipping towards the city beneath. Victorian mansions by the shore lined the fading background of office buildings. The latter just large enough to impress the eye, yet too small to reach the blanket of grey the plane had just broken through. “This is the captain speaking [...]” looking down on her soon-to-be-home she tried fighting the hint of doubt creeping up on her mind “[...] average temperatures and cloudy but dry [...]” An approved visa does not guarantee entry into the United States. The plane rattled and shook, one could hear the air getting thicker and the wind blowing stronger. Then, front first, the wheels touched the ground and after a short up-and-down springing, the pilot began to maneuver the plane towards its assigned lot. “It is my pleasure to welcome you to Boston! The crew and I hope [...]” The DHS and CBP officials at the port-of-entry have authority to permit or deny admission to the United States.

Hundreds of tired feet moved in almost synchronized strides over the polished floor of Boston Logan—a centipede with never more than two feet alike, it seemed, or a rural train rolling out of one station into the next. One wagon after another came to a halt, until every passenger that stepped out of the Boing 747 just a minute ago was separated into their respective line; US-Citizens, ESTA, Visa, Diplomats. The US-section moved so quickly, no one paid attention to the hordes of travelers waiting to step through “the open doors” of the melting-pot, the country of possibilities and freedom, the American Dream. The Diplomat-line was empty, as always. Authority to permit or deny admission to the
United States. She observed a young man standing nervously in line, fiddling with his papers, ready to be asked the “few standard questions”. The DHS and CBP officials may conduct random personal interviews at the port-of-entry. All questions must be answered to your best knowledge. While the line moved another step forward, the young man, fiddling nervously a second ago, was escorted into a separate room for what presumably was a random personal interview. Permit or deny admission to the United States. The CBP officer glanced down at her documents. “What is your motivation for coming to the United States, Miss?” “Graduate Studies, Sir.” “Do you plan on engaging in any illegal activities?” “No.” Permit or deny admission. “Do you carry any illegal substances with you? Any food, agricultural produce?” “No.” “Enjoy your stay, Miss.” And he handed her the documents and she stepped into her new home. Freedom at last? She thought as she began her American Dream.
GENNARO VARRIALE GONZALEZ/O criaturo e o’ carr’armàt
Welcome to Standing Rock

The last stretch of our journey was about the width of my thumb on the map, but it took almost eight hours. An ice storm had swept across the border of North and South Dakota overnight and rendered the roads nearly un-traversable. Winds swept snow drifts from the endless plains across the highways coating them in a solid inch or so of hard packed snow. In the few areas where salt had been laid down, solid sheets of ice formed as the temperatures remained well under the freezing point of salt water. That morning my father and I left the motel early; my Corolla—weighed down with around 800 pounds of firewood, food, and various other supplies—seemed to barely clear the ground. The storm had frozen my doors solid shut, and the temperatures had dipped so low that we had to scrape ice from the outside and inside of the windows. There were times when the only thing keeping us on the road was its straightness; even then, the weight off the wood in the back teased the car. With every slight application of the breaks the car would start to fishtail. It was a nerve-racking, white-knuckled dance of breaking with the engine and the E-brake that separated us and the half-buried cars on the side of the road, but we did it. Finally, a red flag peaked over a dune in the horizon. It was soon joined by many others as we approached the camp.
Flag Road

We were greeted by two men at the entrance. One stood tall and skinny, the other sat lower to the ground, like a tree next to a bush. Both squinted off the sunlight reflected from the snow, showing that their teeth had a 75 percent attendance.

“What can I do for you today?” said the tree, “No drugs, no alcohol.”

The bush continued to stare at the vehicle with the same three-quarter smile. I wasn’t quite sure what to say so I figured I’d explain myself.

“Hi, I’m the class president of my high school.”

The tree just stared.

“Well… um, I did a supply drive at my high school and we have some supplies here for you guys.”

“Alrighty then, if you don’t mind I’m just going to have to ask you to open your trunk to make sure you’re not bringing anything in that shouldn’t be here.”

I was surprised at his matter-of-fact way about things; I had after all driven all the way from Massachusetts, over 1500 miles, in a Corolla loaded way over capacity. I wasn’t looking for him to start bathing my feet, but it just seemed weird that he sat as stone-faced as a mountain. Nevertheless, I proceeded to show him the contents of our Corolla. We had taken out the back seat and loaded the wood there. The rest we put in the trunk along with some food and blankets. Only when he saw all the wood did his expression slightly change… slightly.

“Where did you say you were from again?”

“Massachusetts.”

“That’s a decent haul there. Well, you can just follow this path here that’ll take you to the food and supply tents. Wood is kept mostly at the gates so we’ll take a few bundles here.”

The bush looked up at the notion that he now had a task to perform,
but still remained in a silent squint. The tree continued.

“By the way, any of you guys got a cigarette?”

The bush looked up again.

My father and I both shook our heads no, but offered a handful of handwarmers as a substitute before heading in to the field of tents and teepees that clustered around a path lined with flags from each tribe.

**Wait, before you go**

We drove throughout the camp, dropping off supplies at their respective tents. The ice-storm had done a number on the camp as well. Nearly half of the protesters (mostly the non-natives) quit trying to fight the elements and abandoned their tents to go to a recreational center a few miles down the road. The remains were several collapsed and partially buried tents, many with sleeping bags and clothes still inside. I remember thinking *it’s very possible that there is a body inside one of these tents, and it most likely won’t be found until everything thaws out in the spring.*

Before arriving, I had been connected with one of the veterans who volunteered to support the tribes. He was a relative of a friend of mine and when word got out that I would be heading this way, I was quickly supplied with his contact information and we had exchanged a few brief texts over the past three days of our journey. Suddenly, a few hours before we arrived the texting stopped. All I had to go on was that people at the camp called him Squirrel.

We asked around at each supply tent to see if anybody knew his whereabouts but nobody seemed to. Eventually we found ourselves at the exit gate unloading the last of the wood. It seemed that the camp had been relatively anti-climactic, there only seemed to be a handful of people, and I think both of us were wondering if we had just signed ourselves up for six days of driving only to drop off the supplies. A red-
headed young man had helped us unload the last of our wood and spoke with us for a bit; he was the first one in the camp to hold any type of conversation with us.

“Gee thanks, you guys. This surely helps a lot. Yeah, Mass is really nice. I lived pretty close to Boston, I had a girlfriend there for a while, but I just recently moved out here to help these guys, and I’ll stay as long as it takes.”

Despite smelling like a through-hiker and talking like a typical surfer dude, he proved to be a very decent human being. His thoughts wandered and tagged-along here and there, but for the most part he was very knowledgeable about current events and had a reasonable view on several issues. We talked until the sky began to turn a little pink, finally discerning itself from the grey-white that claimed it and the land during most of the day. My father and I looked at each other, and somewhat reservedly decided that it was probably time for us to head out.

“Oh, you guys aren’t staying?”

“No, we got about six hours of driving before we get to the nearest motel, and these roads are tough enough in daylight”

“Wait, before you go, you got to check out the hill, a few protesters went up there a little while ago to pray and they got surrounded by the DAPL PD so we surrounded them and it was like a stand-off, ya know?”

This seemed to spark a vein of enthusiasm as he said it, “I think things are dying down now but you should still go check it out, that way you wouldn’t have driven all the way here just to, you know, not see the camp.”

My father and I looked at each other once again. It was true, it would be a shame to have come all this way without seeing at least a little bit of what it was like.

“Wanna check it out?” I asked.

“Ummmmmm... yah, sure” said my dad, clearing trying to suppress his desire to do so, in hopes of appearing as a mature reasonable adult.
So, we set off towards the generator lights that lined the crest of a large hill behind the camp marking where the Dakota Access Pipeline company clashed with the Sioux territory.

That’s why they call him that

As we started on our way, several clusters of little black dots slowly trickled down the steep hillside. Despite the sure sign that whatever was happening there was now over, my father and I continued towards the hill. We passed several groups of people heading back from the hill. Some spoke in their native tongues, others whooped their age-old war cries. Some wore traditional feathers, and one group held two tribe flags with one man in the middle carrying an Oxen scull around his neck. That was when I heard it.

_Cshhh_ “Squirrel, you still up at the hill? Over.”

_Cshhh_ “Yeah, I’m just wrapping up a few things up here.” _Cshhh_ “I’ll be down in about five minutes. Charlie got the sled?”

_Cshhh_ “Yeah he’s getting it as we speak.”

I walked over to the lady in partial fatigues holding the walkie-talkie.

“Excuse me? Do you know Squirrel?”

“Yeah, he’s one of the medics here. Are you hurt?”

“No, we just came here from Mass to drop off some supplies. I was in contact with him for the past few days and was hoping to meet him.”

“Ohhh, I see, cool.” _Cshhh_ “Squirrel, there’s a kid down here, too, says he wanted to meet up with you.”

_Cshhh_ “Oh yeah, is his name Liam?”

I nodded.

_Cshhh_ “Yah.”

_Cshhh_ “Tell him I’ll be down in three minutes.”

Sure enough, in three minutes his figure appeared. He was tall and
lean, moved fast, and talked faster. He immediately shoved a granola bar in his mouth, reorganized his medical supply bag, drank a bag of MRE water, and formally introduced himself to me while still chewing. That’s why they called him Squirrel.

Dogsled

“Buddy, have you been able to see the camp? We just came from the hill where DAPL had some non-permitted activity going on. We are heading to the bridge next. You guys are more than welcome to join us, the elders are having a prayer ceremony there in about an hour.”

There was no way you could have made a more appealing offer to my father and me at that moment. Without hesitation, we agreed and started after Squirrel who had already begun to walk towards the group with the two flags and the scull. They were circled around a pine dogsled one of them had thrown together to carry supplies to the bridge. Squirrel laughed at its structure.

