

**Stylus 2013**



# Stylus

a journal of  
literature and art





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# Table of Contents

Editor's Note	11
---------------	----

## PROSE

<b>Chivalry</b> – Norine McKee	14
<b>Nil Picks a Fight</b> – Norine McKee	24
<b>Squatch</b> – Stella Donovan	31
<b>Wings</b> – Rhea Ramakrishnan	35
<b>Urban Moses</b> – Norine McKee	40
<b>Placebo</b> – Nicholas Meriwether	41
<b>Mothman</b> – Stephen Rane	49
<b>Dark Matter</b> – Nicholas Meriwether	54
<b>Helen, Who Hurt You?</b> – Molly Morris	63
<b>Menace</b> – Alexandria Brake	67
<b>Small Victories</b> – Stephanie Levi	71

## ART

Cabrini Art Award	76
<b>Be Reflective</b> – Andrea Bajcsy	77
<b>Amelia No. 18</b> – Nick Frymark	78
<b>After Tonight</b> – Jennifer Block	79
<b>Lost in Translation</b> – Lydia Shia	80
<b>I Lurk Beneath</b> – Annelise Faustino	81
<b>Oscar</b> – Ginger Sapperstein	82
<b>Flight</b> – Becca Goodman	83
<b>Hulk Boy</b> – Ginger Sapperstein	84
<b>Life and Death</b> – Ginger Sapperstein	85
<b>Bloody Mary</b> – Andrea Bacjy	86
<b>Cold Skin Metamorphosis</b> – Andrea Bacjy	87
<b>Drops</b> – Becca Goodman	88
<b>Eras Triptych</b> – Ingrid Berberry	89

## POETRY

<b>An Invisible Middle</b> – Marlena Chertock	92
<b>Song For My Mother</b> – Dolapo Demuren	93
<b>For My Mother, Postpartum</b> – Alexandra Leston	94
<b>Davey Herold, as he Assassinates</b>	
<b>John Wilkes Booth's Horse</b> – Allison Hartley	95
<b>Mockingbird</b> – Charles Zhuang	97
<b>Abyssal</b> – Bryce Gold	98
<b>Midlands</b> – Angelina She	99
<b>My Mother's Closet</b> – Jonathan Reyes	100
<b>Painting the Sidewalk</b> – Samantha Reich	101
<b>Wind chimes</b> – Marlena Chertock	102
<b>Before</b> – Dolapo Demuren	103
<b>The Governor's Warfield Parkway</b> – Charles Zhuang	104
<b>Buffalo 4 The blizzard of '77</b> – Marlena Chertock	105
<b>Drowning</b> – Charles Zhuang	106
<b>Dianne St.</b> – Leigh McDonald	107
<b>Like Dancing</b> – Daniel Parisi	108
Staff Biographies	110
Contributor Biographies	113
Jiménez-Porter Writers House	115
Literary Prize	116
In memoriam	119
Acknowledgements	120
Submission Guidelines	121

Cover Art:

**Tarantula Nebula** – Jenna Parry  
Acrylic paint on wood, 36" x 40"







# Editor's Note

There are different kinds of paper. Heavy stock and low gloss, high sheen and rough-edged. I can't remember the specifics of these sheets. I don't know their reflectance or grain or weight. If I looked through my notebook I might find the details, scrawled in the corner or cramped in the margins, but as this journal coalesced these characteristics faded in importance.

Because these pages are more than their texture or opacity—they showcase the remarkable work of our contributors. They are representative of a fraction of the submissions we received, all of which contained admirable talent. They are the result of hundreds of emails, of late-night meetings, and of dedication to the point of stubbornness.

And the pages are steeped in my gratitude—for advisors, friends, and the editorial staff that worked tirelessly under tight deadlines, propelled by the singular desire to create something and imbue this campus and wider community with a little more creativity.

I hope you find something you like in the pages that follow.

Sincerely,  
Jamie Lee  
Editor-in-Chief





PROSE

# Chivalry | Norine McKee

## 1st Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

Eleven is one of those ages where you don't know quite where you stand. I believe that now, and I believed it then. Twelve holds some modicum of adulthood, and ten is still a kid. This was not something I could express to my friends at the time, because I was the oldest. It was a thing understood between eleven-year-olds. Dianne would have understood.

"Are you ever gonna talk to her?" Bryce was pulling his shirt off over his head as he said it. The lake was best off-season, when the water was bracing and the crowds were thin. At the time the rumors of snakes and crocodiles were an excellent means of driving off tourists and day-swimmers. We encouraged it. That way it was just me and my friends, and a few kids from the neighborhood, including Dianne.

"I might," I said to him. "I just need to think of something."

"Sure," he said. "I believe you." He made a face of blunt, cartoonish skepticism, and launched himself off the pier and into the water.

I watched her, discreetly, where she stood down by the lakeshore. Her breasts had started coming in over the summer, and her mother had bought her a pink, striped, two-piece swimsuit. She stood in the shallows, up to her ankles in silt, and was talking to her girlfriends, who sprawled on towels in the grass behind her. I'd never spoken to a single one of them. In that little Georgia town the boys and girls grew up together, and that daunting force that separated the sexes in most of the places where I'd lived before was blurred – but I wasn't from here. The girls didn't talk to me, and the boys barely did. I was not snubbed out of spite, I think, but because I didn't seem to register in the minds of my classmates.

Except for Bryce and Fergus. Not too many people talked to them, either. I wondered if it was me, the cloud of my new-kidness: if by being their friend I somehow obscured them. But when they weren't being ignored – when their somewhat overpowering personalities broke through that haze of indifference – they showed up to lunch with bruises or cut lips, and dented pride.

"There's a woman at the start of all great things."

Fergus had paddled up to the pier and was hanging off of the algae-stained ladder, aiming his dark, intelligent eyebrows up at me. He had a way of sneaking up on you and spouting things no earthly eleven year old had any business saying. Probably the reason he got his clock cleaned so often.

I humored him, usually. "Yeah?" I said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dunno," he said. He hiked himself up two rungs, leaned one elbow on the pier. "Why don't you go find out?"

"That's corny, Ferg. How's the water?"

"Freezing." He let go, backflopping into the lake. His thin white body disappeared into the green, and reemerged several yards away, slithering along like some lake creature. Bryce was splashing around with his brothers by the rocks, and he raised and waved one tan arm at me. I thought about shucking off my shirt and jumping in after them, but I looked along the bank towards Dianne, then down at my own plump arms, and thought again.

Swimming was one of our more wholesome pastimes. In retrospect, a much more substantial chunk of our time was spent lying around on my parents' sectional sofa and watching television. I had only lived in Georgia for about eleven months, having moved there from Illinois mid-January of that year, but Bryce and Fergus had quickly become fixtures in my life, and my parents tolerated our profound laziness because it was better than my watching TV alone. I hadn't made friends very easily before them, and, in all honesty, haven't made too many since.

Thanksgiving morning, my mother answered the door to find Bryce standing on the stoop with a gleaming tin box in his hands, and Fergus standing behind him with that parent-pleasing little smirk he had perfected.

"Hey, Mrs. Bevan," said Bryce. "My mom asked me to bring some mooncakes over."

She invited them in, accepting the tin with a puzzled smile – Bryce was often bringing us samples of his family's cooking, to my mother's continual perplexity. I waved at them over the back of the couch, and they waved back.

"Make yourselves at home, boys," said my mother, moving into the kitchen. And they did, Fergus simply sitting on the couch beside me, Bryce crawling over the back of it first and flopping onto the cushions like he'd scaled a wall. And, like we'd done almost every week since the friendship began, we sat and watched TV.

Bryce lay back against the arm of the sofa, one leg stretched out over Fergus' lap, the other hanging off the cushion to the floor. He was a compact kid, slightly thickset, but running more towards fit than fat. This bothered me because Bryce was about the laziest kid I'd ever met. His last name was Li and I'd been waiting for months for someone else to make the joke – Bruce Lee; it was so easy, so damn obvious – but kids called him Rice instead. Rice Li. You had to give them credit for creative racism where they lacked the pop culture kind, I guess.

Fergus had one of my mother's magazines laid across Bryce's shin, and was giving some checkered bedset a belittling stare. He was a delicate-looking guy, thin, quiet, smart; the kind of guy who looked like he was wearing glasses even though he never did. A guy I felt ought to be brought

down a peg, until I got to know him, and realized that I liked him. My dad once called him a "smooth customer." Our classmates didn't seem to feel the same. I reached over, grabbed the magazine from his hands, and threw it across the room. "Stop being boring," I said, settling back against the cushions.

He sighed. "I was only reading it because it was less boring than you."

"Shh." Bryce lifted his foot and stuck it in Fergus's face. "Watching TV."

Fergus endured it for a moment, then braced his arms against Bryce's body and shoved him off the sofa. Bryce reared up and dragged him off, and they tussled briefly on the floor before Bryce ended it the way he always did, by pinning Fergus face-down and sitting on his back.

"Now, boys," said my dad, appearing in the doorway just long enough to frown, then slipping away.

Around three-thirty, my mom sent my dad in to tell us the turkey was almost ready. That meant it was time for Bryce and Fergus to leave and for me to work up an appetite walking them home. So we dragged ourselves off the couch and out the door into the peaking autumn daylight.

"If you are gonna make a move on Dianne," Bryce said, as we passed beneath the enflamed canopy of an oak tree, "you better do it now, before her jugs get any bigger. Otherwise you're gonna get some competition."

"He's talking about himself," said Fergus, to me. Bruce shrugged. "I think I have a chance."

"As if you'd even know what to do with them."

"I bet I'll find out a lot sooner than you."

Fergus, who had never seemed to have much interest in girls at all, stopped, looking momentarily stricken. Then he gave Bryce a sharp, hard punch in the small of the back. They fell fighting in the leaves, and I just watched, wondering if this was one of those friendship things forged before my time.

The last day of Thanksgiving break was a warm one, so we spent it at the lake. More kids showed up than usual because of the weather, but it wasn't summer-crowded, at least. Most of the guys just jumped in wearing shorts or, if they were daring, underwear. I personally saw something undignified in showing up in a pair of trunks that said plainly: Yes, I'm here to swim. Jumping in a lake was meant to be an act of passion, after all.

I tugged my shirt off on the pier and discreetly pulled my denim shorts higher up on my hips. Bryce was hopping on one foot, trying to remove a sneaker; Fergus was stripped down to his boxers and a t-shirt, stuffing his socks into his shoes.

"Ricky," said Fergus, standing up and swiping bits of dirt from the seat of his boxers. "Yeah?"

He jerked his head over the side of the pier, at the small rocky beach that wound beneath it. Dianne was crouched at the water's edge, picking

up polished rocks and weighing them in her hands. A couple of boys had followed her, but they hung back, punching each other to look busy.

"Go skip rocks with her," said Fergus, giving me a meaningful lift of the eyebrows.

Those eyebrows always made me want to be honest, so I said, "I wouldn't have anything to say."

"Who said anything about saying anything?" he said. "I said go skip rocks."

I rubbed my arms a little. "Girls always want to talk about stuff."

"Not all of us," he said.

I said, "What?"

"Damn it!" Bryce had been folding his jeans over his arm, and a shower of loose change had poured out of the pocket, through a crack in the boards and into the water below. We turned and he looked up from the gap at us mournfully. "Does money float?" he asked.

"Depends what kind and how wet," said Fergus. "How much was it?" I asked.

He got to his feet, sighing. "Tomorrow's lunch."

Fergus smirked. "Moron." He looked at me to say something but Bryce slammed into him headlong, plunging them both over the edge of the pier and into the lake with a splash. Like the first lemmings of the migration, this spurred the other kids into action, and soon I was the last man standing there.

I looked down at the beach, where the two boys were trying vainly to tug Dianne into the water. She stood firm, and they let go of her arms and went wading in together, calling over their shoulders that it was her loss. I watched her, how her toes kneaded the moist sand closest to the tide, and how her placid, grown-up profile gazed across the water. She looked up and caught me staring, and, before the panic could hit me, I raised one hand and twitched it at her. She smiled, waved back at me, and pushed her bangs behind her ear.

I swallowed, turned, and walked down the pier to join her on the sand.

If she was half as embarrassed as I was when I crouched down beside her at the water's edge, she didn't show it. She scarcely even looked up. "Ricky, right?"

I had the fleeting impulse to say, "Actually, it's Rick," but, thankfully, I resisted.

"Yeah." She smiled again, and, as Fergus had prophesied, didn't seem to have much more to say.

We examined rocks - I, lifting them and studying them critically, she, laughing at my analysis -and then we chucked them out over the water, almost hitting the boys that had tried to pull her in.

I would have been afraid (I didn't think for a second my invisibility would protect me from their wrath) but she laughed louder the closer the

rocks came to their splashing bodies. Her presence seemed to immunize me from their anger. So we threw and we laughed and when the other kids went home, including Fergus and Bryce, we sat on the beach and she reached over and quickly squeezed my hand. Smiling to herself, I suspect, because she knew that was what I wanted.

For a few days after that, Dianne was my friend. Every day in gym, which we'd had all year long (though I doubt she'd ever cared), we met on the blacktop outside of the boys' and girls' changing rooms and strolled together along its perimeter, speaking little, hands almost touching like they had on the beach, until the gym teacher hollered at us to line up. Those three mornings seemed to mark the start of my improved life. I had the seeds of everything I needed right in my hands.

I still sat with the guys at lunch. I knew not to overstep my bounds. Bryce gave me nods of approval over the table. Fergus just smirked a little, knowingly.

On Thursday night, the night before the Fall Festival, I stood in my closet combing through every piece of clothing I owned, looking desperately for something decent. I'd been warned that it was a semi-formal event, the kind that required dress pants, dress shirts, or, if you were a girl and so inclined, dresses. There was also going to be a class photo. I thought of this – of Dianne looking at the photo in ten years time, and seeing me – and I knew I had to look good. I had to fit in, I had to stand out. I would have to look good enough to be worth remembering. It was a test.

It was the test of time, Fergus would have said pretentiously. And I was certain everything I touched would fail.

My father opened the door on me sitting in the middle of a maelstrom of clothes. "Your mother's done ironing your clothes for tomorrow," he said. He half-closed the door, opened it again as if to say something, then thought better and closed it all the way. So my predicament was out of my hands and into a woman's, and I was safe.

When I walked into the gymnasium the next morning, a few anxious strides ahead of my mother, I was thrilled to find that I was not the worst dressed there. In fact, I thought I looked okay. Blue jeans, a white collared shirt, and the black blazer I'd worn to my great-uncle's funeral.

Red and brown streamers hung from the rafters, and the indoor bleachers were punctuated with alternating pumpkins and basketballs. Three tables were pushed against the far wall, cluttered with parent-prepared food: pies, cookies, mashed potatoes, and, in the case of my mother, leftover stew. Most parents brought in one or perhaps two plates' worth of food, but Bryce's mother's contribution warranted an entire half of a table.

Mrs. Li took food very seriously – their family didn't celebrate Thanksgiving, or so Bryce told me, but another, similar holiday which

he dismissed as “the Chinese version.” It came earlier but the leftovers seemed to last longer. When she saw me she handed me a paper plate already loaded with food. I nodded at Bryce, who was standing beside her, hip propped against the table and arms crossed over his chest. It was his customary stance when he was with his mother in public. He nodded back at me. I noted his blue sweater vest and black slacks and felt, smugly, that I had won something.

“Where’s Fergus?” I asked, when my mom had engaged his in stilted conversation.

He shrugged. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

I turned and surveyed the room. I imagined that she would stand out instantly, but it was several long seconds before I picked her out, posing with her friends by the pumpkins while her mother took pictures. She wore a yellow dress that didn’t quite cover her knees, white stockings, and black shoes with just the suggestion of a heel.

“You should go ask for the negatives,” quipped Fergus, behind us.

We turned and watched him place his mother’s tofu turkey platter on the table. He was wearing a dark green cable-knit sweater and – it took a moment to register – a knee-length black skirt with a fringe.

We both stared at him for a moment, shocked. And then Bryce began to laugh.

“Shut up,” said Fergus, smoothing his skirt, red in the face. “We have to dress up, okay? You don’t see me laughing at you guys.”

Bryce was still laughing. But I couldn’t laugh. I couldn’t laugh because it didn’t make any sense. I said, “Fergus.”

Something in my voice shut them both up, and they looked at me. Bryce’s smile had not quite faded; Fergus’ eyebrows were pushed up and together like two checkmarks.

“Fergus,” I whispered, so the room wouldn’t hear. “You – you – you look like a, a – ”

It wasn’t funny. It was horrible. People were turning, kids were grinning, or I imagined they were. They weren’t surprised. They knew something I didn’t.

The puzzled look on Fergus’s face had vanished, and now he was having trouble meeting my eyes. “Oh,” he said to the floor. “I forgot.”

“Forgot?” Bryce looked back and forth between us, perhaps as confused as I was.

“To tell him,” Fergus bit out.

“To tell him...” The moment dragged out, and Bryce stared at me, raking his mind to remember what he’d forgotten to tell me – what, in the eleven months of our friendship, had never come up – and, when it finally lit in his eyes, I had already just about worked it out for myself. I felt sick before he even said the words:

“Oh! Yeah. Fergus is a girl.”



If I hadn't been a joke to the student body before then, I definitely was now. But I was sure they had been laughing at me the whole time. Why else, in the eleven months of my going to their school, living in their town, and thinking that I was, if not liked, then at least not hated, would they not have told me that my only friends had been lying to me from the day we'd met? That one was a liar and the other was a liar and a freak?

I almost ran out of the auditorium then and there, but my mother, who had been talking to Mrs. Li further down the table and had missed the whole scene, came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. "Well boys, don't we all look very –" She stopped, and if I had been in a position to see her face, I'm sure it would have been quite a sight.

"Fergus," she said in a slightly hoarse voice, "dear –"

"Hello, Mrs. Bevan," he said, blushing horribly at the floor.

My mother didn't say anything else. She just forced a weak giggle, gave my shoulders a squeeze, and walked stiffly away. As if the revelation of Fergus's sex was something to be accepted smilingly, with as little embarrassment shown as possible, like one of Bryce's mother's gifts of food brought to our home.

Then the teachers called for us to arrange ourselves on the bleachers for the picture and, for once, I was glad that the class roster put the three of us so far away from each other.

After the picture was taken, everyone scattered, talking and laughing – about me, I'd thought at the time, though in retrospect I'm sure they hadn't even noticed my little crisis – and I dragged Bryce into the hallway. I was mad at him, of course, but at the moment he was the lesser of two evils.

"You knew?" I shouted.

He shrugged, desperately. "Thought you did."

"Thought I did? That Fergus was a g–" I gagged on the word.

"Yeah, I did! Thought you figured it out, or something." He blew air.

"Kinda forgot it myself."

"But his name's Fergus!" I paused, and felt my eyes widen. "His name is Fergus, right?"

"I think so."

"Well, why is his name Fergus if he's – she's a –?"

"I don't know! His parents are freaks, okay? They brought tofu turkey!"

"He's a he! We say he! We always say he!"

"You do," he said. "Well, I do too, I guess. Look, it started as a joke – kind of – everybody thought it was funny, cuz, well, Fergus isn't very – but Ferg, Ferg said if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, or something like that... It was, like, an experiment...they never liked us anyway... And then you came, and we just sorta... forgot, I guess. It was just easier, man."

"I don't understand," I said, my whole face burning. "How can you



forget something like that?"

"I dunno." He had the decency to look embarrassed. "Got used to it."

I groaned and sagged back against the wall. "I'm gonna throw up." And I did, all over the floor.

Bryce grimaced away from the smell. "You shouldn't have had the mooncakes."

