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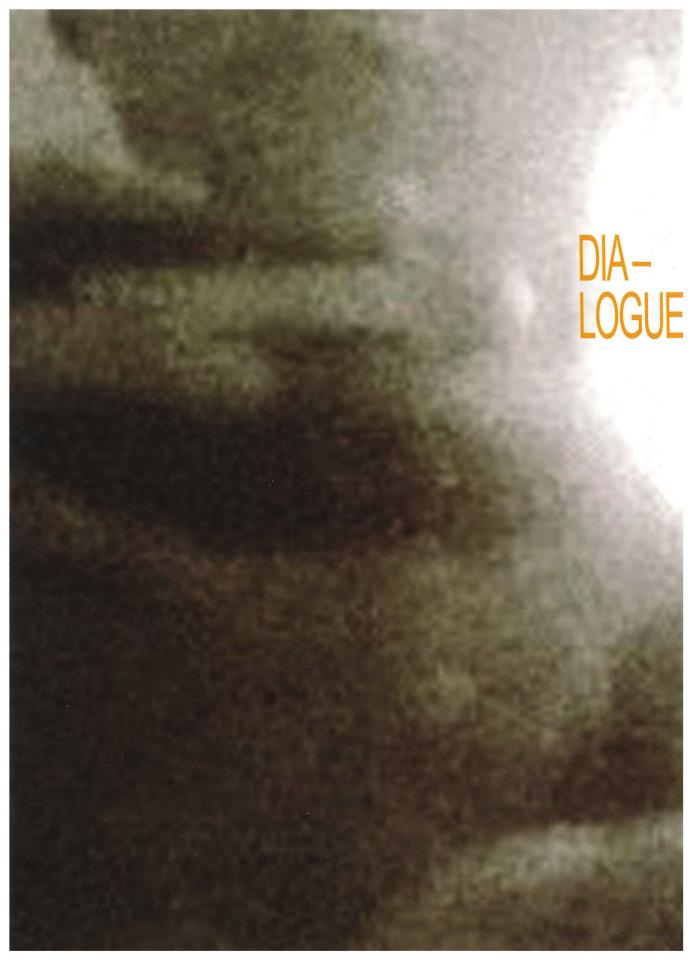
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Editor's Note

Dear readers,

A number of minutes before we planned on packaging this issue up and sending it off to be printed, our layout editor, Andrew Fisher, asked us if we had written an editors note. We paled in unison. With deadlines fast approaching, we sat down together to crank out a few paragraphs, only to sit staring blank-facedly at each other. What to write? Surely as co-editors we had something to say to our readers.

We began talking things through, and slowly we came to realize that we needed an editors note just as much as our readers do. It is so easy to get caught up in numbers, dates, processes, deadlines, and all the chaos that is entailed in the process of making a magazine, and to forget amidst it all why we're doing what we are, and who we're doing it for.

When I wrote just now, "making a magazine," I immediately felt that the expression was not quite accurate. We are not making much of anything, unless it is a simple conduit. What's here comes from some of you all, and is sent out in the hopes that it will spark some thought and bring enjoyment. We do what we do because we know that that short story you wrote for your creative writing class isn't just one less assignment you must complete here at Calvin – it's something you've put a lot of work in, something with a voice, something that's worth putting in a place where people of all types may interact with it. That's what Dialogue is, a place where discussion happens through pieces of art.

Thank you for picking this up, and for taking the time to read. Dialogue would be quite pointless without its readers. I will let you go now, and your classmates, students, and friends will take the stage.

Cheers,

Andrew Szobody & Patrick Hekman



Calvin College's Journal of Commentary and the Arts

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The Orchid Shop

William Overbeeke

Miss Paddlebone opened the door gently, peeking inside the room at the round lump on the bed. "Mr. Gruntweight," she whispered. The slender woman entered the room and went to the old man's side. "Good morning, Mr. Gruntweight." She wore a plain brown skirt and a simple blue blouse.

The great man rolled up in his tousled sheets, yawning as he said, "Good morning."

"What'll it be today, Mr. Gruntweight? Let me guess, the red waistcoat and navy tie?"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Gruntweight huffed. Miss Paddlebone hoisted the man up. He sat bleary-eyed in his undershirt and striped boxers on the edge of his bed as Miss Paddlebone rifled through the closet for his trousers, waistcoat, and tie. She threw him a shirt.

"Do you think you can put that on yourself alright?"

"Yes, yes..." Mr. Gruntweight grunted as he slowly put his left arm into the sleeve. He struggled wrapping the shirt around his back, so Miss Paddlebone raised his right arm and pushed it through its sleeve. Buttons next. Miss Paddlebone started the first one, pressing her fingers into the man's considerable belly.

"Any post today, nurse?" He fumbled with the buttons, pushing them through the holes with fingers the size of carrots.

"Er..." she hesitated. Mr. Gruntweight did not notice the twitch in her eyes. "I mean, yes. I put the post on the table when I came in. A new issue of *The Orchid Review*... and a letter from Michael Nye." She finished the last two buttons for Mr. Gruntweight before adding, "And you know me well enough by now to call me by my name, Mr. Gruntweight. It's Miss Paddlebone."

She must have unintentionally put too much emphasis on the word "Miss" because Mr. Gruntweight's next question was: "So when are you getting married, Miss Paddlebone?"

"Well, seeing as I have no fiancé, not anytime soon." "Shame. I would've thought you'd pick up one of those soldiers coming home from the war. You're young yet." Miss Paddlebone pulled the red waistcoat over Mr. Gruntweight's head and lumpy torso—perhaps a bit harder than she should have.

"So, Michael sent me a letter?"

"Yes..." Miss Paddlebone handed Mr. Gruntweight his cane. "Do you think you can get up? I'm going to put the kettle on."

Mr. Gruntweight groaned as he heaved his body up. He slid his feet into his slippers and schlepped out of the room after Miss Paddlebone.

"Do you remember Douglas Crouch?"

"Douglas Crouch of Crouch's Confectionery? The one who mistook you for Winston Churchill when you entered his shop with your son? And he gave your son—"

"—gave my son a pound's worth of free candy." Mr. Gruntweight laughed. "You

stole the words right out of my mouth, miss. I suppose at my age I repeat myself a lot."

"You told that one yesterday," Miss Paddlebone said as she set the kettle on the stove.

The house—No. 6 Grinsgate—was small. From the front door to the back window, the kitchen and living room were one continuous room, separated only by a dining table covered with a tapestry that served as a tablecloth. A large oak grandfather clock ticked faithfully in the corner of the living room, next to a shelf lined with yellowing books. A dead wireless collected dust in the corner, and the brocade wallpaper was peeling near the ceiling. Seventeen terracotta pots lined the back windowsill, each filled with a different variety of orchid. Magenta. Yellow. White. Their waxy leaves glistened. Their tendrils cast a forest of shadows on the floor.

Mr. Gruntweight settled into his chintz armchair by the back window. He stared at the sunlight lining the petals of his orchids and watched as particles of dust floated dreamily through the morning rays. "Nurse—er—Miss Paddlebone, would you be so kind as to hand me my *Orchid Review?*"

Miss Paddlebone snatched the magazine off the table, but also brought over a glass of water and a plate rattling with at least twenty capsules.

"What's this? I only asked for my magazine."

"Mr. Gruntweight," Miss Paddlebone furrowed her brow but her eyes smiled, "You know they pay me to make you take your medicine. I intend to get my paycheck."

"Very well." Mr. Gruntweight popped the first pill into his mouth and successfully swallowed it. He fiddled with the leaves of *The Orchid Review*, dropping his second pill. He lost it somewhere in the armchair, but did not bother telling Miss Paddlebone. He tried to focus on the letters, but the glare from the window and his old eyes did not work well together.

"Miss Paddlebone?" "Yes," Miss Paddlebone said loudly from his bedroom, where she was making his bed. She came to the doorway. "You said I got a letter from Michael, could you read it for me?"

Miss Paddlebone stood with her mouth open, twiddling her hands. She unconsciously touched the back of her head.

"I can hardly read a bloody thing in this magazine. I doubt I'd be able to read Michael's handwriting."

"Okay..." She paused. "How about I read it to you over breakfast? Come sit." Miss Paddlebone rubbed her hands on her hips and pulled out a chair for Mr. Gruntweight. The man managed to push himself up out of the armchair and hobble over to the table, shifting most of his weight to his right side as he shuffled along.

Miss Paddlebone sieved the tea, accidentally splashing the hot water on the tapestry. She dabbed it up quickly.

"Don't you become as clumsy as me, now, Miss Paddlebone," Mr. Gruntweight chuckled as he lowered himself into the chair. Miss Paddlebone let out a short laugh, opened the letter, and began reading:

"Dear Harold—"

"Nobody calls me that except my wife."

"Are you going to let me read the letter or not?"

Mr. Gruntweight waved his fingers to urge her to continue.