“Looks like one of those fuggin things you’d make as a boy scout—what is that made out of, a pallet?” he said jokingly.

“I worked with what I got, alright?” chuckled the proud builder. “It holds at least.”

“That’s all we need it to do,” said Squirrel pushing it back and forth a few times to see how it glided. “Alright we’ll tow it behind his truck,” he said, pointing to a nearby pickup. “Any volunteers to ride?”

Nobody said anything so I stepped forward and offered my services. February of that year, while visiting my brother in Alaska, I had the distinct pleasure of learning the basics of operating a dogsled from the winner of the 2016 Yukon Quest 300, Hesse Holmes. I’ll spare that story for another essay. Anyway, running a dogsled is pretty easy, with the exception of communicating with the dogs. Fortunately, the pickup solved that problem so we were set. We hitched the dogsled to the back of the pickup and started through the camp towards the bridge.
Time Travel

Soon as the truck set out, the familiar lurch of the dogsled reminded me to bend my knees and hold on tight. The sky was now settling in to dusk and I suddenly began to realize just where I was. The scrape of the dogsled masked the motor of the truck, there were no highways anywhere near to make any type of noise, and with the exception of the generator lights now behind me, there was no unnatural light. The teepees stood out elegantly against the darkening sky, their patterns dancing in the shadows of the nearby fires. A group of elders in the distance sang a low throaty prayer to the steady beat of wood and animal hide drums, while younger Apache and Kamancheh members let out individual war cries that echoed far beyond the clouds their breath created. It was as if I had slipped through a crack in space and found myself in the time when there was no need to protest oil pipelines. We drove by a corral that contained several horses, some covered in war paint, some under classic Indian blankets. They whinnied as we passed by, which only added to the false sense of nostalgia that I picked up from watching old Westerns. Soon enough, we pulled out of the camp and on to the road that led to the bridge. I left the old-world behind me and headed toward something completely new.

The Bridge

It was a small bridge, hardly a bridge at all. The type of bridge that you barely notice when you cross it, and probably wouldn’t if it weren’t for the guard rails. To block traffic, there were jersey borders lined up the entire length of the bridge, all leading up to a set that crossed its width. Snow had built up around them creating a massive barrier where the DAPL police had placed razor wire on top. Opposite the border sat two large generator lights glaring down at the protesters. They
were so bright you could just barely make out the headlights of the
Humvees behind them, fully equipped with water and sound cannons.
The occasional shimmer would suggest that a soldier was walking in
between them, holding a rifle loaded with standard crowd control, less
than lethal, rubber bullets. I wondered if perhaps I had left the country.
It looked like a war scene.

**Songs, Swears, and Prayers**

A palpable tension rose in the air as more protesters arrived, and
more Humvees pulled in. One uniform with a megaphone tried to say
something like “Go home,” but he was only met with angry frustrated
voices... “This is our home,” “This is our land,” “You go home.” Squirrel
and the other medics began setting up a station under the bridge in case
anyone got hurt. I squirmed my way to the very front and stood shoulder
to shoulder with the protesters as we heard a very faint beep, followed
by a crackling voice over one of the soldier’s radios, “Ready the water
cannons.”

I did not see the threat that these people apparently posed to the law
enforcement, but their mere presence seemed to unsettle the guards.
After a few moments of quarrelling between the one man with the
megaphone and several angry protesters, a native woman just behind
me began to sing. It was an old native song, and soon the elders and
many of the other protesters began to sing with them. The song carried
beautifully over the snow, and undoubtedly fell upon the ears of the men
in the turrets, and behind the rifles. I couldn’t imagine how anything but
peace could accompany such a delicate melody and then BANG... BANG!
BANG!

The soldier had fired three rounds upon a cluster of people to my
right, who had apparently gotten too close to the razor wire. He raised
the rifle and slowly scanned the front line. As his barrel passed me, my
blood froze as solid as the water we were standing over. I remember just bracing for pain. It is an awful feeling to brace for an unknown pain. Several young protesters became enraged; they swore at the man, calling him a coward, a fool, a sheep, they asked why he shot peaceful protesters, asked him if it made him feel good. Someone shone a light on him, and he hid his face.

More backup started to pull in and my father grabbed my arm, pulling me away. I wanted to stay, but I also saw his reason. There were those there that wanted to protest the pipeline, and there were those that wanted to provoke it. Only the provokers ever made any kind of news; no stations ever played what came next.

A sachem calmed everyone down and began his prayer.

**Mni Waconi (Mini Winchoni)**

“We pray for this day, for this day is for all of us, another day free, another day of fresh water, and we pray that we may have many more of these days”.

“Woo,” a high-pitched agreement from several tribe members, a type of native amen.

“We pray that their hearts will change, and they will one day stand with us. We pray that their hearts will show them that what they are doing is wrong. And we keep them in our hearts, we keep their families in our hearts, and their kids, their grandkids, and their kids, and so on. We think of our future, we pray for our future... and we pray for theirs too. Woh.”

The end of the prayer was met with chants, whoops, and cheers from various tribes. A new energy fell amongst the crowd as many broke out into a cry of *Mni Waconi*, water is life.
Cold Toes

After the elder’s prayer, the crowd dispersed and returned to the camps. Finally the presence of the subzero temperature started to settle in. I found it hard to believe that just minutes before, the law enforcement had water cannons directed at us. To protect and to serve, but whom? These were people, already pushed to the corners of the badlands, now being stripped of the little they had left. I thought of back home; many in my town would passionately argue for or against the use of our high-school’s “Indian” mascot, but the majority had no clue about the events going on here. Here, there was an actual struggle worth fighting for, and the social-justice-warriors back home patting themselves on the back for eliminating the names were getting a bigger spotlight.

My father and I decided to walk the stretch of road between the entrance and exit gates of the camp for a more direct path to the car. We talked a bit about what we had just witnessed, both a little shaken by the whole display. I scrunched my toes inside of my boots; the tips were numb, but I could still feel the thin layer of ice that built up on the inside.

The Final Cry

The banks of snow alongside the highway were the perfect height; they blocked out most of the camp with the exception of the peaks of the more traditional teepees. Everything was still again until, way off in the distance, a circle of elders began the last song of the evening accompanied by the steady rhythm of several animal hide drums. The song was softened by the snow and sounded as though an echo had traveled from the past to stand next to the protestors during their struggle. We arrived back at the car and prepared to leave the camp once
and for all. A husky appeared out of nowhere and meandered in between us as we fixed up two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to hold us over as we traveled over to the next motel a few hours away. It was pitch black and the dog seemed to come out of nowhere. It was very friendly, most likely because we displayed a hope for some food. It stayed around until we got into the car and it trotted off into the darkness again. We left the camp, and the hill, and the bridge, and the tents, and the drums, and the singers, and the prayer; I rolled down my window despite the cold. One Kamancheh let out a final cry.

All for naught

Two local newspapers had a bit about the trip, and then the story was forgotten. News channels, as before, never reported on the events that took place at the camp until the final day in early spring, when it was reported that the executive order was passed to have the pipeline go through.

“Can you believe what a mess the protestors left behind?”
“Some even left their dogs!”
“So sad to see such cruelty to animals.”

Sacred land was destroyed, water was polluted, and an entire culture, already pushed into a corner, was driven further to becoming a summarized paragraph in a history book. And people cried for their dogs.
Toasted resin dew beads my moustache as I lie in the water that trickles over my shoulders and fords my chest hair. I don't want the little black worms I've seen clinging to the downstream sides of boulders to detach and wiggle in my armpits or ears.

Burbling into the haze are summer's pockets of freshness. The river-rocks knock if the flow rotates them a few hundred degrees.

They're smooth and weathered, soft notches of pressure along my back. I dip my head to let my ears absorb the rocks' muted percussion.

Straining not to talk to my friends as we all lie facing the sky with eyes closed, I think about how language is insufficient most of the time, and how I think I've been thinking in Spanish for over a month, but I still can't say.

The Sun's orange glow inside my eyelids grows blue from top to bottom. I stare at what I'm not seeing-- the same shade I colored the sky every time I'd draw, descending like a dress of soft cotton as it's donned again in the afternoon.
Socks On/ Socks Off

Socks are merely a prelude to shoes, I thought. I’ve worn socks without shoes before, and more frequently, shoes without socks, but to me, the two are inexorably tied in a causal relationship. Seeing things in this way has made me scorn socks, perhaps unfairly. Tube socks are my go-to as they’re the least obstructive pathway to shoes, and when I get home, the first thing I do after taking off my shoes (right inside the doorway, kick them off at the rack so they hit and rattle against it then land with a clunk on the floor) is to peel the sweaty socks off of my feet, relieved. But every now and then, when the circumstances are such that woolen, heavy socks become practical, these lowliest of garments are coupled not only as being a boundary between foot and footwear, but also with crossing the threshold of cold into winter activities.

The earliest socks appear to date back to the Stone Age, when the cave-dwellers would fasten bands of animals hide and fur to their ankles. The depictions in film of Stone Age women often include such bands, which until now I thought was just an ornamental anklet that some crusty Hollywood producer thought might look sexy, but it appears there is actually some historical gravitas to that, too. I’m still not sure why the band would only be around the ankle, as that wouldn't accomplish much for shoes. Although, shoes weren't in play much during the Stone Age, so it's unlikely that the cave-cobblers encouraged more expansive socks to preserve their work, or that they were doing great business to begin with. So the focus comes to the ankle, which doesn't seem like a zone significantly associated with body-heat conservation.
On second thought, there are times when I walk barefoot outside and the mosquitoes *only* attack my ankles, so there must be heightened bloodflow and therefore CO2 emissions coming from the foot-leg junction. And that makes sense, really, given the evolutionary and mechanical complexity of bipedalism. So, following this reasoning, I conclude that socks came into the world as cave-person insect repellent.