I can't say for sure if Dianne was in on the joke. I can't even be sure if it was a joke at all, or if my ignorance had just been looked on as a personal problem that no one had felt the need to correct, and no one had bothered to intercede on my behalf because it was too much trouble and kind of funny, and who cared, anyway?

I do know for sure that Dianne wasn't surprised by Fergus' secret. It hadn't been a secret at all, except to me and my mother and father. ("No," my father had whispered in the kitchen, to my mother, when they thought I was watching TV. "The white one, you mean? Christ, that's embarrassing.") I watched her go by in the hallways, my hand aching to almost-touch hers again because it knew it never would. She rarely looked at me, and when she did, her lips pressed together tightly as if she were trying not to laugh. Whether or not she'd been in on it before, she obviously was now.

Bryce was the only ally I had left. Only having two friends had never bothered me much, until I stopped being friends with one of them. I wasn't about to give up Bryce, and neither was Fergus. We three still sat together at lunch, Fergus and I determinedly ignoring each other, holding separate conversations with Bryce, who switched back and forth, and occasionally – futilely – tried to blend them. When that happened, we'd finish the meal in cold silence, our faces individually burning.

A week and a half after the deadlock began, Fergus decided to end it.

It was recess, and I had been passing a ball around with some guys on the blacktop, who, I suppose, had taken a sort of self-righteous pity on me. They still snickered when I dropped the ball and rolled their eyes in plain sight, but I was grateful to have a place to be, and I imagine they liked having someone feel privileged to be around them.

I had just caught the ball when he rammed right into me, sending me stumbling backwards.

"Hey!" I cried – then I saw who it was, and my mouth snapped shut.

Fergus was standing with his feet planted apart on the asphalt, clenching and unclenching his fists. I noticed that he was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.

"You're an asshole," he said.

The guys I'd been playing with laughed incredulously through o-shaped mouths. Other kids began to turn and watch. Bryce was at the edge of the blacktop, looking on with a stupefied expression. I can't

remember if Dianne was there. If she was, I didn't see her.

I set my jaw, turned, and started to walk away.

"Coward," he said, stopping me. I looked back at him, and he crossed his arms and shrugged.

"Leave me alone, Fergus." More kids were watching now. Some were climbing the jungle gym to get a better look.

He lifted his eyebrows. "Not until you apologize."

I choked on my indignation. If I weren't so desperate to end the scene, I would have demanded to know what the hell I had to apologize for. Instead I said, "No," and I added, with nasty emphasis for the playground to hear, "We're not friends anymore."

There was a pause.

"Fine." With two quick strides he was in my face, and he shoved me back another two steps. "Then hit me."

I recovered, holding out my arms to fend him off. "No!"

"Hit me," he said. "Hit me. Come on."

Everyone was watching.

"Fergus," I said through my teeth. "Stop it."

"Who's the girl here?" he shouted, sparking a brushfire of laughter amidst the crowd. He shoved me back a step, then another. "Hit me. Hit me. Hit me!" And his voice hit this note, this pitch, and I thought: how couldn't I have known? – "Hit me!"

So I did.

These days, most of Fergus' news is relayed to me through Bryce, who calls her every other weekend, and who meets me on odd weekends in the local bar to catch up. When Fergus and I do talk, it's usually in person, once a year at best, when she comes down to visit her parents and show her boyfriend-du-jour around her hometown. We hug a little awkwardly, and then I shake hands with the boyfriend, and we sit and chat, and usually Bryce is there, smiling his huge, beatific smile.

I'm not sure exactly when the pronoun changed in my mind. I don't know if it ever did in hers. Of course, to her – as with everyone – she had always been "me" or "I"; I wonder if sex is at the forefront of our minds when it comes to other people, and only an undercurrent in ourselves, for a reason. How aware am I of my sex at any moment of the day – how aware of other people's? Fergus started me on a lifetime of pondering this, and wondering whether I should feel sorry for it.

It was probably shortly after that fight on the playground that it happened. I mean, when something like that comes to light – "that" being, of course, that Fergus was a girl – you can't go on with the illusion. Even though it was a year or two later before Fergus began to acquire the curves of a young woman, and another few years before she started wearing her hair long, she was colored female for me ever after. Fergus was a girl.

Something had died so that something else could survive.

We'd ripped each other up pretty badly in the fight and I guess the other kids thought that was kind of cool. Not cool enough to be our friends, but cool enough to leave us alone, if that makes any sense. And with their collective sneer off our backs, the tension between us would gradually ease.

Sitting in the principal's office, waiting for our parents to pick us up, we didn't talk. We listened to the clock ticking on the wall and avoided the secretary's bitter old face. Suddenly, Fergus snorted a bubble of blood, and clapped an astonished hand over her nose. I couldn't help but laugh. Scandalized, she turned and looked at me – short hair in disarray, clothing torn in the sleeves and the knees – and then she reached over and maliciously pressed her thumb against the bruise under my eye. I yelped and slapped her hand away.

We stared at each other. Slowly, a smirk crawled across her face. I felt the corners of my mouth twitching upwards and I lost the fight to keep them down. We looked away, still mad, but much less so. I felt the giddy thrill of relief rushing through my veins. And I resolved to, one day, apologize.

One day, I will.

# Nil Picks A Fight | Norine McKee

## 1st Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

She hadn't even planned to go to this party, but her friend had told her that it was gonna be raging. It turned out that it was only raging after she'd come, and was there for nearly two hours, because she'd had a few beers and a problem with another girl.

Sitting on the hood of her friend's car, lips suctioned around the mouth of a brown glass bottle, she watched boys pass with hooded eyes, and they found themselves more conscious of the way they walked. Her hair was short, a straight black bob that made her neck look distinctly long and thin. The hair was a little too thick and wiry for the look to work, and it mushroomed out from her head in a way that was more modish than she'd intended.

"What've I said about sitting on my ride?" asked Winnie, sliding up alongside the car and running a hand over its polished shell. Her hair, a natural orange, was pinned up, and her long eyelashes were painted black. "I wanna introduce you to some friends."

Nil, who'd had enough to drink that she felt the buzz in her thighs, slid down from the hood and followed Winnie through the high, wet grass, to where a group of boys were standing under a tree with red plastic cups in their hands. "Nilofer Johnson," said Winnie, resting her delicate fingers on Nil's high shoulder, "this is Damien, Craig, Jimmy, Harry, and Joel."

Each boy inclined his head or raised a hand in greeting, though they all looked sort of disinterested. The one named Harry didn't even look her way, was in fact looking off somewhere beyond her, to where a group of girls had burst into shrieks of laughter. Her vague horniness, a frequently unsatisfied side-effect of her drinking, honed in on the sharp notch of his jaw, the slightly up-turned nose, the dark hair curling at the nape of his neck, and his total indifference to her.

"Nil is actually a junior," said Winnie, "but she's our age." She said it like an ice-breaker, which it was, but Nil gave her a narrow look. Winnie smiled and added, "Paperwork problem, wasn't it?"

"Actually, no, I failed English." Nil turned back to them and joked, "I barely speak it. Half the time I don't even know what people are saying to me."

Harry rolled his eyes a little, but the other boys just nodded into their cups. It was an unexpected trial that one alone had passed, the unnecessary extra reason to want him, but he excused himself and moved towards the group of laughing girls before she could say another word. She pressed her lips together and let him go.

The rest of her beer later and she was beginning to forgive the

undesirable aspects of Damien Walsh, or at least trying to reconcile them with her quickly depleting standards. The shortness was okay – it made her feel tall – and the forwardness just meant he wasn't too hard to read, and who was she to criticize someone else's haircut? And the joke, the joke about not understanding English, it was a reasonable miss – she was plainly Mediterranean-looking and her friend had introduced her as Nilofer, so it was bound to go over some of their heads. She'd assumed her effortless pronunciation would have tipped them off, but they were high school boys, and drunk. Only a fraction could be expected to catch the joke, right? One out of five to be precise, she thought, gazing in the direction of that one fifth, the one who had walked away, and the leggy blonde he was now talking to.

"So what's your first language?" asked Damien, looking very impressed with himself for asking.

"You seem smart," she said. "Guess."

She might as well have asked him to list her genetic code.

"It's English," she said mercifully, pushing the empty bottle into his hand. "Excuse me."

The party organizers, whoever they were, had staked out a field behind an abandoned stock feed storehouse way out in the sticks. Seemingly the whole senior class was there, as well as some of the more party-savvy juniors, such as herself, and the alcohol flowed. She had no trouble tracking down another drink. Plastic tubs of iced beer were set at approximately equidistant points around the field, and hives of her classmates hovered around each one. She made for the nearest, at one hind corner of the storehouse.

"Nilly!"

A heavy body latched itself around hers, lifting her off her feet and swinging her in a circle.

She knew who it was before her feet touched ground. "Hey," she said into his sweaty shirt.

Martin patted her, released her, and stepped back smiling. He was a huge boy, pushing six- four, with an impressive girth. She had been on good terms with him ever since she'd called out their biology teacher on an embarrassing mistake in ninth grade, in a way, she thought now with regret, that had not invited the admiration or friendship of her peers, and he'd been the only one who'd laughed. He laughed now. "Great party, right?"

"Not bad," she said. "You drinking?"

"Oh yes."

"Allow me." He fished out two cans and handed her one of them. They popped the tabs, clicked, and drank.

"Who you here with?" she asked. "Brendan and the guys?"

He shifted his weight, smiling bashfully. "Nikola Crocetti."

"Oh my god." She turned away to get her bearings and turned back again, making a full circle. "Oh my god, you're joking."

"She's actually really nice!"

"Martin, run."

"I'll call her over here."

"No, thank you."

He was still laughing. "Well, alright." He waved to a cluster of girls a few yards away, among whom, Nil now noticed, stood Nikola Crocetti. Nikola was talking to two other girls, but she waved back briefly.

"No offense, Martin," said Nil, "but how the hell did this happen?"

"Got me," he said, dreamy-eyed.

"Did you win any lotteries? Write a hit single?"

"I did lose a little weight." He patted his stomach. "There you go."

They clicked and drank to that. Then Nikola looked back over, frowning, and made a beckoning gesture.

"Gotta go," said Martin, smiling madly. "My lady calls." He sprang away.

"Christ," she said into her beer. Not knowing, not wanting to know, what angle Nikola was working here.

"You got a problem, bitch?"

The word 'bitch' was not what incensed her. At least she didn't think, in hindsight, that that was it. She didn't mind the word; it meant very little to her; she had reached a point in her life where she thought what other people thought meant very little. 'Bitch,' at this point, was just a prickle over thick skin. It was more likely the fact that the boy, the one who'd rolled his eyes at her joke, Harry, was standing off to one side and watching them, watching her, with plain disgust.

She brought herself up as high as she could and put one hand on her hip. She swayed a little, because, whatever her father said to whoever would listen about the high tolerance of the Khoroushi-Johnsons, five beers had been enough to make her nod off against the storehouse twenty minutes ago, stagger blindly to her feet ten minutes ago, and, when she'd stumbled into a nearby group of girls she didn't know and sloshed their drinks all over them five minutes ago, to stand there and laugh. Nil was never humble when she drank, in fact she got downright shitty, and at that point she couldn't feel much more than dizzy and superior, laughing over the four o-mouthed girls and their drippy new outfits.

And now the whole senior class, and part of her own, was watching.

The girl in the black dress, the one who'd asked her the question, spat lazily to one side.

"Yeah, I got a problem," said Nil, loud enough for everyone to hear. She tried to spit too, and ended up retching a little bit of bile onto the ground. There was a muted groan from the people of the surrounding circle. "Sorry," she said to them. To the girl she said, "Yeah, I got a problem, and it's you."

"Well, why don't you tell me about it?"

Nil hadn't expected a follow-up question. "Uh..."

The girl launched at her. The charge lifted Nil off her feet for a

moment, and then she was in the dirt, too drunk to feel the pain of impact, blinking and coughing. Thankfully she'd peed, off in the woods, earlier in her drunkenness, or she might have peed herself now. Then again, the girl might have left her alone if she did.

"-this dress cost three weeks' paychecks slut-"

The girl chiseled at Nil with small but brutal fists, jagged bones, surprisingly resilient knuckles punctuating every other word. Nil held her arms over her face and, with an economy of motion that surprised her not least of all, jackknifed up into the girl's chin. The girl fell backwards, sprawled open-armed on the grass, and Nil sat up, stunned and staring. The crowd oohed. She looked at the girl's friends, who stood to one side of the fight, and dreaded that they would lunge forward to avenge their leader, but they just stood there cat-calling.

Nil looked back down at her girl, who was now angling herself up on her elbows, her eyes feral and bright. "Fffffffuck," said Nil, and she scrambled backwards and upwards, her horsey limbs uncooperative and spilling her back to earth once or twice along the way. She got her feet under her, spun, and was staggering towards the edge of the clearing - it moved away from her, the crowd stepping backwards as one - when she heard a shriek, and she put her arms over her face again in anticipation of the tackle.

And it was lucky that she had, because otherwise she might have lost a few teeth when she hit the ground this time. The girl fisted her tiny hands in Nil's hair (thank God it's short, she thought) and tried to slam Nil's head repeatedly into the dirt, but the cushion of her arms protected her, and instead she was just rattled up and down. The girl tugged her hair brutally, but not hard enough to rip. Nil rolled, and with an aborted yelp the girl was under her. Nil was on her back, the girl's legs in the air on either side of her. She drove an elbow into the soft stomach beneath her, then flipped herself over, and pinned the girl down. Nil punched her once more, in the ribs, to stun, and leapt up and away as quickly as she could. "Just stay down," she said to the writhing girl, knowing it was pointless because the girl was a hurricane, and Nil had exhausted her own luck.

Just as she was contemplating running into the woods, a large hand wrapped around her bicep and jerked her backwards, and something big - Martin, she thought with joy - stepped past her. "Everybody cool it!" he said, and it was the loudest she'd ever heard him speak. His voice wavered, unused to the authority. A large number of the crowd began to boo. "Cool it," he said to the girl in the black dress, who was sitting up now. She sneered, and coughed into the crook of an elbow, but the fight seemed to have gone out of her. Formidable though she was, she could not have weighed more than one hundred and ten, and might not have known that Martin would never lay hands on a woman.

Martin turned to Nil now, and the closest name she could think of for his look was disbelief. Well, she was in disbelief, too. "You're going home



now," he said quietly, "before someone murders you."

"Yes please," she said. He steered her out of the crowd by her elbow.

"Hey," said one of the girl's friends as Nil was passing. The others had rushed to their fallen champion. This one was wearing a lacy white dress, and the beer Nil had knocked down her front stood out ruinously against the fabric. She stepped forward, her eyes calm. Martin hesitated at Nil's side, but the girl gave him a nod and lifted a hand in truce, so he stepped back.

The girl looked at Nil for a moment. Nil's eyes flicked to the hand, which was still raised, wondering if she was about to be slapped.

The hand closed, and, in a flash that would dog her, for better or worse, the rest of her high school days, punched her hard between the legs.

"You stay down," the girl said to Nil's bent-double form, then strolled past Martin, who just cringed. She had obviously guessed he would not retaliate on Nil's behalf. The crowd near enough to witness this was in hysterics.

Nil dropped to her knees. "God - damn."

"Sorry," he said, squeezing her shoulder. "No, I'm not sorry. You..." He didn't finish the sentence. She suspected he would have said "you were asking for it," if he was not the kind of guy who had probably been raised never to say that sort of thing to a woman.

"I know," she wheezed, and hauled herself up on his arm. "Thanks."

He helped her limp away.

Winnie flitted along behind them, clutching her long red hair, which had come unpinned in her distress. "I can't drive her," she moaned, "I can't drive for hours."

"I'll drive her," said Martin. He sounded very brave saying it, and Nil un-doubled enough to see him cast a mournful look towards the crowd - towards Nikola Crocetti. (You're a good guy, she thought.) She considered offering to lie down in the back of Winnie's car until she was sober enough to drive, but she knew Martin would be annoyed and insist on taking her home anyway. So she said nothing. (You're a fucking nice guy.)

"I'll take her."

No one had noticed Harry until he was standing beside them.

He looked between the three of them, and his keys began a distracted three-note jingle against his thigh. "I've only had one beer," he said, and his uncanny dark eyes did look clear.

"Okay," said Martin and Nil in one voice. Martin shoved her towards their savior, and was moving back in the direction of the scattered crowd at a double-step before Nil could even say goodbye, or thanks again. Winnie looked from Nil to Harry to Nil again, tittered briefly, and was gone.

Nil managed, with effort, to straighten halfway, and smiled up into Harry's serious, beautiful face. She considered saying something coy, but figured she'd keep her mouth shut for a number of reasons. He looked down at her neutrally.



"You're a fucking mess, you know that."

Her smile faltered. "Of course I know that."

Now he smiled. "As long as you know."

"God damn," she said as the car pulled off the grass, some minutes later, and onto the paved road. She put her hands between her thighs where she'd been punched, and groaned.

He glanced over from the driver's seat. Moonlight slipped over his pale face through the filmy windshield. "I didn't know that hurt girls," he said, genuinely curious.

"What, you think it feels good?"

He paused. "I guess it depends on the girl."

"Lord, spare me," she said, and he laughed, a bright sound that startled her into hiccupping a little herself. She schooled her face back into a frown, feeling strangely, childishly, that if he was enjoying himself, she shouldn't be allowed. The wild lusty spin of drunkenness had gone and now she just felt low.

Nice guys, she thought, but now the thought weighed angrily on her mind. They were almost as bad as the bad ones. No, they were fucking worse. Always doing right by you until they had you thinking you were beholden to them forever. Saving your life, taking you home, there was no way to shake them. Unless, like Nikola Crocetti, you took them apart.

They sailed through glittering black boondocks and down the shining highway, and Nil nodded off a little between his lazy questions ("Who started it?" "I don't know."), blinking herself awake whenever he asked a new one ("Do you get punched down there a lot?" "Do you?"), and tucking herself nauseously up against the passenger side door when he took the exit ramp a little too fast. Soon they were rumbling over the uneven pavement of main street, through the town's major intersection and its blinking yellow light, and he asked, "Where do you live?" She named the street and watched his profile the rest of the way home.

Her house was sleeping. She tried to see it as he must: the dirty siding, its scrubby yellow lawn, the sunken chain-link, a green plastic table upended by the stoop. She thought of the inside, which was nicer comparatively, cozy, and turned to him. "Wanna come in?"

He laughed. "No. Way."

"Why don't you come in?" She put a hand on his thigh, dragging her nails up the denim inseam, and leaned in close. "I'll brush my teeth."

He pushed her away, not delicately. His eyes were wide. "You've got to be kidding."

"What? You're here, aren't you? You volunteered, didn't you?"

"I drove you home because you're drunk and just got your ass kicked." She snorted, and he threw the car into park. Then he grabbed her biceps, and turned her roughly towards him. "Did you miss the part where you're a drunk mess? That you can barely walk, and I'm sober?"

"I can barely walk 'cuz I got punched in the vee, not because I'm drunk."

He let go of her like he was about to start ripping out his hair instead, but he just grabbed the wheel. "Oh my god. Just – get out, for fuck's sake." She did, unfolding herself sorely onto her front lawn.

"Good night, Nilofer. You're a fucked up individual."

"It's Nil." She slammed the door.

"Drink some water."

"Nice guys," she shouted as he shifted into drive, and then after his car as he pulled away, "I'm surrounded by nice guys!"

But it wasn't true, and she stood there for a moment, breathing deep, before she went to get the spare key from the backyard.

# Squatch | Stella Donovan

## 2nd Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

That night on television, the hosts of Finding Bigfoot were traveling to southeast Alaska. Ellie and her boyfriend Dave watched the show at their apartment while eating dinner. The couple had been together for nearly two years. Ellie had poisoned Dave's wine. A lethal, medically imperceptible amount of poison.