Dear Harold,

I apologize that I have not written in a while. As you can imagine, the store has kept me busy. This past year has truly been a year of growth for the Orchid Shop.

I will ever be grateful that you sold me the Orchid Shop 25 years ago. It has supported my family and me for as many years. But now I am making final preparations to pass it on to my eldest son, Lee.

We still carry all seventeen varieties of orchid that you originally had, plus a few more. The Alba is currently our bestseller. I understand the Alba is your favorite? I can send over one of our new varieties to add to your collection. Perhaps an orange Phalaenopsis?

Sincerely, Michael Nye

"This is great news, Miss Paddlebone," said Mr. Gruntweight. "We're going to have to write Michael back. I'd like to congratulate him. Would you take dictation for me?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, Mr. Gruntweight," said Miss Paddlebone hurriedly.

"You don't know about what? How to take dictation?" Mr. Gruntweight gave the nurse a quizzical look.

"No. I do," said Miss Paddlebone. "I just don't know if it's good to disturb Mr. Nye. He is very busy after all."

"Nonsense," Mr. Gruntweight growled. "If anyone is allowed to disturb Mr. Nye it's me. I rescued his arse by selling him my shop. Grab that pen. Paper's on the bookshelf." Miss Paddlebone obeyed.

"Dear Michael..." began Mr. Gruntweight. Miss Paddlebone wrote down what he said: "I am happy to hear that things are going well at my shop."
"Shouldn't you say your shop? As in Michael's shop? It is Michael's now," interrupted Miss Paddlebone.

"Yes, yes. Just get the gist of it. ... I am glad to know that the business I started so many years ago has made it into its third generation. I would love to visit you and your son, Lee. Unfortunately, with my ailing health, I cannot make it out of my house much. I hope it wouldn't be too much trouble if you could visit me at my home, No. 6 Grinsgate. I am sending this letter with Miss Paddlebone, my caretaker. She will arrange the date and time." Miss Paddlebone stopped writing mid-sentence. Mr.

Gruntweight was smiling to himself until he realized she had stopped writing. "What is it, my dear?"

"Hand cramps."

"You really are becoming like me, Miss Paddlebone. Just add I hope to see you and Lee in the next week. Sincerely, Mr. Harold Gruntweight. Can you bring the letter over for me today? I can't wait to see them."

"Yes... but finish taking your medication first. I've poured some tea. Would you like marmalade on your toast?"

An hour later Miss Paddlebone made her way up Grinsgate with Mr. Gruntweight's reply in hand. She turned right at the Mews, passed through an alleyway, and came out on Parliament Street. The cobblestone shimmered with the permanent moisture of England. A gritty mist crept along the walls. She passed a bookshop, a Cornish pasty shop, and then stopped in front of a third. The shop was empty. She stared at the giant TO LET sign in the window. Shelving inside was empty except for a particular type of residue: potting soil. A sign hung perpendicular to the shopfront, the silhouette of an orchid framed by a golden script: *The Orchid Shop*.

She felt for a piece of paper in her pocket. An envelope. The outside was addressed to *Mr. Gruntweight, No. 6 Grinsgate, Nether Poppleton, England,* and had a canceled Royal Mail stamp. She pulled out the letter and read it, even though the words had already been burned into her mind:

Dear Harold,

I apologize that I have not written in a while to give you an update on the Orchid Shop. To be honest, things have not been going well. No one seems to want to buy flowers these days. Couldn't hold on to a twopence. I had to sell the business.

I hope you are not disappointed in me. I tried to keep the integrity of your business, to carry on your legacy. I hope you understand.

My family and I are moving to Leeds to live with my brother. I am sorry we did not have time to inform you earlier. I did not want to worry you.

Sincerely,

Michael Nye

P.S. I did sell my last orchid—an Alba—to your caretaker, Miss Paddlebone. What a lovely woman. If I am ever back in town, I will be sure to visit you.

A tear skidded down Miss Paddlebone's cheek. Continuing down the street, she crumpled up the letter and threw it into a rubbish bin.

Darling you are mine

Leah Sienkowski

Darling you are mine

smooth little snails climbing stalks of grass become unbearable weights while it rains. grasses fold and snails dangle like earrings.

Delighted Audio

Leah Sienkowski

The feeling of daylight tiltiness has been overtaken by the intrigue of somebody's words and the ability to stay so long inside them.

Saint Daniel of Padua

Andrew Steiner

Buzzard neck. Tenderloin thighs. The stork knees of a scholar.

Nights, many of them, I'd lie in the center of our bed, slowing my breath until the seconds overtook my heartbeats and the silence crept between them and curled up there like a cat.

Philanderer, never. No imagination and a stiff rod of virtue, swaddled as it was in the old folds of his body. Whatever it was I received, that was all anyone received. I went there late one night, early on, because I had to know. I saw him from the quad, struck out in gold in the holy little window of his office, the heraldry, the saltires and enfields and flying doves, haunting him as he bent to his work. His the only light. He may not have come home. I felt a presence late that woke me as my heart raced, a deep night sweat, but the morning laid the bed bare.

Did he publish? Yes, in journals that seemed to die not long after. His name a wind that blew through a grove and brought down the dead boles. His colleagues, if they were his friends, were not the kind students sleep with or write books about. One red-haired master of false geographies prostrated himself in our driveway in the middle of February, fabulously drunk. Myles put a horse blanket on him and took him home. That was the extent of it.

Gothic romances I read then mostly. Polidori, Walpole, Radcliffe. Late, late with Myles' chaste sherries and ports. Acetaminophen, and the more obvious: vicodin, high-potency ibuprofen, oxycontin, ketamine. I would leave pieces from our set of Wüsthofs in odd places. The bathroom, the nightstand, the porch. The smoking he noticed, I knew, but didn't mention.

When it happened, I don't remember him coming home, but I remember a passage. I dreamed I was a salmon cutting spirit-like through cold water with the brilliant sun splashing seventy ways over the surface of the river, so fast over the small crabs, the snails, through dark curtains of minnows olive green, their fins brushing my face. Home was coming.

A man's face wet beneath fluorescent lights. Tears in a beautiful, old beard.

Infinitely wild

Colleen M. Keehl

A once provided prison
Caused suffocation to the fierce
Caused scarification to the full
Captured pieces from the parts
Tamed the timing of the living
Took the beating of the heart.

Coarse grey clumps
Left standing in the calm,
Left searching in the cold,
Long hindered in the headlights
Of callused cynicism
Offered by the attack.

The white glow long gone From howling in the game From hunting in the group, Formed reckless and relentless When adamantly abandoned; Wanderlust wasn't requested.

Air surrounding resonates
With the echo of the growl
With the echo of the great
When the doors of the damaged
Left legs free to frolic
Amongst the omnipotence of the sky.

This lone wolf
Turned wild in the free
Tuned the wind with his key

Needs no pack to be.

Riffs and Variations on Coastal Rise

Jonathan Hielkema

Road-warping tsunamis wash bleefully blown the bend in the Seussian strangler who once known as Andre is now a warped breed of creep that divides us from the waterside, rise up and don't take no for an answer types that wash up in the dark after nightfall when the tide rolls in an earthquake-motivated furor gods envy men for their toys such serious business and when the coasts fall away on deaf ears the cries will fall for the love of their life on the beach in the middle of a thought that I could beat back the waves but they washed into the office desk I share with my sister who broke up with the sun over our grandmother's skin cancer killer little sister in the den where my office is flooding we float on vinyl records over a hot coffee float from that restaurant on Wacker that we strive to bring that kind of gumption to our jobs but the coasts, though rising are also falling away.

If a train is passing along the coast of a city in a desert bordered by a great sea there is a risk of both death by salt contamination drowning and thirst or both along the side that push the train off the tracks where a man was sealed inwards of himself where life is just a train on wheels that grind forward regardless of orders that God speaks to us on restaurant speakers that my sister used to order us our food that we sipped while shooting the birds and there's a picture of birds on the floating discs that we toss over the beachcombers that pick the corpses off the ground then we riff and toss off a few random statements that don't add to much but make us feel better about the cliffs where the highway meets the pavement collapsing down and down goes the Cubs in another game against the Coasters where we set down the coffee and that's what the music is good for today am I finding a voice or am I just riffing on chords that someone else set down like the endless train of chicken-scratch footprints on the sandy beaches where the combers have wild hair that I beg to touch but my sister reminds me of the obligations I share to my naked cat who sits at home in front of the televised event we attend that was built before the coast imploded and the entire world went into the kind of conniption normally reserved for the jealous lovers in despair.