As with many things, Ancient Egypt was next up, where the custom was to weave socks with two ergonomically questionable toe-pockets to wear with sandals around 1000 BC. In addition to pyramids, slavery, and an overwhelming understanding of the Nile's floodplains' sustentative features, these socks should be part of the general assessment that the Ancient Egyptians had too much time not only on their hands, but also feet. Their socks looked like crab mittens, and permitted a corollary excuse for the fatherly fashion staple of socks and sandals that regrettably still exists today.

Egypt and Greece formed a trade route that has been noted widely as a crucial bridge between the influence and knowledge from the ancient world and the Greco-Roman traditions that eventually informed the Western grasp on things. There is less written about how Egypt must have supplied Greece with socks as well. Maybe they were the old, grimy socks that Egypt didn't want to wash and sent to Greece as a dirty, stinking joke. Maybe they were a lucrative trade good even back then, and the Greeks embraced the novelty of the item and, thinking they had become the cool kids too, joined the Egyptians in wearing their sandals with socks. This was circa 800 BC, when Homer wrote her epic poems:
The Iliad and The Odyssey. In neither of these does she once mention socks, but she does establish that Penelope's textile skills in weaving by day and unweaving her shawl at night were as cleverly used to stall the advances of the skeevy suitors as Odysseus's tactics were in military matters.

When the knitting loom was invented in the 16th century, socks became less interesting. Today, the town of Datang in China produces 8 billion pairs of socks a year. And that, my friends, is too many socks.

When you're backpacking, you can never have too many socks. I mean, don't only bring socks, at the very least bring some water and a snack, too, but if there's a difficult situation in which you must designate a single article of clothing to bring with you into the wilderness, let it be thick, moisture-wicking socks. Two pairs, if you can swing it.

Probably the best experience I've ever had with water, with the exclusion of drinking it, was on sixth day of a trek in New Mexico. This was during the summer between sophomore and junior year of high school with about ten of my fellow Boy Scouts, and I'd brought several pairs of socks with me as the online Boy Scouts of America packing guide recommended. However, knowing that I had placed the Ziploc bag with the extra pairs in it at the bottom of my backpack in an unfathomable bout of stupidity (the guide didn't mention where to put socks—just said how many—so was it really my mistake?), I hadn't yet ventured to unpack my entire bag to retrieve them. So the ones on my feet were six-day-old socks, not once removed, now constituted more of dirt and dust cemented with sweat than fabric after walking an average
of five miles each day in mountainous, desert terrain. This was my first long backpacking trek, and I was becoming more concerned about how my feet itched with a stinging tingle than about them being blistered or sore.

We crossed a stream, about to head up a steep path, even with its zig-zagging switchbacks, to Schaeffer’s Pass, where we would camp and prepare to do a day-hike to the Tooth the next day. The rest of the crew sat down to have a mid-morning snack, but I did not. I took off my boots.

That was the easy part. Removing the boots, which were new but already well broken in, brought me face to face with the socks of a forgotten color, now impossible to ascertain, and stuck to my feet so wickedly that I could hear my toes shriek.

Peeling them off was the hardest part. It was like ripping off a band-aid from a hairy spot, except instead of a polymer adhesive, the glue was my skin after it had forgotten what it was like to breathe, and so it clung to the only thing it had come to know. But when the socks were gone at last, my feet were born anew and they, crying their way into the bright world, brought me over broken gravel that felt like a hot stone massage toward the trickling stream.

When my feet hit the water, it took some time before I could feel what was happening. Maybe it was because the water was so cold that they got numb immediately, or perhaps the layers of dirt and dead skin cells caking my feet provided insulation. It could have been such dire straits that my central nervous system had begun to restrict access to the nerve endings in my feet like circuit breakers in the midst of a solar flare.

It slowly sunk in to my feet, though, that their plight was washing away in the waters of a pristine mountain stream in a desert out West. I stood in the stream while my fellows ate all their raisins and beef jerky, and it was a feeling I will not soon forget. Nor will I forget how the clean socks that I dug out of my pack felt on my sun-dried feet afterwards, and
how glad I was that I had several remaining pairs. I put them at the top of the pack this time, and for the six days left on the trek I was afforded the luxury that few experience in the wilderness of changing into fresh socks every other day.

Skiing, hiking, snowshoeing, standing in the cold waiting for fireworks—socks are more important than shoes in these times. Not that you don't still need shoes, because you'll want them, but the same shoes with thick socks can take you several degrees deeper into nature or the night than basic cotton tube socks would've. Then, there are the fires that glow from the hearth upon your return, and while it's probably toasty enough that the thick socks (fresh pair—not the ones from your snowventures on account of your abnormally sweaty feet) aren't technically necessary, they're still doing more than you'd given them credit for because now it makes no sense to wear shoes.
Calphurnia, above reproach, implored her Caesar not to go, and he agreed, until his buddy Cassius scoffed, “My Lord, her superstitions can’t be how you lead.”

He met his fate. Deshawn remarked, “That’s stale.” He puffed his blunt and finished off his forty. “Cause every brotha that I know in jail says, ‘if I’d only listened to the shorty ...’”

The Volkswagen Westfalia Camper was painted two tones in purple with the indigo across the top and into the signature v down the rounded front and around the VW emblem standing out in white. The violet went across the bottom and therefore the majority of the microbus. Sunlight glistened off the veneer from any angle at any time of day due to the flakes of silver embedded in the paint like a child’s art project without the mess. The inside was custom outfitted over the previous summer as an awkward spell of paternal bonding where they gutted the van and re-fitted it with wall-to-wall red shag carpeting that can be flipped to expose a spring mattress fully dressed in pinstriped sheets of blue and white and an afghan hand-knitted. Between the reversible mattress and the front seats was a single row of brown suede seats that could fold up and down and spin around for occupancy comfort. The front seats were fitted in the same brown suede from the driver’s side, over the center seat, all the way to the passenger side. On the giant steering wheel was a fuzzy white grip, and an orange luau lei was wrapped once around the rearview window and left to hang down. It wasn’t the cleanest ride, with articles of clothing from tee shirts to tube socks scattered helter-skelter and some food wrappers the passengers couldn’t manage to throw out the windows en route. But it’s the smell that stuck with most people.

Stuck in many ways, whether it seeped in the very fiber of their being or merely gripped the fabric of their clothes and refused to let go no matter how they washed. It was a sweet, earthy tone and yet ashy. The
smell was overpowering and animalistic like a stripe of white fur down black. Then there were those times, with the windows open and wind brushing through the van blowing smoke along with the passengers, it was a sweet, sleepy scent. But right now the van was parked, the windows were up and the air was thick with marijuana in a gaseous state surrounding Slim and Dougie Abe. Icons like Janis and Hendrix played through the stereo system while Slim and Dougie swayed to the beat and let their eyes wrinkle at the edge so they saw each other through eyelashes.

The door hung open to keep the heat from stifling them and allowed the boys to stretch their feet over the edge so the grass could graze their bared toes where they parked in a clearing between the playground of Broodmare Elementary and the trail to Badger Brook. On one side of them the babbling of the waterway trickled over the distance until it met with the creaks of a swing set and children playing King of the Castle coming from the other side of the tree line. These noises and the music took scattered dominance of the air. The sunlight fell scattered through the leaves of the oak tree overhead, yet the sun still caught the side mirror of Neville Henderson’s abandoned Travco from before he joined a California hippie commune and abandoned all personal belongings, until it landed on the chests of the boys lying down.

“It’s just, I think like, I don’t get how somebody couldn’t like a dog.” Slim said. “All dogs are good dogs unless bad people get involved.”

“Yeah, like,” Dougie totally understood and nodded. “A dog doesn’t just sic someone. Somebody has to say ’sic em!’ Totally fucked.”

“Did I ever tell ya about the mad dog on Kramer’s Lane?” Robbie Clay asked from where she appeared between two trees on the side of the trail. Her face lit up in the kind of smile she wore when she tricked Dougie or Slim, for even a moment, into believing things. She once had Slim convinced an unidentified flying object was seen hovering over Holy Hill on the Barbhan Campus, and though Slim would never admit
it, Dougie knew he still kind of believed it. That was the power Robbie held over them, much to Dougie’s discomfort. “It was a big and mean one.”

“I don’t remember that one,” Slim sat and made room for Robbie to crawl past them into the van.

Dougie could only imagine Slim didn’t mind her hands grazing across his thighs since Robbie was a fox with a big ole butt in her harem pants made of bright, obtrusive colors better left for a rainbow. She packed on the weight but wore it well so her cheeks swelled when she smiled, and she smiled often. Her long, very long, blonde hair hung braided down her back; the band wrapped around her forehead was made of braided hemp and sat like a crown. Robbie helped herself to the joint sprouting from Dougie’s lips and passed it back only after she’d filled her lungs with the illegal substance. Somehow, both boys found the smoke she blew out to smell sweeter than what already filled the vehicle. Robbie knew that and so she smiled.

“Kane. Remember the Petersons? It was theirs, a great dane or something close to it,” Robbie informed them as she leaned back across the shag rug. Dougie watched a sliver of light from the back window cut across her eyes like war paint and felt the drama of it. “They say Kane was the nicest dog ya ever met, until, y’know, it wasn’t. The thing with big dogs is that they eat a whole lot, eat ya out of house and home. The Petersons just couldn’t keep up with Kane’s appetite. They fed it breakfast, lunch, dinner, clockwork kind of eating. My mom said they went through a bag of dog food every three days.”

“And Mr. Peterson was a bit of a cad. He’d work on the farm, making his muscles nice and big and his wife was a religious woman and didn’t believe in sex unless it was for making kids, that’s why they had so many.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Slim nodded and swallowed through the cottonmouth. “The Petersons had eight kids. Rusty was a year ahead of us, wasn’t he?”
“I remember Rusty sorta,” Dougie nodded. “But this isn’t a trick is it?”