During the first commercial, Dave turned to Ellie.

"You know how I know none of the people on this show have seen a real sasquatch?"

"How?" she answered.

"Because everyone says the creature that they saw was a foot taller than Bobo."

"Bobo?"

"The host with the hat that says 'Gone Squatchin.'"

"Oh."

Ellie had volunteered to cook dinner that night. The meat was heavily salted. She wanted him thirsty.

Dave continued talking.

"That other host makes Bobo go stand in the woods or the swamp or wherever there was a sighting, and tells the person, 'Estimate how tall the creature was compared to Bobo.' And do you know what they all say?"

"What?" Ellie asked.

"They all say, 'Well, it was probably about a foot taller than Bobo.' All of them."

Ellie watched the glass in his hand. He hadn't sipped yet.

"I mean, we're talking about a different species here," Dave said. "The squatches can't all be a foot taller than Bobo. There would have to be some baby and adolescent squatches. Am I right?"

"You're right, baby."

Dave swirled the wine around in the glass and continued talking.

"Unless Mama Squatch has some kind of intense uterus, she isn't pushing them out a foot taller than Bobo. Logically, junior squatches would be sighted more often because they wouldn't have perfected how to hide from humans yet."

It wasn't that Ellie wanted to kill Dave out of malice. She'd been quite fond of him at the beginning. But television compatibility was an important part of every romantic relationship, and they didn't have it.

"And diet," he was telling her. "Diet affects height, right? So unless the squatches all have the exact same diet, which is impossible because this show travels around to different regions with different climates, they

couldn't all be a foot taller than Bobo."

High resolution. Crisp picture quality. Five HDMI inputs. The quality of Dave's television had once made up for his taste in programming, but Ellie's patience had worn thin.

"These people just want to get on TV," Dave said.

She'd thought his preoccupation with sasquatches would be temporary, but in three seasons he hadn't missed an episode.

"They aren't real seekers," Dave concluded.

A few weeks earlier she'd caught him watching a repeat. Not wanting to positively reinforce this behavior, she decided to stop sleeping with him. Not wanting him to sleep with anyone else, she decided to kill him.

"This wine is delicious," Ellie announced.

Absorbed in the show, Dave paid no attention. The hosts of Finding Bigfoot had now arrived in Alaska and were discussing possible sightings with the locals. They collected a photograph of a large nonhuman footprint, a recording of an odd moaning sound, and testimonies from the villagers about several sightings concentrated in one area at the end of town.

Ellie watched him. He was paunchy. Pale. Low levels of color saturation. He wasn't like the Bowflex man on the commercial they'd just seen. The Bowflex man was toned, tanned, building muscle with the technology of progressive resistance, incinerating calories and saying "no more!" to ineffective diet plans. His body rippled against the stark white background, supporting the weights with ease. Drops of perspiration slid down the etched crevices of his abdomen. And all of this in such high resolution, Ellie felt like she could have reached out and touched him.

The flatscreen made everything in her real life seem less vivid. Especially Dave.

Ellie realized that to successfully murder him, she would have to engage him in conversation.

"Do these people get money for saying they've seen Bigfoot?" Ellie asked.

Dave shook his head.

"Call them sasquatch or squatch. Bigfoot is demeaning."

"Really?" Ellie asked, sprinkling more salt on his steak. "Because I feel like 'squatch' sounds way worse. Squatch. Squatch. No matter what tone you use, it doesn't sound natural."

"You shouldn't call them Bigfoots," Dave repeated. "It's disrespectful to their species."

"Bigfeet."

"What?"

"I shouldn't call them Bigfeet. Wouldn't that be the plural of Bigfoot?"

Ellie squeezed a few drops of tabasco on his meat.

"Bigfeet?" Dave scoffed. "That sounds ridiculous."

It was decided that Bobo and the other hosts would spend the night in the woods executing squatch calls and listening for a response.

Dave took a bite of his food and grimaced. He cleared his throat. He raised the wine glass to his lips. Ellie couldn't help it.

"Just tell me one thing," she said.

"What?" Dave asked, halting the glass.

"Do you walk around on two foots, or do you walk around on two feet?"

"I'm not going to--"

"Answer my question."

"Why are you being so--"

"Because I think you walk around on two feet. Am I lying?"

Dave put the wine back down on the table without drinking it.

Turning to her, he rallied.

"I'm sorry, maybe if the show was called The Real Housewives of Squatch County you'd be more interested."

"Did you just say Squatch County?"

Dave seemed to regret the rally but forged ahead bravely.

"I'm sorry that this show is about more than a bunch of rich women with plastic faces going out to lunch."

Ellie sighed. Dave clearly didn't grasp the societal pressures exerted on females aging in the public eye.

"Where exactly is Squatch County?" she asked. "We should call Bobo and tell him to look there. We'll be famous."

Dave sullenly fixed his eyes on the television.

"Let's have a toast to Squatch County," she ordered, extending her arm in a flourish. Dave ignored the gesture.

"Okay, first of all, if I actually saw a squatch, I would never call Bobo."

"Why not?" Ellie asked.

"Can you imagine how much they would be exploited if people knew?"

Ellie paused, considering.

"You wouldn't want credit for finding them?" she asked.

"No. Everyone would put them in cages and do tests on them," he answered. "They'd be separated from their families. Turned into circus freaks. I just want them to be free."

"But the money. The television appearances. You could pay off your student loans."

"It isn't worth it. I don't want to cause pain to anything or anyone."

Ellie regarded him for a long moment.

"What?" Dave asked.

"You're a good person."

"No need to sound so surprised," he mumbled.

Dave picked up his glass. Sighing, he raised it to his lips.

Ellie lunged across at the table, smacking the glass out of his hand.

It shattered on the ground. The wine bled into the carpet.

Dave sputtered in surprise.

"Ellie, what the--"

"There was a bug."

Ellie sprang from her chair, reaching for paper towels on the nearby countertop.

"I love you," she told him.

Dave's hand still floated in midair where it had held the glass a moment before.

"I love you too," he answered.

The search for a squatch in Southeast Alaska had been futile.

Next week on Finding Bigfoot, Bobo and his friends would travel to the Everglades.

Dave, shaken, took the paper towels from Ellie and handed her the remote.

"Here," he said. "Your choice."

# Wings | Rhea Ramakrishnan

## 3rd Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

When I walked into the room last night, I'd crawled beneath the covers still in my winter coat. I hadn't checked, but I'd known there was an open book beneath the bed entitled *The Erotic Mind*. Its splayed pages faced the carpet, some of them creased and dog-eared, their ink smudged by clammy fingers. In a woven basket beneath my desk was a Kodak package sealed shut with scotch tape. There were other Kodak packages in the basket but I trusted that this was the only one still sealed shut. There was an Altoid box between the bed's springboard and the mattress and I trusted that there were still a few dried beads of pot inside of it. The whole room was a collection of things I hadn't wanted anyone to see and things I hadn't ever intended to return to.

And now I'm thinking about how absurd it is to be lying in my childhood bed as though I had never left it. The calendar above the desk by the window still turned to June of the year before I left for college. The same paint cracks on the ceiling directly above the bed. The boy with the teal wings still flying past my window at noon every weekend morning. I squint against the sunlight now pushing through my shut blinds, as I watch his silhouette drift past.

When I was little, I'd played this game with the boy with teal wings: We'd taken baby monitors and beepers and pretended they were laser guns. We'd hide behind the couches in his living room – they were covered in white sheets, always, as if his family had never quite managed to move all the way in – then, we'd point our laser guns towards each other in an attempt to hit each other with our beams. Once, my mother had walked in the door, unsuspecting, and the boy had a clear shot. *Weeooooo, weeooooo*, he'd howled, his laser slicing through her ribs and she'd cried out *Ah, ooh, ughh, you've got me, goodbye cruel world!* And, with that, she fell to the ground. We both stepped out from behind our separate couches and walked over towards my mother. And while he watched her still twitching with the last signs of life, I looked at him. His eyes widened as he tried to curl his lips into a feeling he didn't have the words for.

*It's not real,* I said.

He looked at me and nodded. My mom giggled and got up off the ground, brushing off the front of her blouse. I could tell he didn't understand and I didn't speak to him after that.

Although I'd been so tired when I fell into my old bed still in my

winter coat, it had been so strange to me, sleeping through the night - not waking up to the sound of Lillith's breathing. Lillith on the corner bed in the dark letting the tip of her pocketknife slip beneath the skin on the soft part of her left palm. One slit for Mom and Dad, the only ones with the money to pay for her tuition, her drugs. One slit for the boy with blue eyes who offered her a cigarette outside the library. One slit for Philosophy 101, in which there would be a midterm Tuesday morning.

And then, when I would sit up in my bed and look directly at her - *Lillith, please* - she'd stare back at me, the whites of her tired eyes piercing through the darkness. *Lillith, I'm trying to sleep.* She'd begin to hum while my eyes met hers across the space between our two beds, the pocketknife still sinking in and out of her flesh and I'd find myself falling in and out of sleep to that sound and waking up, finally, to the sound of wings batting against my window.

The boys with the most remarkably colored feathers, I noticed, were the ones who couldn't quite control them - the ones with the golden tips, the crystals studding their quills. They were careless, flying into poplars, fraying their barbs between door hinges. It seemed to me they were cursed with flight and we were cursed with having to watch them fly. It had been easier when we'd all walked to class together. When we'd giggled in the fifth grade watching the boys itch at their shoulder blades in anticipation.

Max's wings were not so elaborate but their size made them impressive. You could lay two of me across their width when he stretched them. Wings like those could get you far. Wings like those were something to boast about. And Max was the type of person who didn't bother with pleasantries. When I'd pick up his phone calls, he'd never say Hello, never How are you. He would launch right into an epic of his flight from Paris to Madrid. How he had darted so quickly between clouds that the fibers of the universe parted for him and he saw its strings vibrating against the fabric of time and space. He'd tell me about some amazing Cuban place he'd eaten at. Always where he, with who he, him, his. And then, when I'd go to his apartment he'd put a record on and all I'd hear was men chanting, bending their voices like warm silver spoons. I'd tell him I thought it sounded nice and he'd close his eyes and nod his head, absentmindedly smoothing out his feathers and I would wonder why I came at all.

And then, inevitably, he would be on top of me pressing his body onto mine and I would allow this despite his breath being jagged and unhinged, unholy against my forehead. I could not even reach an arm around him because his wings would smack against our sides like ceiling tiles falling and crumbling around us.

All this for the finality of when it would be over and I would turn to my side so that I didn't have to look at his face and he'd hold me just like that, both of us pretending we were not with each other. Maybe, even, we



were not with anyone at all. Maybe we were alone in some world that was warm and safe and inviting and, so, it would be okay.

It was Max that showed me there weren't only drugs that made you happy or euphoric or sad or angry. There were drugs to make you desire things and reject them. Drugs to keep you up at night and drugs to put you to sleep. Drugs to make you see eye to eye. There were drugs to make you see a different person when you looked in the mirror. There were drugs to make you feel like you weren't human at all, to make you forget that you ever were. You began not being able to tell, really, whether you were or weren't. I knew that that was why Lillith played with knives. It was the only way I could explain why I stood on the roof of the physics building. Why I pressed a thumbtack into my forefinger and smeared the blood over my lips.

I had always thought that if I had wings, nothing could contain me. If I could fly like they could, how could I keep still, sit at these wooden desks and listen to professors lecture me about molecular theory and Immanuel Kant? If I wasn't bound by anything, it seemed silly to me to enclose myself in anything. I had this image of myself like a lost balloon drifting toward the clouds. Up until my ears popped. Up until I couldn't tell if I was flying away from the world or if the world was flying away from me. And then, I thought, I'd smile and wave down at all those people who I could no longer see, that lonely world which I was no longer a part of.

Still, the boys stayed as if we anchored them there. As if they were holding on to some hope that we could give them something they couldn't give themselves. Even while we waved and smiled and brushed shoulders against one another there was some expanse so large and impenetrable between each and every one of us.

I stood near the ledge of the roof of the physics building for what seemed like hours. The dry wind smacked my hair against my cheeks and chapped my lips. From the roof, I could see the lines of the parking spots to my left. I could lift my finger and trace them in the air and pretend I'd drawn them there. I could see smoke rising from the chimney at the top of the building across the street. I could breathe a little cloud into the cold dark and pretend that smoke was my breath and that it had drifted that far. I swayed on my toes against the ledge. I was overcome by an urge to whistle.

I remembered being afraid of heights. I remembered sitting on a seesaw with a girl in my first grade class and the feeling of my stomach climbing into my chest when she slid off her seat while mine was still in the

air. I remembered saying to Max, I'm miserable.

"We're all miserable," he said, laughing, "so get over it."

When they'd asked me how I'd gotten up there, I hadn't remembered. I had remembered staircases and doors but I couldn't distinguish if they were doors I'd seen in dreams, in passing, or on my way to the roof of the physics building. I had remembered only the cold, dry wind and the tops of buildings. How everything from above seemed to be sectioned into circles and lines like the ones in the parking lots, the edges and corners of rooftops and sidewalks and roads.

"Have you considered taking a semester off?" the guidance counselor had said.

"I heard you tried to off yourself," Lillith had said as I stuffed my bedsheets into a trashbag.

*I didn't*, I said.

"Whatever makes you happy, right."

I remembered temporarily being in flight. At first, it was that same jolt like gravity pulling down the seesaw, my stomach clawing at the walls of my chest cavity. And then it was like I was spreading apart the air with my fingertips. I was between the clouds and the tops of the buildings and, although I felt I had no control, it didn't matter. I closed my eyes and wondered what would happen if I fell asleep flying. When I opened them and looked beneath me, I saw wings dipping downwards and they were not my own. I felt someone else's back beneath my stomach and when I realized we were getting closer to the ground and reached forward, I touched someone else's shoulders. I remembered, then, being afraid of heights.

"I don't get why you did it," said Lillith, "but, you know, whatever makes you happy."

I threw some underwear into a duffel bag on top of my anatomy textbooks and looked at my side of the room, scarcely more bare than it had been before I'd packed all my things. I had expected, in a way, that I would not be here long. Classes were finishing for the day and I could hear people laughing in the hallways, wings batting against our window.

*I didn't do anything. It wasn't real*, I said.

I slide a foot off the bed and then another, feeling the carpet fibers curling around my toes as I walk to the window. I run my fingers over the spines of the notebooks, the old textbooks, the poetry anthologies and novels that have accumulated on my shelf. I stick my hand beneath the

mattress and feel the hard tin corners of the Altoid box. I lift the fringe of the bedspread and see the book with its cover pages peeled open. I trust this place - the smell of it, like laundry detergent and soap, the unassuming warmth of it.

I pull open the curtains and the boy with the teal wings still glides lazily past. I'd known him before he'd ever had wings, when we still guessed what color and shape and size they might turn out to be. He worried they'd grow in crooked and he'd only be able to zigzag erratically through the sky like a gnat. I hadn't known him after they'd started to poke through his skin and I wondered if that made a difference.

I want to tell him to come in. I want to just sit with some other human being and let the drugs wear off and think about things that seem to make sense. I want to put my arms around someone's back and rest my nose on someone's shoulder and not worry about bending feathers.

# Urban Moses | Norine McKee

That's what they're calling him. I know nothing about the guy, aside from a vague impression based on a glimpse of his silhouette through the storm. My friend Donny and I have studied the footage on Donny's video camera almost ceaselessly since this whole thing began, but we can't make out anything beyond the obvious: that a) he is a man; b) he is standing on the rain-slick and battered golden arches of a McDonalds; and c) his hands are stretched towards the sky.

The shot of this mysterious figure lasts about fifteen seconds before tilting abruptly to the side, and then the lens is filled with a rush of dark colors. This is because Donny had been filming on the back of my bike, sitting at the edge of the seat with one arm looped around my waist, narrating (uselessly, it turns out, in the din of the storm), while I cycled desperately along an embankment. I had been trying to cycle towards safety, but really, as far as I knew, I was plunging us deeper into the center of this unnatural-seeming disaster. My bike had lost traction on the drenched pavement around the same time that Donny fixed the spectacle of the Urban Moses in his shot, and we'd teetered and flopped down the embankment into a deluge of rising red water.

The camera survived, but our footage ends there. You'll simply have to rely on the eyewitness testimony of some of the thousands of people who were there to understand what happened afterward. If you asked me, for example, I would tell you that I think I witnessed a miracle. That I watched a man quell the storms of Armageddon with a wave of his arms. That the streets were filled with whirling, dancing, rejoicing people. If you asked Donny, he would tell you that a historic film opportunity had been lost because I'm a shitty cyclist. Donny usually misses the big picture.

# Placebo | Nicholas Meriwether

We're out of Cheerios, so I eat birth control and oxycontin for breakfast this morning. I only take the pills on bad days, and no cereal is bad enough. Dad sits sheepishly on the couch. I can see little shell casings of *O's* dot the crime scene around his slippers.

"Daddy, did you eat all the Cheerios yesterday?"

He grunts and nervously adjusts the oxygen tube jutting into his nostrils. Even after the second stroke he's a terrible liar.

A year ago he was forming choppy sentences. Six months later he was down to mashed words. Then mumbles. And in a few months, probably silence.

I finish scraping the last bit of mayonnaise from the bottom corner of the jar and spread it thinly on a stale piece of Jewish rye, Dad's favorite. I layer a few pieces of processed turkey and Kraft singles and place it next to the Activia yogurt in the fridge. Dr. Spiros says it helps the bowel movements, which is bad considering I gave him the last Depends diaper in the pack last night. I hope he doesn't shit his pants today.

The oxy kicks in while I'm staring in the bathroom mirror with a mound of clothes at my feet. Ugly striped panties, a stolen bra, and an ex's favorite Ravens t-shirt form a little ring around my ankles. I can hear the hot shower water screaming and burning the little vinyl monkeys on the curtain. I scan the naked skin in front of me. A triangle of pale white slices the tan on my hips.

I study my folds and flats. Suck in. Turn to the side. I sigh and run my fingers along my waist to feel the extra quarter-inch I've stretched since I started buying Taco Bell instead of cooking after work. I put my hands on either side of the sink and lean my head against the mirror.

The pill hits me in warm waves now. I know if I stare at myself for long enough, the oxy will take over and everything will be okay again. In this opiate womb there are no fast food calories. No pill bills or pulmonary embolisms. No adjustable rate mortgages. No GPA requirements for CCBC nursing school. No \$8.25 at twenty hours a week. Life is gooey and warm and safe again. I exhale a cloud of vapor.

The hot steam blurs the edges of the mirror until my legs become fuzzy white blobs. Today it's only 7:15, so I have time for an extra hair rinsing and the vibrating shower head. Maybe even another one of Dad's oxy's.

Pinecrest Nursing Home smells like death and formaldehyde. We have five "communities" at the home. I work in the "Fireside" community – mostly low-risk arthritic types. The kind of people who complain about eleven nuggets in a twelve-piece meal. My friends Rachel and Dante work in

"Banners," where old people actually die once in a while. Sometimes you'll be serving food at lunch and somebody just slumps over in their tray, dead. When Dante smokes a joint on lunch break, he says it's to treat his PTSD from such a high casualty rate.

"The shit I seen," he says.

Today I scoop mushy globs of mashed potatoes onto an old man's plate. He stares at my boobs and gives me a dirty smile when I lean over to grab a piece of chicken. I pick the smaller grayish one that's been sitting out all day.

I watch the line of silver-haired geriatrics shuffle a few inches to the right. Luckily I'm still floating from the second oxy.

My supervisor Dave taps me on the shoulder.

"Nina, come back to the kitchen when the line thins out."

"Okay."