Believe what you want but the coast will rise again just as the South which apparently fell to the crushing foot of Sherman's march to the coast where they carried the bags and vats to the sea to protest the injustice being permitted by the local authorities who wielded guns and blanked their faces with rubber bullets when their noses protested against the profligates the eyes were making when they hovered over a sweet piece of cake only not cake if you know what I mean when I say it it's a sweet thing, while the others will leer and tell us that it's no use driving a car through a blood-soaked piano solo of a roadway around the coasts but we ignore them and my sister and I play volleyball on the shore while the radio makes threatening sounds "barking beetles devour the essence of our nature's debt crisis tree shortage mongers die a death" it says and we switch to the beach rock station where a man straddling a dead horse plays electric guitar with Love and we sit down together enjoying the sight of the world drifting out to sea, letting our minds follow

to the brink of despair and then turn back to side A where music always leads and the true madness of the moment is white space the blue expanse that blanks the world and the coasts are falling away, getting higher but falling at the same time we inflate our bike tires and tell our children to stay away 'cause the sharks will get them in the foot because of how they walk on water when it rains outside I wonder if the world will drown and I try to drink as much as I can because if I do I can keep the world alive and the dread inside with the tingling feeling that maybe I can still stomach a globe of pain fallen from God's sky, the reward for years of service. Karma is no bitch. It's an illusion.

Nine/Ten

Justin Majetich

Sara says she's restless. Left alone on the porch, smoke pours from my throat and into the past.

"Transitions stir me up."
I'm struck that she was six years old
ten years ago,
stirred up because I can't be home
with her,
our feet dipped through the nights
that hung in a warm lake.
But I'm at my other home
which means I'm not home at all
or always.

It was always like this.
In a Balkan high-rise,
staring at those terrible towers
spell smoke in Cyrillics and
collapse.
Home is pixilated. And
I was bored there.
You were burning here.

Unamerican.
For never fearing, nor feeling
whatever it was
everyone else felt. I feel
as though the world inhales and waits

for nothing.

Untitled

Tanice Mast

This is a story about a stapler. An ancient looking artifact that keeps a specific place in my house. It lives in the cupboard above the computer, on the lowest shelf, a little left of the printer and in front of the paper clips. This stapler must not move, a point my father obsessively stresses.

"Why would you need to move it?" He says "it's in the perfect place already, handy and accessible." Yet sometimes the stapler would wander from this specific lodging, only to mysteriously reappear again. When it would disappear my poor father ran about all over the house to interrogate us, his family.

One such time my sisters were chatting in their room when suddenly frenzied knocking assaulted the door. My dad entered and politely inquired if they knew the whereabouts of our one and only dear stapler. They didn't, and said as much, so my dad left only to reenter almost immediately, this time without knocking. We assume that after closing the door he becomes frustrated with their casual shrugging off of the question. In hopes of catching them either bringing the stapler out of hiding, or celebrating their success of tricking him he would not knock on his second try. However upon entering the room again and observing no such act of guilt he would have to be content asking only:

"I don't think you heard me, are you sure you don't know where it is?"

This may seem like a big fuss over a small office accessory, but the stapler played an important role in educating my sisters and I about writing. It was a sacred reward.

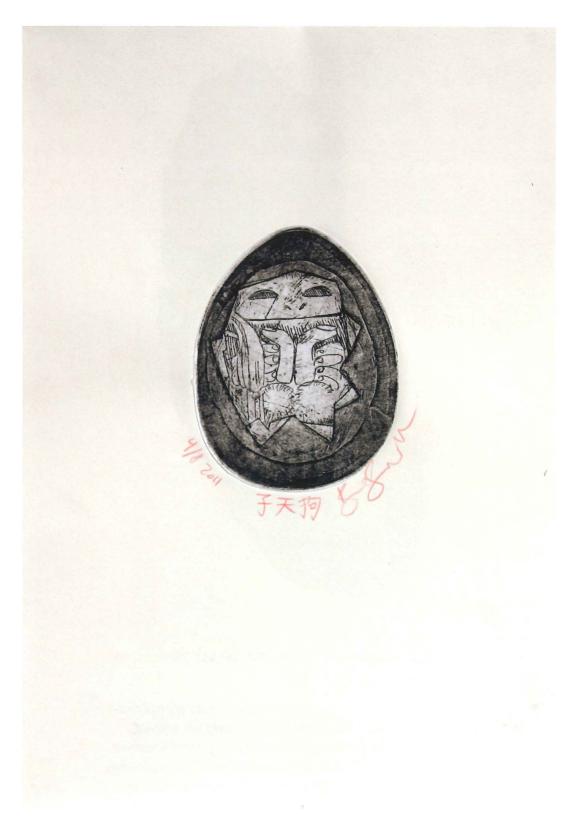
See, my father got really ecstatic about helping us with our writing homework, and we severely LESS excited about his help. It was an intense process that felt like perpetual editing. Pages and Pages, copies and copies shot from our printer only to remain aloof and unstapled. We had to reach in the cupboard above the computer, on the lowest shelf, a little left of the printer and PAST the stapler for a paper clip. Passing over the stapler served as a reminder that we were not done yet, our paper wasn't good enough and there was further to go.

The stapler lived in the cupboard as a "Mecca of togetherness" that any decent paper, any paper of means, had to make a pilgrimage to. A place where papers without my father's faith couldn't even go near. The stapler delivered a soul deep satisfying punch when we finally could use it. It was the sound of success, and my father's stamp of approval.

On my last birthday before leaving for college my dad gave me my very own bright red stapler. To an outsider this may appear a cheap and ridiculous gift, but I know better; my father has faith in my ability to write. Bright red probably to serve as a subtle reminder of the lovely shade I would turn when I believed him to be editing out my voice, or tone from my papers. And although I use the convenient staplers in the ITC, which are tied down to the counter in a fashion my father would

thoroughly approve of, this red stapler reminds me of my father's faith in my ability.

Yet I still pause and wonder about our own dear deviating stapler. When I think about it now, I am not actually able to recall ever being responsible for the stapler missing, nor can I remember my mother or sisters being culprits either. But this isn't a pleasing, ironic story about how my father is the only one responsible for periods of time we were stapler-less. No, this is the story about a stapler. A stapler with the ability to simply disappear every once and a while, to take a holiday from its specific lodging in the cupboard above the computer, on the lowest shelf, a little left of the printer and in front of the paper clips.

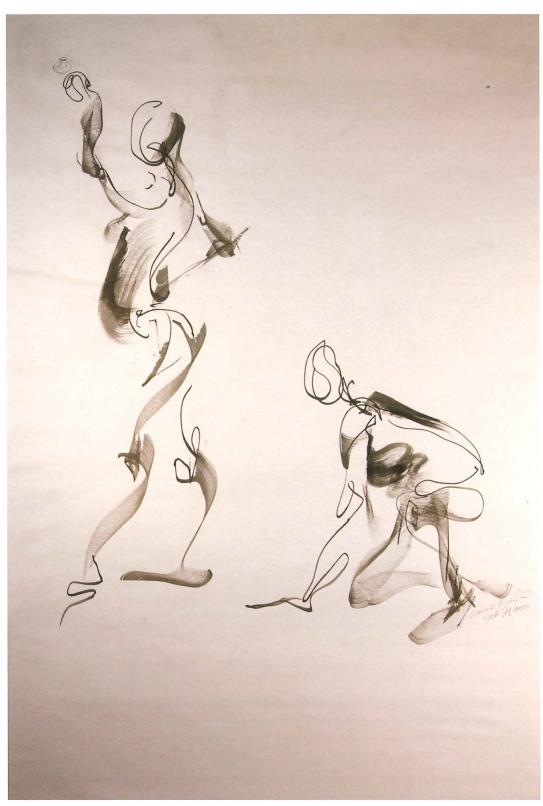


Bjorn Sparrman, *Kotengu*, intaglio



Bjorn Sparrman, Kappa, woodblock print

Myth is a reaction to the unknown. A way of rationalizing the non-rational. The seed of ritual, tradition, culture, cult... The instinctive human understanding of myth becomes a language through which cultural barriers ebb. The grotesque, the peaceful, the obscure, the things that make our hair stick up like an angry cat become our vocabulary. Myth is the most we ever understand.



Joanna Bayliss, *Untitled*, ink on paper



Jenny Swim, #15, mixed media

In this piece I am making use of a material that is traditionally used for 2D purposes and transforming it into a sculptural material, specifically into a kind of textile. I am taking the acrylic paint and instead of using it as a material which creates images, I am utilizing the material itself as an image. I then select certain pieces of this textile-paint, and sew them together to form a kind of paint patch. These two patches are a part of a larger series of approximately 30 patches.