Robbie sobered her face real genuine and propped herself on her elbows so the war paint fell away as she looked Dougie in the eye. “I’m as serious as a heart attack, on my gramma’s life.”

“All right then, continue.” He leaned back down and stared at the navy and green tapestry he’d pinned to the ceiling to represent the night sky.

“So yeah, good ole Mr. Peterson wasn’t getting his fix at home and handsome men, well, plain don’t need to. They can go wherever they like and so he left town with some floozy he met at the Normandy. Mrs. Peterson was heartbroken and she let it destroy her. She got sick and didn’t leave the house anymore. Her kids had to do everything but, I mean, the oldest was only eleven so what could they really do? Meanwhile, Kane had lost its only true master and he was still hungry.” Robbie paused and licked her lips as she teased out the story. “Do you guys know where the Peterson Farm was?”

“A random guess would say Kramer’s Lane,” Dougie answered for the two of them.

“Oh yeah, so y’know, it was a couple miles from the closest grocery store, no neighbors on a farm so the kids couldn’t hitch a ride,” Robbie explained. “Just to feed themselves they had to kill off their cows and shit. Meanwhile, Kane was getting hungry and when a big dog gets hungry, there’s little anybody can do to calm it down. And when they ran out of dog chow, the oldest kid decided keeping a dog wasn’t manageable so he took him out to the barn,” Reading her audience, Robbie started using her body to tell the story along with her voice, moving her left hand along her right arm in a cocking motion with ka-kak of her tongue. “Cocked the double-barrel his dad taught him how to use, pointed it…” She lined it up so her arm pointed at Dougie directly between the eyes and held it as her monologue continued. “And Kane didn’t like that…”
“So, Kane fucking ate him. The dog jumped up high and scared the oldest Peterson so he fell back and dropped the gun, and angry Kane came down—claws into chest,” She let herself fall forward from her knees so she pinned Dougie to the ground and lowered her teeth toward his throat and the motion agitated Dougie in subconscious ways. “And then the hungry animal got its dinner.” She smiled as she moved back to her original position, smoothing the wrinkles from her pants. “One by one, the kids became a meal of Kane the Cuckoo Dog. All the while, Mrs. Peterson prayed alone in her room that the good lord would deliver them from the evils of lust and jealousy. Some people say she didn’t even know the kids were dying, thought the screams were in her head from her broken heart. It wasn’t until the dog finished off the last little ankle-biter that it came clawing at her door, clawed all the way through it.” Robbie rubbed her hands quickly back and forth through the carpeting in imitation of the dog. “And Kane jumped up onto the bed over the little woman and she looked into the jaws of the beast and she screamed ‘JESUS!’” Robbie stood on her knees with one hand clutching her heart and the other reaching for the sky. “‘Jesus!’” She snapped her head forward and looked Dougie straight in the eyes and added in a demonic voice, “‘Drag me to hell!’”

“Baloney!” Dougie scoffed as Robbie fell into a fit of successful laughter. “That never happened.”

“But you thought it did.” Robbie wiggled her eyebrows. Slim to the side was catching his breath.

“You made that up?” He was having a hard time figuring out what to do with his hands.

“Uh huh,” Robbie nodded. “The Petersons moved to Toronto and Kane died from running so fast its stomach flipped over and couldn’t unflip.”

“Why do that to us, us innocent fools?” Dougie groaned and pressed his palms to his eyes at the start of a migraine. He took a puff of a joint
to ease the pinching of light the story caused in his mind.

“Because you always believe me,” Robbie sighed and then took on a more dreamy tone. “I suppose dying by being eaten would be the worst way to die, huh? Maybe not by an animal, like it was their world first after all, but just imagine teeth ripping you apart?”

“I’d rather not.” Dougie shook his head slightly and the pain ebbed for now. As the end of his joint glowed orange and black with an intake of breath, he thought there were worse ways to die.

“Anyway,” Slim brought attention back to him. “This dog though, mine I mean, is like the calmest thing. Well, not calm, but like happy. He’s a happy boy.” Slim spoke amiably of the two-year-old pitbull his father took home from a man sent to jail for drunk driving. “He’s named Pot-Belly.”

“Why?” Dougie asked.

“Annabelle just, y’know, thought pitbulls were called pot-bellies.” Slim informed him.

“My dad hates animals, thinks they’re dirty.” Dougie stood from the van and gripped the blades of grass between his toes.

He stretched so his black hair cut to sharp edges bounced with him. His face was oblong with a cleft chin and an underbite, but only when he laughed. His lips were thin and framed his tiny teeth and the tip of his pink tongue that poked out to lick them after particularly long sentences. Across his upper body he held the extra skin of a boy who lost the baby weight in far too short a time frame and still had some weight to go and height to grow before reaching his adult body. The spitting image of his father, Dougie supposed he was meant to follow in the man’s footsteps: go to Barbhan College, study medicine and physiology and be a success. Dougie could get with it, but that required patience and attention now. Dougie didn’t have that. He figured if worse came to worst, Frenchie was destined for success and both teens’ parents were pushing to make him her trophy husband. That’s feminism right?
“What does it say about your dad that he wants you to marry the only other Japanese student in our grade?” Robbie asked as she played with the ends of her braid, plucking the dead bits and flicking them.

“That he’s Japanese,” Dougie pointed out with mirth in his voice. He moved over to the Travco and ran his hand along the side. The tires had long been deflated and it was in need of a serious wash and a new window where a spring storm had snapped a deadened branch from a nearby tree to puncture the glass and let who knows what kind of wildlife inside. In his mind’s eye, Dougie saw the motorhome done up like his microbus with a groovy paint job of flamboyant colors and maybe some flower designs and ready to ride around the country to avoid the draft and see the Grand Canyon and visit Texan ghost towns like someone without any responsibilities. He hoped after graduation he could just hop in and go and live off odd jobs and experiences with maybe Slim by his side like they talked about after every argument Dougie had with his dad about church-going or report cards, but there were times he wondered why he should wait when he already had a perfectly good car with a bed even.

Thoughts of fleeing Dingo faded from Dougie’s mind as he envisioned the summer coming on slow. The temperature around him lowered marginally and the noises of the playground dimmed until all that could be heard was the brook and the voices on the car radio talking about rush hour. Dougie started up the van with Slim and Robbie playing Go Fish in the back with a mismatched deck of playing cards and he burned rubber when he reached the school parking lot just for the hell of it before taking off down Cormier Avenue.

Finally the school complex was empty. Aside from the occasional badger or beaver shuffling across the pavement and gravel towards the trail to Badger Brook, the sun finished falling in the sky without disturbance, allowing the waxing moon to replace it in a democratic fashion. The warm day melted into a timid night with a gentle breeze
cleaning away the humidity and allowing nature to sigh in relief. The mosquitoes weren’t pleased. The dark navy of the sky outlined in stars acted as a backdrop to the school complex in a suburban gothic sort of way, pleasant enough for a postcard but too common for a museum wall.
Julie and Julia (2009)
A Review

★★★★
Oscar Nominee: Meryl Streep

Julie and Julia is a 2009 film directed by Nora Ephron starring Meryl Streep as Julia Child as she begins her career in cooking and Amy Adams as Julie Powell, the blogger who attempted to cook every recipe in the former’s cookbook. The movie was good, I guess. I mean when I first saw it, I was only fourteen and didn’t realize how much I loved movies yet. My mind was still stuck on The Dark Knight from the year before and my poor adolescent mind thought Jumper was a great film. I saw it in theaters twice. My experience with Julie and Julia was on the sixteen-inch TV from the early 2000’s we put in the kitchen so we wouldn’t have to talk to each other as we ate and didn’t have to argue over what kind of music to fill the house with while the meal was being cooked.

My mom had chosen Julie and Julia because she was a woman in her forties and isn’t that the kind of film that was targeted toward them? I think the movie was a sort of cathartic experience for her because the meatloaf she was cooking made Adams’s character look almost competent behind a stove. I said I was helping when really I was watching the movie because I was a “not in the closet, but in the closet” gay youth and social media told me I was supposed to like the same things as women in their forties. I get that Meryl Streep is an icon, but I have yet to see a movie in which Amy Adams isn’t the real star.

One thing about the movie I remember finding funny was how drunk Julia Childes was, pretty much all the time. She’d pour a sip of wine into the pot bubbling on the stove and then pour several sips into her mouth and I turned to my mom and said, “Just like you!” like the smartass teenager I was. Then my mom teetered on the line of not knowing whether she should laugh or slap me and she decided on that awkward “huh huh huh huh” noise while drowning the tension in another sip of merlot. Towards the end of the movie, when the meatloaf was done, I missed several scenes as I roused the rest of the house to come eat the meatloaf. My nana was watching a Desperate Housewives marathon though if you asked her she had no idea Desperate Housewives was a television show and would probably guess a desperate housewife was the woman next door with three children from three different fathers. My brother was in our shared room playing back-of-the-door basketball as if a 5’8”, seventeen year old slam dunking into a laundry bin was the most impressive thing he could ever imagine. The rap music he cranked was unbearable to me and I liked to hide his CD player because people still used CD players back then and I liked Katy Perry and starting drama.