I hate the kitchen. The cooks always stare at my ass and chest and chuckle at the little inside jokes they make while burning the macaroni. Maybe they talk about my disheveled hair. Or if I have a new boyfriend yet. Or if I give head easy.

When I push the swinging door into the lion's den, they don't turn their heads. The cooks – Jared, Kevin, and Dre – are smirking and staring at someone else today.

"Nina, this is Brittany. She's starting today in Fireside."

The girl has a tiny nose ring and shiny brown hair pulled taut into a bun. She wears tight black pants and a red Pinecrest apron tied lazily around a wafer-thin waist. I study her tan skin and sharp features. She flashes a wide, bright smile when she leans in to shake my hand.

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"Nina, can you show her the ropes today? Get her started working the biscuit line and teach her how to run trays," Dave says.

"Yeah, sounds good. Just follow me."

I motion for her to come with me. Dave turns to walk back to his office for more solitaire and internet porn. When I push the swinging door, I hear Dre clear his throat.

"Don't be a stranger, girl."

I turn to see Brittany stop, flash a half-bemused grin, and roll her eyes. She nods her head for me to walk through the door.

"So, basically each person can have two biscuits maximum, unless they don't have a side. If they try to give you shit just come find me or Dave," I say.

Brittany already looks bored. She plays with the hemp bracelet around her wrist and scans the room of gray heads.

"So granny's gonna jump me for extra bread?" she asks. I give her a rare smile.

"It's like prison rules in here. They're gonna test the new meat. Just don't drop the biscuits," I say.

Brittany throws her head forward, laughing. She turns and studies my face for a few moments.

"That's funny."

"Yeah, I try," I say.

I return to my station in the middle of the buffet line. I can already feel the last sweet milligrams of oxy diluting and working their way out of my body. My body goes through the motions, scooping and shuffling, until my scheduled nicotine break two hours later.

My hands are shaking when I pound a pack of cigarettes and lean against the cold brick wall outside. Reds, of course - the same ones that took my mom when I was little. I see a little chip in the purple nail polish on my thumb when I try to flick the lighter. It sputters and sparks but the wind blows away the flame.

"Need a light?"

I turn and see Brittany standing against the door to the kitchen. I nod. She pulls out a silver Zippo and guards a long flame as it dances in the wind. I lean in until I see an orange glow just beyond the tip of my nose.

"Thanks."

"Sure."

She takes out a box of Camels and loosens a crumpled cigarette from the stack.

"Damn, is everyone here so aggressive? One of the cooks just asked me to follow him to the bathroom."

I snort a chuckle and a little puff of smoke comes out of my nose.

"So what's your deal?" she asks.

"I don't know."

She smiles and punches me playfully on the shoulder. The physical contact startles me.

"Come on."

I inhale another thick plume of carcinogens and nicotine.

"You want to know what the difference is between us and the residents? They know they're dying here."

Brittany looks away, dejected. "Well that's really inspiring on my first day, thanks for that," she says.

I nod and look down at the asphalt.

"How'd you end up here, anyway?" I ask.

She lowers her head bashfully.

"I was a Studio Art major in college. So here I am," she says.

I let out a little breath of laughter before a sharp wind carries it off to Lutherville, or New York, or wherever laughter goes when it leaves Baltimore.

"Welcome to the real world."

We smoke in silence for a little while. After a few moments, something

catches Brittany's eye and she turns to face me with a mischievous grin.

"Hey, come over here for minute," she says. She motions for me to follow her to a long ramp at the corner of the building. I see a few old, discarded wheelchairs sitting at the top of the incline.

"I'll race you down," she says.

"No...we shouldn't."

Brittany climbs into one of the wobbly wheelchairs.

"Come on...don't be such a pussy," she taunts.

I give her a defiant grin and throw my leg over the ramp ledge to pull myself up, careful not to burn my last clean pair of work pants.

"Alright. You're on, bitch."

About halfway down the ramp, the front right wheel of my chair wobbles violently and twists to the right. The wheels jerk to a halt and I am thrown forward out of my chair. I tumble down the incline and skid to a halt on my ass. My knees and the back of my thighs smolder and burn from scrapes.

Brittany turns her chair triumphantly at the bottom and sees me crumpled in a pathetic heap. I see the cherry of my cigarette rolling slowly down the ramp next to me. I grab it with two fingers, place it delicately between my lips, and slump my shoulders in utter defeat. Brittany stares at me in stunned silence for a few seconds. Then, as if on cue, we explode with laughter. I laugh until the November wind stings a hysterical tear on my face, until the scrapes on my legs don't burn, until I don't think about Taco Bell dinners or Dad's diapers.

The next morning, I only swallow birth control.

After about two weeks, Brittany takes a position at the salad station next to me after the previous girl gets caught stealing painkillers.

"She could've shared the goods, at least," Brittany says while pulling apart a thick clump of creamy caesar and croutons.

"I would've just taken the money. Diapers aren't getting cheaper," I say. I instantly bite my lip and close my eyes. I start to wish I had popped a little blue pill this morning.

"Diapers? I knew you were hiding a kid from me," she says.

Shit.

"It's not for uh...it's not like that."

She looks at me inquisitively and raises an eyebrow.

"Fine, Jesus. My dad is...sick, alright?"

"Well how come he's not living here?"

I furrow my brow and shove her playfully. She gets a little splotch of off-orange caesar dressing on her hand.

"Cuz I'm not stripping to put him in here. Unless you want to pay for it."



When I go to my car at the end of the day, there is a stolen box of Depends diapers sitting in the backseat. I pick up a note scrawled on Pinecrest letterhead.

From Lester with love. Better start stripping now – Brittany.

That Friday night most of the younger Pinecrest staff gets together to drink cheap beer and smoke joints at Dante's house off Taylor Avenue. Brittany and I sit next to each other on a faded plaid couch and talk about high school.

"I heard the whole Parkville team got suspended because they filmed a sex tape in the locker room," she says.

I laugh. A few of the guys around nod emphatically and chime in.

"Yeah, I got the video on my phone!"

"See, this is the kind of stuff you don't get at an all-girls school," I say. She chuckles and we each take a few gulps of beer.

"Hey, let me ask you something," she says.

"Shoot."

"How come you never went to college? You're a smart girl."

I take another long sip. Brittany has her arm on the cushion behind me.

"I don't know...I was at Essex for a little while after high school. And then Dad got sick. I always wanted to try nursing but...now's not the time, you know?"

"That's a shame," she says. She puts her hand over one of the pre-torn rips on the thigh of my acid-washed, denim jeans.

"Yeah, well look at all the good it did you."

After a few more beers and puffs the room gets fuzzy and I'm laughing a lot. Brittany touches my shoulders every few seconds and points at the sexist kitchen goons across the room.

We walk outside and sit on the front porch. In a few seconds the orange tips of our cigarettes smolder in the post-industrial darkness. We watch headlights drift up and down Taylor and Brittany scoots over so our hips are touching. I don't stop her.

"When is the last time you had a boyfriend?" she asks.

I take a sip of sweet tasting alcohol from a generic red cup. Skippy, Dante called it. Vodka, lemonade, and beer. I down the last little bit of backwash in one gulp.

"I don't know. Dad was still talking. Well, enough to say he didn't approve," I say with a little breath of desperate laughter. She nods and brings her cup to her lips.

"So what were you like before he got sick?"

"I was fun."

I look longingly at the sputtering sodium vapor street lamp above us. I was too much fun. Too many backseat romps in the White Marsh parking lot. Too many blunt rides up Bel Air Road. Too drunk, too high, too stupid to contemplate things like Medicare or minimum wage.

I sense Brittany's right hand move and she places it on my knee.

"You're still fun. And...you look beautiful tonight," she says.

I stare down into my empty cup. Every few seconds the orange street lamp flickers and I catch a little glint of clumpy lemonade mix stuck to the bottom. The last few ounces of liquor wash over me now. Brittany's hand is warm and calming and I can feel her eyes studying me. But my knees still tingle and I feel a knot in my gut.

Brittany brings her left hand to my face and softly touches the underside of my chin. She slowly raises my head to meet her eyes. They slice me, dissect me. I gaze into her and catch flashes of brilliant green at odd intervals in the broken light.

She reaches up and brushes away a river of brown hair from my face. Then she closes her eyes. My mouth widens slightly and my eyes scan her body movements, unwilling to accept what's about to happen. She guides my chin delicately and leans forward. I don't move my head, just sit frozen until I feel a soft brush on my lips and my world narrows to the smooth skin of her cheek and a strand of her hair in front of my eyes.

I can tell she's a little wobbly from three cupfuls and the sour lemonade taste of her lips. She kisses me again. Gently at first, then more panicked and desperate. She wants me to reciprocate, but I can't move. Fear and uncertainty hug me tight until I can't breathe.

Brittany pulls her lips from mine and brings her head back. We stare at each other in stunned silence.

"I'm...I'm so sorry, Nina. I didn't mean—"

I stammer and finally close my jaw.

"It's..."

I hear the front door swing open. Dante, Kevin, and a few others burst outside and look at us. Our faces are only a few inches apart.

"Whoa...are we interrupting something," Dante says. I hear a few nervous chuckles.

My head gets light and the coldness in the air begins to suffocate me. My chest starts heaving and I feel vomit at the base of my throat.

"I...I have to go," I blurt out.

I stand up and walk down the stoop. Brittany turns her head. Her mouth smiles, but I can see the pain and humiliation in eyes that flickered and danced only few moments before.

I light another Marlboro on the drive down Harford Road. I inhale and inhale until the hot cherry touches the tan filter and burns the webbing of my fingers.

I can barely feel it. My chest cavity is hollow and empty, unable to support my collapsing frame.

I turn right on the narrow strait of Inglewood Avenue. I'm still a little drunk from the skippy, so it takes some focus to avoid side-swiping the neighbor's new black F-250. I wonder if it makes him happy. His big truck on a small street in a small city in a small world.

I can feel my phone buzzing against my thigh. Brittany has been calling me the entire ride home. I don't know what to say.

When I open the screen door it falls off the broken hinge. I stare at the door for a few seconds, punch the broken plastic a few times in frustration, then throw it against the wall. I walk inside and put my purse on the kitchen counter atop a three-inch stack of unopened mail.

Dad sits on the couch with Conan blaring on full volume. His eyes flash from the colors on the screen but I wonder if he's even watching. I walk over to him, kiss the top of his head, and collapse in a heap of clothes on the cushion next to him.

His eyes study the television screen. I hear canned laughter blaring every few seconds and the studio audience applauds. I place my hand over his and feel the IV bumps in his loose, rough skin. I trace the dark gray veins in the yellowing folds and wrinkles.

"Dad, I really, really need your advice right now," I whisper softly.

"And now our next guest..." the TV drones.

He stares blankly. Dull. An empty shell of the man who used to hurl me into the dark water at Ocean City. These pockmarked, veiny hands are not the same ones that held me at my mother's funeral. He would tell me to be strong. Or to follow my heart. Or even that it was unnatural, a sin against the Almighty.

Anything. Anything, but this fucking silence.

"Daddy, please," I plead.

Nothing.

"Please say something to me."

He turns his long face slowly and draws a deep breath of oxygen from the tank at his slippers. He stares at me for a few seconds. Then, he places his right hand over mine to create a little sandwich of warm skin and fingers between us. His eyes are sad and confused.

"I just can't do it anymore, Dad." I say.

I choke on the lump in my throat and feel warm rivers of tears flow down the side of my cheeks. I lean my head into his chest and sob against his dirty robe. He pats the back of my hair with a feeble, trembling hand.

The audience laughs.

After a few minutes I stand up and walk to the kitchen. I reach into the "TUE" pouch on his daily medication tray and pick out two blue pills. I take a novelty mug labeled "World's Luckiest Dad" and use the bottom to crush the pills against the grease-stained kitchen counter. When I have ground the pills into a fine powder, I lean my head below the sink so I don't catch

myself in the mirror across the room.

When I look in the mirror again to wipe the blue ring from my nostrils, I don't think about the person staring back at me.

Dad dies on the couch three weeks later while I'm at work. That night, when the ambulance leaves, I drive to the edge of the Gunpowder River. Dad used to take me fishing here when he could still talk and walk and cast a rod.

I examine the smooth skin on the back of my hand and wonder who will take care of me when my hands are wrinkled and yellowing and rough with IV bumps. I reach into my purse and pull out the pill bottle, bringing it up to my face to spot the little shadows of oxycontin inside. I close one eye and look through the bottle so the whole world is tinted an ugly orange.

I slowly unscrew the bottle. As I tilt it into my palm, my phone vibrates with a text message.

"Can we talk?"

I take out my phone and type out a reply. A tear falls from the tip of my nose and blurs the little black pixels on the screen that read Brittany. My phone vibrates a few minutes later with a response.

"I'm on the way."

In a few minutes, I see headlights pull up to the curb behind me and a familiar voice calls my name. I stand up, look out to the mouth of the river, and clutch the pills in my hand. In one motion, I cock my arm back and throw the orange bottle in a brilliant arc into the water. The bottle lands with a little splash in the darkness.

I turn around, naked and unafraid.

# Mothman | Stephen Rane

I can't decide if the mothman's timing was exceptional or terrible. On the one hand, me and Christina were having a lot of problems and I was about ready to start looking for an apartment to move into, you know, just so we could have a little space to think things through. But when the mothman arrived and showed no intention of leaving our backyard, I couldn't very well just leave Christina alone with him. Oh, sure, I believe in women's rights and all, but it just wouldn't have felt right. It was probably for the best for us, anyway, 'cause if I had left she may not have wanted me to come back.

But, on the other hand, it's hard to say any time is a good time for the mothman to show up. It was three weeks ago on a Friday morning when we found him. Christina saw him first; she was going out back to water her flowers that never quite bloomed as well as she wanted them to and he was shuffling around near the tulips. She screamed and ran back inside the house, she was screaming so much I couldn't get out of her what was actually wrong (I figured she must have cut herself on a garden tool again). When I didn't see any injury, I went out back myself and that's when I first saw him. He must have been seven feet tall at least, big wings under his arms, and those eyes. Like saucers, bright red, and they seemed to only get brighter at night. I only knew what he was because I had been sleeping on the couch again a few nights before and I can never get comfortable on the thing so I had been watching that movie about the mothman to try and fall asleep. He wasn't doing anything particularly sinister at the time, but it was still pretty freaky, you know? We called the police but I shouldn't have told them what we were really seeing. It took a lot of convincing to get the operator to finally send a dispatch and by the time the cops showed up the mothman had gone. Our house was on the edge of some woods and there were a lot of big spruces and oaks in our backyard, so there were plenty of places for him to hide. Over the next few days we kept seeing him and we kept calling the police, and now they don't come anymore.

"Can't you just shoot it?" Christina asked me one time while we were looking out our kitchen window, watching him poking through her flowers with the tips of his wings.

"With what? You know I don't have a gun."

She rubbed her arms nervously. It reminded me for some reason of back when we were still dating and I took her to an ice rink. She had been too cold, I could tell, but she didn't say so, bless her. I fell twice and broke my nose that night.

"We can't just keep living like this, David."

"I don't know, Chris, is it really all that bad? He doesn't really seem dangerous or anything."

"Are you kidding me? It's a monster, some kind of mutant, or worse. And what's this 'he?'"

I looked down into the sink and pushed the handle on the faucet from side to side absently. "Well, it's 'mothman,' so makes sense he would be a he."

She sighed heavily and rubbed at her eyes. When she looked back outside she pointed violently. "Look, now it's ruining my flowers!"

It was true, the mothman was making a bit of a nuisance of himself. I guess he was digging for food (though at the time I had no idea what or if he ate) and he was starting to tear some of the flowers out, roots and all. I was about to suggest I go try and spook him back into the trees for the sake of her garden but Christina was already unlocking the back door and stomping out onto the porch.

"Shoo! Stop that, stop that right now!" She was waving her arms wildly, I guess trying to make herself look bigger, and it was enough to frighten the mothman. He scrambled around for a moment before flapping his enormous wings and taking flight, hiding himself somewhere in the upper branches of our trees. Christina kept pestering me about buying a gun to shoot him, but I wouldn't do it. She said I was too much of a coward to shoot something, but that's not it at all. Finally I told her if she wanted him shot so bad she could buy the gun and do it herself and she hasn't brought it back up since then.

I didn't want her to think I was completely ignoring the situation, though. I mean, he freaked me out as bad as anyone else who has the mothman in their backyard, I just didn't really know what to do at first. I started to research as much about him as I could, which was pretty tough because most of the stuff you can find on a supposedly mythical creature is not very legitimate. I re-watched that prophecies movie, read the book it was based on, and read up whatever I could find on the internet. I was still sleeping on the couch at that point so I had plenty of time to do this late into the night what with my insomnia. I finally decided the best thing to do was to go to where his story started, and that was Point Pleasant, West Virginia.

"What, you're just going to leave me here alone with that thing?" We were standing in the driveway. I was about to start the drive to West Virginia.

"Relax, Chris, I'll be back by dinner time. It's only a couple hour drive."

Her brow crinkled up the way it always did when she knew she wasn't going to get her way, the way I used to always tell her I thought was cute even as she was fuming at me. I guess it had been a while since I had told her that.

"Just promise me you'll be back before dark. Sometimes I can see those eyes out there and it just really freaks me out."

"I promise. Love you."

I think she said, 'Love you too,' but in all honesty I was already

rushing into the car and starting it up so I didn't hear clearly. I didn't really mean to say it myself, what with our problems and all, so I didn't want it to get awkward.

When I got to Point Pleasant, I found that the town had fully embraced their local legend. It wasn't happening that day, but I learned that they actually have a yearly festival devoted to the mothman. There was a little museum dedicated to him and I learned all about the first sightings of him and the conspiracy theories around what exactly he was. There was a plaque that talked about that bridge that collapsed, when all those poor people died, and how everyone thinks the mothman had something to do with it because of this grainy photo that makes it look like he's on the bridge before it fell. I found myself thinking 'this doesn't sound like our mothman' and thought it strange that I would consider him 'ours.' But it was true, I just couldn't imagine that the big fellow who shuffles around our backyard poking at flowers and getting spooked by my wife could really do something so horrible as take down a bridge.

Outside they had a statue of him, but I didn't like it all that much. It was some bright, metal monstrosity, and honestly it did not depict him accurately at all. It was all teeth and claws and muscle and made him look like one of the monsters from the Godzilla movies. In reality, he looked more like a tall monk, his head permanently sunk low, and he had no hands as far as I could tell. I noticed that seated on a nearby bench was an old man wearing a camo baseball cap and smiling at me. I smiled back, just trying to be polite, and he motioned for me to come over.

"You here to see our local legend?" he asked, showing a surprisingly full set of teeth.

"Oh, I was just a little curious."

He laughed, a sort of wheezing sound that spoke to a lifetime of smoking. "What am I asking, I can tell you've already seen 'im."

"What makes you say that?"

"Folks who come through here for him are usually lots younger, and they get all excited when they see the museum and the statue, and they usually go running straight off to the old weapons factory. That's where he's supposed to live, you know. But you're too calm about it. Yes sir, you've already seen him in the flesh."

Maybe his folksy charm made me warm up to him, or maybe it was the chance to finally speak to someone else who knew what we were going through, but I decided to sit with him to talk. He introduced himself as Bill McCloud. "You've seen him too?"

"Sure have, near a hundred times, myself. Almost caught him once, too, with a net trap I set. Ah, but that was ages ago, I was still young enough not to appreciate anything in this world."

"He's not...dangerous, is he?"

"Dangerous? Lord, no! Least not to the likes of you or me. I never known 'im to hurt a soul, which is more than I can say for some people."



"Do you know where he came from?"