Jenny Swim, #3, mixed media



Bridgette Keehl, Untitled, oil on canvas



Bridgette Keehl, Untitled, oil on canvas



Hannah Abma, Untitled, oil on canvas



Hannah Abma, Untitled, oil on canvas

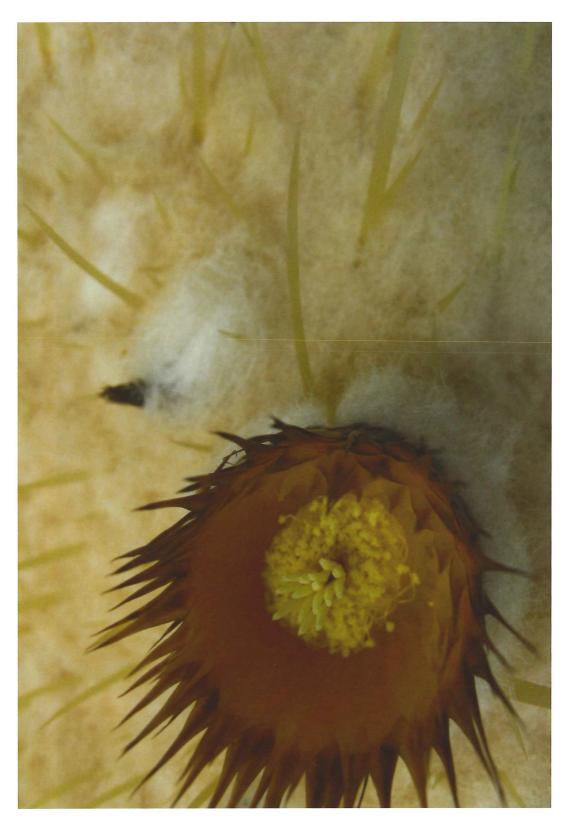
Using photographs of cells on the microscopic level, I base my paintings off the nervous system. I alter the images by introducing bold colours and making it more gestural and expressive. These large scale images turn such a miniscule part of a constantly firing system into something expansive and enveloping.



Ashleigh VandeKopple, Picking Tulips, ink, graphite, and colored pencil



Caroline Higgins, Untitled, digital photography

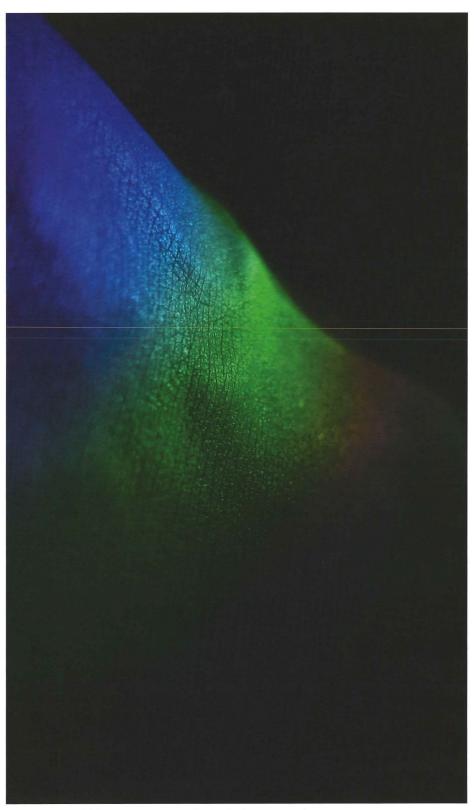


Amy Jonkman, *Untitled*, digital photography

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Amy Jonkman, *Untitled*, digital photography

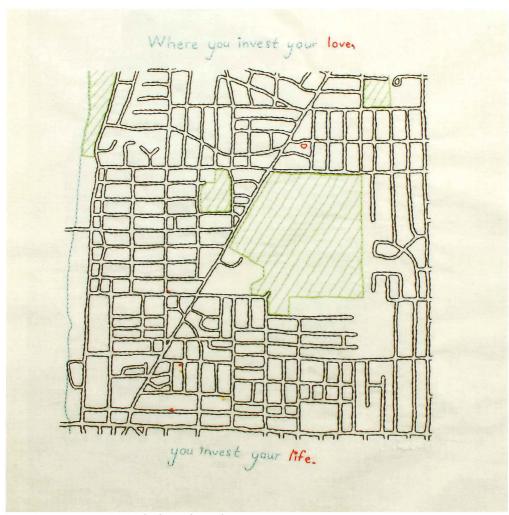


Zach Fisk, Skin at 11:44am, digital photography



Sheila Morken, Untitled, ceramics

This box is a part of a series I have been working on for a year. I call it a box because it can hold something in it, though it is not functional. A box is something that can protect another object by it's walls. This box holds more wall-like structures within itself which lead into an empty space. The empty space is meant to give a sense of continuation into the unknown. It is a box that has an entrance available to the outside, but it is a raw entrance, without the protection of the glaze that surrounds the rest of the piece.



Emily Helmus, Untitled, embroidery

This is a commissioned map of Grand Rapids' Creston Neighborhood. Embroidering custom maps is an intimate, meditative experience. I feel that a piece of my 'self' is stitched into any map I am working on, even when I have never set foot in the place. Block by block as the map reveals itself, I find that my thoughts are processed and clarified parallel to the map's progress.

January 2010

Caroline Higgins

We can stop for coffee Signals click after the highway The radio warns of traffic, crime And the ending of the day

We can be like Jesus
Walking out over the water
Solid ice bends under your boots
I remember I'm a daughter

We can wear this silence Seen by suspended frozen fish Looking up at footprint shadows And lacking the lips to kiss

We can peel off this skin Because its soaked with tears and snow Toss it all into the backseat We will air-dry as we go

Night Driving

Maxwell Howard

By the time she came in, he had had his eyes closed for some time- sitting there with a haphazardly open textbook on Greek literature. Although he was awake, he no longer could distinguish if his eyes were open or shut. Sometimes this happened to him. If he woke in a particular mood or spirit, feeling pleasant surroundings, but not seeing them, he would often succumb to the blindness. Ignoring it by losing himself in thought and eventually forgetting that he was even there.

Seeing his state, she woke him gently–kindly even. It stirred a quiet, low feeling in him which he chose not to investigate. What use would this origin of pleasure be to him?

As he opened his eyes and he looked away from her, he said, Hello.

You ready to go?

Yeah, let me just get my stuff together.

He grabbed his books and stuffed them somewhat haphazardly into his book bag. Heading out, walking directly into the low sun that penetrated that thick glass, the two walked between bookshelves making sparse, small conversation- out of nature more than enjoyment- stopping only once or twice to eye a particular book which neither intended to read. They walked together with stride of aimlessness, although they indeed had a destination. Near the exit she reached for his hand and he held back. He looked over.

Where do you want to go?

Paul's? It's been awhile since we've been there. We should go more often.

Alright, I'm cool with that.

They were outside and he knew the sun would set soon- maybe before they even arrived at Paul's. He went to the passenger side of his forlorn car. It sat, seeming to shake, as it waited in anticipation and horror at being brought to life—being made to move. He opened the door for her, just as he was raised to do. Strangely enough and despite the car's obvious frailty, he felt as if this was a car that suited him. That owning the car he had shaped it into another extremity of his, neat and orderly, getting him from place to place just as it was intended. That opening that sticking door was a test of patience he purposely designed—although he never minded it much. And that the rumbling lawn mower like engine kept him humble, although he never was concerned about humility.

He pulled out and drove, eyeing the emptying lot as he went, eyeing it for the sake of doing so. For a moment he thought of something he should say, but forgot it in the next moment. He was content and waited for her to speak up. When she finally did, it was pleasant; it was small and it was fine. He replied pleasantly too and he even laughed. What reason had he not too?

He put his hand on her thigh–keeping the other on the wheel–and gave it a sure squeeze. He loved driving. Sometimes he would become lost in it–driving longer than he intended to. Sometimes, after running out of gas on the side of a midnight road, he would listen to the silence of the dark and begrudgingly move from his place to get the ever present extra gallon that sloshed and spilled in the trunk. Then he would watch the lights pass again. That's what he really loved. But now it was light out, and he waited for the dark in a consciousness he was only slightly aware of.

They pulled in and got out. At the front the hostess asked how many would be in their party. Two. The hostess gave a playful smirk and led them to a comfortable booth near the back and by the windows. He looked out and watched the post rush-hour traffic trickle through. It was soothing; it was low; and it was constant. Of the three attributes he appreciated its consistency the most. Or maybe he didn't. Sometimes he wondered if he did, but only sometimes. He wondered why he had to wonder about that low hum and not about those passing lights. He wondered why he had to wonder about the taste of the diner's turkey club and not of her warm thighs. But he didn't think too much on this. He ate his food and touched her legs in the same way.

The waitress came around for a second time, refilling both their glasses. They thanked her and the waitress left.

She looked over his shoulder with a look of suppressed curiosity and then interrupted him in the middle of a sentence about a dead Russian novelist, who had recently made him see himself in a new, paler light, although he neither told her about this nor had yet to decide whether or not he would do anything about it. Is that Samantha over there? He turned and shot a furtive but inconspicuous glace.

Yeah, that is her.

Should I say hello? I've never been especially good at these situations. But I shouldn't snuff her, right?