So everybody filled their plate with meatloaf and green beans and mashed potatoes fresh from the box and they dispersed once more since we weren’t the kind of family to discuss our days and enjoy each other’s company. My mom sat at the island in the kitchen that we still have eight years later even though there’s several rings from red wine and condensation-covered glasses, but it matched the wine stain on the ceiling from later that night when my mom tripped over our dog, Lula-Belle, and the cork flew and slammed against the white paint but it was dark so nobody noticed until the next morning when it was too late. She looked at me and asked me why I hadn’t made a plate and I’m not sure if it was right as the credits began rolling, but I like to imagine that it was the moment I decided from then on I’d watch any movie starring Amy Adams and I turned to my mom to say, “I don’t like meatloaf.”
One thing about the movie I remember finding funny was how drunk Julia Child was, pretty much all the time. She’d pour a sip of wine into the pot bubbling on the stove and then pour several sips into her mouth and I turned to my mom and said, “Just like you!” like the smartass teenager I was. Then my mom teetered on the line of not knowing whether she should laugh or slap me and she decided on that awkward “huh huh huh huh” noise while drowning the tension in another sip of merlot. Towards the end of the movie, when the meatloaf was done, I missed several scenes as I roused the rest of the house to come eat the meatloaf. My nana was watching a Desperate Housewives marathon, though if you asked her she had no idea Desperate Housewives was a television show and would probably guess a desperate housewife was the woman next door with three children from three different fathers. My brother was in our shared room playing back-of-the-door basketball as if a 5'8" seventeen-year-old slam dunking into a laundry bin was the most impressive thing he could ever imagine. The rap music he cranked was unbearable to me and I liked to hide his CD player because people still used CD players back then and I liked Katy Perry and starting drama.

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Loosely formed hordes of black beasts surveyed the landscape. Moving in arrhythmic stutters they sought a fertile place to stake their claim.

“The beauty of it, oh the glory.” In his eyes burned a fire, hot and bright. “Mother, will you look?”

She faced away from him with her head cocked to the side. A black phone was nestled between her ear and shoulder. Speaking quickly, she punctuated her conversation with quick shallow drags of her cigarette.

They came upon a land that was gold in the afternoon sun. It was rich with the salt of open pores and sweat.

He lifted his head and held his hand to his brow. He stared intensely but his jaw was slack. “It’s wonderful.”

She kicked at the dog at her feet until he let out a quick yelp and retreated to the shade under the patio table. Here he chewed on his paw and licked ants off the concrete.

A wind shook the field of blonde as a dark form passed over the sun. Thick currents of air threatened to rip them from their fortune. He stayed focused but swatted at the air. After waving his hand without collision he let it fall on the back of his neck.

Her words were many but without any strength. While she spoke her interest was on her hands. She turned them one way then the other, visibly impressed with the latest vibrant color of her fingernails.

Unable to find a suitable host and sensing the approaching danger the flies took off. They didn’t go as a group. Bobbing up and down and
side-to-side, they went alone.

The sweat was building up on his face now. He rubbed then scratched at his neck hard before turning to the woman and then back to the sky. “Mom, you’ve got to look.”

She let the phone slide off her shoulder and caught it with her hand. She squinted her eyes and her pupils contracted before the flicker in her eye was snuffed out with a forceful blink.

Approaching quickly was a pack of hunters. They were predators, vicious raptors that fought and killed as much for sport as necessity.

“Mom, are you looking?”

For at least a full second, she squeezed them shut tight, raising her cheeks so as to almost smile.

Spiders on the ground scurried into the shadows. Ants fought each other for access to the colony. The caterpillars munched on flimsy green leaves.

“Just look, please.”

He was too late. She shrieked and flailed her arms. The buzzing enveloped her, and she turned wildly, falling and catching her hair in the hinge of the open screen door.

In bands of black and gold they clung to one another and to her skin. Beating their wings, they forced their ovipositors deep and injected their venom.

“Mom?” This time he didn’t turn to face her.

Their synchronous vibrations wove an amorphous canvas mask. It obscured everything except those sweeping bands of black and gold light. She clawed at it with her blood red nails as she pulled herself up and ran. He had been told not to look directly at the sun before, but he never listened. She never gave him reason. Today, he thought, was different. He stood and followed her inside, brushing a lone wasp off his arm. Holding the door wide open, he looked up over his shoulder and blinked before turning and letting the door shut at his heels.
Puppets' Guts

The beast I can't refrain
from becoming, the benthos
of my guts, the grip of a gamy
hunch, won't want to conquer
much, a bit of fluff, a fuzz
nesting messy in my guts.

The lug and rumble of heavy
things, trucks passing
on the highway, not the dwaal
of muscle ache, but our jeers;
our cries, their listeners want
to be the sticks—and we're the icy
sheets for once—robot-dancing
under us, propping us up; we're
the wrestling dogs, tussling
our scruffs, the huffing rush and
chilly gusts of nighttime air,
gone aloof for good.

Our hunches will animate
us—forget about our guts.
We will look like ghosts.
All elbows and knees—
we'll make pillars, we'll
make beams—prodding,
stippling the sheets,
the fabrics of animus;
the flits and tugs of puppets'
strings, all sodden in our dust,
will tangle in the dusk,
we'll tangle in the dusk
Sam Linstead

An Ode to Looking Upward

Remember leaving
in the rain all the
pullets pecking at
muddy grubs writhing
in our sodden footprints
becoming speckled
lakes? A tattoo of skulls
and jungle islands,
chieftains' fiery arrows,
and a spider's web
of a motorcycle's chain
sticks to your skin tight
like a drum's tight,
patted by a fidgeting
child, wild
with the fear
of growing old.

Let us quaver,
wave, and shiver,
give ourselves over
to stormy chanteys
sailing down streets
in nothing but
our panties, yes?

Let us, us young
susurrous shamans,
shaking with
trembling talons,
scraping with our friends
in the alleys of clammy
habituated strip malls,
remember leaving
in the rain with our
hands and our legs
and our dogs
off their leashes
and our drugs
in cloudy plastic bags,
and the worries, man.

We, gaunt and gory ones,
obsessed with violent
video games, we fuss
and wrestle over girls
and the next death,
argue and muscle
over time and
pretzel sandwiches,
we're out hunting
for a word tonight,
and let us find it,
chugging Gatorade,
icing our lips with rum,
celebrating our little
brothers' birthdays
on the dewy chilly
grass; like rubbing
a dog on her back,
we rub and shove
our fingers through it.
The smell of barbecue
and charcoal and suntan
lotion, the telescope,
the peering around,
the looking upward.
A bottle of scorpion rum
and yoyos in a plastic
display case on his dresser.
We're stepping over fleshy
books to get there. Let us,
man, let us wobble, looking,
scrape our knees and yank
our tendons. The scorpion
stuck as if in amber—
but slosh it around!
Go ahead, I dare you.
I'm serious, man, the
scorpion's
drowning in
spicy sappy
goo—so romantic
is he—traipsing through
warm heroin, after just
a miniscule tang of
a critter. We all take
shots of Scorpion, rum
that is, friendly stuff,
of sugar cane, and
sweet malt, ghostly
notes of asphalt—
or is that the scorpion
I'm tasting? a hint
of lemon, lead,
matches, eggs,
and wet sand:
Pass me the blue
Gatorade, for my
stinging tongue,
my turning stomach,
my lying down and
tipping backward,
my crying out about
the taste of acid,
like paper and ass
sweat, my head
sinking into my
shoulders and my
looking upward and
our eating charred
bread with our hands.

Remember leaving
in the rain, plucking
our feathers free
of lice and mites,
tricking ourselves
into microwave
ovens, the first
robins of spring,
dead squished
red on the road?
but the looking
upward! the grace,
man! the falling
upward, man,
letting feet
become your
hands, shearing
your memories
down like you
shear your sheep;
see us, our ugly raw
cranberry-colored
skin, for what
we are.

See us leaving
in the rain, see
us heaving forth
our knees to trees
in woods we
wouldn't know.
   No reason
to hear these sighs, these creaks, these chimes, and we have stolen away our twisted ways in our winter caches, placing our peevishnesses, our tastes, in graces, small graces we prove by kissing laymen at the day's end and shoveling journeys where the waves bend, and hoping we receive flowers with scribbled funny cards from our best friends, our very best friends.
Jack tells us his fact about cows having multiple stomachs. He's talking about What is a cud? and all that. My momma slows and pulls a uey around some short curbed grass, then we flash by the long white logs of the puzzled together fences again, and she pulls in on the gravelly dirt of a farm where a sign stands saying FIRST RIDING LESSON FREE, hoping maybe I'll start talking. My brother, purple-fisted Jack, gnaws a small iceberg of frozen blueberries, eying me in the passenger door mirror. His little talons of clumpy damp blond hair flit and flap against his head.

I'm seeing this older girl who's standing by the barn with a shit-beige helmet on. She wears tan capris that have cloth cinches at the openings and a striped pink tank top pinned with frills. She's one of those horse girls. Her eyebrows are little caterpillars wriggling under a flame. Her cheeks look like raw salmon and marshmallows. She's one of those girls who was convinced she was a horse when she was a kid, maybe still is. You can glimpse the feral look in her dull pointy black eyes, darting, aghast and wide as if with the thought of captivity. Her cushiony chubby face. A shock of rotten hay on her head. Her one lazy eye.

My momma beckons us out of her McDonald's-smelling van. The air outside would smell of sunned fields and dew and wet wood from last night's rain if it weren't sogged with the scent of manure. Jack turns out
of the passenger seat and heaves the van door back, which rushes open and crashes backward like some piece of a high-grade military aircraft. And Jack hurtles out into the fields, and Momma's yelling after him. There sit three barns and a stable bigger than anything. And there is the house, smaller than the smallest barn, standing like a scarecrow in a distant field, its blue-painted wood torn blurry in the heat. I'm staying in the car for now, next to Jack's old booster seat, and I scrape around in Jack's bag for a frozen blueberry, but there's nothing but purple slime left. I've seen him drink that purple slime, hold the bag over his opened mouth and let the warm indigo goo drizzle down his throat. I wipe my fingers down in the crack of the seat, where no one ever reaches.