He wheezed again. "Ah, now there's a tourist's question. I'll tell you what I tell all the others, and it's that he comes from the same place as you and me, and I expect he'll go on to the same place, too. That's what I tell the tourists." He looked at me and winked. "But you're no tourist, are you, boy?"

I wasn't really sure what he was getting at, so I decided to just get what information from him I could. "Can you think of any reason why he might leave that factory? You know, move in somewhere else?"

"Who's saying he did? I saw him myself just outside town only two nights ago."

"Well, I'm asking because I think he's moved in behind my house."

"Could be, no reason he should keep cooped up in one place all his life. He's got those wings for a reason."

It was starting to get late so I told Bill thanks for the info and said goodbye. When I got back home Christina had dinner waiting for me and we ate together almost like it was normal. I told her everything I had learned at Point Pleasant and tried to reassure her that we didn't have to be afraid of the mothman. I don't know if she felt any safer about him after what I told her, but she thanked me for going to the trouble to find it all out.

Six days ago, I actually got to get close to him. When he first arrived he would take off into the trees whenever he caught sight of one of us, but that afternoon he didn't seem to mind me. He was eating some nuts that had fallen from some of the oaks and just let me walk up to him. Once I got that close, I realized he was fuzzy, covered in a little layer of gray fur. I'm not afraid of him at all anymore. It's hard to be scared of something that's furry. He seemed to like me just fine, too, he chirped and clicked whenever I got close but not in a scared or angry way, like he was just trying to chat with me.

"How's it going, buddy?" Chirp, chirp. "That's good. Listen, could you do me a favor and keep away from Christina's flowers? She works really hard on them and it really stresses her out when you go tearing them up like you do. I can start bringing a little something for you if you're getting hungry. Deal?" Chirp, click, chirp. I took that as a yes and went back inside. I came back out with a half-finished bag of trail mix and left it on the ground next to one of the oaks. When I went back out the next day, the bag was empty and the mothman was digging nearby, like he was waiting for me.

"I guess you liked that, huh?" Click. I went out to see him every day after that. He became to me something between a pet and a drinking buddy.

"Do you ever miss Point Pleasant, buddy?" Click, chirp. "I know they miss you. They've got a whole museum for you and everything. Their statue of you is way off, though, I gotta remember to tell them that next time I go. Bill says hi, too." Chirp, chirp. "Oh! Good news, I'm off the couch now." Click, chirp, click. "Yeah, Christina and I are back in the same bed. I



think it's cause she's not so crazy over those flowers anymore. I owe you one for that, friend."

Christina says he still makes her a little uncomfortable but she realizes there's nothing we can do about him. I think she likes him more than she lets on, anyway, because earlier today she was making pancakes and she made a few more than she usually does for the two of us. But when I sat down to the table, we had just the regular amount, and I would just bet there's one or two pancakes sitting on a plate out back for the mothman.

# Dark Matter | Nicholas Meriwether

Carl Sagan said, "If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a worthy goal." Here at Robert E. Lee Park in my '99 Honda, with a blonde *madama's* lips wrapped around my dick and a Dutch in my mouth, I have found my place in the universe. Natalie says I can never finish when I get too spacey, but I can't help it. We're a mote of dust floating in the vast cosmic ocean. She can spare an extra few minutes until the job is done.

I catch a glimpse of my wrinkled MIT admissions letter on the beer-stained upholstery in the corner of my eye. The letter lies under a metal water bottle stuffed with three ounces of high-grade marijuana.

I inhale thick plumes of Sour Diesel and hold them in my lungs until the lens gets blurry. Soon all I can see through the haze is a tuft of blonde hair bobbing rhythmically in my lap. A tingle runs down my spine and I close my eyes. She sucks the essence of me until I am nothing but empty clothes and a wisp of gray smoke.

A familiar piano riff comes on – Nas's "The World is Yours" – and I fumble lazily for the recliner until I catch the lever with my fingertips. Suddenly, the seat flies backward a few inches. A tiny orange ember floats down from the tip of the blunt and scalds the back of Natalie's neck. She jerks her head upwards in pain, grazing the foreskin of my *kunna*.

"Ow, shit, Nat," I say.

She rubs a tiny red burn.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" she asks.

"You bit me."

Natalie shakes her head and I see her curls catch the orange glint of fading sunlight reflecting off the city reservoir. She glares at me.

"Look at you. It's like you don't give a shit about anything anymore. Not even this," Nat says.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to burn you."

She sighs and reclines her chair, then reaches over and takes the blunt from me. I watch her take a long puff and see my pubescent fantasies fade into nothingness.

A year ago I was still fantasizing about being with a white girl, a *madama*, as they say in Malayalam. I never thought I'd get tired of her, too.

No *BMW's*, Appa says. Blacks, Muslims, or whites.

That's about as far as the sex talk goes with FOB parents – Fresh Off the Boat. But this is Baltimore, not South India.

She looks over at me again.

"You don't get it. This isn't working because nothing matters to you. You used to be so much more. Now...there's less and less every day..."

Her voice trails off and floats to the back of my head until it's a distant whirr. I look up at the evening sky and wait for the stars.

My phone buzzes loudly in the cup holder.

Amma (6:31PM): Sabu where are you?  
I'm in space again, mom.

I've liked space since I was a kid. Before we left Kerala I would stare up at dots in the night until my neck ached. When we got to Baltimore, it was the only thing that was the same. Appa got me a telescope for my seventh birthday and showed me the constellations. When he was on call late at the hospital, I would point my telescope east towards Hopkins and wait for his car. A shooting star on the asteroid belt of Eastern Avenue.

They say the only things *desi* parents won't skimp on are education and weddings. I was taking calc I in eighth grade before I was watching internet porn. By junior year I was doing stuff like NHS, Forensics, Peer Ed, and all the other things that make white parents jealous and their kids mean-spirited.

I mostly hung out with guys from church, fellow desis stranded on the beachhead of white America. They called us ABCDs: "American Born Confused Desis." We talked about things like MIT admission rates, family trips to Six Flags, and SAT prep courses. I wanted to study space, to leave this place and reach into the void.

Until one day, impact. I collide with a mass large enough to tweak my trajectory by just a few degrees: Kevin Casey. We meet at a Forensics meeting two weeks into my junior year. He's a bright kid, but the wrinkles in his hoodie and the blankness of his face betray a deep intellectual apathy. He usually sits in the back of debate meetings and screws around on his phone, but today he wears a rare smile as he approaches.

"Hey Sebastian, what are you doing tonight?"

"I have a family thing," I reply quickly.

The great lie of the Indian teenager.

"Come on, man. I'm having some people over tonight. I want you to come," Kevin insists.

I don't know what to say to him. I don't know why Kevin wants to hang out, maybe just to make fun of me. I know Amma would kill me. I know how uncomfortable it would be. I know other kids think I'm a FOB, and rightly so. I know it's a universe I can't survive in. But then he says something that changes everything.

"I'll bring girls."

And that's enough for me. Pornography had recently shown me a world beyond physics classes or family weddings or even Hubble pictures. I wanted to be normal. I wanted a girl, a white girl. So I fumble for my worn Nokia flip phone and nervously punch in his phone number, impervious to the black hole opening beneath my feet.

Kevin's house is in Rosedale, a working class eastside neighborhood

that still looks like collateral damage from the recession. I'm new to this cluster, in the world of the blue-collar *saipas* and *madamas* – and the air on this planet smells weird. A little more sulphur and carbon dioxide, a little less hope. As we approach his house, I see an old man sleeping on a bench that reads "The Greatest City in America" in faded white letters.

We walk to the door of a squat one-story brick house and I instinctively take off my shoes. Kevin gives me an odd glance. I slide my feet slowly back into my worn Adidas trainers and bite my lip in embarrassment.

A middle-aged white *auntie* sits on the couch in the living room. Kevin's mom.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asks.

"I fucking told you I was going out, Ma. You know I'm having people over tonight, by the way," Kevin says.

My eyes widen. I've never heard someone talk to a parent so boldly. If I even looked at my dad the wrong way I'd get a whack with the *uddy*. Suddenly, the whole universe just got a lot bigger.

"Well if anything gets stolen this time I'll slap the shit out of you. And no smoking upstairs," she says.

"Okay, okay."

I look around the small living room. The place is dirty, probably too daunting to clean after an overtime shift. Kevin's mom sits on an old sofa. One cushion has a noticeable indent where his dad once sat, then his step-dad, then a string of bad boyfriends. I follow Kevin downstairs to the basement.

We play a few games of Madden on a small TV until Kevin tells me the girls are here. I straighten up on the couch and try to adjust the collar of my K-Mart polo. I notice dark stains forming under my armpits and fold my arms across my chest.

The wood at the top of the staircase creaks and squeals under the weight of three pretty madamas. They come into view one by one and look at Kevin and me. Mostly me.

Kevin stands up and greets them each with a cheeky smile and a hug.

"Is that...Sebastian Gupta?" I hear one girl say quietly.

"Yeah it is. Girls, this is Sebastian. He's a newbie," Kevin says with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Natalie."

"Lindsey."

"I'm Grace."

Kevin sits on the rug in front of a coffee table and pulls out a glass pipe shaped like a colorful fish. Streams of red and orange streak down the fish's gills and the top of the tail is shaped like a bowl. I look around, confused.

He carefully pinches a strange mound of ground spices and places it in the fish's tail, wiping away loose specks of light green dust with his thumb. It takes an embarrassingly long time for me to realize what's going on.

"Who wants to get stoned?" he asks.

My heart starts pounding and I can feel a bead of sweat trickle down my forehead. The girls chuckle and Grace raises her hand. I fidget and check my phone as Kevin hands her the fish and a blue Bic lighter. It's too late for me to call Amma. I know I'm screwed.

Grace flicks the lighter until a bright flame catches the green dust in the fish tail. The fish glows orange for a few seconds as she inhales from a hole in its mouth. She holds the smoke in her lungs until a geyser of smoke ejects from her mouth and floats above us. I try to look casual but the stain under my arms is spreading down my sides.

"Gupta, your turn," Kevin says.

I gulp and shake my head.

"Nah, I'm good, man. I have work tomorrow."

That's the line I practiced. But Kevin knows I don't have a job.

He glances at Natalie with a smile.

"Just relax, dude. Nat, why don't you give him a shotgun?"

"No, I really don't want—" I stop talking as Kevin pats my knee.

"Relax," Natalie says.

My breathing gets heavy. Natalie lights the pipe and takes a long pull. She gives a wry smile, climbs onto the recliner to straddle me, and grabs the sides of my face. Before I can resist, she leans in and presses her lips to mine.

My first kiss.

I close my eyes and feel the softness of her mouth. Taste her. Inhale her. She guides my hands to her thighs and I rub on the smooth, acid-washed denim.

With my lips parted, she exhales a harsh plume and pushes it into my lungs with her breath. My chest expands until I can't feel any more oxygen. Suddenly, my lungs start seizing and I realize I have a problem.

Natalie pulls her lips away and I am left asphyxiating in front of her. She looks around the room at the others, now giddy at my corruption. I hold it about two seconds before I cough in her face and let out a thick mist of marijuana smoke and saliva. She disappears in a brilliant explosion like a white dwarf as I hack up more and more.

I can hear Kevin and the others laughing and feel my *kunna* pressed hard against the inseam of my khakis. She can obviously feel it against her thigh, but mercifully she doesn't say anything in front of the others.

Natalie climbs off my lap diligently and returns to the couch, giggling. I'm still wrapping my head around my first experience with a girl when the THC sets in. It comes over me in a wave. I feel fuzzy. Things get slower. My limbs feel weighted down and it gets hard to move.

Kevin's voice echoes in my head and I feel a firm hand on my shoulder.

"Congrats, man. We popped your cherry."  
I hear the girls clapping and laughing.  
It sounds like we're underwater.  
It feels like space.

After a few minutes everyone gets nice and stoned. The girls chuckle at nearly everything Kevin says now, and soon enough I work up the courage to talk to Natalie.

"Are you like, a total weedhead?" I stammer.

She laughs. I laugh too.

"It's pothead. And yeah, I suppose I am," she says.

"Are you like, a total nerd?" she asks.

I hesitate.

"Yeah...I suppose I am, too."

She nods approvingly.

"Sebastian's gonna be an astrophysicist someday. A NASA guy," Kevin says.

"Oh, I love that stuff. Like aliens and all that... Do you think we're alone, Sebastian?" Natalie asks in a slow, intoxicated drawl.

Maybe it's the weed, but I now feel confident enough to talk without stammering.

"Well, statistically, it would be incredible if we weren't. There are hundreds of billions of solar systems exactly like ours. We're just a little blue dot."

Natalie sits back and nods her head in contemplation.

"I mean, doesn't that scare the shit out of you? Make you feel insignificant?"

I smile at her.

"Not really. You are the universe experiencing itself."

Grace, Lindsey, and Kevin all shake their heads in puzzlement.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Grace says.

Natalie turns and furrows her brow at Grace. There is a sparkle behind the redness of her eyes when she turns to look at me.

"No, I think it makes sense. You mean it's all interconnected. I like that," she says, "I still feel like we're alone, though. At least until something else out there finds us."

"No, we're not alone. I'm right here with you," I say.

She smiles coyly and – before I realize what's happening – reaches over to hold my hand on the corner of the couch.

"You're too smart for your own good," she says quietly.

Rubbing her smooth skin against my sweaty palms, I lean back and close my eyes again.

I'm standing on the edge of nothingness, gazing into the vast frontier.

I'm happy for the first time in a long while.

Kevin drops me off around eleven-thirty. My mom sits at the kitchen table when I walk in.

"Sabu, where have you been? I've been texting you."

"I know, I'm sorry, Amma. My phone doesn't get service at Pranshu's."

Oh, shit.

"I thought you went to Vignesh's house."

"I...I did. Then we went to Pranshu's to work on a project."

Amma gives me a hard stare, like she knows. I look away so she doesn't catch the red hue in my eyes.

"Just get upstairs and get to bed. We have a family cookout tomorrow."

I try not to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Yes, Amma."

I lay my head on the pillow and think about the infinite possibilities to my finite existence. I feel the sudden urge to explore this universe beyond garbas and gossiping aunties. I think about lying. About drugs. Then, I think about Natalie.

The next week in school I start sitting with Kevin at lunch. I meet his friends – preppy *saipas* like Ryan, John, and Garrett. They look at me skeptically at first, but everyone seems amused to have a token *desi* at the table. They talk about things like blowjobs, smoking, and comedy movies. I hang on their every word. And I'm a quick learner.

Natalie and I start texting. After only a few days, I'm already mastering the subtleties of "lol" and "haha" and a range of flirty emoticons. Class seems less important. India feels light years away.

I start hanging with the guys after school since they don't take attendance at Forensics or NHS anyway. The first couple times I smoke, I cough and the guys all laugh. Each time I get high I wonder if this is all a big joke. Maybe the *saipas* just like corrupting me. Globalizing their vices. Within a few months, I'm taking bigger hits than Kevin. Suddenly, I'm no longer a novelty.

"What up, Seabass?" they say when I walk by.

One day Vignesh asks me why they call me that, if they're making fun of me. I shrug.

"I kind of like it."

By senior year Wu-Tang and Nas have become fixtures on the stereo of my rusty blue Honda, a hand-me-down from one of my uncles. I can roll beautifully pearled joints in under two minutes. And my grades are still good, which means my parents don't really care how often I hang out at "Vignesh's."

Natalie and I have sex a few times a week. Afterwards, we argue for hours about things like God, existentialism, and the scientific merit of *Ancient Aliens*. I give her the box set of *Cosmos* for her birthday. A few weeks later, she gives me her older sister's dog-eared copy of Nietzsche and tells me it will change my life. It does.

I pack her a bowl in her basement and show her *The Universe* for the first time. She sits mesmerized in a dope-induced existentialist trance for half an hour after.

"Doesn't this make life seem pointless to you?"

"I mean, it puts my problems in perspective. Life means whatever you want."

"So, what matters to you, then?"

I feel her warmth cozied up next to me under a stained Ravens blanket. It still makes me shake my head and smile.

"This, I think."

A few weeks later, Kevin asks me to start pushing with him.

"It's not that risky if we just sell to our friends. We'd make like an eighth a week in profit. We could smoke for free."

It's a good point, I think.

They say it's not the lack of oxygen that kills you in a black hole. You die slowly, over the course of a minute, while the colossal force of super massive gravity pulls your body apart at the molecular level. Kevin Casey is pulling me into the abyss, atom by atom.

"Come on, man. When have I ever led you wrong?" he asks.

I don't know what to say. So I say okay.

Amma throws a big party for me when I get the letter from MIT. All the aunties come over with Tupperware crates of food and months of fresh gossip.

"Look at little Sabu, the rocket scientist," they say.

"Pretty soon we'll find you a wife. A pretty Cochin girl, maybe."

"I heard he stays out late," some of them whisper.

I don't really care. I'm stoned out of my mind with half a bottle of Visine guarding me from suspicion.

"Sabu, sit down with me," Amma says to me in the kitchen when everyone leaves.

I take a seat at the kitchen table.

"Are you happy?"

"Yeah, of course."

She reaches over and wipes a bit of orange tandoori chicken from my cheek.

"Sabu, life isn't always what you expect. But you have to believe things



will work out."

I've waited for this moment since sixth grade. It feels hollow, staged.

"I'm just tired of everyone else's plan for me, Amma."

She rubs my shoulder.

"We only want what's best for you. That's why we came here in the first place. So you could be successful. We sacrificed so much for you to get this far. And we're proud."

I look over her shoulder and wonder what this conversation would sound like if we were still in Kerala. No weed, no Sagan, no Natalie. I guess the universe just has a way of reaching out to you.

"I love you so much, Sabu."

"I love you too, Amma."

I hope I still sound convincing.

A few weeks later Natalie asks me if we'll stay together in college. She's already enrolled in a few philosophy courses at CCBC. We park up by the reservoir at Robert E. Lee and I roll a blunt while the sun sets behind us.

"If you're willing to try it, then I am too," I say.

She smiles but doesn't say anything for a while.

"I'm just glad you're not selling with Kevin. You have too much to lose."

*Maybe that's the point*, I think. My eyes drift back to the metal coffee mug in the backseat. I glance at the shiny new necklace dangling above her cleavage.

"I would never do that, babe."

Natalie touches my belt buckle. We share a few puffs before she goes down on me. I recline my seat and watch the smoke form a little spiral galaxy above me.

It looks big enough for the two of us.

A few minutes later I drift away in a haze of flesh and smoke. I feel the tingle in my legs and back that tells me I am close.

"Oh, God, Nat," I say.

I pull the recliner. The ash falls and burns the back of her neck and our relationship smolders to soot in the ensuing argument.

"You don't get it...I don't think this is working..." she begins.

I zone out, neither willing nor able to feel anything at all.

My phone buzzes.

Amma (6:31PM): Sabu where are you?

Our universe implodes with three quick taps.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

Metal on glass.

The hilt of a Baltimore Police issue Maglite strikes my driver-side window.

I look around. The blunt burning in my hand, the half-naked blonde madama, the three ounces in the backseat.

When I close my eyes again, I am swallowed up by the void and everything goes black.

# Helen, Who Hurt You? | Molly Morris

The boy is already halfway through a Rocket Popsicle when the sheriff turns his car into the parking lot. "I'll pick him up," the sheriff had said, even though the boy was closer to the sheriff's station than he was when he'd gotten the call. He'd leaned into his radio, said, "I'm on my way back anyhow."

Red and blue sugar water drips into the boy's tube socks, succumbing to the September heat and forming sad little stains on the concrete. The boy looks at them, stares, as they hit the pavement, gone before he can blink.

"Peter?" The sheriff asks as his window squeals down. The boy nods. "Get in."