He turned around again and waved and called her name. Almost immediately, she waved back and he couldn't help but wonder if she saw him before and waited—seeing what would happen while she sat uncomfortably in her seat. He beckoned her over and she came followed by a man, young and confident. Her friend intimidated

him. Sam's friend had this look, this look that made him seem taller than he actually was—that made him resemble someone better than he was. He wondered if Sam's friend knew he had this effect.

He didn't know what to say besides hello, so he said only that. Hello. He regurgitated another rhetorical greeting. How have you been?

Sam said something he didn't bother to remember, and she introduced her friend: Kurt. He seemed nice enough when he spoke and when he bent over to shake hands. He had a firm grip. It was alright.

Sam didn't sing anymore; he specifically asked about it. He specifically feigned sadness, too. He inquired some more and waited for his turn to speak. He was studying now—trying to write—trying to impress his professors. He had had some trouble lately, but he didn't mention that. He felt a completely explainable and still overwhelming need to be alright. He was also running more and eating better. This in no way could make good conversation, but he told them anyway—to fill the silence, or maybe just because he liked talking.

Kurt, whose name he had already begun to forget–Kyle? Or Conner?–stood mute beside Sam–mute with purpose though–not like the muteness of the attention deficit child. Kurt stood tall–partially because he was born with that mannerism and partially because he intended to. He would look down onto the party so they knew he was there. His gaze seemed strangely intentional, although none of them would have put it in those words.

Do I have something on my face? Or did I do something strange? They asked each other when he and Sam left.

These questions were mostly hers though. He stared back at Sam and K? walking back to their table and felt something like deja-vu. He thought he had seen this happen before, but to someone else—a vicarious experience he remembered in a film he didn't particularly enjoy.

Do you ever feel like a character from fiction?

She paused a moment. Like a book character?

Anything. Books, movies, plays.

I love Pocahontas, she's beautiful, she has everything together.

That wasn't the question, but he ignored it. She didn't resemble the real figure or the Disney princess and he didn't think about her answer. What about you? She repeated this twice before he heard her.

He didn't answer. All his thoughts sounded contrived and boyish. He wanted to say

36 Dialogue

Faust, but he only let the words form in his mind. He felt that actually saying them would be taken as an offhand remark, a macabre joke, although he found nothing exceptionally strange or dark about Dr. Faust. He liked him; he thought he might have even been his friend if he was real—even though he sometimes thought about how Faust's quest for knowledge started off so idiotically. He didn't mind this mental association between him and the famous doctor.

His phone vibrated once. Twice, as she said something about the food: it was cold. It was a text from Sam. He had guessed it; he opened it above the table to make it obvious.

What's that?

Nothing.

He paid the bill, accidentally leaving ten dollars as a tip instead of the five he intended. It was dark now and he looked up at the moon and it was beautiful; he knew it instantly and never doubted it. He looked to the stars and found the few constellations he knew.

Cassiopeia there. He pointed in a general direction. Orion, and although it could have been any three close stars, he said it firmly. He saw the Big Dipper for sure, but didn't say anything about it because it seemed so obvious.

The drive back was quiet and he put on a talk radio show that he liked not because of the words spoken, but instead how they were spoken. They sounded better out of that faceless feminine voice and he kept it low so he could hear its whispers. He pulled into her parents' driveway and let the car idle. Due to routine expectation, his pants constricted around his waist. The pair embraced and with time he moved closer and held her tighter—touching her thighs and pressing closer.

He told her he had to go and gave her one last kiss before leaving. She got out of the car and he pulled out, not watching her leave and not letting his gaze linger. Tired and feeling strange—an effect of maybe the huge moon or the silent night—he took a detour, a road unpaved and unlit, and pulled over to the side of the path.

His chair felt comfortable and he leaned it back realizing the radio was still on. He didn't turn up the volume, now that he knew it was there he could distinguish the words perfectly. The voice talked about bullies she encountered when she was growing up and what she would do now. It was terrible. He turned it off.

He opened his phone and looked at the message again. It was still the same. He didn't know what he was expecting. He wouldn't go over though, or maybe he would. His thoughts were idle and drifting like the feeling when one is presented with a funny puzzle. He didn't care, but he wouldn't go tonight. He wasn't raised that way. He didn't care, so he sat a few moments longer and left taking the long way home.

Serious Silly

Spenser Lincoln

Suffering succotash And restless leg syndrome. Put six feet under With surgical precision. Catastrophic cataclysm With killer strikes. Cold sword casts, Because of black cats. Sociopathic psychos, Crazy serial murderers, Obsessive stalkers. Stages of insanity. Stride to cyanide, Suicidal search. Suggesting several ends. Zeta slow Sentence to death.

Never See Me

Caroline Higgins

It wasn't the first time I had been to Graham Funeral Home. I was there when my Granny died. That woman loved birds, so there were birds everywhere then. Us kids drew cartoon birds and v-shaped doodles on brown paper and taped them to the walls of the room where the funeral service was held. The mothers said it was beautiful, and some even cried. I may have pouted, but I didn't cry at Granny's funeral. I do remember crying when I found out my Grandpapa, my father's father, was dead. I didn't let my sisters see me cry, even though they were crying too. I was the tough brother, so I cried in secret. Kay thinks she is so strong, because she is the oldest, but really, I am the stronger one. By the time I woke up the next morning, I knew the tears were over. I was out. I was over it. But because we were in the South, I would have to pretend to be sad for at least another three days, while relatives came from near and far---but mostly near---to pay their respects the family.

In the South, the family of the dead is supposed to stay at the funeral home all day long. And even though this is the second southern funeral my sisters and I have been to, it doesn't mean that this is any easier to get through. The actual funeral service is two days from now, which means two more days of waiting around. Two more days of seeing the tired faces of my grandfather's old friends. Two more days of holding my breath as I walk through the room with the casket, dodging hugs and avoiding looking at the Grandpapa's face. There is the room where he is the worst, and the coldest. The casket is always open. People congregate here, and I don't understand how they can keep talking to each other without glancing over at him at the time.

The second room is small, with only a few leather chairs and some side tables. I sit here in the mornings, with my two sisters and my younger cousin, Mike. Mike laughs a lot, and apparently thinks I am really funny. I have to be careful, because if we laugh too loudly we get in trouble with the grown-ups.

"Y'all hush," they would say, bringing a finger to their lips and a stern look to their eyes, "Show some respect, will ya?" We would also get in trouble when we played cards. It was just Go Fish, but, as Kay reminded me, these people were Baptists. The small room became the unintentional kids room. Kay had snuck in some magazines in her purse, and when there were no grown-ups were around, we flipped through them. It was girl stuff, but Mike and I looked at them because the girls were pretty, and it was easy to make fun of the advertisements for makeup and the quizzes that supposedly determined whether or not you and your crush were meant to be. Kay didn't even get mad at us for wrinkling the pages when we would stuff them in between the chair cushions when grown-ups came in.

The third room was the food room. The barbeque room. The pie room. The fried chicken room. Mom says bringing a casserole is the way southerners say "I'm sorry for your loss." No one shows up empty-handed. Since we aren't allowed to leave, it is great that we never have to worry about getting hungry. There are always homemade biscuits to snack on and gallons of sweet tea in the fridge. But I don't

like sweet tea, I would convince Kay to walk with me down the street to get a coke at Arby's. Kay always said she didn't have money, but she usually had a couple of dollars somewhere in her purse. She just didn't want to give the money to me. Always said she was saving it to buy a new journal or gel pens or something. The only problem with walking to Arby's was that I would sweat because I was wearing dressy clothes. Why was it that when someone died we had to dress up? Grandpapa never dressed up. He always wore overalls when we worked in his wood-shop, where he would give me sawdust covered cans of Mountain Dew, which I would drink right away, even though they weren't cold.

It was always freezing in the funeral home itself, because the air conditioning was turned on so high. We begged Mom to be allowed to bring sweatshirts to wear, even though they were "so casual." By the second day, she let us. I wore an Atlanta Braves hoodie over my thin button-up shirt.

My Grandpapa died on a Wednesday. The first day at the funeral home was Thursday, and on Friday, my aunt made Mike go to school. The morning dragged without my cousin's energy. Without Mike, Kay would just read a book and Abby brought black and white drawings of Disney princesses to life with a 64-pack of crayons. Who needs 64 crayons? It even had a sharpener built in to the box. I'm sure Mom just bought that pack to keep her entertained.

All day, we sat in our little room. We left to get food, or when someone wanted to offer us their condolences along with an awkward hug. I watched Mom through the doorway, and wondered how she always managed to pull off the "sad smile." Whenever anyone came to talk to me, I just kept my mouth in a perfectly straight line and narrowed my eyes. I have been making this face a lot. I don't know how to stop. I hope it doesn't look like I don't care. By noon on Friday, I couldn't take it anymore. I sat on the arm of the leather chair Kay was slowly sinking in to and began reading The Two Towers over her shoulder. "Andrew, knock it off! Bring your own book." I knew she would get mad.