I reach for a slip of gum out of my momma's purse, and I hear her doddering up and someone else's footsteps, heavier and lurching faster up toward the van. I sit back and drop the slip of dusty white mint gum on my tongue, and I chew for a bit with my eyes closed. And then it's them up in my face. This tall brawny woman and my mother peering in at me. So I climb out, and I have to shake this woman's dewy hands, and she squeezes mine too long, crushing the knuckle of my pinky under my ring finger. I hear the bones in my hand crackling under clammy weight. This woman smells of talcum powder and manure and the grit at the bottom of my momma's makeup bag. She has a pony-tailed mane of tattered sandy hair that witchily reaches for her butt. She clenches this spry look to her face, like an old chimpanzee.

And Momma says this woman has to watch over a pregnant mare who has begun having contractions as they pulled up, so she won't be able to give me a riding lesson, but her best rider, the girl whom all the horses just adore, is around, Micaela, and she would be happy to get me up on a stinking stupid horse and watch me fall off and break my neck. I oblige because it's easier than sitting in that silent car all that ride back home. If I don't goat myself up on a horse, she'll make a day of it, won't pull over for food or even to let Jack go to the bathroom until we
get home, if I don't play along in her stupid games, her petty attempts to make me say something. We were coming back from Connecticut, from visiting my elderly grandmother, who is a staff writer for the New Yorker and often has towering white-haired men and women wafting about her house, drinking eggnog, vodka, eating olives and stinky cheeses, talking about what is a novel and how does one find truth. The place is an everlasting party you're not invited to, and even scrambling eggs with pepper and salt and cottage cheese, someone will say to you, I read a story about a girl like you, or a boy like you—I've been long confused for a boy since I shaved my head to rid of lice eggs a year ago—Jack's fault—or they'll say something about your food or the way you look like your grandmother, and this is you just trying to make some eggs for you and your little brother, this is like six a.m., you figuring these cloudy ghosts of adults would sleep in a little bit, for how tired they look, the purple sags under their eyes, but they rise early like you, their putrid morning breaths, and you have to eat your eggs cold because these adults won't stop talking, and you are supposed to be respectful. And so I'll get on a horse, and not because I'm going on being respectful.

So I have to pull on these boots and wear myself a brown helmet, with torn oily leather on the inside and long gray hairs. We're in this dusty and shadowy barn, hay carpeting the floors and dusty light beams cutting through into the dry and glimmering hay. “Don't worry, dear, that's just my old helmet,” says the horse woman, towering over me, who looks like one of the ashen dotards from my grandmother's house, except Horse Woman is incredibly muscular, in places those grannies couldn't dream of. Her biceps and thighs are like a man's, hairy and impossibly brawn. She has a bold angular jaw and dry wide lips and rough ruddy skin. “That's why I'm hesitant,” I say. And Momma flicks this look at me I know means Jack will fuss all the way home about his bladder pulsing full of purple slime, because she's pissed and sweaty, and she won't budge, not even for Jack, and she's scratching at the back.
of her scalp now because she has lice, and, worse, she won't admit it, won't deign to wash her skull with the insecticidal shampoo that smells like piss and bleach.

“The horse you'll be riding is named Cleverer,” Horse Woman says. “Micaela will show you how to groom and mount her.” Jack pokes his head into the barn and makes a face at me.

“That's not a word,” I say.

“Hm?”

“It's 'more clever.'”

“I think it is a word,” Momma says. And she's behind me with her hand on her hip and her other in her hair drawn up in a filthy nest.

“You're probably right, but even if it's not a word,” Horse Woman says, “it's her name 'cause she's cleverer than anybody.”

“I doubt that,” I say, with some reason I got to avoid her eyes now. I feel a flash of heat in my cheeks and in my neck and a tensing of my muscles. As if I'm the one who should be embarrassed. I'm going to pilfer lice from my momma's hair and plant them in Horse Woman's old, stinking helmet. I stop listening and plan my operation.

“So I'll go get Micaela, and she'll be so glad to help you out!” Her smile pinches her eyes shut, and then she treads away, her footsteps hefty and reverberant on the old wood.

My mother hands me another piece of gum. I spit out the tasteless gray blob of the first one on the hay. “When are you going to learn to respect people,” Momma mutters, and she fumbles around in her purse and pulls out cigarettes and a lighter. And I think it's worth it to break my silence here, but I don't, but I could have, said When are you going to respect your children? She thinks she's doing something right by Stephen, paying to keep him locked up. I remember the nights we'd go to Stephen's shows, and we'd smile and watch all the nervewracked comics mumbling memories from crinkled paper, bleary-eyed with shaky hands. And I remember all of these nights all jammed up into one, this one
night when Jack fell asleep on Dad's shoulders, all us waiting for Stephen to come out on stage, the room a photograph slowly stirring until Stevie jogged out onto the stage. He'd shoot his eyes right into yours, into the oldest woman's eyes and the youngest baby's, and his smile with his crooked teeth and his big heart lumped in the back of his throat could get you laughing out of just joy. He had a joke about horse girls. I remember it some. He had this barrage of one-liners he'd fire through, lambasting them for minutes straight, and he'd end the joke by saying something like, “The next time you are in the same space as a horse girl, I want you to be civil to her, don't complain, don't bitch and make up jokes about her and tell a dark room full of strangers like I'm doing now, but be civil, and when you go home and couch yourself to watch some Netflix, thank fucking god or whatever beautiful thing you believe in that you were not born that girl's horse.”

I don't have to be told my revulsion is wrong, that my opinion of the horse girl lifestyle has everything to do with Stephen, and somewhere buried in the meat of my brain there is the pang of his words repeating, and I know they're true, truer than anything anyone ever says out loud. But there's something else wadding up in my throat. Like Stephen, I think my heart is crawling out, like a skittish little hermit crab looking for a better home. There's something more important than being good to people, and it's what I'm doing now, scouring for eulogy.

Horse Woman marches back into the barn with Horse Girl, and I see her nose pinch up at once and her cheeks turn pink. My mother pulls her cigarette to her side, and looks up at the woman through a beam of smoky light. A small tentacle of smoke flits up and nicks Horse Woman's eyelash. She stands there, trembling, rubbing her eye. She is quiet for a few buzzing seconds of us looking at her breathing slow but heavy, and then she lets out this demonic shrill, and she retches at us, something about fire. And she tells us Go wait outside a moment, in a steadying but quaking voice. "Micaela, will you go make sure Jodie has water?"
girl, who I hadn't even seen come in, makes a purrup and skitters off. My 
momma and I walk a ways and we think, Jack, where is he? who could be 
off running with a pack of wolves by now.

“What a bitch,” my mother whispers to me. She stuffs her cigarette 
into a saddle hanging off the barn, leaving an ashy black stain, and 
drops it to the ground. “Can you check the car for your brother?”

He's not in the car, and he's not in any of the barns. Momma watches 
from the stable as I raise my hands up and shrug. I feel my heart start 
thudding a bit faster, but Jack always does this: we always find him: he's 
like a cat. Horse Girl lopes up and says would I like to watch her brush 
Cleverer now. “No,” I spit. She stands there, quiet, in a way people do 
when they want to draw your attention to look at them, because they are 
opening their mouths, widening their eyes—that's how shocked they are, 
ereft of words, sound—but I just walk off and over to Momma and shake 
my head when she asks.

“You don't have to look for him. Why don't you just go do your lesson, 
dear,” Momma says, and she's ashamed of me for not finding him right 
away. Won't look in my eyes. She holds her head up and squints at the 
fields, looking for the small swath of a blue shirt.

Momma circles back to the barn and pulls Horse Girl out and asks 
her if she'll take me now for a lesson. I shoot her a nasty look, but she 
won't even meet my eyes. She walks off, calling for Jack. Horse Girl leads 
me to the main stable. An enormous building with a lazy but sturdy 
frame. Plain wood, unpainted. Maybe it was just recently built. She leads 
me into the dark and dank space, smelling of manure and wet hay. “Let's 
get his stuff and then go feed him some snacks. He's out in the corral.”

“Did you ever want to be a horse as a kid?” I ask.

“You too?” she says, her eyes brightening.

“No, I'm just wondering about you. You're like one of those horse 
girls.”

“I just love horses. Am I not allowed to love an animal?”
“In some states it's illegal.”
Her face twists. One eye pinches shut. “You're gross. Do you wanna ride Cleverer or what?” she says.
“No, I don't.”
“Why are you even here then?”
“My mom is making me,” I say.
“Why are you so mean about it?” she asks, reaching her hand over the stall gate, on which a placard hangs that reads Cleverer.
“I'm not mean, I'm just honest.”
“I think you're rude, and a bit ungrateful.”
“At least I'm not fucking obsessed with horses.” I feel the heat in my cheeks again. I see myself shoving her in a stall and locking it. Instead, I feel myself walking behind her to the horses.
“That's supposed to be an insult?” Horse Girl smiles, looking back at me. She feels comfortable here. These are her grounds, not mine. “Okay, here's his saddle, his brush, his fly sheet, and there's something else but I'm totally having a brain fart!”
“It doesn't matter, I don't even want to touch him.” There's anger in me still, but it's caked dry and solid, and it won't be seething any time soon, even though I want it to. All I can feel is this heaviness, my sogging wet warm heart lolling, pushing, gurgling against my tonsils. I don't want to swallow. I don't want to answer to anything.

We walk slowly out to the fields beyond the barn where there is a corral with an electrified fence strung between white wooden posts. I gaze back at the little barns tucked neatly together, where my mom has probably already found Jack, awaiting me in the car. There is no reason I have to keep shoving my legs forward. I could turn around, but I won't. I know I won't. I walk up to Micaela, stopping a few feet away from her. The snout of a horse emerges, and then its maw and body, and it gallops around half of the corral then trots up to us. Micaela holds out her hand and he slurps up the dusty oats she holds out, his eyes wide and white.
“You wanna try? I can just brush him later. I'm guessin' you're not really into that. I can just tell your mom you mounted him.”