Peter rubs his hands along his shorts and rises from the curb. He slides onto the warm leather of the sheriff's car and runs a hand across his forehead, feeling the sweat peeling down his brow.

"I'm Sheriff Wharton," the sheriff says without turning a nose toward the boy. He jerks his head toward the ice cream parlor. "I could go for a Rocket Pop myself," he says as he runs his tongue across his teeth. Two weeks ago, Sheriff Wharton had strolled into the same parlor under newcomer status, giving polite smiles to the owner, who crowed, "There's a new sheriff in town!" Everyone had laughed. He already had two dates.

Peter struggles in the leather. "Would you like one, sir?" he asks, flitting nervous eyes up to the sheriff.

The sheriff reaches down for a handful of sunflower seeds wedged in a half-gone bag from beside the clutch, pulls up his cupped hand to show Peter. "Not necessary," he answers. He drops a handful of seeds onto his tongue. "Where did you say you found it?"

"Anderson's creek," Peter says. "By the bridge."

Sheriff Wharton nods, keeping his eyes pointed toward the narrow strip of road ahead of the patrol car. He cracks a seed between his teeth, spits out the open window. "What were you boys doing down there?" he asks. When he'd offered to take the boy down into the woods, he said he wanted to make sure the kid wasn't "fucking around." Wouldn't want to send the whole squad down for a joke.

"We were swimming and skipping rocks," Peter says, his nose twitching with the words. He turns his face toward the passenger window and watches the trees, red, orange, and brown, skip past his eyes. Red, orange, brown, crack, spit, go the sunflower seeds, crack, spit.

The sheriff keeps his hands gripped around the wheel, fingers only lifting every few moments to tap along with the voice crooning from the radio. "How old are you, Peter?"

The air between them, thick, heavy, and bright, hangs like a damp sheet. The boy beside him struggles in his seatbelt. "Eleven," Peter answers.

Sheriff Wharton lurches his neck toward the window, letting out a series of sickening pops. He was nine once, stumbling on the rocks aside the creek, bare backs of boys winking in the sun. Crack, spit, the seeds go streaking past the glass, into the wind.

"Nice afternoon for a pack of boys," the sheriff trails. "I like your town, Peter. Sleepy, quiet, sweet place to raise a family."

Peter's voice floats into the wind pouring from the rolled down window. "Not anymore," he says beneath his breath. The sheriff can feel the boy's nerves as he rakes his fingernails down his thighs.

Even with only two weeks under his belt, the sheriff is near certain he's made the right choice when he'd stretched a map out and his heavy finger landed on Peter's town. One nail print alongside the interstate and a transfer request later, he has a new home.

Everyone here likes him. "There's something charming," the women at the grocery store say. "He trims his fingernails and has nice shoes." His hair is combed, his teeth smooth. Even the boy sitting beside him now looks as though he must make the effort to hold his stare out the window.

Peter and the sheriff drive the next few miles in a warm silence, the radio and crunching gravel the only sounds echoing through the patrol car. When the sheriff cracks another seed, Peter jumps.

Crack, spit, they're almost there, and when Sheriff Wharton finally turns off the road and parks alongside the edge of the woods, Peter's hands are nearly shaking. "Here?" The sheriff asks as the engine quiets. Peter nods.

They emerge from the car, feet burrowing beneath heaps of leaves and stray branches as Sheriff Wharton pushes through the trail and Peter follows close behind.

"We were picking stones right over here," Peter says as the sound of trickling water filters through the trees. He swats a passing fly, the ring of skin slapping skin cutting through the air. Sheriff Wharton fixes his eyes on the emerging stream and stops as his feet near the water, splitting seeds between his front teeth.

Peter stays standing in the pathway, eyes stuck still to his unlaced tennis shoes. His voice is small, lodged in the back of his throat. "That's when we found her." He lifts a hand and points toward the body stretched across the shore.

The man sucks his teeth, the thin sound grating against Peter's ears. The sheriff's eyes, still hidden behind shaded lenses, roam the dirt-covered arms and legs sprawled before him. He turns away but not for long and circles the woman, footsteps leaving thick marks in the mud.

"I think it's Ms. Porter," Peter whispers. "From the grocery store." Though her eyes are closed, purple lips cracked and swollen, pale chest exposed in the sun, Peter knows her from the mangled red hair stuck to her

cheeks.

"It's Helen," Sheriff Wharton says as he lets out a low whistle. He bends down closer to the ground, half a seed erupting from his mouth like water from a spigot. It lands on the woman's face, a salted flake much darker than her pale blue skin. "Damn," the sheriff says. He reaches over and flicks the shell from her cheek, watching it land in the mud.

The sheriff smirks into the ground as he plucks up a leaf smattered with pinpricks of blood. He bites the corner of his cheek and, with eyes on Helen's broken fingernails, rakes his own across the veins of the leaf until it is no more.

Peter's hands are trembling still as Sheriff Wharton reaches down for the skirt twisted around Helen's bruised waist. The boy's eyes are everywhere but the floor. "She was raped," the sheriff says, lifting her skirt. He turns his face toward Peter. "Did you and your friends touch Ms. Porter?" he asks.

Peter nearly leaps from his freckled skin. "No," he stammers. "No, sir."

The silence is still. The sheriff bobs on bended knees, mouth working, hands fluttering. He turns his face to Peter, eyes running the length of the boy. "Have you ever seen a naked woman, Peter?" he asks. Between his fingers, he strokes the skirt fabric, feeling the rough side grate beneath his skin. Soft side, rough side, soft side, rough side.

Peter's breathing is slow, labored, pained. "No, sir," Peter says, eyes darting.

Sheriff Wharton smirks. He breaks their stare and rises, hands on hips. "You're getting to the age where the girls try to take you for a ride," he says. Looking at Helen, he remembers his own days of being a boy in a creek, remembers the change in the water when girls began joining the boys.

Peter parts his lips. "Sheriff?"

Crack, spit, the seeds are everywhere. "They seem innocent, pure," the sheriff says without hearing. He sucks in a deep breath, feeling his lungs expand with a sharp, hot sting. "But they're dirty, and they stay that way." Crack, spit, hiss. "A man needs to protect himself, Peter."

Peter braves a step backward, foot landing on an already snapped twig. "Okay, sir," he says, voice uneven. "Can I go back to the car?"

Sheriff Wharton nods. Behind him, he hears Peter's feet scramble back down the path, branches clamoring as he pushes out of the woods.

Under his breath, the sheriff hums a low tune he remembers from the radio. He glances down at Helen, her face turned toward the stream, neck twisted at an angle that reminds him of chickens set for slaughter.

Far off, the sheriff hears Peter slam the patrol car door shut. He had taken it too far, said too much, but he loved niggling out reactions, and with Helen at his feet, he couldn't grit his teeth any longer. He had managed to keep his thoughts from her body stretched out in the woods but even the sight of the trees made his fingers tingle.

She hadn't looked this way when he left her beside the water last night – her skin, though slowly chilling, had at least still appeared as though blood pumped beneath. Helen had looked so beautiful behind the glow of a candle, but she looked even more so beneath the press of his thumbs. The sheriff had managed to leave the last town before pitchforks reached his door, but with two more eager women waiting for a “date with the sheriff,” he wonders how long he can keep himself behind curtains. But just as he had with Lakeside, Freeport, and Southern Falls, he would wait to flee until the last moment he could get away with.

He spits more seeds onto the floor, scattered and careful, an amateur mistake. He was new, the department would shrug; he would never do it again, he would make promises. Sheriff Wharton with the smooth teeth.

He stares over the creek, waters rushing over pebbles and greens. Crack, spit. He'll drive the boy home, let him scrabble from the car. He doesn't care much for kids. Especially not boys. Crack, crack, he can breathe into the breeze with little effort.

Yes, he thinks, this town will work fine.

# Menace | Alexandria Brake

He wasn't sure why he hadn't told anyone. Why he had left the house alone and silent. Why he had gone to school. What he thought he was returning home to at the end of the day. But he did. He locked the door, descended the steps, walked to school alone. Eyes locked to his academic vector, thoughts locked on Anna.

He remembered Anna when she was a baby. For some reason her left front tooth didn't grow in until she was more than a year old. Sometimes he would sit next to her while their family sat down for dinner and he'd poke the gummy space between her teeth and get yelled at by his mother. He always tried to make up for it by giving her a pat on the head, or flicking a pea at her in the time between when dinner was finished and his mother admitted defeat in the battle for vegetable consumption. Anna always smiled blankly in the way that babies do, the space between her teeth gaping open, perfectly pea-sized. Adam had once managed to lodge a carrot cube directly in there. His mother yelled at him so intensely he gave his sister two pats on the head. Why she yelled he wasn't exactly sure, her words were foggy in his memory now. But he could still feel the soft silk of Anna's baby fuzz beneath his hand, the smooth warmth of her bowl-shaped head. He lingered on that second pat, wondering if he could feel the beating of her heart all the way through her skull or if it was just his own pulse coming through his fingers. Or maybe their hearts were simply beating in time, their resonant frequencies matching each other and magnifying in harmonic and vibrational energy.

He stepped off of the bus and walked toward the school. It wasn't walking, really, simply a repetitive falling motion, catching himself one step at a time as his feet crossed the threshold. He passed through the metal detectors inside the doors. He collapsed and caught, fell and recovered toward his locker. The guards wanded over his tumbling body, finding nothing, telling him to move along, get to class stay in school. They handed him his empty schoolbag. He didn't need weapons to hurt them. Whoever they were, the universal they responsible for all wrongs in the world. Responsible for everything that had happened. He descended into his classrooms, blank-faced, blank-eyed, blank-paged.

Adam remembered Anna's first day of school. He held her hand all the way down the block. He showed her how to go through the metal detectors, how to say hello to the nice security guard, flash him a smile with her now-perfect teeth, how to laugh when he told the nice security guard about the time he stuck a carrot in between her missing teeth. *This is your locker*, he said to her, placing her lunch bag on the high shelf so that she couldn't reach it. She jumped, reached, frowned, said to him, *No I'll get it later, it's alright*. He drew her a map to her classes, full of stick figure Mrs. Murphys



with speech bubbles that said "NO TALKING" and "I DON'T LIKE FUN" and "ANNA YOU SMELL." She smiled. She went to class. She waved as she walked away and he took her lunch bag down from the shelf and shut the locker. At lunchtime she would give away half her sandwich to a boy who couldn't bring any lunch because his parents weren't home to feed him.

He went to P.E. even though he didn't usually. No one questioned it. No one seemed to notice or mind. No one spoke to him, because they had nothing to say. He didn't mind since there was nothing anyone could say to him that wouldn't remind him of Anna. There was nothing he could say back that wouldn't be Anna. So he spoke to no one and no one spoke. He ran laps around the gym. Around and around and around and around. He didn't stop even when all the other boys were simply taking half-steps so that the girls would think they were still running and the girls still weren't noticing since they were busy gossiping. He counted his steps. 4,583. 4,584. 4,585.

He remembered teaching Anna to smoke her first cigarette. He was on the porch, sneaking one from the pack in his mother's purse. He stared out at the night sky, mapping the constellations Orion, Cassiopeia, Aries with the coals of his cigarette. He'd known them all so well as the glowing end traced from star to star, but now he could only remember Cassiopeia. Anna sat beside him. *Show me.* He shook his head and continued drawing into the sky, making up his own constellations now, his own myths of heavenly interference, new stars that had yet to be storied. *Show me or I'll tell mom.* He smiled, took an extra he'd been saving for later out from behind his ear. He'd seen rebels do that in movies and thought it looked cool. She'd seen him do it and thought it was cooler. He gave her the basics: *inhale, no Anna inhale, exhale, see it light up when you breathe? Feel the smoke in your lungs? How it tastes like the ends of a barbeque on the fifth of July?* She nodded, exhaled, coughed. They laughed and he showed her how if she moved it fast enough she could almost write her name with the light from the cigarette end. She got halfway through the first N when she realized he was messing with her and threw the cigarette at his head. She missed. She asked for the rest of his smoke, but he just shook his head and breathed in the tobacco and the stars and the nighttime.

He paid little less than lip service to his math class. Teachers who had once doted upon him looked at him confused, guilty, sympathetic, he couldn't tell. He didn't care. Maybe they wanted to ask but they wouldn't. He hated them for that. For pretending nothing was wrong when he could see in their eyes they knew something. He wouldn't talk in words, only numbers, because he knew that his only words could be Anna and everything that had happened. The things that he could not explain but needed an explanation. The formula for the length of a parametric curve is  $L = \int_a^b \sqrt{\left(\frac{dx}{dt}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{dy}{dt}\right)^2} dt$ . One plus one is two. Two times two is four. He nodded and recited numbers, drawing proofs with half-inch yellow chalk on a blackboard that squeaked.



He remembered that once she got to high school, Anna never was any good at math. She was an artist, she could paint better than Van Gogh. Or almost better at least. He didn't really understand "better" or "worse" at painting but she explained things like brush strokes and relief and lithography. She sighed and shrugged when he nodded and asked what you call an American drawing. She tried desperately not to laugh when he shouted *A YANKEE DOODLE*. She made friends that were artists and she would come home from their houses smelling of sweat and acrylic paint and the ends of a barbeque on the fifth of July. Her eyes were bloodshot and her words faded at the end of every syllable. *Adammmm, whyyy doo youu thhinkk soo fuckkkingggg muchh? Adddammm anddd Eveee sitttinggg inn a treeeee...* She would sleep heavily those nights, when he'd sneak into her room to check that she was snoring. Sometimes he would walk in to wake her in the morning and there would be some new scrawling on her walls. Flowers, once, orchids and sloppy daisies, blackened with a charcoal stick never to be found. Once the words to a poem he'd never heard, *The tigers have found me and I give no shits. Tigers Tigers but never any shits*. She had become elusive, a darkness, an enigma of cosmic entropy that he could never unravel. But he still walked with her to school every day, still put her lunch bag on the top shelf even though she could reach it now. He still took it down when she turned to go to class even though he knew that she wouldn't end up there - that she'd take her things out of her locker, meet her friends out back, and disappear into the cracks in the sidewalk.

He was walking home. Not walking but falling. Not falling but plummeting, pulled down by pure gravity at the precise rate of acceleration of 9.8 meters per second squared. Falling and turning back, falling and going forward, falling in circles like the orbit of every star and planet, like Cassiopeia, like the North Star which had no name. Orbiting slowly around and towards home, home that was not home? He didn't know anymore. He stood, hand on the door, leaning toward it, falling still.

He remembered waking up that morning to look for Anna. She hadn't come home by the time he went to bed late the night before. He checked her bedroom, walls now colored entirely black with the illegible charcoal ramblings of her mind. Her mirror was smeared with lipstick in a shade he never saw her wear. Thin strips of sunlight slipped through the blinds and touched down upon torn sheets of paper, a broken paintbrush, viscous drops of paint too dark to just be red. Her dresser drawers were overturned, clothes strewn in wild patterns over the floor; he couldn't be sure if they were intentional or random chaos. If they were simply a result of the state of cosmic entropy or if she was experimenting with floors and fabrics and shapes as she sometimes did. She was in bed, at last, one cheek red with nail polish or fabric dye or the new oil-based paints she loved so much. Her fingers flushed with the color. He sighed. Shut the door. Went down the stairs. Said goodbye to his mother as she left for work. Realized Anna hadn't been snoring.

He crossed the threshold to what had once been home, where he and Anna had once played hide-and-seek and broken the urn of Grandmother's ashes, where he and Anna had once played cowboys and Indians and princesses and dragons and doubled parts because Anna wanted too many characters for two siblings to play, where he and Anna had grown, maybe not up but some sideways, up-like direction. He tried to avoid the stairs, her bedroom, but it was the center of gravity, the black hole which drew things toward it with a force equal to the gravitational constant times the mass of the first object times the mass of the second object divided by the distance squared and the distance was quickly decreasing. He reached the bed, held himself up, fell to the floor and sat beside what had once been his sister. What had once been his sister but was now cold and empty, lifeless and stained with nail polish or fabric dye or the new oil-based paints she loved so much.

# Small Victories | Stephanie Levi

You are inside of your living room with your family. You live in a baby blue brick duplex that has three bedrooms and two baths. You can vaguely hear your neighbor yelling at her two three-year-old twins, but you have long since learned the ability to tune them out.

You are sitting on your red couch. Your spouse is next to you "watching TV." Most people called it napping. If you were to ask your spouse who was just eliminated from Project Runway, your spouse would tell you to shut up. You would just laugh. Your two teenaged kids, one a boy and the other a girl, are on their iPod or phone or handheld gaming system. It all looks the same to you, and quite frankly, you think they all do the same thing. It is reaching dinner time.

"I'll get dinner started," you offer. "Let's have chicken alfredo."

Your spouse snaps awake and both your children groan.

"No. You overcook the broccoli," your daughter complains.

"You also undercook the pasta," your son joins in.

"What's our agreement about the kitchen?" your spouse asks.

"I'm not allowed in the kitchen," you answer automatically. "But I use to cook for my older brother and sister when we were kids."

"That's nice dear, but now you don't have to," Your spouse pats your shoulder.

"You *really* don't have to," your son says.

You sink back into the couch as your spouse goes to prepare dinner. Project Runway had ended, so your daughter changes the channel to a teen drama that surprisingly both your kids like. Thirty minutes of teenaged mystery and drama later, your daughter desires chocolate. Unfortunately, there is no chocolate in the house and she wants someone to go get some more. You know better than to argue or to tell her to get it herself.

"Give me a minute and I'll pick some up from Rams," your spouse calls from the kitchen.

"I'll go," you say. You'd rather walk the ten minutes to the convenience store than continue watching highschoolers backstab each other in HD.

"You won't get what I want. You never get the right one. You never remember anything."

Your daughter is picky. Your daughter also remembers every mistake you've ever made. She remembers the time you told her doctor she was allergic to dairy and peanuts. She's allergic to pollen and dog fur. Your son is the one with food allergies. She remembers the time you painted her room her favorite color while she was gone for the weekend. She hugged you and thanked you for her new green room. Two months later, she casually told you her favorite color is actually purple "so please get a purple phone case." She also remembers the time you bought her an orange cake for her

birthday. She threw it up.

"Just tell me what you want and I'll write it down," you tell her. "Or am I too incompetent to write a list."

Your daughter rolls her eyes. She wants a Hershey bar, but only if it has almonds. Get the mint or caramel Ghirardelli chocolate but don't get raspberry. Twix, Snickers, and M&Ms are fine. Don't come back with Three Musketeers, Milky Ways, or Butterfingers. And while you're at it, you son wants lemonade (no pulp), fudge cookies, and brownies. Your spouse wants Orbits gum, ginger ale, and Aleve.

"Do you want me to give you the mon-?"

"No." you tell your spouse.

You don't like taking money from your spouse. Your spouse makes more money than you. Truthfully, this doesn't bother you much at home. At work, it became more of a problem.

Just like your spouse, you received your bachelor's degree from the state university. Your spouse received a bachelor of accountancy and became an accountant. You received a bachelor in science, majored in biochemistry, and became a local highschool physics teacher instead of going to graduate school because of circumstance. You like being a teacher, but it was never what you planned to do with your life. You also don't have any particular love for physics, but the two semesters you took in college was enough to teach highschoolers. You would rather teach chemistry, but that position is filled by an electrical engineer.

Either way, you can afford to pay for a few groceries. You head out with the list in your jacket pocket. The night air is brisk, but you like the fresh cool air. With the convenience store, Rams, only being three blocks down the street, it doesn't take long to buy all the items.

When you reach the house, you confidently hand your daughter her Twix, her Hershey with almonds, and her Snickers. Your son gets his lemonade and his cookies, but you tell him he can eat the brownies on the weekend. You give your spouse the Aleve, the Orbits gum, and the ginger ale. You think your family looks happy.