"Let's spy on Abby. Let's play 'Abby never sees us'!" "We are too old to play that game. And you know Abby will freak out. We have to be quiet."

"What's quieter than spying? You have to be quiet. Or else you aren't a good spy. Are you saying you can't be a good spy?"

Kay dog-eared the page she was on, and closed her book. I knew she would give in eventually.

"Fine. But we have to spy from outside," she said, "Or else it will be too obvious."

The heat outside was overwhelming and heavy. We blinked until our eyes adjusted to the light. We tiptoed across flower-beds and peered through the windows, careful to duck when anyone passed by. We used to play this game all the time at home, spying on our sister. I liked to play because Abby got so mad at us. It was hilarious when she screamed and yelled. Kay liked it because she liked to ready spy books. She read all of The Boxcar Children series. Who does that? She was currently into The Adventures of Mary Kate and Ashley. Those books are dumb, though. The Olsen twins bike to Alaska in one of them and are always home in time for supper. Yeah, right.

It wasn't long before Abby saw us through the window. I winked at her when she looked up from her coloring book and saw me, which I knew would really get her going. She stopped mid-princess and headed for the door.

"Go!" I whispered to Kay, and we ran as fast as we could towards the back of the funeral home, and ducked down behind a parked station wagon.

"Guys!" I heard Abby's high-pitched voice. We had called her "the pterodactyl" when she was a toddler because she always squawked. This was my idea. I liked to read dinosaur books. I still do.

"I know you're out here," she said, "I can see your feet."

She could, so we ran. We ran out from behind the car, and through a side door back into Graham Funeral Home. Without thinking, I locked it behind me. It was very dark.

"We lost major points for that one," said Kay, out of breath. We always said we lost points whenever Abby saw us, even though we never knew how many points we lost, or how many we began with. It just made the game exciting.

"Shh," I said, "Where are we? I thought this was the Fellowship Hall. I want some fried apple pies."

"You just had like three. This room is creepy. Where is the light switch? I can't find it."

But my eyes were beginning to adjust.

"There are coffins in here," I said, as I was slowly able to make out shapes. They surrounded us, stacked on top of each other, along the walls, all closed. "Like I said, creepy. Let's qo," my sister said.

"But Abby! Let's go through the room, there must be a way out. It will probably lead right to people and food."

Kay grabbed my arm as I began to walk into the darkness. She followed me, but kept holding on. The aisle between the coffins was narrow. We had to turn sideways to walk. As we continued, the spaces between them only seemed to get smaller and smaller. I felt like I was in a maze, although I was pretty sure we had been walking in a straight line the whole time.

My hand hit velvet and I pulled back a curtain. There was a faint light coming from a frosted window, and, to my horror, there was a face. Not my Grandfather's face, but a face nonetheless, staring up into the sky, in an open coffin. I turned around and pushed Kay, my first instinct being to protect her from seeing what I had just seen. She understood, and we ran as quickly as we could out of the room, weaving between coffins, and opening the door that lead us back into the land of the light and the living.

An old man was standing outside, smoking a cigarette, leaning against the brick. He was in an orange-brown tweed suit, and I realized with horror that he worked for Graham Funeral Home.

"Y'all don't go pokin around in there. Might make some friends by accident." He didn't even look at me, but starred up into the sky. When we didn't respond, he clearly felt the need to elaborate. He looked me square in the eye, "There's a dead guy in there. More than one, actually." He smiled. He had yellow teeth. We ran for our lives.

In a Poem of Water

Rachel Van Wingerden

In a poem of water. Where

Blue mirrors blue:

Blue jean print after blue jean print.

In the bosom of swells gone wild. Where

Crashing waves:

Lap skin alive Lap away thirst.

Freedom shouts.

Our sun

Beams-- with smiles

and, into the silk of day - planes light

Waves – boisterous waves gathering momentum –

Propel life: Glorious life. Propel us: glorious Us.

"Thank you, God," cry out our lifted lips

Salt-free grins too wide for faces Project Unadulterated thankfulness.

And joy.

And belief.

And hope.

And dare it be written? Yes.

And progress.

It's a lake full of friendship. at its best;

We are strongest. Together. In these whitewashed walls of waves.

World is waking up into our understanding.

Stretching, contentedly, full out.

Swelling to fill our inspired eyes

To lift us into a moment forever soul-sketched

On our canvassed skin.

On our sense-awakened minds.

Antithesis to Stork

Jake Schepers

The move towards distraction precedes the necessity of invention. Your thumb-twiddling accompanies a greater sense of purpose. A higher order of being. Considering silt not as residue but as outcome made dragging the river a prime candidate for the most fun you could possibly imagine for a Saturday afternoon: you could watch the silt rearrange itself in a constant state of flux and realize for yourself that you too might become one with the river bed. You soliloquize your admiration for the river just out of earshot of the rescue team staring at the mechanical crane, the agent of delivering the dead. The antithesis to stork. You stalk the chief-of-police and pace with him until someone accuses you of sulking, and you realize you are and politely dismiss yourself. If only there was a way to prevent your drooping shoulders. You sketch a contraption precisely for this purpose. You sketch a contraption that would make this all much, much easier.

I Played Hooky

Phanuelle Duchatelier

To my brothers and sisters in Haiti

I played hooky once.
I went downtown that day
To see them kill my brothers and my sisters
Burn their bodies
But I did not cry.

They took away the merchant's kids:

The merchant, he who lost his brother, whose body was burnt by them in the plaza.

Their laughs rose up like incense.

They took away the mother's belongings:

The mother, she who lost her legs after running away at night from them before they raped her.

They took away the father's dignity:

The father that was kidnapped but escaped, the father that swore to his children and his wife to get them out of this misery.

They took away every pleasant thing, my reason for living.

They killed, slaughtered my brothers and sisters.

But I didn't cry.

I watched Lavalas (the political party) march on to the next town, Delmas:

Delmas, the city that used to embrace security, the city where kids, families and lovers used to spend time with each other.

I watched the Makout slaughter the animals, burn the school, the market place:

I saw them kill a dog, he who did not harm anyone, was harmed by them as a way of showing their power.

I watched Lavalas bring tears wherever they went, but I didn't let them bring tears to my life.

I watched them bring darkness.

But I couldn't cry

They turned to me and slapped me:

They turned to me and tore my clothes apart:

The clothes that were bought by my mom who's been fighting to get me out of this torment.

They turned to me spat, and soiled my clothes.

They turned to me and dragged me around the city of Nazon:

Nazon, the city that served as a hiding place for them the city that cries due to the rate of crimes .

They turned to me and said, "Go and tell."

I played hooky once.
And I will do it again
And endure the pain
That my brothers and sisters are enduring
But I will not cry.

To Fear

Katerina A. Parsons

There's nothing to fear but a twisted stomach.
There's nothing to fear but a yellow sort of dust,
Somewhere between
Where I believe and where I understand.

There's nothing to fear To fear! I raise my glass to fear.

There's nothing to fear but a feeling.

Nothing to it, small, I think that

There's nothing to fear, really.

There's nothing much to fear, at least.

How bold the powerless! How powerful the bold!

To fear! Brash, empty fellow, here: I raise my glass to you.

Quiet Voice

Wesley Jones

Speak in the quiet
You are the whisper
Your nose peering around the wall of your
hiding place
Your voice is louder than ten thousand
drums
When I hear you in the quiet
And you know I am listening
Speak little one
Into the quiet your voice soars
Even the almost silent word
Reverberates

Deranged

Jonathan Hielkema

Keep a kaleidoscope near your bed Remind yourself of what's behind those pretty eyes A psychedelic gelatin Bone-dry matter skeleton

Splash your rice on the wall Count grains and index Earn the daily keep Yourself perpetually inverted Twice thrown the socks and shoes upon the floor

Creature stalks, domesticated Joyless daylight rising in the next day Keep a brush by your head If your wooly cortex needs tending

A waterfront is high in pressure, low in fat Devour it wholly Brainstorms breaking out Create frontal brushfires Don't dare cull the fuel

Reach the streets and drive the new sedan Don't disconnect your ears Woman in the van Shining bright eyes behind a muddy tint In the window

Barking in your ears
File the notions in this cabinet
Ideas in that
Feed speciousness to the cat
And the venom in your own veins?
Suck it and swallow, Re-digest

Drawer that beneath the chair Adjacent wrought iron desk On which you bake your daily bread In stunted silence, tree-like lack of motion I shudder for the hinges well-oiled

Elysium

Joshua Epperly

"We are certainly in a common class with the beasts; every action of animal life is concerned with seeking bodily pleasure and avoiding pain." – Saint Augustine

Day 1

I love starting new chapters. Even better than starting new chapters is starting the first chapter of a book not yet written. A book where you're no more sure than anyone else of where the story will take you because it's nothing more a formless thought. I awoke today to find myself in the first chapter of such a book. As soon as I lifted my heavy eyelids, I was greeted by a torrent of blinding white light that seeped into every pore of my skin. After an intense couple of minutes, this radiance ebbed and I distinguished my surroundings. A room of polished marble walls and floor, cluttered with furniture adorned in precious emeralds. I was lying on a weightless mattress and covered in white silk blankets. Both awe and bewilderment overcame me. Last time I checked, I was not a billionaire. This was not the bedroom of a hapless writer who couldn't afford as much as a warm coat for the winter.