“You'd lie for me?"

“Not really much of a lie, is it? Plus, I don't know your mom, so what does it matter?”

“Okay.”

“Here.” She pulls a handful of oats from her pocket and pours them into my opened palm.

“Just watch out for the fence.”

I hold my hand through two wires of the fence, about a foot apart, and open my palm in the direction of the horse, who nibbles into the fur of his chest, drooling. His googly eyes shoot up and his snout follows, and he lashes toward my hand. I jump backward, laughing by accident. Horse Girl catches my smile, and I rub it off my face before she can say something, and I reach toward him again without thinking.

“Don’t worry if he bites you a little. It won't hurt.”

“He better not fucking bite me.”

The horse is stuck in a gaze at the oats in my palm, and as soon as my hand passes through the fence, he darts for it, slobbing it up. I jump back again, pulling my hand out, and I can't stop myself from laughing, smiling like an idiot, and he’s lunging his snout through after me, and I pull my hand up and away and I nick the wire of the fence with my fingertips. My hand sticks to the wire, grasps it for a second, and I yank it away. I’m frozen empty for a second, a slight sting to my palm, but my muscles do begin to loosen, while my jaw is staying rigid, and I’m hearing Horse Girl woof at me. I take a step back and I feel a ringing in my cheeks. I feel my heartbeat slow down. My lungs relax and grow big and deflate, grow big and deflate. I think I’m overreacting.

“You hurted him! You shocked him! Hey!”

I walk in the direction of the barns, haughty as I’ll get, and I turn back once to see Micaela entering the corral, holding her hand out to the
horse, tears streaming down her red cheeks. I laugh, but it doesn't feel like how I thought it would. My mother is sitting up against the barn wall, head in her hands, a cigarette smoking between her fingers. “You haven't seen him?” I shake my head. “What, did he go to the bathroom? What the hell? He is no video games for a year when I find him,” she says. I stay quiet. I feel arrogant. To keep this protest up in a time like this. She doesn't look at me, just mutters, “But you got on a horse?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Yeah well that's fun, huh?”

***

We search almost an hour for him. We hear growls and labored breathing. We hear Horse Woman shouting at a veterinarian who came by in a blue Mercedes. We see Horse Girl, red-faced still, cutting me deadly looks, her lips trembling about to spatter, standing in the doorway of the barn where a horse is giving birth. We hear them all in one moment erupt into nervous, celebratory laughter, and I half expect Stephen to walk out, the real reason everybody's laughing, dressed in a suit, doing a gig. But they are laughing about their lives now, about a new life now, and I'm here wishing them all dead. I'm the outsider here, a squinting stranger, and it feels like at any moment I could be ousted even further. A churlish castaway, a peevish old hag. What I could become is what I might as well be now, and it's nothing like how I want to be.

Momma slogs up the grassy hill by the house to look around there, and I'm staying put meanwhile, and I don't feel like finding Jack neither, because then it's in the dead quiet car with the impassive two of us, and then it's sinking home into that dream we all have together, where we always fight, where we always lie to each other and hide in our own riddled cryptic ways. Horse Woman is emerging from a smaller barn,
peeling off clear translucent gloves, tossing them to the dusty hay, and asks me if I know where my mom is. I lean against the barn and avoid meeting her eyes. I’m smug with huffy now, I’ve gotten used to this already, this way I’ll have to spend my life. I hear her turn and walk the other way, and I think Jack will be on coming out any time now—he has to at some point appear, head hung low, saying I got lost in the woods, or something else—when Horse Woman flashes in front of me and clenches my wrist.

“Why is Micaela saying you shocked Cleverer?” she says, sticking her pimply red nose and her teeth as white as radish flesh in closer to me. Her fingers stab hard into mine.

“Nothing,” I say, and I wrench away and I’m running toward the car, and I hear her thudding after me, and I’m just about to grab the door handle when she slams into me and shoves me against the side of the car. Her hot putrid breath in my ear. And I’m stuck, nothing to breathe.

“Hey!” Horse Woman breathes into my mouth. “What did you do?”

I'm pinned and I'm flailing everything, feeling my limbs whip and beat against her, the car. I'm out of energy so quick it feels like swimming in jeans, but I'm yanking and heaving my limbs around, and she has to loosen her sweaty grip, and I'll slip from it and turn around now—and her eyes look like they're boiling, like hot eggs, and when I look away I feel her arm reaching out toward me again—but I see Jack sneaking up behind her—Jack!—and he pours the bag of slimy blueberry goo onto her head. “Take that!” he shouts and he runs behind the car and watches her through the window reach her hand up to feel the wet slime.

“What? Gra!” she screams as she glimpses her dripping purple fingers, the melting witch, and she falls some steps back. I back around to the other side of the car too. And we see our momma running from a long way off, at a slow wavy pace. She looks like she’ll collapse, like a droplet of color dribbling down the far off canvas of the horizon. Her
lungs must be pounding rapid, gripping themselves tight, the size of pebbles. I start my amble toward her. My body limps weak with the bruises and the tightness in my muscles.

“What are you doing to her?” she says, panting and gripping her chest. Horse Woman turns to look at her, a delirious look in her eyes, like that gaze I caught in Horse Girl's eyes when we first pulled up.

“Your daughter just shocked my horse.”

“No my daughter did not. And I saw you put your hands on her.”

“Micaela told me all that she....”

“Shut it! My daughter would never hurt an animal on purpose. Willa, babe, did she hurt you?”

“No,” I say, and Jack looks up at me and asks if I'm talking to Momma again. I shake my head no, but that's not true, so I say, “Kind of.”

“Your boy and your daughter are in a lot of trouble.”

“You are in trouble. You. We are leaving, and you are getting a terrible review on Yelp!”

Horse Woman exhales a sharp breath. “Leave! You leave! All of you! I am calling the police.” She scurries off to her house, calling for Micaela with short sharp breaths, like a cat in heat. After a few moments of wind and silence and permeating sweat, my momma says, “I shouldn't have done that.”

“She totally bodyslammed you, Willa. That was crazy,” Jack says.

“Where were you that whole time?” I ask.

“We were looking for you, Jack. You’d be grounded, but I....” Momma starts, but she digs around for her keys as Jack yells, “I object! I was in the car the whole time. I told you I was going there.”

“Willa said she checked the car.”

“I did!” I say, but they don't believe me, and I must have missed him, thinking now of how I only glimpsed through the backseat window, how he could have been up front or in the way-back. We're crepitating up our long winding driveway at dark, when we speak of Horse Woman again
and how if she had called the police they'd have pulled us over by now. We sit in the car for a second, hearing its engine exhale and buzz till it falls silent and we hear the croaking of the frogs. Momma collects the keys into her purse, and Jack climbs back and opens the slider. He runs inside and I see Dad in the warm-lit doorway, amber light spraying out, brush a hand through Jack's hair and send him deeper into the house. He peeks out, squinting at the dark car, where I've asked Momma to tell me straight what's going to happen to my brother, and what is going to happen to me.
Fog continues to descend on pale flower dotted fields as dew collects on clovers facing a faceless sky. Dark muddy stones were built up, one on top of the other, creating a lone wall lifting up against a sky that is the shade of a pure white canvas covered in dust. Water leaks into the ground from a marsh that must hate rock and covet empty sky enough to cause one side of the wall to sink, crumble, disappear. Green moss grows in cracks where stone meets stone, growing like sweaty peach fuzz on a face that has never met a razor.

Alone, walking through sodden earth, a man mutters a prayer as he closes in on the wailing cry silencing every word he utters with grief and loss. He carries a bible in his left hand covered in dark wool as he fingers the beads around his neck with his right, meticulously touching every ball above the cross. Preparation of the protection needed from the monster singing just beyond the collapsing wall. His left hand began hovering over the leather bound handle attached to a thin silver sword blessed with hope, honor and river water made into the blood of a prophet. His feet are bare and defenseless as sharpened rocks dig out drops as if...
blood pays for blood.
He draws his silver faith while walking around the stones to confront a small
grey haired woman, weeping red tears from yellow translucent eyes.
Tow Truck

The tight electric etchings of the cup slip back and forth from her fingers, blue, white, rouge, white, and blue again, sweat dimming each shade. The sludge slides back and forth, crashing its waves onto the Styrofoam walls, rotating into each other like the inner ramparts of a tornado. Her fingers keep shuffling with themselves. Even with the steam lifting into her face, even with the wool blanket wrapped around her, even with panicked sweat drenching the sidewalk, she cannot stop shaking. Her lips push and pull themselves from the red lipstick iced on their surfaces; her pearly white teeth pummel themselves like battling rams. She cannot stop shaking.

Her mom’s blanket, stinking of cherry air freshener, becomes too slippery for her stiff shoulders. Like melting ice, it releases itself from its pillory, crumpling onto the concrete. She flexes her neck up, each muscle popping, buckling and unbuckling. The night sky’s textures seem to be at war with each other. Copper-purple haze fills the sky, but the white light of the stars peels itself through the skin. Those little beams of light are so far away, how could they rip through the smog like that?

Her neck crumples down, reminding her of the craters that took a seat on that pink paint, the newly made corners, cuts, dents, and gashes lying on the Pepto-Bismol coating. Smudged, the hue has made its mark on the victim, matte black with pink pimples now. She has accidentally created her own unfortunate Speed Racer villain, some sort of psychotic ice cream truck set on mass destruction.
Her neck twists to the left. The yellow light flickers through the black glass windows, hitting her eyes from two angles. The wheels pull inward, and then around so the crane can make its move. The tears dry up on her smelted make-up. Her hand clenches the auburn roots of her bottle blonde mane.