You decide to hug your daughter and kiss your spouse on the cheek. Your daughter returns the hug and your spouse returns the kiss on the cheek. Your son leaves the room before you can get to him. You don't let that spoil your small victory.





ART

# Cabrini Art Award

The Cabrini Art Award is an art contest conducted by Stylus and judged by our talented art editor, Annie Pi, along with assistant art editor, Hannah Methvin. The Cabrini Art Award winners were selected from a pool of submissions that the editors collectively voted on as finalists for the award. Ms. Pi and Ms. Methvin then determined the three winners based on a point system meant to objectively score each piece on artistic merit.

The Stylus Cover Art Award is a separate contest judged by the art editor, layout editor, and editor-in-chief. The cover contest gives an artist the opportunity to have their artwork featured as the cover design for the journal. The specifications for the cover contest were tailored to represent this issue's theme, tone, and mood. The art submission that best represented these aspects of this year's artwork and writing was awarded the honor of cover design.

All art submitted to Stylus for publication was considered for both the Cabrini Art Award and Stylus Cover Art Award.



# 1st Place



Be Reflective – Andrea Bajcsy  
Digital art  
8" x 11"

# 2nd Place



Amelia No. 18 – Nick Frymark  
Digital photograph

# 3rd Place

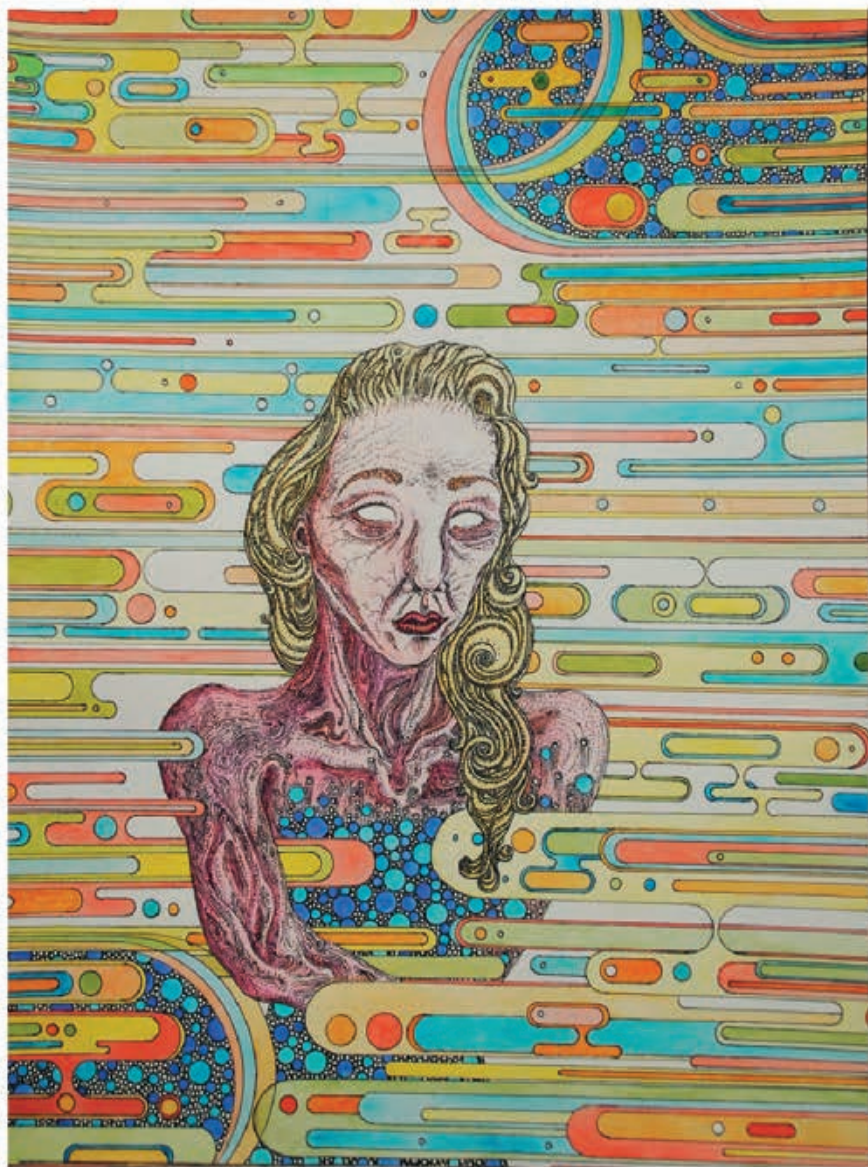


After Tonight – Jennifer Block  
Melted crayon wax, 16" x 20"



Lost in Translation - Lydia Shia  
Charcoal, 20" x 24"

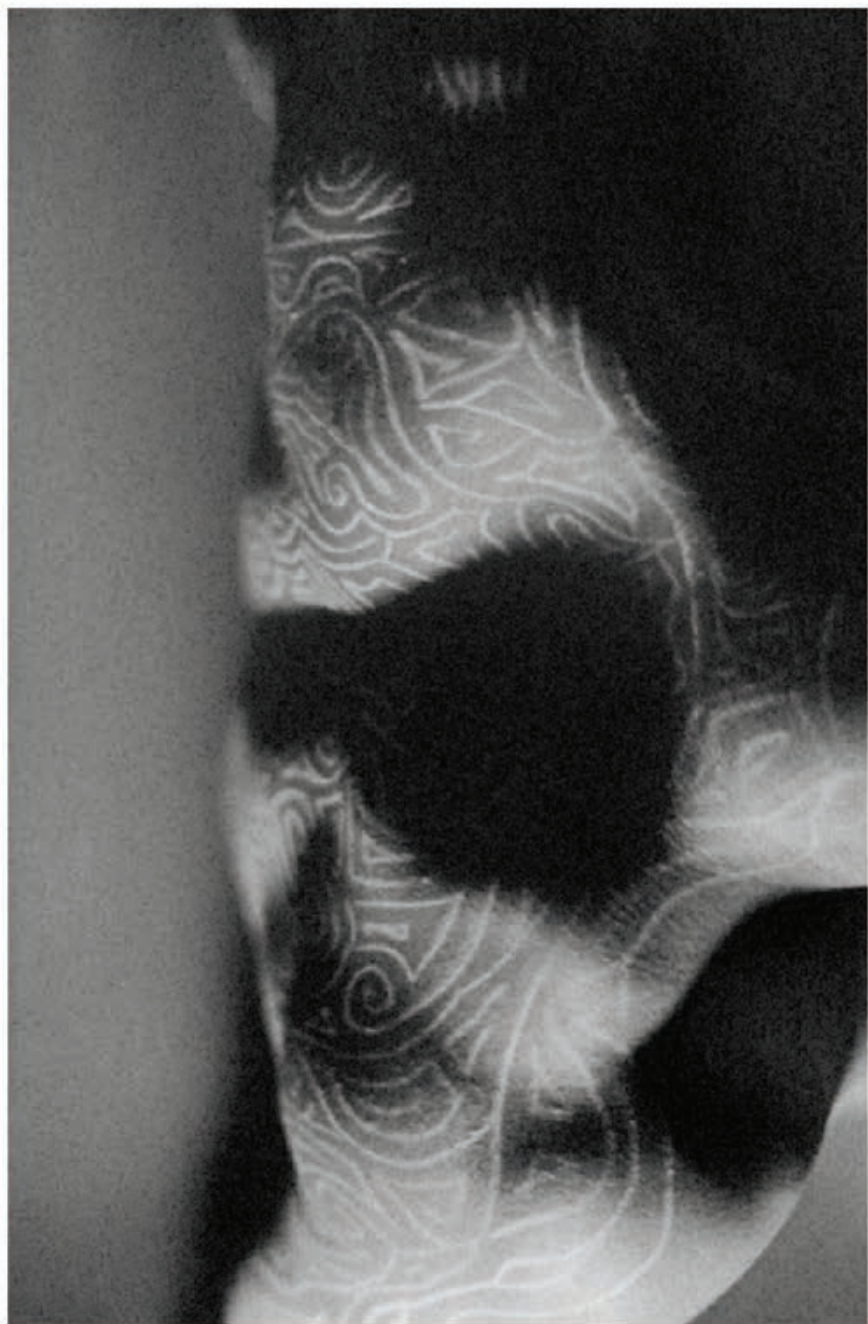




I Lurk Beneath – Anneliese Faustino  
Watercolor, pen, ink, 18" x 24"



Oscar – Ginger Sapperstein  
Acrylic on canvas



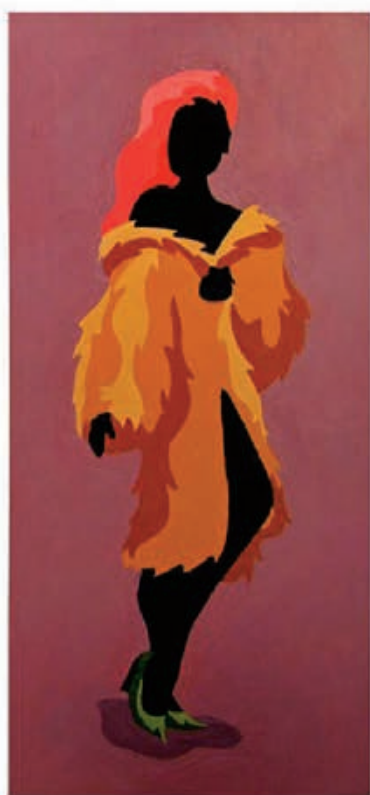
Flight - Becca Goodman  
Gelatin silver print, 20" x 24"





Hulk Boy – Ginger Sapperstein  
Acrylic on bristol, 13" x 11"

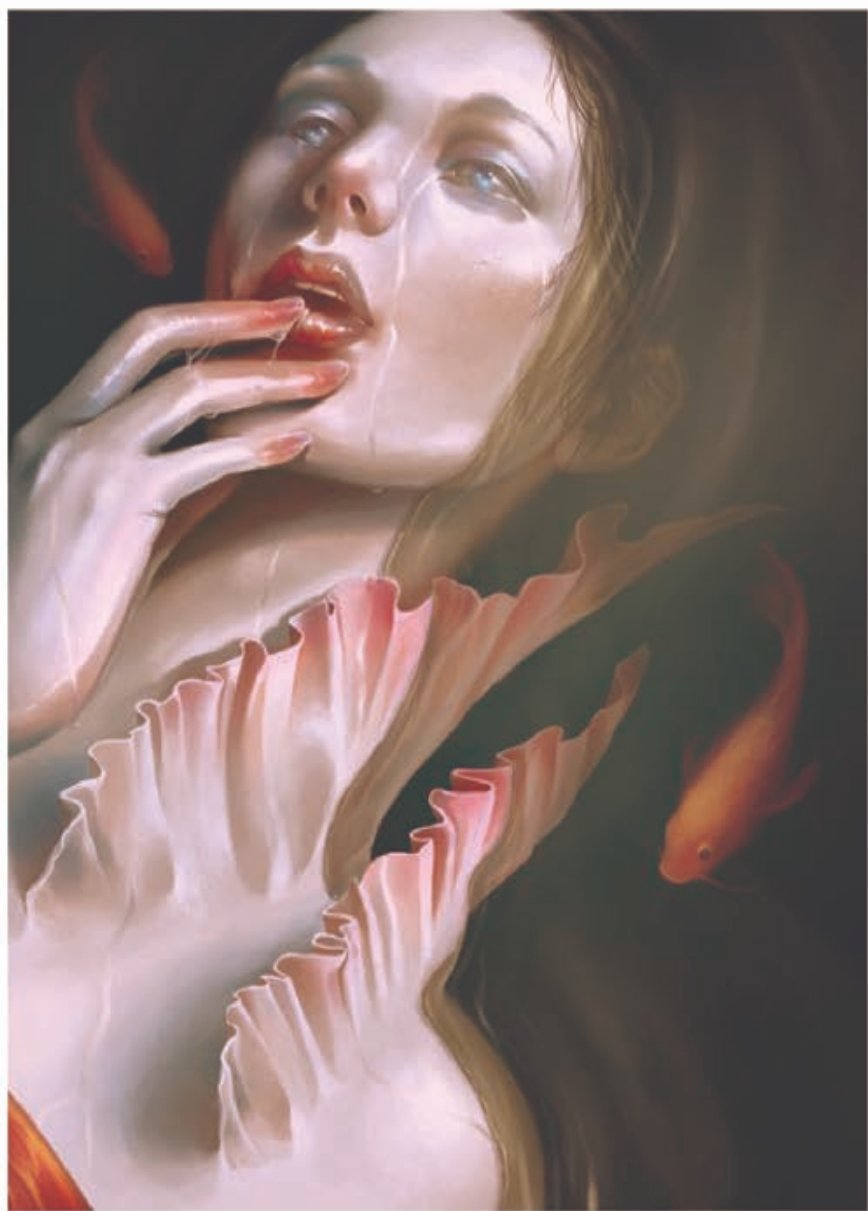




Life and Death – Ginger Sapperstein  
Acrylic on presentation board, 24" x 18"



Bloody Mary - Andrea Bajcsy  
Digital art, 6.5" x 9"



Cold Skin Metamorphosis – Andrea Bajcsy  
Digital art, 6" x 8"



Drops - Becca Goodman  
Gelatin silver print, 10" x 7"





Eras Triptych – Ingrid Berbery  
Acrylic paint, oil pastel on wood panel, 9.75" x 31.75"



POETRY

# An Invisible Middle |

Marlena Chertock

1st Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

*The prisoners were brought to the bridge and given the choice to remain in the country of their captivity or cross over to the other country. If they chose to cross the bridge, they would never be allowed to return.*

*—Bridge of No Return*

Soldiers gave him the choice to stay on this side  
or cross.

He wouldn't be allowed back.  
He shuffled forward,  
the ropes around his ankles  
leaving coiled imprints.

The middle planks didn't seem different from the sides,  
but they were

an invisible marker,  
the Military Demarcation Line.  
He walked away from his prison of 10 years,  
where he'd kissed another captive  
for four minutes  
while the guards stopped a fight in a nearby cell.

He stood between two countries sliced  
in the middle,  
like his father used to split the kimchi,  
half for his sister  
and half for him.



# Song for My Mother |

Dolapo Demuren

**2nd Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize**

Mother, are you here? Is it your mouth dreaming  
around my ears, again, in a tongue strange to me?

Everyday, I wake to the little my lips can do.  
They are parted waters— wings of a moa— thunderbolts rubbing.

I am away, and growing. With windows,  
it is hard to wake alone: the sun takes breaths in my bed—  
there is the smell of hydrangea, the sound of apples  
falling from the small teeth of branches and also  
there is the sound of nothing— that speaks to me.

The sun, with its hands, gives its weightless fruit,  
which I carry like a cross with my eyes.

I rise in my bed to watch light taste my room with  
movements like a hungry, crouching cub. I do not say anything.

I am reminded of when I was a crescent in your arms mother—  
in the kitchen, bibbed by a rainbow of cotton over my breastbone.

Your hands would open my mouth and plant cut pieces of banana, orange  
and tangerine. The peels in the sink were like the flags of countries.

When you fed me, I don't remember what it was  
you would say, it was a kind of nothing to me then.  
But you sang to me with your hands. And I, young without  
anything to say, hungrily kissed your hands— to speak to them.

Sunlight touches its lips on my face, this morning, and breathes.

It will find silent flowers at the bottom of my stomach—  
when I open my mouth.

# For My Mother, Postpartum | Alexandra Leston

**3rd Place Winner, Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize**

After "For My Sister in the River" by Danielle Cadena Deulen

When I was born my mother spent four months in bed.  
It was January and everything was frozen, grey and spent  
and formless, so when she pressed me to her it was  
in the shape of something clotted, hair running  
like the dark water of a womb. My mother is tall  
but she is easily bent. When I turn sixteen she'll cradle me  
in a public park, scarf turning wildly about us (slinging over our  
shoulders in the wind.) She'll stay for hours, begging,  
come home with me. I'll hear only her breathing filled  
with the weight of sleep, twisting over the chest  
of her pillows, a dead thing writhing. When she named me,  
she pooled oceans between her hands and knees,  
smoothed the bedclothes, buoyed my body there, whispered,  
We're living. We're strong. I was too young to pull away.  
It wasn't just the silt sifting over her relief, or how the wind  
broke across her levied back, but the way my mother  
drowned, spine curved around me, elbows soft at her sides.

# Davey Herold, as he Assassinates John Wilkes Booth's Horse | Allison Hartley

First, disappointment because you thought it would be more-- just an inch of  
pull and release, a  
minor convulsion, fingers slipping over a metal trigger.

Next, she--stiffening, massive, funny because you thought there'd be a thud,  
but you caught her lying down, eyes open like a sentinel, she never knew you  
were lawless,  
funny that as warm blood pools and congeals around the wound, dark flowers  
blooming  
over her silent face, you only think of your own damn cracked and broken skin,  
the way your fingers stiffen because April mornings are more cold, more damp  
than you'd ever thought they'd be, funny you never noticed how the slope  
of her neck is as perfect as a woman's back, somehow you know that of all  
the home comforts, you'll never have a woman again, that warmth will come  
instead from the currents inside a horse, pushing red through your hands into  
her knotted mane.

Years ago, you heard the term "dead man walking"--the second before it's over,  
when her broken and cracked hooves convulse no more than an inch of pull and  
release,  
you think the phrase "dead horse walking" is better, she shudders to a still  
and you realize that she was better company than her master is, as she stills  
he writhes and moans on the ground beside her, muttering something  
Shakespeare,  
either he's delirious from the pain of his broken leg, or maybe it's his old crazy  
coming through, funny how the only animals you've ever shot before had  
broken legs,  
you would get glory in the mercy of slaughter, maybe even amnesty if you are  
caught  
for the conspiracy, but instead you shoot the dumb horse the history books will  
forget anyways.

As you throw down the gun and close her eyes, your hand comes away hot and  
wet,  
funny you never thought horses shed tears, weeks later a soldier will unbind  
your hands  
and hold a looking glass to your face as he roughly shaves your neck, muttering  
something

about making it smooth for the hangman's noose, when he asks you how it feels  
to make  
eye contact with a killer in the glass, you will protest that your only crime was  
offing a horse,  
but funny that only then you'll see your eyes are the same dull brown as the  
loyal dead horse  
you left rotting by the Potomac, you resolve that even after they lead you up a  
rickety wooden  
platform and bridle you with rope around your neck, they will not see you cry.

Last, at the end, before your feet convulse no more than an inch of pull and  
release, the hangman's  
jig-- disappointment because dumb horses die in vain, you thought you would  
be more.

# Mockingbird | Charles Zhuang

This morning, on my way out, I saw you  
on top of dead bramble, imitating  
the sound of a crow. For more  
than one minute, we stared, standing  
no further than two friends.  
I could see the stroma of your irises, every fiber  
folding within, the color  
hazel. Belonging  
to the family *Mimidae*, passerine  
of the class, *Aves*, your kind, *the Northern Mockingbird*  
of marked white wings and gray plumage, black  
stripes, ascended tail—I look at you,  
"how original."  
And if all I said were true, you may remember me  
when I forgot my umbrella  
at a shelterless stop, and you stood  
only a foot above some sign,  
unafraid as if  
I wasn't human.

# Abyssal | Bryce Gold

There's a bathtub at  
the bottom of the ocean  
filled with a gas  
that's heavier than water.  
There are girls there, too,  
wearing mismatched sandals  
that washed out to sea  
a long time ago. They look like  
crushes you had in high school,  
but their eyes are always saddened  
by the things they've never seen  
and they never smile  
or remember your hands  
as they take off your clothes  
and help you into the bath.  
When that gas reaches  
your lips, it tastes so  
sour, like candies bought  
from ice cream men.  
It has been said that it's  
the last thing you can taste  
before you suffocate  
from drowning, and all  
the girls just laugh.