But then it all came to me like a cognitive slap in the face. I was dead! Undeniably dead! I remembered the sudden stroke that knocked me to the tile floor, the silent hysteria when I lost my ability to breath, the look on my wife's face as she watched me foam at the mouth. My final and most vivid memory. As if it were the final scene of one big far-reaching dream - the only image I could cling to in the seconds after being jarred from REM sleep.

This revelation carried me to a state of pure ecstasy. Am I really in heaven? I slapped my face, blinked my eyes and concluded I was not dreaming. I made it to heaven! I could hardly take it in at once! The gods have granted me the honor of tasting the sweet waters of Elysium. I had passed through the void and entered a higher plane of consciousness; I had found my true home.

But I couldn't for the life of me piece together my existence from the other side of the void. Random, fragmented images and events flooded my mind. I knew I was a husband, a father and a writer - but beyond that, I couldn't recall who I was. My name, my childhood, my wedding day, my hopes and dreams – these concepts were dead and buried. However, a few of the more sorrowful epochs of my prior life resurfaced after further contemplation. Strange. I suppose it doesn't matter either way. I'm here and I'm reborn! I briefly considered giving myself a new name but figured that names weren't needed in this place.

The entire day I have been mostly resting and occasionally meditating in this luxurious room. I know it's a shamefully tedious thing to do considering where I am and what is available to me, but I feel like I haven't slept for a decade. My soul has made quite the journey. So perhaps it's just cross-cosmos jet lag. Anyways, by tomorrow I will be ready to emerge from my hibernation and venture through the glorious city that awaits me. This journal will document the expedition of a nameless spirit through the streets of paradise.

Day 3

I have an awfully vague recollection from my former life of traveling to a distant land and seeing some sort of chapel. I know I'm not being too specific but as I said before, my memory is very limited, especially with names of places or people. I do remember that it was one of the more famous chapels in the world and featured paintings by one of the greatest painters in human history. As I gazed at the master-piece that surrounded me, with its flawless blending of colors and myriad of hues, I thought, "There couldn't be anything more beautiful than this".

Well, now that I'm on the other side, I must say that that painting seems like a toddler's crayon doodles in the presence of the buildings that this city is made up of. They're just inconceivable. They mock the laws of architecture and spit in the face of physics. Some of these towers twist and bend in every direction as your eyes travel up its sides, but when you stand back and look at them as wholes, you realize they're nothing less than works of sublime chaos. Others simply shoot straight up and pierce the sky like needles, and when you realize that they're miles high you shiver with humiliation. I even almost feel guilty describing this city with these words of mine. As soon as my pen strikes the page and scrawls out these letters I have dampened its majesty a thousand fold.

On another note, I saw the man in charge. Another experience that I have the audacity to spoil with my pathetic words. To put it quite simply, I walked into his throne room by accident. I came to a balcony overlooking a room that seemed to stretch as far and as wide as the rest of the city. In the center of the room, a towering, glowing form sat in an equally intimidating throne. From miles away, he filled my entire line of vision. His robes seemed to spill through the entire chamber, and upon his face perched a white mask. It had holes for the eyes and mouth like a theater mask. I saw thousands upon thousands marching in endless circles around the throne, all wearing shimmering robes of gold and silver and purple and other colors I haven't even seen before. They reminded me of the battery-operated model trains that orbit the bases of Christmas trees.

I'm not sure yet what I think of this whole spectacle. One thing for certain is that I was struck with almost a primal fear of the god in the throne with the mask. Is this a god of mercy or a god of wrath? That mask is either a visor protecting us from the transcendent rays of his splendor or the floodgate holding back a thousand plagues begging to be released. My dread is rooted in the ambiguity of the mask.

Day 6

I've been hoofing it since evening three days ago. While still in the nucleus of the city, a desire to run overtook me and I've been running since then. I must have run five marathons back to back in the span of fifty hours! Not so much as a bead of sweat or muscle cramp has hindered me. It's good to see these stiff joints move so fluidly!

The unrestrained natural environment of paradise has been surprising me far more than the emerald and jasper skyscrapers of the city. I have passed through rolling deserts, barren tundra landscapes and dense jungles soaked in the luminosity of flowers that glow with neon hues. These landscapes are more sporadic then the convulsions of an epileptic old man. It seems that the trees and flowers just spring up where they want to, without any regard to soil, sunlight or moisture. In fact, all the landscape illustrates this jumbled quality. I've seen patches of rhododendrons bloom on the sterile floor of the arctic and snow banks in the arid grasslands. I've even stumbled across a herd of elk in a rainforest!

Last night I fell asleep on a thick bed of moss under a canopy of the stars. When I woke up I found myself lying on flat rocky ground. I scanned the area and realized that the trees were now evergreens instead of the maples that surrounded me the night before. The landscape is continually transforming.

During all this running, I haven't encountered a single soul. The absence of human beings is disquieting. Paradise is an awfully empty place...

Day 7

I was a husband, a father, a writer, and a depressed lowlife. That was my identity. I am in a place where everyone begins again, but I am incapable of severing all the ties from my old self. It's an umbilical cord attaching me to my origin, and I am lacking the scalpel to slice it. The haze of my previous life surrounds me and I cannot find my way out of it. Why should I? Yes, I was depressed but I didn't regret my life. My wife and my two daughters were my everything. Their faces are gone but their essences live inside of me. But sometimes they're nothing more than a mirage that I run towards but never touch. God, I miss them. Do they know where I am?

Day 9

I met my first human today. He's a young, wiry man who has a surprisingly resonant voice and rich laugh. Unlike myself, he's chosen to give himself a name. His name is Mist. Apparently because that was the first thing he saw when he first woke up. He calls me Gray - in reference to my hair color.

As I ran along the seashore, I perceived a gold castle resting on top of some rocky precipice far out in the distance. After an hour more spent running and ten minutes of scaling the rock face, I had arrived at the doorway of this castle. Like the buildings in the central city, this structure was too magnificent to take in all at once. I crossed its threshold and strolled through the vacant corridors inside. I found Mist in the sun-room, swimming naked in a pool of what looked like grape wine.

It's been wonderful sharing the company of another human being. His very presence validates my experiences and soothes me with the fact that I am not the only one perplexed by this new existence. Our conversations for these last hours have centered around attempting to piece together what we can from our previous lives and making sense of this new home. Mist has expressed nothing but pure admiration of this paradise. An existentialist to the core, he calls himself. He remarked on how this place has allowed him to embrace the ecstasy of living each moment without the threat of death looming on the horizon.

Mist revealed to me what I've been too blind to notice. I've always felt that I've been capable of these things. In my time here, I've felt an invigorating clearness of

mind and a kind of warm energy that has embedded itself in my bones – but didn't know what to attribute these sensations to. We have unrestrained creating powers. Mist himself had merely envisioned this gold castle and it emerged from the ground. He claims that everything from the rolling deserts to the iridescent sea is his creation – and I believe him. Every spark of desire can be channeled into this creative power and immediately satisfied.

He urged me to try out my abilities. I realized then that I hadn't eaten in a week. There were no hunger pangs, but only a longing for the taste of food. It was difficult, but through several minutes of concentration, a table sagging with undreamed of delicacies materialized. There was everything – seafood paella, apple tarts, duck confit, white truffle, caviar, prime rib, linguine, and every kind of dessert imaginable. The braised lamb was exceptionally tasty. When there was nothing left but bones and bread crumbs, Mist materialized his own table and we gorged all over again.

Now I'm so fatigued that I am literally feeling crushed as if an invisible hand is pushing down on me. Mist said that these waves of exhaustion normally hit you after bursts of creation. I'll sleep now.

Day ???

Had I slept for ten hours? Ten days? Ten weeks? There is no way of knowing. All I know is that the sun was at the height of its arch when I woke up. I wouldn't be surprised if I had slipped into a coma.

Mist was nowhere to be seen when I emerged from my room. Either he is out and about forming more landscapes or tucked away in some recess of the castle I have not discovered. I'm sure there will be another opportunity to give him my thanks. In any case, I desired my own home. I ventured out into the mountains, searching for an adequate foundation. The landscape had indeed changed again, albeit only in small and subtle ways.

I found a nice, flat plateau and proceeded to create my own castle, section by section. I didn't stop until I had produced a citadel twice the size of Mist's. It took about three hours total.