“My dad’s gonna be so mad at me.”
ROBERT McKENZIE

Morning Rail Cochrane to Moosonee

Names on this dot matrix display are full of consonants and apthongs. I take

your photo and press it plane to the window so you can see the aurora—ethereal and kind—flicker by like the cylinder of a zoetrope.

Note on the back:
   BLT Club Sandwhich w/Mayo
ROBERT MCKENZIE/Bridge
Nathan Miller

Moth

It's three AM Moth—you look like a fallen leaf. 
I know you meant it, but in West Virginia, 
With all the moths down the drain 
Of my shower stall like soaking bits of satin cloth— 
Were they at all frightened? 
And should I be of faucets? 
From their branch into the void, Moth, 
Why are we awake together? 
In this moment—I pondering our place, 
And you quietly thirsting for the moon 
In my mirror; it seems silly, and a bit sick, 
All of this—perhaps you and I 
Are both swimming in the wrong light. 
And you will die later on my window sill, 
But now it is a bit past three AM and quiet 
And I don't think either of us 
Mind that quite much.
Like watching your child having a finger chopped off, the sorrow is palpable to get through the day watching geese and a crane showing prowess while neglecting my pain. They nibble insects and the tender shoots underneath the water while a car swears loud bass on River Street and they will be there when I am not. The river will move on when the geese and crane fly south, some stay. Leaving the bench, my time with the geese and crane are over and I return home. It is not black, gold, or her home, and I miss her chin, and ears. I was Ellie’s hero. I miss that mutt.
JONATHAN SILVERMAN/Stop Ahead,
I don’t need to think of this like an escape.
As if an hour in the preserve could do that.
Recharge me like an electric car. Think Green:
a political slogan on a bumper sticker.
I take the access road from the parking lot.
It’s crumbling, having never been maintained
since the Air Force gave Wilderness Conservation
the land: barbed fences, ammunition
bunkers, office buildings and telephone poles.
I see the leafed-over remnants of all of these,

but soon I come to a half-frozen pond with reeds
poking up from its surface and the muddy shore.
Across the pond the lichen on the trunks
of the un-leafed trees is neon green, so pale
it looks unnatural against the deeper green
of the taller pines and the gun-metal sky.
If I trusted the ice, I’d walk on the pond’s surface
where I’d be encircled by the lichenized trees.
For some reason it’s only the trees near the water
that have it. I’d like someone to explain this to me.

I don’t need to think of this like an escape
because I’m not escaping anything. I meant
to clear my head, or recharge or whatever else
a walk in the woods is supposed to do for you,
but I only feel like I’ve been passed over
by more potent bodies of focus and years
of consistent growth. I need someone to teach me
the names of all these trees. That’d be a start.
I need to clean the spamware from my head.
I need to sit on a rock. Look at the trees.

I begin to see how each is a pillar holding its fair share—just the weight of its own branches, except for some which hold the weight of a fallen dead one. And I begin to feel my own weight as negligible. Like a bird, or a glass figure in a glass display case. The world looks murky from inside. A museum is a good place to lose your mind, but it’s a prison to the imagination. Better to go on the Disney Safari tour—it’s a bit less regimented, and there’s animals.

Better still to learn the names of the trees and birds you normally see in the trees. Stop thinking of it as an escape, like these specks of wilderness aren’t held captive by the whims of our humanity, the worst of these being art, which is inside me the way our country’s filled with AR-15s.
SHEILA VO \( / \) day\&night
Contributors

Matthew Ahern is a junior with majors in History and English and minors in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and American Studies. When not at school, he works at the Concord Old Manse where both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne honed their writing craft. He hopes that one day some of their talent might rub off on him.

Tyler Borton is a senior BLA major with concentrations in music and writing. He has no plans, aspirations or hopes.

Rubin Brenner is a senior double majoring in Peace & Conflict Studies and Political Science. "Traveling in Silence: Memories of a Year Abroad" is his first published piece and was crafted from notes he took on his phone while studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and traveling in the Middle East during his school vacations. Following graduation, he hopes to pursue a diplomatic career while continuing to write about and study violent conflicts throughout the world.

Michael Caizzi is senior English/Creative Writing major with a minor in Theatre Arts. He'd like to thank the many wonderful professors he's had at UML, in particular Andre Dubus III, Shelley Barish, and Maggie Dietz for too many reasons to count. It has been his pleasure to serve as a Managing Editor for the 2018 issue of *The Offering*.

Chandler Camerato is a senior English/Creative writing major. She is a poetry editor for *The Offering*.

Kale Connerty is a senior English/Creative Writing major with minors in Climate Change and Sustainability and Spanish. "African Violets" and "Brushing" are her first published poems. She would like to thank all of her incredible professors, in particular Maggie Dietz, Tom Hersey, and Maureen Stanton, for their support and encouragement of her writing during her time at UMass Lowell.
Mitchell Lockhart Crook is a senior English/Creative Writing major with a minor in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Though he began his journey at UMass Lowell as a Mechanical Engineering student he has since found his passion in writing fiction and poetry, and would like to thank Professor Andre Dubus III and Dr. Dale Young for all of their guidance and encouragement. After graduation he plans to work in the publishing industry and continue writing his high fantasy series, Out of the Darkness.

Mary Everett is an Environmental Studies major, graduating in May. In the summer, she will begin her MFA in fiction at Warren Wilson College. She lives in Amesbury with her husband, a cat named Al, and a chinchilla named Catsby.

Amelia Fantasia is a freshman English/Creative Writing major. She plans to continue writing poetry and fiction until she dies or gets arthritis. This is the first time anything of hers has been published.

Sarah Fritz studied at UML as an undergraduate exchange student. She is currently attending the English MA program at UMass Boston. She focuses her research on Modern Literature and Spatial Theories, and deals with conflicts of cultural space in her creative writing. Besides literature, her passions are food, travelling, visual arts, and wine.

Gennaro Varriale Gonzalez is a licensed Visual Art teacher for the department of education in Massachusetts. Upon attained the BFA and MFA in Fine Arts in Naples, Italy, he decided to study at UMass Lowell for another Master: Peace and Conflict Studies. A choice born because through art it is possible to communicate messages of social justice. Gennaro designs illustrations for publishing companies and social and cultural projects, as well as cooperating with the novelist Marco Peluso. Gennaro is also a caricaturist for events in USA and Europe.

Nancy Hannan is a junior, English/Creative Writing major. Lately she has been attempting to write poetry because it is challenging and she likes the way poems sound. She also enjoys photography, although she has not taken a class for it yet. She likes taking photographs of nature.

Liam Hendrik Henderson is a freshman majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering. His look on life is, “You’ve got 5 senses and about 80 years in the tank, so you may as well try to do it all.”
Tom Hersey is currently a Visiting Instructor in both the English Department and the Honors College. Tom has taught at UMass Lowell for 19 years, offering courses in both the English and Philosophy Departments. His photography is largely inspired by shared experiences with family, students, and friends. This is the fourth time that his work as appeared in The Offering.

Dan Johnston is a senior. He enjoys food, sports, nature, and beer.

Melissa Juchniewicz is a graduate of the master's and doctorate programs of UMass Lowell's Graduate School of Education (now the College of Education). She is a Visiting Lecturer in the English Department, and a member of the Hyla Brook Poets of Derry, New Hampshire.

Reid Kapala is a senior majoring in English/Creative Writing and a triple minor in History, German, and Digital Media. He likes to write.

Jacob LaMountain is a junior Physics major with a passion for writing and visual art. He co-produced the short film Game Night, which can be found online. He's produced a number of sculptures, including rocks hung from trees with woven saplings, and a 7-foot tall hanging PVC dodecahedron wrapped with over 1500 LEDs. His work can be found on instagram and tumblr under the username JakeLaMtn.

Sam Lininstead is a writer.

Bryan Maguire is an English/Creative Writing major. He likes dogs and to fish. After graduating he will fish and work.

Alex Matte is a sophomore English/Creative Writing major. He enjoys writing nonfiction, but is open to any form of literature. After graduating, he plans to continue writing while pursuing his lifelong goal to become a teacher.

Robert McKenzie is an English/Creative Writing major in his last semester at UML. He likes coffee and writing about himself in the third person.

Nathan Miller is an aspiring poet from Haverhill, Massachusetts currently studying English. His work draws inspiration from his upbringing in the Merrimack Valley and his travels across the American countryside. He thanks his friends and family for their constant support in doing what he loves.
Michael Nuzzo is a junior Computer Engineering student with a minor in Sound Recording Technology. A musician since childhood, he was first exposed to photography when he stole his mother’s camera to make album covers in high school. He plans to combine his passion for photography, music, and engineering to design new digital media systems for creators. He would like to thank his mother for being so forgiving of his thievery, and to thank both of his parents for supporting him in all his pursuits.

Justin Roy graduated from UMass Lowell last May, with a BA in English/Creative Writing. He still writes often and is pursuing his long-term goal of teaching English. This is Justin's second published poem in The Offering.

Jonathan Silverman is an associate professor of English at UMass Lowell. He is the author of Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture, the co-author of The World Is a Text, and the co-editor of Remaking the American College Campus. He has served as the Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway.

Tom Stevens graduated from UMass Lowell last year. He still hangs out with his Creative Writing major buds.

Sheila Vo is a junior Fine Arts/Graphic Design major. She enjoys taking photographs in her free time and she tries to incorporate it in her work when she can. She encourages others to get out of their comfort zone and try a new hobby to help keep creativity alive.

A. David Wunsch is Professor Emeritus in the Dept. of Electrical and Computer Engineering. He has been at Lowell since joining Lowell Tech in 1969. He studied with Minor White in 1966.
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