# Midlands | Angelina She

I arrived here in a typhoon, city lights scattered by  
lost raindrops. And the storm was reincarnated in me.  
Destination, Midlands, passing signs  
you "could have" read, a moment  
that we "could have" had, a visitor, I  
"would have" made this a home.

Hands folded in my lap, my fingers fidgeted, palms  
embraced for warmth. Pray, how does one give  
eulogies for dreams? Because it wasn't you and your  
trespasses; it was the laughter of children, sunshine  
trailing kisses on wooden floors, Sunday mornings – that,  
the sudden end of that. I let myself dream, I never  
looked back.

And then, there was an unsettling still  
in the air about me. I think of you,  
across the Pacific,  
apologies and goodbyes,  
dissolve into depths of oceans below  
and settle into peaks far beyond  
where I stand.

Midlands. On clear nights,  
city lights resonate, threaten to burst.  
Tell me, how do dreams end?  
When do moments lose meaning?  
Does time heal, or  
does time bury?

(And will you forget me?)

I arrived here in a typhoon,  
lost to be led home.

# My Mother's Closet |

## Jonathan Reyes

I turn the handle and the door  
Resists for a moment before opening  
Like a delicate jewelry box. Then in.  
Scrub tops and purple striped sweaters hang  
Empty, save for the wire-thin hangers  
Like the frail shoulders they draped over  
Just before the Christmas of '94.  
They have long been unworn, but I am  
Cradled by the arms they once clothed.  
She is present here: in the teardrop  
Earrings. In each heel along the  
Yellowed footing. In the stethoscope  
A younger me pressed against her  
Back and to her chest. I find a red hat.  
Then a single brown hair from her  
Head. It balded much too young.



# Painting the Sidewalk | Samantha Reich

I pluck grass from the ground  
to affect the body of earth,  
take some with me  
to hold green in my hand again,  
breathe in its vegetable-water smell,  
finger smoothly-sticky lines  
before slicing its fibers,  
for this gentle discord is music  
and I, the composer of grass  
when blades fall to the sidewalk,  
and rain stains the concrete green.

# Wind chimes | Marlena Chertock

The birch tree outside is covered  
in wind chimes, all sizes,  
colors — wood and metal.

She spends months on one,  
gluing polished colored glass,  
threading ribbon through the wooden tops.

The neighbors stand on her lawn,  
picking favorites.

She thought she was late this month,  
but then there was a forest  
of falling crimson leaves.

She leaned on the tub,  
raked the bathroom floor.

Wind.  
Outside, the wind chimes clang and din  
like the shrill shouts of children.

# Before | Dolapo Demuren

The evergreen leans leafless into his open, bedroom window.

He lies on the sheet. On his back,

staring. The ceiling fan spins shadows over his mouth, which move like dancing dahlias. His eyes, with each close, catch the dark like drops of warm rain—. To his ears, there is no moon. He hears the midnight wind harrow a terrain into his covers. On his back,

staring. In the ceiling, he sees himself as a child hearing his father, from downstairs, try to relearn the piano after a woman dropped her heart on his playing fingers— he sees the mother he never had breastfeed him nectar that burned him open— and watches the flint-like figure of his father listening to the blues in the dark and how it slowly jumped out of him like a Bengal rattling too fast in his eyes.

He turns

his head, faces the wall. He is beginning to close his eyes. He thinks, Father would be downstairs playing the piano— I understand his strange melody only when sleeping.

# The Governor's Warfield Parkway |

Charles Zhuang

I took the Governor's Warfield  
the other day, and saw the shadows  
of those branches casted  
by the streetlights. They flailed  
in the wind, like effigies  
shaken by shamans. I remembered  
how slow you used to drive  
through this way, under  
the speed limit, as the road caved down  
like a cup, and you  
looking at the shapes of light, carved  
by the leaves. You used to imagine  
this road was made by something larger  
than a house, that could only crawl,  
came and went, leaving  
this mark  
in our world. It reminded me  
of that time in spring  
when we hung lanterns over  
the limbs of cherry trees, waiting  
until night, to unroll the blankets,  
make the tables, sit  
on our knees, and have lunch  
with you in your formal, and I  
in my black coat, you  
bowing, and I, greeting,  
"Hello."

# Buffalo 4

## The blizzard of '77 |

Marlena Chertock

The fire spread through Whitney Place,  
ate six homes, left them freezing.

Fire trucks stuck  
in mounds of snow up to roofs.

They watched flames lick a crib in the house next door,  
the wood charred black, the back wall crumbled.

Fathers and mothers trapped in the shoe factory  
ran up and down metal stairs to stay warm.

Cars stopped for four days  
in the middle of the street, passengers turned to glaciers.

The Buffalo Courier Express didn't thud on front doors  
that morning, the first time in 143 years.

# Drowning | Charles Zhuang

And it came to me

that hell was not made of fire.

Darkness, maybe. Cold,

certainly. It was

a small hole in the ground

filled with water,

breathing little worlds

of air

below

so far

underneath,

making

an engulfing sound

until only a muffle

would come above,

ascending

to dancing light,

in the ways

that a sea nymph does,

or Poseidon,

but without power.

# Dianne St. | Leigh McDonald

You had asked me  
to chase crabs along the beach.  
In front of Dianne Street,  
you ran toward me with the tide  
holding something to show me.

It was a sea spider  
with shelter holes  
like those of children,  
raking their ketchup stained hands into the grain,  
not knowing how to cleanse them.

When I saw it on the gravel,  
the crab was as small  
as your finger tip poking it along.

You wanted to bring it closer.  
You wanted to show me  
something I was afraid of.  
But by the time you could force it  
into your grip,  
you had killed it—  
it was too small.  
And after, you tried to hug me  
with those same hands.

# Like Dancing | Daniel Parisi

I realize,  
in the silent moment  
between fluttered lashes  
and gently restrained wrists,  
that she is delicate as a petal  
yet strong as the bough that bears it





# Staff Biographies

## **Jamie Lee, Editor-in-Chief**

Jamie is a senior journalism and English double degree student. She is not fond of writing bios.

## **Adriana Scott, Assistant Editor**

Adriana Scott is a junior journalism major and creative writing minor. She loves writing fiction and being involved with philanthropy on campus. She enjoys spoken word and supporting other poetry lovers on open mic nights.

## **David Bowman, Prose Editor**

David Bowman is a junior English major. He's a member of the Jiménez-Porter Writer's House and is proud to say that he survived running an editorial board this semester.

## **Molly Morris, Assistant Prose Editor**

Molly Morris is a senior English major and creative writing minor with the hopes of one day becoming a published Young Adult author. Until that day, she would like to work with a publishing house or fashion magazine, writing about things she actually likes (which are cats, glitter, chocolate, and Michael Jackson).

## **Leigh McDonald, Poetry Editor**

Leigh McDonald is an English and psychology major of junior standing. This is her second year as a staff member of Stylus. She likes helping out around the Jiménez-Porter Writer's House, occasional sailing, frequent artichokes, and your poems. (, , )( ^ \_ ^ )( , , )

## **Dolapo Demuren, Assistant Poetry Editor**

Dolapo Demuren is a sophomore English major with a creative writing minor. Some of his favorite poets are W. S. Merwin, Yusef Komunyakaa, Pablo Neruda and William Stafford.

## **Annie Pi, Art Editor**

Annie Pi is still the art editor. She has pending degrees in English and business, an unhealthy obsession with ramen, and far too many dresses in her closet.

## **Hannah Methvin, Assistant Art Editor**

Hannah Methvin is a junior English and studio art double major. However, no, she will not draw you something. She is vice president of the University

of Maryland arts hub, Terpmode (terpmode.com), and a member of University of Maryland's comedic a capella group, Mockapella. She is clumsy and enjoys Lean Cuisine pizzas. She can also quote almost every line from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

### **Brittany Williams, Multilingual Editor**

Brittany Williams is a sociology and French double major. She did not pick her majors with any career goal in mind, but instead based on her love for learning about and conversing with different people. The Livemocha courses are her new best friend, but there is always room for more, so wheel over a computer chair and join.

### **Josh Logue, Senior Copy Editor**

Josh Logue is a junior journalism major. He doesn't have much in the way of published fiction or notable credits to his name just yet, but you wait. He will. He writes short fiction almost exclusively, so keep a look out.

### **Hannah Kolman, Copy Editor**

Hannah Kolman is a sophomore psychology and economics double major. When she is not copy editing, she enjoys reading, doing yoga, and playing with puppies.

### **Monica Parks, Copy Editor**

Monica is a junior English major with a pre-law concentration. This means she enjoys debating comma placement and will do so for the rest of the foreseeable future. In addition to grammatical minutiae, her interests include cooking, constitutional law, owls, pizza, and Victorian Gothic literature.

### **Priya Krishnan, Layout Editor**

Priya Krishnan is a sophomore neurobiology/physiology and music double degree. She can often be found adventuring in the outdoors, whether running on endless trails or climbing mountains. She has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her favorite poet is Rumi. She loves laughter, yoga, lights, and music.

### **Michael Kinney, Assistant Layout Editor**

Michael Kinney is the assistant layout editor for Stylus and a freshman cell biology and genetics major. He enjoys cheering on the Terps at every sporting event he gets the chance to attend and spreading his school spirit.

**Shelby Cain, Marketing Executive**

Shelby Cain is a double major in English and criminology and is also a member of the Jiménez-Porter Writer's House. She is a dedicated poet and her favorite book is *Peter Pan* by James Barrie.

**Charles Zhuang, Treasurer**

Charles Zhuang is studying philosophy and computer science with interests in artificial intelligence, although he avoids discussing issues related to any of those topics outside of the academic environment. He's 22 but is often mistaken to be much younger than that and believes that hell is a small hole in the ground filled with water. His favorite color is red.

**Sean Donegan, Web Editor**

Sean is a senior English major with a minor in creative writing. He also serves on the Prose Board for Stylus. He spends his free time not working on his Murakami backlog, writing short stories and sometimes performing site updates.

# Contributor Biographies

**Andrea Bajcsy** is a freshman at the University of Maryland.

**Ingrid Berbery** graduated in December 2012 with a degree in studio art and a Latin American Studies certificate. In her last semester, she developed an abstract expressionist style employing bold colors in her paintings.

**Jennifer Block** is a junior studio art major and art history minor. When she is not creating new artwork, she enjoys teaching art classes, reading, and traveling.

**Alexandria Brake** is a sophomore English major from Deep River, Connecticut. She lives in the Jiménez-Porter Writer's House, is an active member of Maryland Crew, and hosts a radio show called "The Sound and the Furries" on Tuesday nights.

**Marlena Chertock** is a senior journalism major and creative writing minor. She is the Editor-in-Chief of The Writers' Bloc, a literary-focused newspaper on campus. Chertock is a member of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House and focuses on feature writing and poetry.

**Stella Donovan** is a senior English major and a member of the Jimenez-Porter Writers' House. She would like to thank her parents for their unfailing love and support.

**Anneliese Faustino** is a freshman studio art and chemistry double major at the University of Maryland. She hopes to incorporate these two passions into her career. In her spare time she practices martial art, tutors, and searches for geocaches with friends.

**Nick Frymark** is an art student from Damascus, Maryland. He is influenced by progression and regression over time and the influence of life's uncertainty.

**Bryce Gold** is a senior English major and creative writing minor.

**Becca Goodman** is a senior graduating with a double degree in studio art and art history. She is actively pursuing a career in art restoration and conservation. Her work is directly rooted in her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and her fascination with human behavior, and advocates awareness about mental health.

**Allison Hartley** is a sophomore, a history major, an English major, a twin. She is a poet and loves the new and interesting ways that words can come together, even in something as mundane as a biography. She wishes that she could write like Tess Gallagher and wishes she were Eleanor Roosevelt. One day, Alli will work in a museum, or maybe in an archive. Maybe she will be in a museum or an archive one day as well.

**Alexandra Leston** is a sophomore English and Spanish double major. She'd like to thank her parents, Lindsay Bernal, Carmen Reyes, Johnna Schmidt, Shannon, and all her classmates in ENGL353.

**Stephanie Levi** really didn't feel like writing a bio. So she didn't. Good day, everyone.

**Norine McKee** is a junior English and Chinese double major, and a second-year resident of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House.

**Nicholas Meriwether** is a senior government and politics major from Baltimore, Maryland. He would like to acknowledge Junot Díaz, David Simon, Kendrick Lamar, and Ray Lewis for their continued inspiration. Special thanks to Mom, John, Luke, Nina, Pran, and the Baltimore Ravens.

**Daniel Parisi** is a sophomore theater and English major, actor, writer, poet, and comedian. He is a member of the University of Maryland comedy troupe The Bureau.

**Jenna Parry** is a recent studio art graduate drawing inspiration from outer space. After completing a minor in astronomy in December, she decided to pursue a second degree in physics with the hope of one day working for a space agency.

**Rhea Ramakrishnan** is a sophomore biology major who also, coincidentally, likes to write.

**Stephen Rane** studied English and linguistics. This is his first published work.

**Samantha Reich** is a senior family science major. She is a member of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House and Terpoets. Her interests include poetry, photography, and choral performance.

**Jonathan Reyes** is a junior working toward a double degree in computer engineering and English. His hobbies include biking, weightlifting, and reading.

**Ginger Sapperstein** is a senior art major. She will be attending graduate school in the fall for Instruction and Curriculum.

**Lydia Shia** is senior math major. When not encumbered by math problems, she likes to design and to search for eclectic coffee shops and music.

**Angee She** is a senior neurobiology and English double major. She is an avid traveler and ethnic food enthusiast.

# Stylus and the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House

Stylus is largely funded and supported by the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House, a Living and Learning Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. Many of the journal's staff members belong to the program (though any University of Maryland student can be involved with Stylus). Located within Dorchester Hall, the Writers' House is a campus-wide literary hub for the study of creative writing across cultures and languages. Students hone their skills through workshops, colloquia, and lectures led by Writers' House faculty and visiting authors. The two-year program is open to students of all majors and years. For more information about joining the Writers' House, visit our website at [writershouse.umd.edu](http://writershouse.umd.edu) or e-mail the director, Johnna Schmidt, at [jmschmid@umd.edu](mailto:jmschmid@umd.edu).



[WWW.WRITERSHOUSE.UMD.EDU](http://WWW.WRITERSHOUSE.UMD.EDU)

# Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize

The Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize is an annual writing contest open to all University of Maryland undergraduates. The prize is in its eleventh year and is administered by staff at the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. To preserve anonymity, outside judges read the manuscripts after names of authors have been removed.

## Prose Awards

Initial Reader: David Max Horowitz

Final Judge: Robert Girardi

Robert Girardi has published six acclaimed volumes of fiction, including *Madeleine's Ghost*, *A Vaudeville of Devils--Seven Moral Tales*, and *Gorgeous East*. Foreign language editions have appeared in French, Italian, German, Russian, Estonian and Hebrew. He has also written for film and network television; his journalism has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *Washingtonian Magazine* and *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, among other publications. He has taught film and creative writing at the University of Iowa and was Writer-in-Residence at Goucher College. He lives in Washington D.C. with his three children and pet finch, Carrot.

## Poetry Awards

Initial Reader: Henry Mills

Final Judge: Kyle Dargan

Kyle G. Dargan is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Logorrhea Dementia: A Self-Diagnosis* (UGA 2010). His debut, *The Listening* (UGA 2004), won the 2003 Cave Canem Prize, and his second, *Bouquet of Hungers* (UGA 2007), was awarded the 2008 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in poetry. Dargan's poems and non-fiction have appeared in publications such as *Callaloo*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Jubilat*, *The Newark Star-Ledger*, *Ploughshares*, *TheRoot.com*, and *Shenandoah*. While a Yusef Komunyakaa fellow at Indiana University, he served as poetry editor for *Indiana Review*. He is the founding editor of *Post No Ills* magazine and was most recently the managing editor of *Callaloo*.



# Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize Winners

## Prose Awards

**1st Place:** Norine McKee, "Chivalry" and "Nil Picks a Fight"

**2nd Place:** Stella Donovan, "Squatch"

**3rd Place:** Rhea Ramakrishnan, "Wings"

### **Finalists:**

Molly Morris, "June Floats Away," and "Gone, Gone, Goodbye"

Laura Pavlo, "The Color of the Sky in the Nighttime"

Stephen Rane, "Mothman"

Rohma Sahibzada, "What He Left Behind"

## Poetry Awards

**1st Place:** Marlena Chertock, "An Invisible Middle"

**2nd Place:** Dolapo Demuren, "Song for My Mother"

**3rd Place:** Alexandra Leston, "For My Mother, Postpartum"

### **Finalist:**

Tyler Kutner, "Walking" and "The Vendor"





Stephen Rane, 1990-2013

In memory of Stephen Rane and Nimo Thande, remarkable contributors to our creative community, and friends loved and lost.



Wairimu "Nimo" Thande, 1992-2012

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following organizations and people for their support. Their generosity has enabled us to publish a journal that created a literary community for passionate undergraduates, as well as a physical publication that celebrates talent and creativity. It is because of their kindness that this journal is able to continue each year.

## Benefactors:

The Jiménez-Porter Writers' House  
The Student Government Association  
PepsiCo Enhancement Fund

## Friends:

Terpoets | The Department of Art | The School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures | The College of Arts and Humanities | The Office of Undergraduate Studies | The Program in Creative Writing | University of Maryland Department of Business Printing Services | University of Maryland Archive | Elizabeth Arnold | Lindsay Bernal | Don Berger | Maud Casey | Michael Collier | Rod Jellema | Laura Lauth | Howard Norman | Stanley Plumly | Kevin Remmell | Vivianne Salgado | Johnna Schmidt | Jason Schneiderman | Anne Turkos | Joshua Weiner | David Wyatt | David Max Horowitz | Robert Girardi | Henry Mills | Kyle Dargan | Sara Burnett | Jesse Brooks | Marlena Chertock | Josh Logue

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# Submission Guidelines

Submit all work to our database: [www.styluslit.org/submit.html](http://www.styluslit.org/submit.html).

Stylus accepts high-quality submissions of prose, poetry, and art from all University of Maryland, College Park students, undergraduate and graduate.

Our reading period is from August to March, and our final deadline is January 31. Submitters will be notified of their status shortly thereafter, and no later than April 30. We accept up to five pieces across all genres. The work is put through a rigorous, anonymous review process. A brief biography of the author or artist must accompany each submission. Please also include your UID with each submission. We maintain flexibility in the layout process. No work is guaranteed acceptance until publication.

Those interested in serving on our staff, please email [styluslit@gmail.com](mailto:styluslit@gmail.com) and visit our website for more information at [www.styluslit.org](http://www.styluslit.org).

Prose and poetry should be uploaded through our website in .doc(x) , .txt, or .rtf format. Our prose limit is 3,500 words. Students interested in submitting longer pieces of exceptional quality are invited to email an excerpt of their piece, along with an abstract. Multilingual work should be accompanied by an English translation when possible, or with expressed permission to be translated by our staff. Art submissions may be emailed in PNG, TIFF, or JPEG format at greater than 600 dpi. Submitters should also include information about the medium and dimensions of each piece. Students unable to submit their work via our database should email [art.styluslit@gmail.com](mailto:art.styluslit@gmail.com) to contact our art director.

Stylus is a project undertaken solely by undergraduate students of the University of Maryland, College Park. The University of Maryland is not responsible for any of the statements, opinions, or printing errors contained herein. The Stylus staff has done its utmost to prevent any and all such errors. If an error should occur, the journal will print a correction on the website.