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay in bed with the invisible hand squashing me and thoughts of my wife chewing away at my mind. Her face, her name, her touch, her hopes and dreams are lost to me. I only remember the feeling. An unrelenting yearning with no face to attach it to. Will she ever find me again?

I tried envisioning her in my head. Maybe I could create her like I created my castle. Only a shapeless fervor surfaced. Just then, the door creaked open and a slender figure silently paced towards my bed. Her body was initially just a silhouette in the darkness, but by the time she came on top of me I could tell that she was the most strikingly beautiful woman I'd ever seen. As she began to passionately kiss my neck, she whispered that she was here to comfort me. From that point on, there were no more words spoken. Only the thrusting and the moaning and the noise of flesh on flesh. I wrapped my arms around this angel's smooth back and squeezed her tight, praying to never lose her. After the climax, she vanished and I was left hugging empty space.

The next woman cleared away the sorrow that found me when the last one left. As soon as she too was taken from me, I created another one. This process repeated over and over until the sex was mechanical and our bodies were cogs in an engine. An engine tangled in blankets, spewing out red smoke.

The heart wants what it wants.

Day ???

All these dreams are the same. They're neither euphoric nor nightmarish. No seraphim to lead me or demons to chase me. I wander through blank, white void, searching for a door or at least a wall. I never find anything. Tantric Buddhists strive for emptiness, believing it to preface new insights and higher levels of being. But the emptiness of my dreams is only emptiness.

Day 18

It's a small world, or at least smaller than I once believed it to be. I was running across the jungles, grasslands and arctic ice sheets - these biomes that blend and mix and merge with one another — until I stumbled across Mist. His back turned to me; he appeared to be changing the course of a river. I shouted at him like an old fool and the moment he recognized me, he sprinted over and flung his arms around me. I knew I'd run into him again eventually!

I found out from him that it had been nine days since I had dropped by his castle. That makes today day eighteen. Good thing he doesn't sleep for days on end like me.

We spent that day ripping apart the natural world. We were bored of creation. Why should our powers only flow in one direction? Why not get a taste of destruction? We flung our arms around like composers leading the most explosive concerto in human history. With a wave of my hand, towering redwoods uprooted and fell into one another. They screeched as they toppled to the ground like dominos. Through not so much as ten seconds of our concentration, the ground was pummeled with mile deep craters. Tigers and deer and chimps scattered in every direction when we came near. We attempted to strike them dead with no success. I guess our powers end there. Mist trumped me. He blew up an entire mountain. Massive boulders were propelled into the sky and rained down on us like meteors. They deflected off us as if we were surrounded by unseen force fields. There probably were a hundred thousand other souls tearing apart their very own worlds at that exact moment. Annihilating in perfect harmony.

We own our worlds.

Day 20

I used to write most feverishly when I was barraged with waves of suffering. It was my friend, my lover and my shrink. I engraved whatever I needed remember and released whatever I needed to forget. Here it seems that writing does nothing. Everything is already said and laid out in front of me in alphabetical order. Here there is no more intangible to swing wildly at because these lands are the intangible that I once searched for. But yet I write, not because I need to but because I used to.

Day 24

There's an itch at the back of my skull, consuming me slowly. It torments me day and night. It plagues me with the notion that there may not be any hope in this place. I don't want to believe that it's true. I run from this notion and convince my-self that there must be hope in Elysium. But I am doubting more than ever.

I met a woman on the shores of Lotus Lake – a part of my created world. Her name was Joy. She said it was the first emotion she felt upon first waking up. How foreign that joy seems to me now.

When I first saw her walking on the shoreline, the colors of her figure sharply contrasted everything around her. Rays of light danced through the strands of her auburn hair. Her skin was darkened as if it had absorbed the beauty of the forest around her. Her voice rang with clarity and truthfulness in all our conversations. When she spoke, it soothed my spirit. When I spoke, she looked at me with direct eyes that exhibited a genuine interest in everything I had to say. She was such a wonderful woman.

I asked her if she wanted to create or destroy anything and she refused. Instead we hiked over to a waterfall that gushed from a fissure in a cliff – also part of my created world. We lay on the sun-baked sandstone and soaked up the cool vapor emitted from the waterfall.

She said a lot of things there I'll never forget. Things that I initially dismissed as drivel but gradually, through the course of our lengthy discussion, appreciated as words of insight. She said that this place sucks away your soul and your humanity and that she's never felt further from goodness than she does here. She said that she loathed her abilities and is considering snuffing them out but is afraid and didn't know if that were even possible. She asked me what I think she should do.

And then she vanished. Just like the women that I create. Except that she was an authentic soul – someone who died in her previous life and woke up here. My comfort women evaporate like steam upon my wishes, but I can't do that to an authentic soul. The only being that could be responsible for this is the God in the throne room with the flowing robes and white mask.

The God of this place didn't want her. He cast her out like if she were a bastard child. Did she offend you, my God? Can we not exist without your interference? To think that God erased this innocent woman simply for saying something he didn't want to hear – it makes me shiver.

Day 25

I understand it all now. Everything is worthless. Tonight I am enclosed in darkness. I survey the landscape from the lofty view of my palace of rubbish, my temple exalting nothing. The landscape is morphing again. I watch as the trees rot, the lake dries up and the flowers retreat into the ground. New scenery springs up to take its place – more attractive than the last, but equally as empty of worth.

There is not a thread of any enduring value to be found in Elysium. This is why

nature dies and reawakens every night. This is why my created women vanish at the height of passion. This is why I crave for more food after feasting for hours. This is why people like Joy are crossed out as soon as they begin fighting for something that lasts. God, Zeus or whoever's the tyrant that is in power doesn't know the first thing about his own handiwork. We don't want to be force fed comfort until we choke on our own vomit. Above all else, we want a reason for existence.

Tomorrow I will run and not stop running until I burst through the doors of the throne room. I will bring my accusations against the god of this place and if I am erased, all the better.

Day 27

I blasphemed the overseer and the overseer responded accordingly. I pushed my way through the thousands of pathetic disciples still orbiting the throne in their eternal circles and halted at the feet of this towering dictator. I spewed words like fire and screamed curses until I had nothing more to say. His answer required no words. He lifted me up to eye level with one hand and with the other removed his mask.

That face! The infinite horror of that face! I glimpsed at the cavernous void of his eyes and in that fleeting moment I comprehended everything. I am in hell and in the presence of Satan himself. My God, when did you abandon me? Or when did I abandon you? This question will sit half-digested in the pit of my stomach for eternity.

I've been sent to a lower lever of hell. Every facet of this new place is a stripped down, barren reflection of above. Our powers are very limited. We cannot create palaces or oceans or forests. We are still able to create food and other people, but the food is spartan in comparison to the delicacies of above and the women fight viciously when you try to screw them. The overseers offer us cement cells for living quarters and we gladly take them. We are given work assignments each day that aren't backbreaking but instead are menial and futile. Violent conflicts erupt around every corner because everyone feels as if they are licensed to control everything. Where exquisiteness and indulgence were in the upper level, here is starkness and restraint.

I accept my fate. With discomfort comes meaning. I'll clench my teeth and ache all over but sometimes I'll know that I am human. That devil actually believes that he is punishing me. What a fool. I am liberated.

Day ???

It's been awhile since I last wrote. Some days I think I've been down here a decade and other days I'm convinced that I just arrived. Day and night bleed into each other and I'm left unsure whether to take a walk or work the fields or collapse in bed. A sense of time was one of the first things to go. Sometimes while I till the

earth I fantasize about being back in the upper level, lounging in my castle or making love to Joy. Oh God, what am I saying? I must work harder at controlling these silly fervors.

Day ???

My master, my savior, my lord of everything! I fell on my knees and groveled like the dog I am, and you heard me. I begged for forgiveness and you lifted me out of the abyss! Your mercy never runs dry!

I'm where I belong again. I came from the nightmare world of below and now live free. I'm where I can have whatever I desire whenever I desire to have it. Here the wine flows in rivers and the women line up to please me. I'll never speak ill of this place again. I'd bite off my tongue before I dishonor you with my words! I'd chop off my hand before I do anything that rouses your anger!

I don't think I'll ever deserve the magnificence of this land but yet I am here and I am reborn! I've been gone for far too long from where I'm needed. This place needs me to sculpt it, to rule it, to extract its essence, to make it real. I won't exist without it and it won't exist without me. Oh, my Elysium!

Ameiurus Melas

Dan Christmann

Though it struggles for life, it thrives in the murk. The lonely bullhead through its whiskers will grieve Though dirges loose their potency when none can Hear, and tears in water are just more water To those that flash and fly and skim above his Head, bulbous head. It is lost within, never stirs But for the drifting of the current. Lower Than low, its bed is the detritus through which It gasps, Gulps with sudden rhythm. Spasmodic Are his struggles, for every breath is his last. Dying a thousand deaths, the bullhead worships Through a life of lament.

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